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Honesty admits discourse: Lying in the fiction of Elizabeth Gaskell

McGavran, Dorothy Heissenbuttel, Ph.D.

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1994

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HONESTY ADMITS DISCOURSE: LYING IN THE FICTION OF ELIZABETH GASKELL

by

Dorothy Heissenbuttel McGavran

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
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Approved by

Mary Ellis Gibson
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Variously deemed a motif, an image or a puzzling preoccupation, lying links all of Elizabeth Gaskell's works, and its political implications are far more important than critics have recognized. Lying, this dissertation argues, is the key that opens up Gaskell's values, purposes, and methods, including her own linguistic shifts and suppressions. Moreover, twentieth-century theorists of discourse and power such as Foucault and Bakhtin have helped locate lying as one of the linguistic tools for expressing and dealing with cultural change. For Gaskell, lying does not represent a turning away from truth but an expansion of the grounds for truth. Examination of the lies in her six major novels and many of her shorter works confirms that Gaskell was interrogating current assumptions of truth by encouraging inspection of motives and reinterpretation of values.

In Gaskell's fiction, lies bubble up from long-built suppression, forcing disturbing questions of gender, power, and truth to the surface. Gaskell forces reexamination of the situation of the fallen woman and her place in society. She examines justice and the law in her historical works and their subversive subtexts, often pitting the laws of human beings against the laws of God and finding a wild but more

genuine justice emerging in the voices of marginalized people.

Always an educator and a moralist, Elizabeth Gaskell admits and values oral cultures and multiple literacies, but insists on a special kind of reading of contexts as well as of texts required by those who would be moral agents. She opposes double standards of honesty for men and women and deplores the practice of cunning and mendacity considered necessary for some women in the marriage market. Thus while disclaiming that there is one absolute truth, Gaskell pursues truth by admitting discourse.

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APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I

LYING AND THE TRUTH: "TO SEPARATE THE UNA FROM THE DUESSA"

Hamlet: "If you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty" (3.1.107-8).

When Sissela Bok researched the topic of lying in the mid-1970s, she found very little written on it. In fact, she found that the index to the Encyclopedia of Philosophy contained no reference to "lying" or to "deception" while over 100 were given under the heading "truth" (5). Bok hypothesized that philosophy was hesitant to look closely at the reasons people lie before exploring the theory and meaning of truth (xx). Bok believed, when she first published Lying in 1978, that it was "high time" to take up the actual everyday choices people have to make in determining whether to lie or not. She was not interested in the malicious lie. As she put it,

> I want to stress the more vexing dilemmas of ordinary life, dilemmas which beset those who think that their lies are too insignificant to matter much, and others who believe that lying can protect someone or benefit society. We need to look most searchingly, not at what we would all reject as unconscionable, but at those cases where many see good reasons to lie. (xxi)

Over one hundred years before Sissela Bok, another woman

explored the same questions in fiction. Elizabeth Gaskell began writing novels for publication about 1845. Her great concern was to write the truth, yet she dwelt on and indeed seems preoccupied with the causes and effects of lying. Is it ever "right" to lie? Are good and moral people ever justified in lying to serve good ends? Is it ever right to lie in response to unjust laws, institutions and individuals?

Gaskell opened up the field of novelistic discourse to include people's everyday linguistic attempts to articulate the "vexing dilemmas of ordinary life." Variously deemed a motif, an image, or a puzzling preoccupation, lying links all her works, and its political implications are far more important than critics have recognized. In fact, though it is common to divide her novels into the social action novels--Mary Barton, Ruth, and North and South--and the rural idylls--Cranford and Wives and Daughters--and to think they--as well as the historical novel Sylvia's Lovers--are not of a piece, all her fiction should be considered in every analysis which does justice to her achievement. In her 1990 review of Gaskell criticism, Hilary Schor claims that the novelist "has yet to receive the range of critical intelligence, careful reading, and cultural shake-up that she deserves" ("Elizabeth Gaskell" 369). I find lying to be the key that opens up Gaskell's values, purposes, and methods, including her own linguistic shifts, dodges, and suppressions. Moreover, twentieth-century theorists of

discourse and power such as Foucault and Bakhtin have helped me to locate lying as one of the linguistic tools for expressing and dealing with cultural change. I have concluded, consequently, that lying in Gaskell's novels does not represent a turning away from truth but an expansion of the grounds for truth. "Ground" is context, and therefore the spatial setting on which Gaskell founds her fictional worlds. Kenneth Burke's Grammar of Motives explores the scenic word ground as it is used in philosophy for describing motives. Burke says, "'On what grounds did he do this?' is translated 'What kind of scene did he say it was, that called for such an act?'" (1001). By pursuing the lie and the grounds for it, Gaskell subverts the comforting myths of middle-class complacency, takes the back door to truth, and aims to expand the awareness and sympathy of her readers.

Moreover, Gaskell found the grounds for truth in her own backyard. Living in the industrialized center of England at a period of social and political change, Gaskell opened up the novel's midcentury landscape to include the cityscape. She claimed to know nothing about "political economy or the theories of trade" (Mary Barton[1] 38), yet she understood the languages of the people she lived among. She knew the streets and homes and factories of smoke-filled Manchester just as she knew the villages and fields Manchester's citizens had left behind--and she knew their voices, their dialects. Writing at the same time (1840's)

as Friedrich Engels about the same place, Gaskell describes Manchester more deeply, more knowingly than the German textile-manufacturer's son, according to John Lucas' evaluation: "Mrs. Gaskell can present evidence of structures of experience, ways of living, adaptations and changes that are importantly present in the creation of working-class consciousness, though they are set quite apart from the shop floor" (Literature of Change 49). Gaskell knew where the residents of Manchester came from, what songs and games they brought with them, what values were rooted in their rural past and how they conflicted with the urban-industrial present (Lucas, Literature 38). Engels may have spent two years (1842-44) observing the city, but Gaskell lived all her adult life among the people whom she served in working-class schools and the Unitarian chapel where her husband was minister. The living places of her characters became for Gaskell the grounds for their words and actions and, consequently, the domain of truth.

The two domains of truth and moral truthfulness often overlap but yet must not be confused, Sissela Bok argues (6). Words have always had power, but truth has not always had the same value. According to Bok, in oral societies truth was granted to what was saved from forgetfulness. Keeping information from slipping away made it true or alive (5). Bok argues that in pre-Socratic Greek societies, works of art also were seen as making objects "true" (5). It was only later with Plato, that the great interest in

epistemology, in the opposition of truth to error or of true to false imitation, became the central issue (5). Truth is a matter of epistemology and truthfulness a matter of morals. When the standard of honesty or truthfulness is examined as a moral question, intent is the determining question. Sissela Bok points out that

> the moral question of whether you are lying or not is not settled by establishing the truth or falsity of what you say. In order to settle this question, we must know whether you intend your statement to mislead. (6).

The paradox at the heart of Gaskell's treatment of lying is that she intends the truth when her characters and sometimes her narrators intend to mislead through lying. Indeed Gaskell's novels present a gallery of liars. It is not her plots which have revived critical interest and inspired reassessment of Gaskell today; it is her presentation of characters in a clash of discourse. Through her liars Gaskell's intention is to speak the truth about her world. Intentions, therefore, may seem to work at cross-purposes, and certainly, as a multivocal narrator, Gaskell has been accused of working against herself.

Most significantly, Gaskell's novels show that lying is not the negation or absence of truth. When good characters lie and their reasons are developed from the ground up, the lie becomes another way of verbally constituting the situation. In Swift's Gulliver's Travels, the fourth voyage

finds Gulliver among the rational Houyhnhnms who have no concept of and therefore no word for lying. They simply dismiss Gulliver's explanation of lying as "saying the thing which is not." Gaskell demonstrates a more complex system of language than that neighed by the horses. In most cases, lying is saying the thing which is also. Examination of the lies in her fiction confirms that Gaskell was interrogating current assumptions of truth by encouraging inspection of motives and reinterpretation of values.

Crucial lies make Gaskell's plots turn and force her readers to admit unconventional points of view. Of her six major novels, the plots of three turn on a lie. In Ruth the decision of Thurston and Faith Benson to present Ruth to their community as a young widow with child, not as a fallen woman, leads to the climax of the plot rather than any act of Ruth herself. The decision to lie by two worthy, moral people is clearly intended to help rehabilitate Ruth and save the child from growing up as a social outcast. In North and South Margaret's lie to protect her brother's life casts doubt upon her character and "honesty" in Mr. Thornton's loving but judging eyes. But Margaret's intention is to protect her brother, who is already under an unjust condemnation for mutiny. In Sylvia's Lovers, it is more difficult to find good intentions behind Philip Hepburn's lie or his withholding of truth from Sylvia Robson. He does, however, rationalize the lie by claiming to save Sylvia from the unfaithful specksioneer,[2] Charley

Kinraid. Philip feels he has evidence to support his fear that Charley will deal lightly with Sylvia's affections. He thus excuses his lie to "protect" Sylvia from more hurt, not realizing that he is setting them both up for a hurtful, lifeless marriage. Philip's lie is only partly vindicated by the speedy marriage of Kinraid after he returns to find Sylvia already "taken."

Gaskell's characters may use the well-meant lie to spare someone suffering or pain. The husband in "A Manchester Marriage" at first accuses the faithful servant Norah of lying and stealing--an accusation based on stereotypes of her gender and class. But later, when convinced of her honesty by the circumstance of his wife's first husband's reappearance and subsequent suicide and the reappearance of the "stolen" brooch, the husband and the servant conspire to withhold the truth from the wife. Both intend the lie to protect the wife from blaming herself for the comfortable turn her life has taken after her first husband's supposed death at sea. In Cranford, friends of Miss Matty similarly conspire to lie in order to help her through financial difficulties.

Lies are often intended or considered in Gaskell's fiction to save lives. The mother, Eleanor Gwynn, in "The Well of Pen Morfa" lies to protect her ill daughter, Nest, from the knowledge of her lover's abandonment until she is strong enough physically to hear the truth. The question of whether Nest would rather die than live her life as a

cripple is denied her by the loving lie of her mother. In the outcome, the mother's love triumphs over the lie when Nest chooses the way to live out her days. In "A Dark Night's Work" Ellinor Watkins sacrifices her life and love to corroborate her father's cover-up of his accidental murder of his partner Dunster. The lie compounds the murderer's victims as first father, then Ellinor, and the faithful servant Dixon--all conspirators--ruin their lives to protect the honor of Ellinor's father.

Sometimes Gaskell places characters in positions where lying is an option not ultimately taken. For example, Mary Barton is put in the witness box in the impossible position of choosing between lying to save her father, who she knows committed the murder, or telling the truth and saving her lover Jem Wilson who is on trial for it. Hardly knowing what she intends in this situation, Mary is torn for a time from her right mind. Gaskell spares Mary, however, from actually having to lie on the witness stand by giving her an active role in obtaining a valid alibi for Jem Wilson. Options prove only teasing, however, in the nightmarish short story, "Lois the Witch," in which a whole society, persuaded of their own truth, condemns innocent women as witches. The title character can save her life by confessing to being a witch, but she refuses to lie to live.

In Gaskell's plots the pivotal lie does not even have to be verbally stated. Though critics often comment that Mr. Holdsworth in Cousin Phillis did not intentionally

deceive Phillis because his love was undeclared, the old servant Betty knows that lies do not have to come from the tongue: "Aye. aye! but there's eyes, and there's hands as well as tongues; and a man as two o' th' one and but one o' t'other" (Cousin Phillis[3] 336). Holdsworth does not admit to himself or to the narrator Paul that he intends to let his eyes and hands deceive Phillis, and he escapes to his new job on the Canadian railroad with his honor intact. But Gaskell explores his intentions and the results of his unstated lie and finds them just as tragic as if inscribed in words.

Critics have long recognized that Gaskell explores the language of the lie. As early as 1929, Gerald DeWitt Sanders lists instances of lying in three novels--Ruth, North and South, and Sylvia's Lovers--and notes, "it appears that Mrs. Gaskell had more than a cursory interest in lying and its effects: perhaps some experience of her own led her to dwell upon the matter so frequently" (72). Sanders does not carry his observation any further, and in fact, few critics have known what to do with the proliferation of lying in Gaskell. Writing about narrative stance in North and South led P. N. Furbank in 1973 to write an article published in Encounter on "Mendacity in Mrs. Gaskell." Furbank concludes rather testily, "Mrs. Gaskell is the poet of deceit; she knows the country of shams better than anyone" (55).

In fact, at the heart of Gaskell criticism is the notion that Gaskell herself is two-faced. One face shows the proper Victorian minister's wife and mother who, as Lord David Cecil said in 1934, "was all a woman was expected to be; gentle, domestic, tactful, prone to tears, easily shocked. So far from chafing at the limits imposed on her activities, she accepted them with serene satisfaction" (208). This comment reflects the image of the moral Mrs. Gaskell, respected as a woman but belittled as an artist by early scholars.

Postmodern criticism is, however, discovering the other face of Elizabeth Gaskell. John Lucas splits her into the "official side. . . liberal, pious, incuriously middle class," "and the "unofficial side [which] keeps pushing this pattern [of reconciliation] awry, revealing different patterns of inevitability, of antagonism, misunderstandings, hatred" (Literature 13). This "marvelously anarchic force" in Gaskell's works is not in my view the result of an unconscious split in the thrust of her novels, nor is it a split in her personality as Felicia Bonaparte has recently maintained[4]. While hardly denying that Gaskell writes subversive texts, I prefer to pursue the images in her fiction not to reveal the dark shadows of her secret life but to unveil the complexity of her novelistic project. Gaskell was herself a truthful woman. The Unitarian impulse toward truth informed her every act. The pattern of lying in her fiction cannot be simply explained by splitting

Gaskell into what she herself even referred to in a famous letter to Eliza Fox, as her many "Mes," or her "warring members":

> One of my mes is, I do believe, a true Christian--another of my mes is a wife and mother; . . . . Then again I've another self with a full taste for beauty and convenience. (Letters [5] 108)

The context of this letter, however, is what places it at the center of Gaskell's novelistic project, and reading the context is crucial when reading Gaskell. She is not writing about splits in her personality. She is writing about her guilt at moving into a new house--Plymouth Grove--and she begs Tottie (Eliza Fox) to come and persuade her

> "the wrong the better course" and that it is right to spend so much ourselves on so purely selfish a thing as a house is, while so many are wanting--thats [sic] the haunting thought to me; at least to one of my 'Mes,' for I have a great number.(L 108)

The "many mes" are responding in this passage to a moral problem expressed by her failure to believe "the wrong [is] the better course." Her consciousness of being split is grounded--just as her fiction is--in the living places or contexts of her world. She is troubled about living in a fine and comfortable house when so many are suffering in cramped rooms and dirty cellars. The truth as she saw it in Manchester presented many faces and many voices. The effect of her realism was to write from the inside out. Working

class characters, fallen women, and poor servants are permitted to speak from their homes, from their streets, and in their own languages. They are given voice in Gaskell's works.

The truth Gaskell is driving at and moral truthfulness are both defined, expressed, and discussed through language, and as Michel Foucault would maintain, "discourse is inseparable from power" (Selden 76). In fact, as Charles Taylor puts it, Foucault has a "Nietzschean refusal of the notion of truth as having any meaning outside of a given order of power" (77). Gaskell provides in the contexts of her fictional worlds the means to reading "the given order of power." Foucault's analysis of history reveals Gaskell's time period as a pivotal one brought about by the Enlightenment. The old classical control exercised by standards of aristocratic honor, the order of the universe, and a monological world view was giving way to a new control inspired by humanitarianism which grew out of ordinary life (Taylor 72-3). This change of control is not valued by Foucault as a breakthrough for freedom and individualism, an analysis typical of Enlightenment apologists; instead he sees a new kind of control based on surveillance. Public space with a public authority in plain view is supplanted in the "modern" world of the nineteenth century with hidden scrutiny and discipline (Taylor 74).

Certainly Gaskell reflects the turn to a liberal humanitarianism in her concerns for preserving life, for

relieving suffering and for meeting the needs of ordinary people. She gets these goals from following the Romantic impulse, which, Donald Stone argues, was given a Victorian twist by women writers such as Gaskell, Charlotte Bronte, and George Eliot. Stone sees the subject of Victorian fiction centering on "the struggle between realistic possibilities and romantic aspirations, between societal or domestic values and the needs of the individual" (138). The tragic view expressed in most of Gaskell's fiction results from what Donald Stone sees in Gaskell as "a Wordsworthian sense of the burden of reality . . . and a realization of the tragic bounds of life " (136).

At the same time Gaskell reveals Romantic aspirations, her realistic methods reflect what Foucault was later to call the forms of discipline exercised by the institutions and discourse that control them. Gaskell is fully aware of the changes brought about by the increase in surveillance effected by the establishing of a police force in every English town. Alexander Welsh explains that by the end of the Victorian period in England the police force had become "the most visible symbol of society" (85). By 1861, police were everywhere in England, maintaining order and preventing crime as well as apprehending and punishing criminals (85-86). The police were in the business of observing the streets of the cities, as the title given these officers in England suggests: they were named inspectors at the suggestion of Jeremy Bentham (Welsh 90). This title

dignified the aim of these officers--and that of others to follow in the fields of health and education--to achieve reform and not simply to punish. Their function was to collect and communicate information.

In a curious parallel, Gaskell's function as a writer is also to inspect the streets and to report on the circumstances of the narrow world of each novel. In an essay called "Disappearances," which appeared in Household Words in 1851, Gaskell explains with wry humor the effect of police surveillance on both the ordinary citizen and on the novelist's enterprise. She remembers "with a smile" (Cranford and Other Tales[6] 410), how a friend of hers traced the address of Mr. B., a cousin of Gaskell, by going to the town, ten miles from London, where Mr. B. had been last heard of. There the friend asked for Mr. B.'s address at the post office, the bakery, and the butcher shop with no luck. Finally, at the railway office he asked the book-keeper if he knew where Mr. B. lodged. The clerk could not say but directed Gaskell's friend to "a person standing by a pillar" (COT 411). This person, when asked about Mr. B., replied with exact information:

> Mr. B.? tall gentleman, with light hair? Yes, sir, I know Mr. B. He lodges at No. 8 Morton Villas--has done these three weeks or more; but you'll not find him there, sir, now. He went to town by the eleven o'clock train, and does not usually return until the half-past four train. (COT 411)

Of course, the man standing by the pillar was a police inspector. Gaskell's comment on her friend's story reveals her awareness of the way police surveillance had changed the consciousness of her society:

> I thought that there could be no more romances written on the same kind of plot as Caleb Williams; the principal interest of which, to the superficial reader, consists in the alternation of hope and fear, that the hero may, or may not, escape his pursuer. . . . It is no longer a struggle between man and man, but between a vast organized machinery, and a weak, solitary individual; we have no hopes, no fears--only certainty. (COT 411)

Gaskell lived in a time of transition. As an inspector of her world, her aim was to present all the circumstances of her changing world, but with the goal of reform rather than control. "The vast organized machinery" must not crush the solitary individual. Following Dickens' advice to contributors to Household Words to "brighten" their tone (Uglow 254), Gaskell makes her essay on the detective police light and humorous. She reveals, for example, that the effect of surveillance is at best a mixed blessing: "Once more, let me say, I am thankful I live in the days of the Detective Police. If I am murdered, or commit bigamy, at any rate my friends will have the comfort of knowing all about it" (COT 420).

When Gaskell turned to inspect the streets and homes of her characters, she found more institutions for the

individual to fear. The discipline of the factories, the structure of the slums, the twisting of the streets, the regulation of hours of the day and the control over living space--all are reflected in her descriptions. Living space is minutely detailed. The architecture of almost every house is described so that the reader can draw a floor plan. In Gaskell's novels the discipline of the living conditions, the structure of the day's hours and the year's pattern of long months of work interspersed with few vacations all come down like a grid, locking in the romantic aspirations of her characters and exciting her humanitarian sympathies. Gaskell shows the reader Blake's "chartered streets."

In Mary Barton, for example, Gaskell states the point of view of the "poor weaver" as he watches his employer's increase in wealth, symbolized in his "removing from house to house, each one grander than the last, till he ends in building one more magnificent than all" (MB 59). Gaskell claims the worker is bewildered by this movement from house to house--like her own move to Plymouth Grove--at the same time he and his fellow workers see such suffering in their own ranks for want of basic food and shelter. From the workers' point of view, moving house in bad times means "Large houses are still occupied, while spinners' and weavers' cottages stand empty, because the families that once occupied them are obliged to live in rooms or cellars" (MB 59).

Houses speak of injustices to whoever has eyes to see. Gaskell's method takes the reader down levels of Manchester's streets, around corners and within cellars where the "smell was so foetid as almost to knock" down Barton and Wilson when they come to aid the dying Davenport who lies on "damp and mouldy" straw "no dog would have chosen" over a bare, oozing floor (MB 100). Streets tell stories, but not everyone knows how to read them. When Barton goes for help, he passes "well-filled, well-lighted shops" and he feels the contrast to the "dim gloomy cellar" where he just left Davenport dying (MB 101). But Gaskell does not trust all of her readers to be able to read the suffering of those Barton passes in the street:

> But he [Barton] could not, you cannot, read the lot of those who daily pass you by in the street. How do you know the wild romance of their lives; the trials, the temptations they are even now enduring, resisting, sinking under? . . . Errands of mercy--errands of sin--did you ever think where all the thousands of people you daily meet are bound? (MB 101-102).

As Virginia Woolf was to argue in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," "all novels begin with an old lady in the corner opposite" (324). For Woolf it was the woman in the corner of the train; for Gaskell the people "who elbowed [her] daily in the busy streets" (Preface to MB 37). These streets are the ones T. S. Eliot was later to call streets of "insidious intent," and, while one view of Gaskell would

place her miles away from such duplicity, she does have a reforming purpose that she realizes is not widely accepted in the 1840's. In a letter describing her purpose in Mary Barton, she says she earnestly hopes to turn her audience around and make them see:

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

If the workers find the master's movement to better and better houses an intolerable injustice, Gaskell hopes she can persuade her readers to question their society as John Barton does: "Why should [the worker] alone suffer from bad times?" (60).

But then, in a passage much discussed by critics, Gaskell follows this analysis of the workers' point of view by a strangely smug-sounding intrusion from her narrator:

> I know that this is not really the case; and I know what is the truth in such matters: but what I wish to impress is what the workman feels and thinks. True, that with child-like improvidence, good times will often dissipate his grumbling, and make him forget all prudence and foresight. (MB 60)

What voice is this, claiming truth for a patronizing middle-class analysis of the worker's child-like money management?

Rather than Elizabeth Gaskell, this voice sounds as if Josiah Bounderby of Dickens' Coketown has lost his way in the wrong novel, stereotyping workers as improvident desirers of venison and turtle soup.

Critics have wondered whether the narrator of Mary Barton is expressing one truth, many truths, or no truth. Which of her authorial voices is her own? Coral Lansbury sees Gaskell in disguise as a typical middle-class reader:

> Nothing could be more unwise than to regard the authorial 'I' of the novels as the voice of Elizabeth Gaskell, particularly in the Manchester novels. There the narrator has a tendency to engage in false pleading and specious argument, while the workers demonstrate honesty and commonsense. (9)

Rosemarie Bodenheimer tries to explain what she calls Gaskell's "uneven presentation of social problems but also her wavering performance as a narrator" ("Private Grief" 196). She concludes that "Gaskell's ameliorating narrator leaps . . . toward middle-class liberal formulae" (214) and sometimes retreats "to middle-class liberal platitudes" (196). The asides of the narrator, according to Catherine Gallagher, prevent nineteenth-century readers from wondering whether the conclusions reached by Barton are valid. The narrator wants to assure her readers that Barton is wrong in his conclusions, but her goal is to help that reader understand how he reached them by studying his environment (73).

Marjorie Stone alone argues for what she calls "Gaskell's innovative artistry" when she explains the narrative voice as a result of Bakhtinian polyphony. Stone says Gaskell speaks in multiple voices even in the narrator's "I," and attributes passages such as the one cited above to Gaskell's "dialogization of authorial discourse" (195) and her "remarkable ability --one might say her 'negative capability'--to accomodate conflicting discourses and perspectives" (196). While it will be clear in what follows that I agree with Stone's Baktinian reading of Gaskell, I believe that Gaskell was less conscious of her "innovative artistry" in Mary Barton's authorial voice than of her literary project to tell all the truths and admit all the discourse of the situation. Gaskell's "many mes" are responding to the moral issues she describes. Her many authorial voices force the reader to ask, "When is the wrong ever the better course? When is the lie justified?" For Gaskell truth was caught in the grip of circumstance. Admitting discourse was the means to free it.

Some masters had not before looked at the dying children of the workers. In fact, it was common for them to blame the workers themselves for their own problems. Stephen Gill quotes a passage from Love's Handbook of Manchester, written in 1842, which reveals a typical middle-class displacement of blame on the victims:

> In the times alluded to they [the workers] might have saved money, and now they are reaping the punishment

> that follows improvidence. There seems among the operatives, generally, a want of independent feeling. Few elevate themselves, even when they might, from a state of even servile dependence. Those who are not confederated in a bond of mutual support, fly to charities, seek gratuitous medical advice, and appeal to the benevolent societies of the town, on every apparent emergency: and they get so into the habit of thus doing, that they come to think they have a prescriptive right not to do anything for themselves. The moral condition of this class wants elevating, and till that is effected no permanent improvement can be made in their outward circumstances. (10-11)

Gaskell is subversive precisely because she implies whose "moral condition" really "wants elevating." Gaskell's double-voiced narrator even parrots Love's comments on the workers' improvidence in the passage from Mary Barton quoted earlier where she claims to know the truth about the workers' condition:

> but what I wish to impress is what the workman feels and thinks. True, that with child-like improvidence, good times will often dissipate his grumbling, and make him forget all prudence and foresight. (MB 60)

In this passage Gaskell's syntax manages to evade directly calling the workers child-like, while the semantics of the sentence imply that they are. She thus juxtaposes middle-class stereotypes dripping with moral condescension with other possible interpretations of what the workers feel and think. Moreover, stark descriptions of children dying give the lie to middle-class platitudes. The reader of Gaskell's

novels is forced to choose which version of the workers' lives is true.

Although her ultimate goal is to extend the awareness of her readers, Gaskell sometimes does not tell the whole truth about her intentions and her methods because she understands the politics of a woman's daring to tell the truth to men, indeed to the very factory owners of her own class. After writing her first novel, Mary Barton, Gaskell says repeatedly in her letters that she wanted to write the truth about the condition of the workers. "I believe I wrote truth. I like you to understand it" (L 66). "I wanted to represent the subject in the light in which some of the workmen certainly consider to be true, not that I dare to say it is the abstract absolute truth" (L 67). In the Preface to Mary Barton, she also stresses her desire to tell the truth even though she "know[s] nothing of Political Economy or the theories of trade" (MB 38).

While Gaskell's disclaimer excuses her from political motives, it is disingenuous because she did understand political economy. A letter to her daughter, Marianne, in 1851 reveals some advice about women's improper "meddling" in political economy. Amid opinions on the size and trimming of Marianne's bonnet, Gaskell advises her, not without irony, to read up on free trade and Adam Smith but not to "become a partizan in politics or in anything else" (L 148). People are skeptical, she argues, of women who form opinions "about measures of state" on the basis of

three weeks' study:

> That is one reason why so many people dislike that women should meddle with politics: they say it is a subject requiring long patient study of many branches of science; and a logical training which few women have had,--that women are apt to take up a thing without being even able to state their reasons clearly, and yet on that insufficient knowledge they take a more violent and bigoted stand than thoughtful men dare to do. (L 148)

Gaskell was well aware of politics and economic theory, but she was also aware of what "they say" about opinionated, meddling women.

Public opinion about women also influenced Gaskell's selection of details in writing The Life of Charlotte Bronte. Just as she suppressed her knowledge of political economy and indeed her political agenda in Mary Barton, Gaskell also withheld or altered the truth about Bronte. Both biographers Gerin and Uglow claim that Gaskell knew about Charlotte's love for M. Heger, her teacher in Brussels, but Gaskell changed the emphasis and even the dates for Branwell's decline in order to provide a cover for Charlotte's depression of 1845. Uglow explains Gaskell's manipulation of the truth in this way: "The biography, supposedly so devoted to showing Charlotte's inner life and 'the circumstances which make her what she was', thus involved a suppression which matched Charlotte's own" (399). Suzann Bick claims that the weakness of the biography comes

from Gaskell's defense of Bronte against charges of "coarseness" and suppression of what Charlotte herself had called her "wild, romantic" side (36-7). Bick maintains that Gaskell defended and vindicated Charlotte by emphasizing the rugged Yorkshire area, an eccentric father, an off-balance sister, and an intemperate brother (38-39). Gaskell herself, writing to Charles Kingsley in 1857 after the book had received threats of lawsuits, gives her own reasons for her treatment of Bronte:

> I can only say Respect & value the memory of Charlotte Bronte as she deserves. No one can know all she had to go through, but those who knew her well, and have seen her most intimate and confidential letters. The merciful judgment of all connected with that terrible life lies with God; and we may all be thankful that it does. I tried hard to write the truth. . . . Only do think of her, on, through all. You do not know what she had to bear; and what she had to hear. (L 452-3)

Once again Gaskell rests on the truth for her own vindication when confronted with the many complaints and the demands for an emended third edition. As Bick points out, however, both authors wrestled with the truth in their fiction, as a letter from Bronte to Gaskell reveals (45). Gaskell cites this letter in The Life as an example of what Bronte thought "fictitious writing ought to be":

> A thought strikes me. Do you, who have so many friends,--so large a circle of acquaintance,--find it easy, when you sit down to write, to isolate yourself from all those ties, and their sweet associations, so

> as to be your <u>own</u> <u>woman,</u> uninfluenced or swayed by the consciousness of how your work may affect other minds; what blame or what sympathy it may call forth? Does no luminous cloud ever come between you and the severe Truth, as you know it in your own secret and clear-seeing soul? (504-505)

Missy Kubitschek suggests that Gaskell's wrestling and ultimate suppression of the truth in <u>The Life of Charlotte Bronte</u> could perhaps have led her to analyze the motives and effects of lying in her next novel, <u>Sylvia's Lovers</u> (110). I believe Gaskell was more aware about her novelistic project than Kubitschek's agenda suggests. She had written before about lying and its effects. It appears that in Gaskell's practice, the truth could be suppressed as fits the novelist's purpose or even the biographer's. This is not to say that lying is justified, but that truthfulness may include more than one truth.

Moreover, comfortable truths may need to be undermined in order to serve a more comprehensive, if not absolute, truth. Again in the Preface to <u>Mary Barton</u> Gaskell explains how and why she wrote the novel: "to give some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people" (38). After reading <u>Mary Barton</u>, Thomas Carlyle wrote to Gaskell with warm appreciation for this announced purpose and its successful realization in the novel:

> I gratefully accept it as a real contribution (about the first real one) towards developing a huge subject,

> which has lain dumb too long, and really ought to speak for itself, and tell us its meaning a little, if there be any voice in it at all. Speech or literature (which is, or should be, select speech) could hardly find a more rational function, I think, at present. (qtd. in Uglow 217)

Gaskell's method of presenting truth is to give "utterance" to hitherto "dumb people." She does this not only in her social action novels but in all of her fiction. Cranford and Wives and Daughters, often considered idylls and hardly worth the time of social and materialist critics, should also be recognized as realizations of her literary purpose--to give utterance to dumb people. In these domestic novels the people are women in families and communities and especially women who live without men.

Cranford, for example, is a community of women, or, as Gaskell's narrator Mary Smith puts it, Cranford is "in possession of the Amazons" (Cranford[7] 1). From the first sentence of the story, male worlds--the commercial world of Drumble and the world of adventure of Peter Jenkyns--are pitted against female worlds in a mock battle. Lies are a key to the battle, which is one of values. The lies in Cranford can be divided into the male lies of Peter Jenkyns' tall tales and the female lies of Miss Matty's friends who have to conceal their contributions to her income when the bank fails. Susan Morgan points out that the world of business, represented by Drumble and the narrator's father, and the "dreamy and heroic realm of high adventure" (86),

which Peter tells of, are equally unreal when put against the values of Cranford's Amazons. Morgan maintains that Mary Smith's narration represents an education and even a conversion to those values of women: "Mary is a convert, discovering in Cranford a truth her father cannot tell and seeing through the eyes of Cranford to the fictions he takes for truth" (87). Peter's lies, "so very much like Baron Munchausen's" (C 152), "more wonderful . . . than Sinbad the Sailor" and "quite as good as an Arabian night" (C 154), represent entertainment, escape, and satire, but the lies of the women arrange Miss Matty's life so that she can support herself. Gaskell convinces the reader that both lies are necessary.

Peter's lies, like those of all storytellers, are creative. Patsy Stoneman claims that Peter's tale of shooting a cherubim in the Himalayas contrasts with "the fixed truths of Dr. Johnson and Miss Jenkyns, which claim to cover all eventualities" (96). Stoneman puts Peter with Matty and "the maternal principle" (97) rather than on the side of paternal law with his older sister Deborah. Gaskell gives voice to the women of communities and families who are not usually listened to. Miss Jenkyns, whose word is law, and who continues the absolute rule of her father, did much to harm Miss Matty's happiness. In Gaskell's scheme, however, the word of the older daughter gives way to that of the younger, as the writings of Dr. Johnson give way to those of Dickens.

In Mary Barton the narrator claims that the suffering of the working people cries out for expression: "They only wanted a Dante to record their sufferings. And yet even his words would fall short of the awful truth" (MB 125). For her first work Gaskell undertook what Dante would have fallen short in presenting, the hell of Manchester life from the point of view of those in the inferno itself. Gaskell's reference to Dante is well chosen because of his portrayal of hell, but a poet is not the best artist for the task Gaskell has in mind. A novelist is. The world view that Gaskell wanted to introduce to her readers was decentered and shaken by industrialism. The truth, as she put it in a letter, is not "the abstract absolute truth" (L 67), but the multivocal truths of people's lives. As a medieval poet, Dante had a unified world view. M. M. Bakhtin explains what makes the novelist differ from the poet in terms of the decentralization of language:

> The novel is the expression of a Galilean perception of language, one that denies the absolutism of a single and unitary language--that is, that refuses to acknowledge its own language as the sole verbal and semantic center of the ideological world. (366)

Gaskell's purpose, therefore, of giving voice to the workers and the poor, to the suffering townspeople she met in the streets of Manchester, and to single women was entirely suited to the novel as Bakhtin was later to describe it.

Bakhtin maintains that the novelist "ventriloquates" the languages (299) or "orchestrates all . . . themes," permitting "a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized)" (263). He calls the multiplicity of voices in the novel heteroglossia. The many national and social languages gathered by the novelist, according to Bakhtin, are all "equally capable of being 'languages of truth,' but since such is the case, all . . . are equally relative, reified, and limited, as they are merely the languages of social groups, professions and other cross-sections of everyday life" (367). Marjorie Stone has made an excellent case for applying Bakhtin to Gaskell's conscious use of "varieties of middle-class, working-class, and women's discourse in Mary Barton" (177). Stone's analysis deals well with the key concepts of duty and improvidence in that novel, but she does not employ Bakhtin to explain Gaskell's approach to lying and the truth.

The fact that Gaskell's plots often turn on lies or climax with options to lie reveals that conflicts in her novels are played out on a field of discourse. Michael Holquist, in his introduction to The Dialogic Imagination, maintains that Bakhtin's contribution to the theory of the novel is to reduce the basic scenario of all plots to two people talking in a certain context (xx). Holquist claims that Bakhtin identified "an almost Manichean sense of

opposition and struggle at the heart of existence, a ceaseless battle between centrifugal forces that seek to keep things apart, and centripetal forces that strive to make things cohere" (xviii). We can see this clash of forces in nature, culture, the individual's mind, and in utterances, but it is most found in language (xviii). Bakhtin has said that what he calls the "living utterance" is charged with meaning taken from "a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment" (276). The object is charged with the past, its social context and the individual's private meanings. It "unfolds" in a dialogue of "social heteroglossia," resulting in "the Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages that goes on around any object" (278). It is the business of the novelist to ventriloquize these languages. Gaskell has done this by allowing silenced people to speak through her novels--the workers of Manchester, the women of Cranford and Hollingsford, the sailors of Whitby captured by the press gangs, the railroad workers, the farmers, the dissenting ministers.

Gaskell's awareness of the power of language to awaken social responsibility in the reader is expressed by the narrator in Mary Barton: "I think again that surely, in a Christian land, it [the workers' distress] was not known even so feebly as words could tell it, or the more happy and fortunate would have thronged with their sympathy and their aid" (126). The words to tell it were, in Gaskell's mind, the workers' own words. Many were thoughtful people, as she

knew from personal experience among them. And they must be permitted to speak for themselves. In a letter to Mrs. Greg, Gaskell comments on her choice of the hero John Barton, "There are many such whose lives are tragic ["magic," in text; editors suggest change] poems which cannot take formal language" (L 74).

John Barton's participation in taking the Chartist Petition to London ends in anger and bitterness when he and the petition are received with silence there. Gaskell believed she was giving voice to "dumb" people like John Barton. Unfortunately, the workers were usually given the silent treatment by an ignoring world. Dale Bauer's application of Bakhtin's theories to silenced women applies here to all the silenced people whose voices Gaskell orchestrates: "Through Bakhtin's principle of the dialogization of the novel, we can interpret the silenced or suicidal voice of female characters compelling a dialogue with those others who would prefer to think they do not exist" (14). Gaskell saw that people in her community were excluded from dialogue, and the novel for her gave the means of presenting the truth about her world. The truth, as she and the reader interpret it, emerges from dialogue, but it cannot be one "abstract, absolute truth." The novel is not a monologue, but, as Bakhtin says, "a spring of dialogism that never runs dry" (330).

Truths run deep into time and range wide into space. The lies in Gaskell novels, therefore, require a deep

history--indeed a whole novel--to develop their grounding. In North and South, for example, Margaret Hale's lie about her brother requires that we follow her father's crisis of faith and abandonment of his ministry, her mother's consequent collapse and illness, her brother's condemnation for mutiny if he sets foot on English soil, and Margaret's assumption of an active moral role in holding the family together--in fact, in keeping the family alive. It is ironic that Margaret's father can afford the luxury of refusing to lie in his unspecified crisis of belief, but his abandonment of vocation sets in motion the compromising of his family and eventually of Margaret's integrity. Gaskell's point is that moral agents are grounded in complex contexts. Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it this way in an essay entitled "What is meant by 'Telling the Truth'?":

> The truthfulness which we owe to God must assume a concrete form in the world. Our speech must be truthful, not in principle but concretely. . . . the simple fact is that the ethical cannot be detached from reality, and consequently continual progress in learning to appreciate reality is a necessary ingredient in ethical action. (364)

Bonhoeffer theorizes what Gaskell unfolds in all of her novels, the process of learning to read the context and to act morally in the face of it. According to Bonhoeffer, children and inexperienced people have more to learn because of the world's complexity.

Analysis of the lie and of Gaskell's social and political purposes leads to the conclusion that her novels are all novels of education. According to Bonhoeffer, "Telling the truth is, therefore, something which must be learnt" (364). He argues that truth telling does not depend on a fixed moral character which always acts blamelessly. Moral action in truth telling demands that the agent read the situation and act or speak according to what is real. Bonhoeffer continues,

> "Telling the truth", therefore, is not solely a matter of moral character; it is also a matter of correct appreciation of real situations and of serious reflection upon them . . . . The real is to be expressed in words. That is what constitutes truthful speech. (283)

Gaskell's novelistic purpose is revealed in a character--usually a young woman--who learns how to express what is real in words. Fittingly, Gaskell identifies Mary Barton with The Faerie Queen's Una whose quest is a perilous one--as are all the quests of Gaskell's heroines:

> And you must remember, too, that never was so young a girl so friendless, or so penniless, as Mary was at this time. But the lion accompanied Una through the wilderness and the danger; and so will a high, resolved purpose of right-doing ever guard and accompany the helpless. (MB 302)

The legal system and trial Mary faces are as much a wilderness as ever Una attempted. But all of Gaskell's heroines--Ruth Hinson, Margaret Hale, Phillis Holman, Molly Gibson, Sylvia Robson--have a "high, resolved purpose of right-doing" as they try to find words to fit their moral context.

The reader, like the questing heroine, is led through the wilderness by "the lion" of Gaskell's own high resolved purpose of right doing, but sometimes the reader feels as Mr. Thornton did when, tortured by his knowledge of her lie--he awakens from a dream of her: "He felt hardly able to separate the Una from the Duessa; and the dislike he had for the latter seemed to envelope and disfigure the former" (331). Many middle-class readers of Gaskell's own time must have been deeply suspicious of Gaskell and must have believed her message to be subversive. After all, she suggested that workers and women have an argument that puts masters and men on the moral defensive. A review of Mary Barton from the New Monthly Magazine and Humourist, published in 1848, presents a nervous and unsettled response to Gaskell's call for reform. John Lucas argues that the review is a tribute to Gaskell's power of stating the workers' case and the "unease" which her novel caused conservatives:

> The authoress professes to have nothing to do with political economy of the theories of trade, she says that she merely wishes to impress what the workman feels and thinks, but she allows the discontented to

> murmur in prolonged strains without an attempt to chasten the heart or correct the understanding. Barton rails at all capitalists as being so only through the toil of the poor. This would be staunch communism. There surely must be capitalists or the condition of the poor would be worse than ever. We are told in scripture that the poor shall never cease out of the land, but we are also told that their expectation shall not perish, and that those who trust, shall be fed and delivered out of affliction. Further than this we are told that the person of the poor should be no more respected than that of the rich should be honoured, and while it is sinful to oppress and a duty to assist, so also the poor that will not bear rebuke, their poverty is their destruction. (qtd. in Lucas, "Mrs. Gaskell and Brotherhood," 164).

No wonder the factory owners of Manchester were rocked by Gaskell's first novel. As she reports to her publisher Edward Chapman in 1849, "Half the masters here are bitterly angry with me--half (and the best half) are buying it to give to their work-people's libraries" (L 68). Mr. Thornton, the mill owner of North and South, and Mr. Carson of Mary Barton are both brought to painful awareness by the women and workers Gaskell puts directly in their view. Both suffer deeply by being forced to look at the houses and streets of Manchester. Both are unhinged from the complacencies of their moral judgments. According to Hilary Schor, Gaskell provides a model reader in the character of Mr. Carson (Scheherezade 42). By the end of the novel, Carson has, like the reader, "seen what was in front of him all along--has, in essence, finally read the novel we have been reading" (42). He is brought, Schor says, to an

awareness of "the essential lesson of this novel, "that we . . . are bound to each other" (43).

If Gaskell had been content to send one Una after another into the social and political wilderness of nineteenth-century society to search out the truth, her novels would have less interest. It is the Duessas instead who provide the interest, the intrigue, the comedy, and the farce which make her novels so compelling. Though Bakhtin would not himself pick Gaskell as a proficient practicer of what he called "gay deception," his treatment of the unmasking of lies is directly applicable to her purpose. Bakhtin distinguishes--though he never named them--two stylistic lines in the history of the novel--the monoglot and the heteroglot. The monoglot may recognize other voices, but it privileges one language as the truth (Clark and Holquist 291-2). "It knows only a single language and a single style" (292). The heteroglot novel, according to Clark and Holquist, "is skeptical of all languages that assume they are the only voice of truth, a claim to exclusive privilege that Bakhtin calls the "lie of pathos." The heteroglot novel puts against the "lie of pathos" the "joyful deception" of another unmasking lie or, as Bakhtin puts it, "a gay and intelligent deception, a <u>lie</u> justified because it is directed precisely to <u>liars</u>" (401).

Though her novels are far from those of Cervantes or Rabelais--Bakhtin's preeminent practitioners of gay deception--Gaskell presents her own alternatives to

Bakhtin's "merry rogue," that deceiver who unmasks deception. Merry rogues apppear in almost every novel, but they are not usually the main characters. Instead Gaskell uses merry rogues as foils to her main characters. Gallagher has called Mary Barton's friend Sally Leadbitter farcical and comic. She is "a working class version of the witty female rogue" (68), but a rogue whose worldly wise ways "correct" Mary's romantic reading of Harry Carson's intentions. Similarly, Molly Gibson's stepsister, Cynthia, plays Duessa to Molly's Una in Wives and Daughters. Unmasking deceivers and the interplay of voices make Gaskell herself the Gay Deceiver who aims to undeceive.

In the course of her career, Gaskell grew in awareness of the effect upon her readers of admitting discourse. She depended less on the interference of her narrators and direct address of the reader in each successive novel. However, she became more aware of the need for people in everyday existence to read and interpret the languages surrounding them. Two of Gaskell's best works--Sylvia's Lovers and Cousin Phillis--concern literacy and learning. In Sylvia's Lovers a seemingly minor theme is the illiteracy of the title character. Sylvia cannot read, and Philip Hepburn undertakes to teach her. However, she is a reluctant learner and is much more swayed by the tall whaling tales of Charley Kinraid. The subtext of this novel is not that Sylvia would be happier if she could read books, but that she would be more aware if she could read

discourse. Learning to read the lie is a skill for everyday life. Unfortunately the tragedy is that Sylvia does not learn to read until all her chances for happiness lie dead.

Cousin Phillis seems the reverse of Sylvia's Lovers, but both works show Gaskell's preoccupation with reading and interpreting languages. Unlike Sylvia, Phillis is a learned young woman, reading both Latin and Greek with her father. She also is learning to read Italian by tackling Dante. Her tragedy unfolds despite her learning and through no fault of her own. Her cousin, the naive and unread narrator of the story, however, has learned by the end to read the discourse of his world with more of a feeling and poetic sensibility. Learning to read the lie does not save one from tragedy but deepens the moral life.

Telling the truth depends then on reading the situation and the play of voices that surrounds the individual. Gaskell puts her main characters in the middle of the Tower of Babel and says, which voice is telling a lie? What is the moral way out of this muddle? If others are lying or if the community is compounding a lie through its institutions, what can the individual do to rectify the situation? Though Gaskell, following the social pattern of Unitarians, always seeks action in response to recognition of wrong, there is often not much that can be done. So many of her works are tragedies because nothing can be done in time to save the character we have followed to uneasy awareness. Awareness of the truth can sometimes even kill. Hester Huntroyd, the

mother in "The Crooked Branch," dies after the courtroom scene where she and her husband are forced to testify about their knowledge of their son's participation in a robbery of their own house. They tell the truth, as demanded by the court, but the cost of speaking the truth, instead of the more comforting lies they have lived with for years, paralyzes the mother and puts her on her deathbed. Her old husband addresses the court after speaking for his paralyzed wife, "And now yo've truth, and a' th' truth, and I'll leave yo' to th' Judgment o' God for th' way yo've getten at it" (CP 238). Humans can bear only so much knowledge of the truth.

In a story that attacks tyranny of class and gender, Gaskell united the Una and the Duessa in one person. Lucy of "The Poor Clare" appears, as Patsy Stoneman points out, as a literal double (136). One part of Lucy is the sweet, demure, lovely girl the narrator falls in love with. But Lucy's double appears as a sexual monster before his very eyes:

> Just at that instant, standing as I was opposite to her in the full and perfect morning light, I saw behind her another figure,--a ghastly resemblance complete in likeness, so far as form and feature and minutest touch of dress could go, but with a loathsome demon soul looking out of the grey eyes, that were in turns mocking and voluptuous. My heart stood still within me; every hair rose up erect; my flesh crept with horror. I could not see the grave and tender Lucy--my eyes were fascinated by the creature beyond. (My Lady Ludlow[8] 304-5)

Maureen T. Reddy sees the story "as a myth of female power and powerlessness" (261). Reddy and Stoneman focus on Gaskell's exposition of society's problem with female sexuality and its repression (261 and 136). According to Jenny Uglow, Gaskell wrote "The Poor Clare" while working on The Life of Charlotte Bronte. Like Charlotte Bronte, Lucy has Irish ancestry and comes from north Lancashire. Uglow argues that the sexually double Lucy was suggested to Gaskell because of her uncovering and suppression of Bronte's sensual nature in researching and writing the biography (399).

I believe, however, that "The Poor Clare" reveals much more about Gaskell's political purpose in her later novels and stories. Increasingly the subtexts of Gaskell's fiction lead the reader to recognize the use and abuse of language to achieve power. Lucy's divided nature has its origin in the curse of her grandmother, Bridget Fitzgerald. Bridget curses a dissolute Mr. Gisborne when he wantonly kills her dog, which had originally belonged to Mary, Bridget's daughter. Mary had been lost to Bridget for years ever since she had left home to go into service on the Continent. As Bridget later finds out, however, Mary had been deceived by Gisborne--the very man Bridget had cursed--into a false marriage and had drowned herself after giving birth to Lucy. While the story strongly opposes cursing--the hasty reaction of Bridget to injustice and arrogant male power--at the same time it exposes the deep-rooted causes of female rebellion

and admits the point of view of a so-called witch to serious consideration.

Bridget's ultimate fate is to expiate her sins in an Antwerp convent where, as a "poor Clare," she dies after saving the man she originally cursed and thus releases Lucy from her demon. Gisborne is in Antwerp fighting to uphold Austrian rule in the low countries. The citizens of Antwerp, on whose side the narrator fights, are resisting Austrian rule the way Bridget originally resisted Lucy's father's unthinking tyranny. It may seem that Bridget admits her sin by sacrificing her own life for her enemy just as Gaskell seems to support the role of the Catholic church in defining women's roles and offering Bridget the means to expiate her sin. But Gaskell's treatment of the church is in fact ambiguous, and the final scene reveals the subversive subtext of the whole story. When the city of Antwerp comes to the convent to attend the sister dying of starvation, the narrator reads the passage from Romans 12:20, which Bridget--now Sister Magdalen--had copied in English and placed by her bed: "Therefore, if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink" (MLL 332). But Gaskell withholds the second half of this biblical verse--"for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head." Edgar Wright says readers of Gaskell's time would know the second part of the verse well and calls Gaskell's omission "brilliant . . . since it points up, by its very

absence, the whole action of the story" (MLL note 452). Within the suppressed half-verse lies the subversive justification of Bridget's curse and of the existence of witches.

The story, though judged flawed by most readers, including Reddy, because of its complicated plot and many characters (261), illustrates Gaskell's typical methods and themes. She reviews every character's background, explaining how Bridget came to be judged a witch by her neighbors and how Lucy is the child of a deceiving father and a betrayed mother. Gisborne's repenting of his treatment of Lucy's mother and his loving Lucy do not change his arrogance in treating others, and thus he kills the helpless dog when he fails to kill any true game on a day's hunting. By coincidence, but also by character, he treats the dog as he had its owner, Mary. Bridget reacts with the only power her society has granted a woman in her position. She curses the arrogant Gisborne. In several of her later short stories, Gaskell turns to the subjects of witchcraft and vengeance as a response to deceit and tyranny. She looks at the powerless and recognizes the language of their protest.

The narrator of "The Poor Clare" follows Gaskell's own technique in pursuing a story. As a lawyer, he is assigned to explore the lines of descent to settle an inheritance. He untangles the story's strands, traces missing people, and comes to understand the backgrounds of all the characters.

He cares about them enough to become active in the search for answers. Following the education given him by his uncle, an eminent attorney and authority on geneology, he spends time "ferreting out every scrap of paper or parchment and every word of tradition respecting the family" (MLL 286). He admits all the circumstantial evidence just as Gaskell admits all languages spoken by her characters--whether they be curses or prayers. When the lawyer has read the contexts of the living and the dead, he reacts with love and pity for those who have suffered. The goals of Gaskell's narrative method and that of the compassionate and feeling lawyer are the same: to determine the inheritance of the living. "The Poor Clare" not only presents the Una and Duessa of Gaskell's fiction in one character; it also reveals that in her novels curses and lies bubble up from long-building suppression, forcing disturbing questions of gender, power, and truth to the surface.

The following chapters explore these questions, which Gaskell raises in her continuing and unrelenting examination of the grounds and justification for lying. Questions of lying and gender surface in chapter two, specifically in the case of a fallen woman. By structuring a whole novel--Ruth--to fit the argument and purpose of the lie/lie pun, Gaskell creates a parable with inversions that compel readers to reexamine their automatic condemnation of fallen women. Chapter two also explores Gaskell's Unitarian background to develop her habits of reasoning and interpreting.

Unitarianism explains Gaskell's willingness to question and reinterpret not only moral standards but also the most basic Christian doctrines.

As an educator and a moralist, Gaskell is aware of the way language may be used and abused to gain power. Chapter three examines closely justice and the law through Gaskell's historical works and their subversive subtexts. Gaskell pits the laws of man against the laws of God and finds a wild, but more genuine justice often emerges in the voices of outlaws and marginalized people. Chapter four continues to consider the people of Gaskell's borderlands, but this time from the angle of literacy and learning. Gaskell admits and values oral cultures and multiple literacies, but insists on a special kind of reading required by those who would be moral agents. In all her works the reading of contexts is more vital than the reading of texts and can be even of life-and-death importance.

Chapter five explores Gaskell's analysis of the double standards of honesty for men and women. The information explosion and the growth of a credit economy made more important the reliability of people's word. However, among women in the marriage market truthfulness had given way to cunning and mendacity as they manipulated a place of security for themselves or their daughters. Gaskell indicts her society for such pathological uses of information as silence, secrets, lies, and blackmail and suggests discretion as an ameliorating virtue. Although a comic

novel, Wives and Daughters is based on the serious issue of maintaining women's integrity and survival in the new economy. In all her works, Gaskell strives to move her readers from complacency to reform by giving voice to all the marginalized people of her fictional worlds.

While disclaiming that there is one absolute truth, Gaskell pursues truth by admitting discourse. She would not agree with Hamlet's advice to Ophelia that her "honesty should admit no discourse to [her] beauty" (3.1.107-8). She would agree, however, with his implication that power and even danger lie in "discourse." Gaskell's honesty, operating in a different time and place, demanded that she open up the grounds for truth.

[1] References to Mary Barton are to the Penguin edition of 1970, edited by Stephen Gill. Future references to this novel will be abbreviated MB.

[2] A specksioneer is "the chief harpooner on a whaler" according to Andrew Sanders, editor of Sylvia's Lovers, 517.

[3] References are to the Oxford Press edition of Cousin Phillis and Other Tales, edited by Angus Easson, and are abbreviated CP in the text.

[4] Bonaparte's unconventional biography "'constructs' the inner Gaskell" (11) whom she sees revealed in the language and images of her fiction. Bonaparte claims it was "only through images that she could tell the world those truths she wanted not to know herself" (11). Further, Bonaparte argues that Gaskell made herself into the ideal Mrs. Gaskell to deal with her traumatic childhood (45-46), hiding her demon in memories and dreams which only surfaced in her fiction. According to Bonaparte, lying is one of Gaskell's "central images" (170). Liars in her fiction are doers, whom Bonaparte bizarrely classifies as male. Not content to be passive, a liar--whether the male Philip Hepburn or the female Margaret Hale--chooses a male act just as Gaskell chose the art of fiction to express her demon (223). Lies bother the official "Mrs. Gaskell" but express the secret self that she has hidden even from herself. Bonaparte equates the images of Gaskell's novels with the context of Gaskell's own life, taking a leap that makes fascinating reading. Gaskell herself, however, stayed grounded in the distinct world of each novel.

[5] References to Gaskell's letters are to J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard's edition of The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell, published by Harvard UP in 1967. Future references will be abbreviated L, and numbers will refer to pages, not letters.

[6] References to "Disappearances" are to Volume 2 of the Knutsford edition, entitled Cranford and Other Tales. Editor is A. W. Ward. This volume will be abbreviated COT in future references.

[7] References to Cranford are to the Oxford Press edition, edited by Elizabeth Porges Watson. Future references to this novel will be abbreviated C.

[8] References to "The Poor Clare" are to the Oxford Press edition of My Lady Ludlow and Other Stories, edited by Edgar Wright. Future references to this collection will be abbreviated MLL.

CHAPTER II

ELIZABETH GASKELL, UNITARIAN: RUTHLESS FOR REFORM

What kind of religious group can call itself Christian while denying the divinity of Jesus? What kind of Christian belief is prepared ultimately to see Christianity itself fall before the power of reasonable inquiry? What kind of interpretation finds the Bible fallible when questioned by analysis of social situations? What kind of religion is willing to overthrow creeds and conventions to accept what reason discovers as truth? How can one judge what is moral in a world that requires constant reinterpretation? Just as questions invert the syntax of the declarative sentence, so do Unitarians sometimes find spiritual meaning and sense in unsettling inversions. Unitarians are believers in one God and in the pursuit of truth; therefore, they find themselves questioning just about every belief or creed that the orthodox affirm. Their own belief is that through inquiry humans can make progress toward salvation. Coral Lansbury describes Unitarians as an essentially hopeful people with few reasons for crisis during the stormy Victorian religious climate:

> Their theology was an optimistic affirmation of man as a rational being who could ultimately attain a perfect state in this world without recourse to marvels and miracles. (11)

Elizabeth Gaskell was a Unitarian; she was born, educated and married in the dissenting sect. Although the word Unitarian never appears in any form in her works (Webb, "Gaskells" 159), the Unitarian spirit of inquiry controls her choice of topics and accounts for her emphasis on interpretation. Her mission in writing was in keeping with her religious principles, and she undertook a conscious literary project to educate and change society. Lansbury maintains that Gaskell has been misunderstood because too little attention has been paid to her religion (15); there were both an influence and indeed an advantage to Gaskell of being born a Unitarian:

> To be born a woman in the Victorian era was to enter a world of social and cultural deprivation unknown to a man. But to be born a woman and Unitarian was to be released from much of the prejudice and oppression enjoined upon other women. (11)

Gaskell was fortunate because Unitarians advocated the equal education of women and because religious inquiry based on reason lay at the heart of their religion. Yet these privileges were inseparable from a strict responsibility. Unitarians consequently believed it was their duty to question all creeds, conventions, and confessions. "Elizabeth Gaskell never doubted," Lansbury argues, "that she was born with the right and the ability to change society" (15). In Ruth, she undertook to do just that.

The novel grew from her own personal missionary action; it tests current moral positions; and it requires reinterpretation of conventional beliefs. Through the use of a crucial lie, Gaskell ruthlessly suggests to Victorians that they invert vice and virtue, sinner and saint in the case of a particular fallen woman, who is in much the same situation as Pasley, the prostitute "rescued" by Gaskell herself.

To understand Ruth, which Craik has claimed is religious the way no other of Gaskell's novels is (Elizabeth Gaskell 49), one must examine the habits of religious thinking that characterize Unitarians. To the orthodox, Unitarians were the most disconcerting of the dissenting sects because of their open willingness to question doctrine. During the eighteenth century, "the Unitarians were," according to Joseph Priestley, "a sect everywhere spoken against" (qtd. in Webb, Harriet 65). Priestley had been attacked by both the Established Church and what Francis E. Mineka calls "orthodox Dissenters" (18). Unitarians were opposed, therefore, by Anglicans, but also by Methodists and Roman Catholics. One Methodist hymn expresses the strength of feeling against Unitarians:

> Stretch out thy arm, thou Triune God!
> The Unitarian fiend expel,
> And chase his doctrines back to Hell.
> (qtd. in Mineka 19).

Earl Morse Wilbur, in his History of Unitarianism, determines three leading principles of the sect: freedom, reason, and tolerance (5). First, the Unitarians believed in complete freedom of the mind to pursue religious thought. Creeds and confessions were like fetters on the free exercise of reason. According to Sylvia Kirby, for the Unitarians "no doctrine was too sacred to be questioned" (22). For an example Kirby mentions the Unitarian analysis of the biblical injunction that the poor will always be with us. Acceptance of this principle led, Unitarians believed, to a complacency and holding back of remedies for poverty; consequently, in the mid-nineteenth century Unitarians abandoned the infallibility of the Bible in this and similar cases (22).[1] Gaskell experienced no persecution because of her faith, but her works reveal the application of reason to every social situation and toleration and flexibility in beliefs. Harriet Martineau, who was raised in a strong Unitarian family in circumstances similar to Elizabeth Gaskell's, eventually gave up Unitarianism because of the insistence upon reason and reinterpretation. Writing somewhat bitterly after she deserted their ranks, Martineau says, "Unitarians took any liberty they pleased with the revelation they professed to receive" (qtd. in Mineka 21).

The importance of using reason to pursue truth was the second principle fundamental to Unitarian belief. Priestley was even "prepared to see Christianity itself fall before the tide of enquiry at some distantly future time" (Webb,

"Gaskells" 148). Wilbur maintains that Unitarians have always been flexible to changes in "the forms of thought; being at all times far more concerned with the underlying spirit of Christianity in its application to the situations of practical life than with intellectual formulations of Christian thought" (5). Because of flexible belief and the practice of inquiry Unitarians have been committed to a third principle, tolerance, and open to the discoveries of science (Webb, "Gaskells" 148). A sermon preached by the Reverend Thomas Belsham in 1790 conveys the mission to search out truth which forms the basis for Unitarianism. Belsham declared it everyone's duty

> to bear testimony to . . . [truth] by diligent enquiry after it, courageous profession of it, faithful adherence to it, and by using every fair and honourable means of promoting its progress in the world" (Webb, Harriet 68).

Bearing testimony to truth for Elizabeth Gaskell gave her a more inquiring mind and a tendency to test accepted practices. It also gave her a missionary's zeal to seek action. R. K. Webb argues that pursuit of truth for Unitarians was an "imperative of candour" in two senses: "speaking out about truth and speaking with utter frankness" ("Gaskells" 163).

Unitarians do not believe in two important doctrines--the Trinity and the Divinity of Christ (Easson 5), but from

their omission many more doctrines fall. Jesus is a man and not to be worshiped as a God. Unitarians are strictly Protestant when it comes to resting on scriptures and individual interpretation. In fact, scriptures are used as justification for the denial of the trinity. Priestley argued for the combination of reason and the Bible to prevent "the gross delusions of Papists, who, after relinquishing reason, have been made to believe a lie" (qtd. in Easson 5). Angus Easson explains how other doctrines fell with that of Jesus' divinity. The Doctrine of Atonement, for example, no longer operated: "But if man, Jesus could not volunteer to take our sins on him nor his death atone for them" (6). Original sin, salvation by grace alone, and predestination all are unreasonable when the divinity of Christ is gone. In a sermon entitled "Unitarian Christians Called to Bear Witness to the Truth," William Gaskell called original sin "the denial of human reason" (qtd. in Stoneman 59).

Paradoxically, despite their denial of Jesus' divinity, Unitarians are still Christian, though some, like Charlotte Bronte's husband A. B. Nicholls, called them "heretics," and the Norfolk Chronicle "outcasts from the Christian hope" (qtd. in Easson 11). R. K. Webb stresses that for Unitarians the mission of Jesus was divine while his person was not: "When He judged, He knew what it was to sin; if He had learned to be perfect, so everyone could learn to be perfect" ("Gaskells" 145). According to Webb, Priestley

retained two elements from scriptures to attest to Unitarians' rights to be called Christian: the miracles and the resurrection. Both could withstand--Priestly believed--the test of historical criticism. Further, with Jesus' resurrection came the promise of all people's resurrection though the means were unknowable ("Gaskells" 145).[2] Mineka's book, The Dissidence of Dissent, expresses in its title the disconcerting and jarring inconsistencies which Unitarianism was heir to after Priestley (20-21). However, the strong influence of eighteenth-century Unitarianism on Gaskell gave rise to her passionate pursuit of truth and her belief that the individual assumes the burden of morality.

Important in any examination of Elizabeth Gaskell's novels is her belief that living morally was a process of questioning, of interpreting, and of testing. In her novels she castigates those who piously rely on unbending moral codes: Mr. Bradshaw in Ruth; the Puritan ministers in "Lois the Witch." Hilary Schor has commented that "for Gaskell, morality is never absolutely fixed" (Scheherezade 70). According to Jenny Uglow, William and Elizabeth Gaskell fought

> social evil, not original sin or the works of the devil . . . If such evil was humanly created, it must, they felt, be open to human remedy through practical measures and through the power of the word to awaken conscience and modify behavior. (73)

Controversies and social evils, consequently, demanded commitment of word and action. Both Gaskells were so committed: William through teaching and preaching; Elizabeth through writing and social service.

Both Gaskells fit in what Webb calls the "Channingite and philanthropic cross-current" of nineteenth century Unitarianism ("Gaskells" 156). James Martineau, a close friend, was responsible in the 1830s for the new strain in the sect in England which was grounded more in "internal promptings," Priestleyan free will and "a different perception of conscience" than on what was seen by some as cold, Priestleyan, rational argument ("Gaskells" 146). In addition, the influence of two Americans strongly affected nineteenth century Unitarians. Emphasis on the word can be seen in a new "warmer" devotional preaching practiced by William Ellery Channing and in emphasis on action in the domestic missions to the poor practiced by Channing's friend Joseph Tuckerman (147). While these Unitarian actions were educational, they operated on the individual, one-on-one level rather than on the general societal level.

With the influence of these American reformers and a spirit of individualism and attention to the common life inherited from Romanticism, Elizabeth Gaskell was, not surprisingly, among the first novelists to turn to the social problem of the fallen woman. In 1849 Gaskell undertook to help a poor sixteen-year-old prostitute named Pasley. As Gaskell explains in a letter to Charles Dickens

in January of 1850, Pasley was the daughter of an Irish clergyman, who died when she was two, and an indifferent mother, who, when she remarried, abandoned her--when Pasley was only six--to an orphan school and a guardian uncle. At fourteen, she was apprenticed to a dressmaker whose business failed. Her second placement was with a dressmaker of "profligate" character, who arranged for her seduction by a surgeon called in when she was sick. Pasley wrote to her mother but never heard from her during her entire apprenticeship. She lapsed into prostitution, drinking, and theft for four months at the encouragement of women who took her from the penitentiary (L 98-9). Gaskell had found her imprisoned for theft and was so touched with her case that she wrote to Charles Dickens for a reference to Angela Burdett-Coutts. Coutts did rescue work among fallen women, enabling many to emigrate to Australia. Dickens not only replied but helped with the emigration to the Cape and a letter of advice from Miss Coutts. Significantly, the letter to Dickens takes a good story-telling form with what Uglow calls "a postscript, a dramatic, ironic coda" (246). In the postscript Gaskell tells how the girl again met her seducer who was sent for when she was in New Bayley Prison. When they came "face to face, the girl just fainted dead away, and he was so affected he had to sit down,--he said 'Good God how did you come here'" (L 99).

In the case of Pasley, Gaskell showed herself active in word and deed in social service. According to Gerin, she

visited her three times a week in prison, found respectable people to accompany her to London and an emigrating family to go with her to the Cape, provided her outfit and paid her passage (105). Significantly, Gaskell wants to send Pasley out "with as free and unbranded a character as she can; if possible, the very fact of having been in prison etc. to be unknown on her landing" (L 99). Bonaparte suggests that Gaskell means inventing a story to protect her in her new community, as the Bensons do to protect Ruth Hilton (82). It is evident that her involvement with Pasley determined the subject and some of the plot of the novel she was to title Ruth.

The strength of Gaskell's reforming intentions in Ruth can be found in a passage of a letter to Eliza Fox about Pasley. "Tottie," as Gaskell called Fox, had visited Manchester at the time of Gaskell's concern for the girl and had also taken an interest in her case. Gaskell writes, "Well I suppose it won't do to pull this world to pieces, and make up a better, but sometimes it seems the only way of effectually puryfying [sic] it" (L 91). Obviously Gaskell was concerned with social hypocrisy and the double standard. But as she reworked Pasley's story into the novel, the tale became, as Gerin called it, "a study of Woman in Relation to Society--of Woman as a Victim of the existing Social Order" (127-8).

Ruth represents for Victorian readers a "pulling to pieces" of their complacent condemnation of the exclusive

"sins" of fallen women. Gaskell was, according to Aina Rubenius, "one of the very first Victorian writers of fiction to attack the generally accepted double moral in sexual matters" (188). And George Watt has cautioned that it "is easy to forget how completely new Ruth was" (20). According to Hilary Schor, "Gaskell meant to write a novel not like other narratives of fallen women" (Scheherezade 74). As these comments indicate, Gaskell is breaking with literary convention in approaching this topic as she does. W. A. Craik explains that it is not that mid-century Victorians were squeamish or that authors were limited in choice of topics.

> But there is no denying that there are literary conventions and expectations to be satisfied. Sexual irregularity is acceptable if it is history, or treated with reticence or humour, or secondarily; prostitutes can appear if idealized or good-hearted, or if they die . . . . One feels that the mid-nineteenth century in its fiction could stomach fallen women, illegitimate children, adulterers and profligates of both sexes, provided that there are not too many at once, and certain rules were observed: that, if present in large quantities, they are peripheral, that there is no reward for vice, or if there is, it is condemned. (48)

Gaskell, however, focuses the whole novel, not just the periphery, on Ruth's case. She had already dealt conventionally with Mary Barton's Aunt Esther, whose professional name was Butterfly, and also with Lizzie Leigh in a short story. What is new in Ruth is Gaskell's questioning whether being a sexual victim can even be regarded as committing a vice (Watt 20).

In addition, Gaskell sets Ruth in a society that reflects other moral problems from corruption in public elections to tyranny in the family. Watt argues that Gaskell "forces readers to reevaluate concepts of sin and morality" (40). Wright maintains that Ruth is not just about fallen women but also about family and upbringing (71). Susan Morgan compares Gaskell's novel with Eliot's Middlemarch (91-3). According to Morgan, Gaskell too creates a whole world demanding reform--in election laws, education, and moral values. Gaskell, however, ignores politics in the novel's darker denouement. Her villains in politics--Bellingham and Bradshaw--stay in power, unlike Eliot's Brooke and Bulstrode. Her champions of change are the unlikely Thurstan Benson and Ruth Denbigh, who practice moral flexibility and forgiveness as well as an active charity (92-96).

Unitarian values, their inquiring spirit, and their missionary action unite in Ruth to "pull the world to pieces" and purify it, as Gaskell intended. But, of course, she was misunderstood, and in some cases perhaps reviled because understood too well. Unfavorable reactions to Ruth caused Gaskell to experience what she called a "'Ruth' fever"(L 222):

> but oh! I was so poorly! and cd [sic] not get over the hard things people said of Ruth. . . . I think I must be an improper woman without knowing it, I do so manage to shock people. Now should you have burnt the 1st vol. of Ruth as so very bad? even if you had been a very anxious father of a family? Yet two men have; and

> a third has forbidden his wife to read it; they sit next to us in Chapel and you can't think how "improper" I feel under their eyes. (L 222-23)

One London library withdrew the novel as being "unfit for family reading," and The Literary Gazette expressed "deep regret that we and all admirers of Mary Barton must feel at the author's loss of reputation" (L 223).

In time, others appreciated what Gaskell had dared and achieved in Ruth. G. H. Lewes commented on the newness of Gaskell's approach: "The author of Ruth has wisely done what few authors see the wisdom of doing--opened a new mine instead of working the old one" (qtd. in Watt 20-21). And in time, Gaskell could regain her sense of humor about the reception of Ruth, appreciating the pun returned by Sir Francis Doyle when she said to him, "she wished people would not look at her as if she were the author of Ruth." Doyle's reply, "Can't you tell them, my dear, that you're Ruthless?" (L 309), appealed to Gaskell, no doubt, because she was getting over the first reactions to the novel which had misunderstood her purpose in writing Ruth. But even more, I believe, the play on words reveals the truth. Gaskell was ruthless in her attempt to change society's view of the fallen and the unfallen woman. She was "pulling to pieces" her world, and it was with a violence that proceeded from strong conviction and religious zeal. She wrote to Mary Green in 1853 about Ruth: "I did feel as if I had something to say about it that I must say, and you know I can tell

stories better than any other way of expressing myself" (qtd. in Uglow 236).

It must not be forgotten, moreover, that there were two controversial topics in Ruth: Ruth's fall and the Bensons' lie, the one daringly attacking society's view of the responsibility for sexuality and the other the morality of lying. In the importance she placed on lying in these two senses, Gaskell was writing a whole novel on the lie/lie pun which Christopher Ricks has designated "simply the most important pun in the language" (123). The importance of any pun derives, Ricks argues, from the "compacting or . . . constellating of language and literature, of social and cultural circumstance" (121). As for the lie/lie pun, its range and its potency are derived from its function in testing truth. Ricks puts it strongly:

> The importance of the lie/lie pun is that it concentrates an extraordinarily ranging and profound network of truth-testing situations and postures: it brings mendacity up against those situations and postures which constitute the great moments or endurances of truth: the childbed, the love bed, the deathbed, the grave. (131)

Ricks argues further that the pun "disconcerts" but does not simply invert (131); dishonesty is not pitted against honesty but placed in a testing situation (134). In Ruth, the Bensons' lie is undertaken to cover up society's unquestioning but sure response to Ruth's situation and to

her illegitimate son. Gaskell is testing that response at the same time she floats the lie to deal with it. Just as Shakespeare and the Dark Lady form a verbal pact in his Sonnet 138 to lie with and to each other and thus oppose "the world's false subtleties," so Gaskell constructs a moral testing ground for the double standard. Shakespeare's "simple truth" cannot endure just as simple Ruth is pitiful amidst the lies of Bellingham and the hypocrisy of her employer. Gaskell makes clear that "the world" would be too much for her innocent, if not virgin, heroine. It is no accident that ruth is one of the few words that rhymes with truth, and its meaning--though old fashioned today--is pity. Lying, however, is complex. Ricks explains that the

> lie has the special potency of immediately paradoxical possibilities, since it strikes at the roots of language and may strike, self-incriminatingly, at itself. The importance of lying therefore ranges from all those daily falsehoods in the ordinary world to such abstract but intense considerations of language, society, and philosophy. (125)

Gaskell deconstructs Victorian society's lies about sexuality in order to show her readers the t(ruth).

Gaskell's project in Ruth is a complex one because she chose to yoke the two senses of lie and to stress the role of language and interpretation in maintaining moral standards. In making a case for social change, Gaskell insists in Ruth that we question widely accepted truths

about sexuality, courtship, education, and upbringing. She tests the rigid Puritan moral codes of Bradshaw with the inquiring approach of Unitarianism represented by Benson. Ruth becomes a moral testing ground. Ruth's story becomes a parable of the search for a moral life following the spirit of Unitarianism.

Michael Wheeler has noted in his study of biblical sources in Mary Barton and Ruth how much Gaskell drew on gospel parables in her allusions and also in the structures of her tales. Christ's parables, Wheeler argues, "shaped her own realist narrative into parabolical episodes of crisis and renewal" (38). Reading Ruth as a parable helps, therefore, with the fissures in its structure--with the split Rosemary Bodenheimer finds between the pastoral argument of the first nine chapters and the social argument of the rest of the book (Politics 153). W. A. Craik has argued that instead of a plot, Ruth has a series of events arranged to show "progress of the soul" (54). Parallel stories reflect and contrast with Ruth's moral progress. Reading the novel as a parable also accounts for the extraordinary absence of will and intelligence in Ruth herself--"such a beautiful ignoramus" as Bellingham thinks of her (Ruth[3] 75)--and with her daemonic double" Jemima, who, Felicia Bonaparte says, is "born of Ruth's redemption" (123). Finally, the parabolic reading explains the need for Ruth's death at the end--against which Charlotte Bronte and Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote to Gaskell protesting

(Uglow 323 and 340). As Wheeler notes, "Ruth works out her suffering here on earth, and is promised heaven at the end of the novel" (38).

The parable begins with Ruth as a non-self and traces her fall, her private redemption, her public redemption and then her salvation. Through inversions, Gaskell illustrates how the last shall be first and the first last. This paradox is suggested not only by the way Ruth rises from most despised to canonized, but also the way the most twisted man, Thurston Benson, is beatified, and the most upright pillar of the chapel, Bradshaw, is revealed to be hollow. Through these two actors and through the traditional villainy of the lazy upperclass Bellingham/Donne Gaskell plays out the lie/lie pun. She illustrates through all the truth-testing of the novel the fragile but most enduring power of love. As Ricks argues, "The most important truth that can be uttered is also the most important, easiest, and most contemptible lie: 'I love you'" (137). If anything is responsible for the burning of Ruth by Gaskell's pew-mates, it is probably their identifying most with the Bradshaw-Bellingham characters and feeling most Gaskell's scorn.

The first nine chapters of Ruth have puzzled many critics because of Ruth's seeming innocence. Bodenheimer explains the confusion caused by Gaskell's portrayal: "Either Ruth must be a victim of social forces beyond her control or she must be guilty of sexuality" (Politics 153).

But Gaskell did not allow her to be guilty even though she permitted her to be stupid. Lansbury complains of her "being vapid and on the verge of illiteracy" (64). Further, Lansbury charges that Gaskell "never fails to make apparent that the simple charm which men find so attractive in Ruth is derived from her lack of intelligence, not her personality" (69). Bodenheimer has, I believe, the best interpretation of Ruth at this stage when she identifies her "natural innocence" as "presocial" (Politics 156). Bodenheimer believes Gaskell stresses the pastoral setting when the couple go to Wales "as though her real relationship were not with Bellingham but with nature" (158). I too see Ruth in this early section in a natural state before she becomes socially shaped. Gaskell's insistence on native innocence comes from her stand against original sin. Ruth is a non-self, not socially aware. Until she is struck by the boy, Harry, and called "a bad naughty girl," she has no idea that she has done anything sinful or wrong. Ruth "stood, white and still, with a new idea running through her mind" (R 72). Ruth has become a social being as the words break through her dense, childlike awareness.

M. M. Bakhtin has argued in his essay Freudianism that "self-awareness is always verbal, always a matter of finding some specifically suitable verbal complex" (qtd. in Clark and Holquist 206). Ruth has been struck both physically and verbally by the boy's outburst and name-calling. Bakhtin claims that

> any instance of self-awareness . . . is an act of gauging oneself against some social norm. Social evaluation is, so to speak, the socialization of oneself and one's behavior. In becoming aware of myself, I attempt to look at myself, as it were, through the eyes of another person. (qtd. in Clark, Holquist 206).

Bakhtin differs from Freud in this crucial movement from the non-self to self-awareness through the acquisition of languages. Freud argues for a movement from the complete ego involvement of the infant to an awareness of others. Gaskell permits Ruth to emerge from her natural state only when language makes her aware of society's code. Until then love and Bellingham's lies ruled her actions. Even yet she is not conscious of sin until she visits Chapel in Eccleston and takes in the words Benson chose, deliberately avoiding any reference to her condition:

> But where is the chapter which does not contain something which a broken and contrite spirit may not apply to itself. And so it fell out that, as he read, Ruth's heart was smitten, and she sank down; and down, till she was kneeling on the floor of the pew, and speaking to God in the spirit, if not in the words of the Prodigal son: "Father! I have sinned against Heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy child! (R 154)

Not the widow's cap, nor the shorn hair, nor the wedding ring bring consciousness to Ruth the way the words of the Bible do.

The first nine chapters of Ruth might be called "Ruthless" because of the absence of a conscious heroine. Ruth moves from being a social innocent, who, as Bodenheimer points out is not the same as a virgin, to become a "social problem" (Politics 157 and 160). And at this point the novel shifts to the consciousness of the Bensons.

When Gaskell changes the focus to the Bensons' problems in representing Ruth's case and Ruth's reception in society, she emphasizes the rule of language. After Bellingham deserts Ruth at the Inn in Wales and she sinks into suicidal despair, Thurston Benson struggles for the right words to reach her. But, as Gaskell says, "Indeed, it was true that his words did not vibrate in her atmosphere" (R 100). Finally finding the right appeal to her, he invokes her mother's name, and Ruth agrees to wait until the next day. Once again when Thurston's sister Faith arrives to nurse Ruth, he struggles for the right words to explain to Faith Ruth's situation: "Oh! for a seraph's tongue, and a seraph's powers of representation! but there was no seraph at hand" (R 111). Hilary Schor emphasizes the "questioning of inherited languages" which frequently forms the subject of Ruth (Scheherezade 79). Faith Benson herself reacts to her brother's story of Ruth--unmediated as it is by seraph's tongues--with the inherited language of her class and station on the subject of fallen women: "It would be better for her to die at once, I think" (R 112). But Thurston does know "the one word [to] put them right." He speaks her name

"in the tone which had authority over her" (R 112). Once Faith is brought round to her brother's way of thinking, no one is more zealous in finding the right language to represent Ruth's condition to the world. She seems constantly to affirm what she said in her letter in response to her brother's summons to Wales: "I obey, thereby proving my right to my name of Faith" (R 109).

The scenes between brother and sister set the tone for Gaskell's hostility to Victorian social mores. The question remains: how will Ruth's situation be represented? The plot turns on this question, which takes over from Ruth's fall as the central issue of the novel. The Bensons wander "into whole labyrinths of social ethics" (R 117). In the decision to lie about Ruth's past when they take her home to Eccleston with them, they are making the ends justify the means. Here Gaskell gives the narration the stamp of middle class respectability when she says of Thurston's dilemma, "It was the decision--the pivot, on which the fate of years moved; and he turned it the wrong way. But it was not for his own sake" (R 122). While the narrator seems to maintain that the lie is wrong, she also makes clear the extenuating circumstances: it is not a selfish lie. Certainly the lie is morally ambiguous. Bodenheimer suggests that Gaskell always makes the liar who violates social laws pay for it in social exposure. Yet the very act of exposure brings out the challenge to those social conventions (Politics 162).

Other lies in the novel are the ones society ignores or glosses over. Bellingham and Richard Bradshaw are the two traditional male liars society tolerates. Bellingham's cruel lies appeal to Ruth at her weakest, according to George Watt (25). Bellingham uses her homeless, friendless position to construct his lies, asking her to think of him as a brother (R 41 and 37) and suggesting he can befriend her through his mother (R 37). Richard Bradshaw, another kind of liar through forgery, is a true social hypocrite. As Bodenheimer points out, Ruth's lie covers an emotional truth while Richard's false following of duty covers crimes of business and honor (Politics 162). While Ruth's lie protects her through a weak time and saves her illegitimate son from Thomas Wilkins' fate (R 121-22), the lies of Bellingham and Richard Bradshaw cover sexual and material opportunism, petty and self-serving.

Moreover, Benson's reasoning about the lie follows a Unitarian belief in necessarianism. According to Webb, necessarianism explains misery and evil as connected to and a part of God's larger scheme. While Channing accused Priestley of epicureanism, and others might think this doctrine smacks of fatalism or even predestination, necessarians never resigned themselves to inaction (Harriet 82-3). In the lie protecting Ruth, Benson reasons that

> no holy or self-denying effort can fall to the ground vain and useless; but the sweep of eternity is large, and God alone knows when the effect is to be produced (R 128).

R. K. Webb explains that in this case Benson comforts himself with "the working of a larger principle, central to necessarian theology" ("Gaskells" 164). For Unitarians of Priestley's generation, sin fits into the essentially optimistic belief in God's plan. According to Theophilus Lindsey, a strong eighteenth-century voice for Unitarian beliefs, God "never ordains or permits evil but with a view to the production of a greater good, which could not have existed without it" (qtd. in Lansbury 13). Lansbury maintains that Benson is always troubled by the lie, but at this point he puts its consequences into the hands of providence (62).

Ruth is a novel that begins, therefore, with violations of truth but ends with God's plan working out in the world. Susan Morgan describes the plot of Ruth in "a simple way": "The fallen woman becomes the angel in the house who then, and this is the essential step, becomes the angel in the town" (95). Gaskell's unconventional handling of the plot of the fallen woman places Ruth in community and works out a series of inversions. These patterned inversions are designed to argue for change in social laws and convention as well as change in individual and family behavior. Gaskell first contrasts Benson and Bellingham--physically as men and morally as Ruth's protectors. Then she invites comparison between Benson and Bradshaw as representatives of what Patsy Stoneman sees as "a debate within Christianity between humane Unitarianism and punitive Calvinism" (111).

Gaskell's doubling of the characters of Ruth and Jemima Bradshaw reveals that the outcome of a girl's courtship may depend on her circumstances, not on her moral integrity. In her final pairing of Bradshaw and Donne--the seducer, not even true to his own name--Gaskell enlarges the range of her social criticism to suggest, as Susan Morgan argues, that "the forces that use women are tied to the forces that condemn them" (94). The final patterned inversion in Ruth is the transformation of Ruth from Magdalen to Madonna, from sinner to saint. For this change, Gaskell seemed to feel Ruth's death was necessary. Gaskell completed her parable by choosing Ruth's deathbed and grave as the last full measures of the lie/lie pun. Gaskell remains ruthless in showing society the consequences of failure to reform.

Mr. Benson and Mr. Bellingham control questions about the love bed and the child bed. Both are lovers; both are liars but in quite different senses. George Watt has identified Benson as one of Gaskell's inversions: "He looks weak but he is strong. He looks incomplete, but he is whole" (30). Ironically, when Bellingham understands who Ruth's "little hunchback" is, he declares, "He looks like Riquet-with-the-Tuft. He's not a gentleman, though" (R 70). Ruth had identified Benson as a gentleman. She found his face "quite beautiful" while Bellingham judged the man from his back. Riquet-with-the Tuft is a dwarf in Perrault's fairy tales. Ugly, but capable of making the person he loves intelligent, the dwarf loves an unintelligent but

beautiful woman. Upon their marriage, the dwarf becomes handsome and she becomes intelligent (Shelstone, N. 462). Benson acts out this fairy tale by rescuing Ruth from suicide. He does so, however, by calling up her pity for his own helpless state when he falls trying to save her. Like the fairy tale's dwarf, Benson gives Ruth the means to save herself. In this sense his lie empowers her to assume control of her life and save herself.

Benson and Bellingham have parallel relationships to Ruth. In fact, Felicia Bonaparte argues that Benson is Ruth's spiritual "husband," signified by her wearing his mother's wedding ring, and Bellingham is her "husband in the flesh" (120). The child conceived belongs to Bellingham, but is raised by Benson. According to Bonaparte, Ruth's sin--her natural child--becomes her salvation--the spiritual child (121). The magic of the fairy tale transformation is achieved in Ruth through the mediation of Benson's Unitarian mission. Even though Harriet Martineau called Benson a "nincompoop" (qtd. in Webb, "Gaskells" 160), and Webb thinks his portrayal indicative of Gaskell's being "overwhelmed by the boldness of her subject" ("Gaskells" 161), Benson remains the pivot on which Ruth's fate turns. That pivot is the ennabling lie.

The Benson-Bradshaw debate pits two religious types against each other, but by developing the whole Bradshaw family and contrasting it to the Benson household, Gaskell reveals the way religion permeates everyday life, the

upbringing of children, and the inheritance of values. Though Bradshaw is a member of Benson's congregation, he does not share his religious beliefs. His god is the judgmental God of the Puritans, and his belief in original sin and predestination puts him in line with Calvin.

> He drew a clear line of partition, which separated mankind into two great groups, to one of which, by the grace of God, he and his belonged; while the other was composed of those whom it was his duty to try and reform, and bring the whole force of his morality to bear upon, with lectures, admonitions, and exhortations--a duty to be performed, because it was a duty--but with very little of that Hope and Faith which is the Spirit that maketh alive" (R 324).

Gaskell's purpose is not to reproduce a particular Unitarian congregation in Benson's Chapel, but rather to demonstrate the need to test the doctrines and beliefs of many sects, to hold them up to the spirit of Christianity.

In the debate that follows Bradshaw's finding out Ruth's secret past, Benson and Bradshaw reveal their moral convictions. Bradshaw judges from what he calls the world's "practical wisdom":

> The world has decided how such women are to be treated; and, you may depend upon it, there is so much practical wisdom in the world that its way of acting is right in the long run. (R 351)

Interpreting on the basis of fixed laws and moral absolutes,

Bradshaw will not test or open his mind to Benson's argument for change:

> Is it not time to change some of our ways of thinking and acting? I declare before God, that if I believe in any one human truth, it is this--that to every woman, who, like Ruth, has sinned, should be given a chance of self-redemption--and that such a chance should be given in no supercilious or contemptuous manner, but in the spirit of the holy Christ. (R 351)

Benson stands "with Christ against the world" (R 351). But he also realizes that where Christ stands is open to interpretation. Once again Benson searches for the right words: "Now I wish God would give me power to speak out convincingly what I believe to be His truth, that not every woman who has fallen is depraved" (R 350).

The questions of finding the right words, interpreting rightly biblical language, and following with the right action are central to Gaskell's project and in accord with Unitarian principles. Hilary Schor argues that "Gaskell like Ruth lives in a world of interpretation, social and literary convention, flawed powers of 'representation'" (Scheherezade 74). Even though Benson bases his argument on the attitude of Christ to Mary Magdalen, Bradshaw stands with the world and sees Benson as "a man who has deluded himself into considering falsehood right" (R 351). Gaskell's critics were also bothered by Benson's lie. Uglow reports that Charlotte Bronte had warned Gaskell of the

response of critics to the lie: "There--I doubt not--some critics will stick like flies caught in treacle" (341). George Henry Lewes, however, was one critic who saw that the lie was "forced by the untruths of convention" (qtd. in Uglow 341). Faith Benson, in a debate with her brother, brings up the unarguable fact that the lie bought Ruth time, "in which to grow stronger and wiser, so that she can bear her shame now in a way she never could have done at first" (R 361). Thurston Benson, however, continues to believe the lie was wrong and will not admit with Faith that "our telling a lie has been the saving of her. There is no fear of her going wrong now" (R 362). He responds, "God's omnipotence did not need our sin." The Bensons, in their combined effect, through word and deed, were the saving of Ruth. Gaskell leaves the rightness of the lie undecided by splitting Faith from her brother on the issue of the lie, but nevertheless giving her argument the weight of textual evidence.

The actions of Bradshaw and Benson speak louder than their words. The two households reveal differences in the positions of women in them and in the upbringing of children. The unconventional family of the Benson includes as an equal the servant Sally, whom Gaskell allows, in a further shaking of hierarchy, to feel superior in her Anglican faith to her dissenting employers. The Bensons--including Sally--educate and transform Ruth. Coral Lansbury maintains, "As a Unitarian Elizabeth Gaskell firmly believed

that every human being could be developed by education to the full capacity of his intelligence (64). In the unconventional Benson household, Ruth and Faith join Sally in the kitchen duties while Sally takes an occasional take-charge attitude in the raising of Leonard. For example, she tells Thurston Benson that his moral duty to Leonard includes sparing the rod in the case of Leonard's lying.

The principle of Leonard's upbringing fits Thurston Benson's flexible standards of morality. In the Benson household "education was but a series of experiments to them all" (R 202). Benson and Ruth were pleased and found "hopeful" in his character "the determination to be a 'law unto himself'"(R 383). Permissiveness is not the goal but independence. Unitarians would approve of

> an inclination in him to reason, especially and principally with Mr. Benson, on the great questions of ethics which the majority of the world have settled long ago. (R 383)

Gaskell had expressed her approval of a similar independence in her daughter Marianne, home on holiday from school in 1851:

> It is delightful to see what good it had done MA, sending her to school; & is a proof of how evil works out good. She is such a "law unto herself" now, such a sense of duty and obeys her sense. (L 160)

Marianne, like Leonard, had learned to be obedient to her own careful planning, reasoning, and sense of right.

On the other hand, Gaskell details the Bradshaw family's authoritative educational principles. Like Leonard, Richard Bradshaw

> was an only son, and yet Mr. Bradshaw might venture to say, he had never had his own way in his life . . . All children were obedient, if their parents were decided and authoritative; and everyone would turn out well, if properly managed. If they did not prove good, they must take the consequences of their errors. (R 211)

Such principles, however, encourage deceit in the family, as Jemima realizes when observing her mother's behavior:

> Mrs. Bradshaw murmured faintly at her husband when his back was turned; but if his voice was heard, or his footsteps sounded in the distance, she was mute, and hurried her children into the attitude or action most pleasing to their father. Jemima, it is true, rebelled against this manner of proceeding, which savoured to her a little of deceit; but even she had not, as yet, overcome her awe of her father sufficiently to act independently of him, and according to her own sense of right. (R 211)

As Patsy Stoneman points out, the two approaches to education illustrated by the Bradshaws and the Bensons result in different attitudes to misbehavior and punishment when the children do wrong (104). Stoneman cites the scene where Bradshaw and Benson discuss Richard Bradshaw's crime of forgery (104). Bradshaw disowns his son, attributing his

crime to "innate wickedness" since he cannot condemn his upbringing! Benson, on the other hand, refuses to prosecute the young man "until I know all the circumstances" (R 404). His judgment of Richard shares the same attempt to interpret the facts that he exercised in Ruth's case:

> I should decline taking such a step against any young man without first ascertaining the particulars about him, which I know already about Richard, and which determine me against doing what would blast his character for life--would destroy every good quality he has. (405)

Benson argues fruitlessly with Bradshaw about being more flexible, more forgiving, more reasonable. As he leaves, Bradshaw retorts, "If there were more people like me, and fewer like you, there would be less evil in the world, sir. It's you sentimentalists that nurse up sin" (R 406).

As Bradshaw departs, Benson is much shocked, but not as much by Richard's crime "as by what it was a sign of" (R 406). The two male children of the Benson and Bradshaw households serve as signifiers of their upbringing. Through one of Gaskell's telling inversions, the illegitimate Leonard seems set at novel's end with a good profession and a self-reliant character, while Richard Bradshaw's forgery signifies the underhanded deceit which is a product of his father's inflexible tyranny. According to George Watt, Benson is the "personification of the new morality Gaskell would have her readers accept" (31), while Bradshaw is the

self-satisfied, inflexible Puritan she protests. And Valentine Cunningham states that Gaskell's protest is

> more than a woman's protest against a man's world: with exceptional courage Mrs. Gaskell is prepared to suggest that all is not well with the code of the Liberal-bourgeois-Dissenting millocracy. (134)

In her portrayal of Bradshaw, Gaskell accused the people who sat in the pew with her at Cross Street Chapel.

But Gaskell was interested in Ruth in the raising of girls as well as boys. Ruth serves as a governess to the younger Bradshaw girls and a friend to Jemima. Jemima plays a much more important role, however, as Ruth's double. Uglow claims that at the point Jemima enters, "the heroine literally splits in two" (334). Jemima's subplot, according to Bodenheimer, is a "comic version of Ruth's tragedy" (Politics 163). Ruth's early story is asocial and is developed in a pastoral setting in natural innocence. Jemima's story puts her in a protected family but in the odd position of wanting to marry the man her family has approved of. Her inner feelings prompt her to rebel (Bodenheimer 163). In contrast to Ruth's passive response to Bellingham's "courtship," Jemima rebels against the staid game of her own proper courtship where she feels Mr. Farquhar and she are "like pieces of chess": "She would so fain have let herself love Mr. Farquhar; but this constant manoeuvring . . . made her sick at heart" (R 240). Jemima

wants to do away with the pretense of her father's trying to win her consent: "She felt as if she would rather be bought openly, like an Oriental daughter, where no one is degraded in their own eyes by being parties to such a contract" (R 240-1). There is no doubt that Jemima wishes to be called upon for more moral responsibility.

Jemima creates her own jealous tempest when Mr. Farquhar misreads her rebellion and turns to pursue placid Ruth. Ironically, Gaskell reveals that the fallen Ruth is more like an ideal Victorian wife than stormy Jemima. Gaskell involves Ruth, through unconscious rivalry with Jemima, in a discussion of Victorian marriage and its ideal of placid empty wives (Watt 37). Farquhar imagines Ruth would make what Watt calls a "trouble-free Victorian wife" (37). The comedy is played out too easily for Farquhar when Ruth's past is revealed and he thinks his feelings for Ruth have gone undetected: "He was also most thankful, most self-gratulatory, that he had gone no further in his admiration of her--that he had never expressed his regard in words" (R 369). Though courtship is a time when women are supposed to have the most power in choosing their mate, Gaskell reveals it to be--at least in Jemima's case--a time when a woman humbly realizes her place. The Farquhar's marriage will be better than most precisely because each of them knows and loves Ruth. They were independently humbled into recognizing and admitting the truth of their feelings.

Knowledge of Ruth's secret, obtained from Mrs. Pearson's "small-talk" (R 318), puts Jemima in a crisis she is ill prepared for because, in her protected and authoritative education, she was not brought up to independent thinking. When regarding Ruth, she cannot separate the Una from the Duessa: "Who was true? Who was not? Who was good and pure? Who was not? The very foundations of Jemima's belief in her mind were shaken" (R 326). Jemima imagines the whole world is infected by the overturning of her view of Ruth: "Oh! for one ray of God's holy light to know what was seeming, and what was truth in this traitorous hollow earth!" (R 326).

In the character of Jemima, Gaskell is retelling the parable of the sinner and the Pharisee who went up to the temple to pray. But the parable is in female terms. In Ruth, the parable reads as follows: A poor girl without family or friends and a proper, protected girl of good family went out to the market to be wed. The poor girl fell upon vice and was forever cast out. The proper girl is taught to avoid the poor girl lest she be tainted. Jemima is forced to examine her reaction to Ruth's secret in light of her father's teachings:

> She had never imagined that she should ever come into contact with anyone who had committed open sin; she had never shaped her conviction into words and sentences, but still it was there, that all the respectable, all the family and religious circumstances of her life, would hedge her in, and guard her from ever encountering the great shock of coming face to face

> with vice. Without being pharisaical in her estimation of herself, she had all a Pharisee's dread of publicans and sinners and all a child's cowardliness--that cowardliness which prompts it to shut its eyes against the object of terror, rather than acknowledge its existence with brave faith. (R 323)

Jemima cannot get away from her upbringing and her "father's often reiterated speeches" (R 324). She had rebelled earlier against the hard Calvinistic doctrine of her father, but she had led a sheltered life. At first she prefered never to see Ruth again:

> She wished that she could take her up, and put her down at a distance somewhere--anywhere--where she might never see or hear of her more; never be reminded, as she must be whenever she saw her, that such things were, in this sunny, bright, lark-singing earth, over which the blue dome of heaven bent softly down, as Jemima sat down in the hayfield that June afternoon. (R 324)

Jemima is like Christabel in Coleridge's poem. She has met her Geraldine, the older, more experienced woman, and at first she prefers to suppress her knowledge. According to Rubenius, a pure-minded Victorian woman must know nothing about sex, and the fallen woman must be removed from her regard (189). But Gaskell echoes Coleridge's visionary reconciling of innocence and experience in Christabel:

> No doubt, she hath a vision sweet.
> What if her guardian spirit 'twere,
> What if she knew her mother near?
> But this she knows, in joys and woes,
> That saints will aid if men will call:
> For the blue sky bends over all!

The blue sky that bends over the fallen world covers both Jemima and Ruth as it covered Christabel and Geraldine, and Jemima must come to accept her responsibility for moral action--but not by yielding to her father's view of the world's "practical wisdom."

Jemima resolves her crisis by moving from pride--"there came a sense of the power which the knowledge of this secret gave her over Ruth" (R 326)--to humility--"and, seeing how I have no goodness or strength in me, and how I might just have been like Ruth, or rather, worse than she ever was" (R 365). Her realization that everyone is sinful and no sin should permanently degrade a character moves her to the moral Everywoman position that, according to Hilary Schor, Gaskell wants her readers to believe: "that sin is not an absolute, that knowledge itself may be circumstantial" (Scheherezade 70). In the system of inversions that Gaskell impells her readers to consider, the real perversity is society's. George Watt considers how Mrs. Mason caused Ruth's downful by excluding her from shelter (35). Watt claims, "Girls may then be driven to the streets, not by their sin, but by others' reactions to that which they consider sin" (35).

Society also puts form before substance, as Jenny Uglow points out in the case of the wedding ring, the widow's cap, the name of Mrs. Denbigh, and Sally's will on parchment with "law words" (326). Signs and words may prove to be inadequate or lying, but people must struggle to

represent the truth by attempting to understand each other. Gaskell is like Bakhtin in "adding communication theory to theology" (Clark and Holquist 208). Both insist on understanding the other in the spirit of Christ's golden rule. Bakhtin argued that we "take on, in other words, the role of others with the same depth of sympathy and understanding that we bring to our own perception of ourselves" (Clark and Holquist 208). Jemima's role is to reveal the process of change that readers must go through in reforming their attitudes toward the fallen woman.

But why must Ruth die? Readers have rebelled against Ruth's death ever since Charlotte Bronte read the plan of the novel and said, "Yet--hear my protest! Why should she die?" (qtd. in Easson 125). George Watt is surprised that Bronte protested Ruth's death for he "cannot imagine the novel without it" (38-9). Watt is moved by her death, however melodramatic, because it sets spiritual values against the pragmatic, materialistic, self-righteous corruptions of "the world" (39). Ruth's death is another instance, I believe, of Gaskell's ruthless "pulling this world to pieces." Bronte named her "a stern priestess in these matters," unwilling "to stay the sacrificial knife" (qtd. in Easson 125). Schor calls Ruth's death "a slap in the face of the reader" designed to shock complacency (Scheherezade 75). In fact, Schor believes Gaskell bows to novel convention about the fate of the fallen woman in order to remind readers of "the excessively plotted lives women

lead" (75). Ruth's fate must end in Ruth-lessness because pity-less society demands it.

In setting up her final inversion in the death of Ruth, Gaskell raises the sinner to sainthood. Ruth becomes the town's saint, and in nursing Bellingham/Donne, she completes her soul's progress in self-sacrifice. Watt claims Ruth is "one of the first feminine saviour figures in Western literature. She suffers the rejection of society, then gives her life to the root cause of her problems" (38). Ruth herself atones for her sin not in the sense that Christ atones for the sins of the world. The atonement is a doctrine Unitarians reject, but its "etymological derivation --at-one-ment--[means] the reconciliation of all men with God and with each other" (Webb, "Gaskells" 167). According to Gaskell's contemporary, Chevalier Bunsen, "Ruth must needs perish, but atoned and glorified" (qtd. in Basch 250).

But Ruth is not just a book about social problems; it is also and at the same time about the representation of the truth and the interpretation of languages. Ruth poses several questions: How can human lives be best represented to save rather than condemn? How can words bring people together? How can morality keep up with change? In his funeral sermon for Ruth, Mr. Benson remains concerned with how to represent Ruth's life, with how to find words to fit it. It was "an office he could render to her" (R 455), but it was also a way to teach others about moral character: "Moreover, it was possible that the circumstances of her

life, which were known to all, might be made effective in this manner to work conviction of many truths" (R 455).

As Benson attempted to work conviction of truths with words, Gaskell has also in the novel. But language breaks down, as Benson realizes repeatedly in dealing with Ruth's story. Earlier he had longed for the tongue of a seraph in telling it to his sister Faith. At her funeral he gave up the words he had labored on to read Revelations seven, beginning with the ninth verse, and all in the congregation knew he meant that God was receiving Ruth and wiping all tears from her eyes. Gaskell reminds us of the many languages of worship in humorously including Sally's discussion of the "sermon." She assures her fellow churchman, Mr. Davis, that Dissenters like Mr. Benson can preach "as grand a sermon . . . as ever we hear in church" (R 458). Mr. Bradshaw--formerly so sure of his absolutes and the world's practical wisdom--is so choked up when he visits Ruth's grave that he cannot speak when he takes Leonard home to the Bensons. Gaskell has tongue-tied the proud Bradshaw and the humble Benson with her representation of Ruth. She has moved them both beyond convention to question the automatic response and the automatic condemnation. She has shaken up hierarchy in the practices of home and church.

In chapter 1 of Ruth, Gaskell forecasts the real subject of the novel under the guise of conventional

exposition of time and place:

> The daily life into which people are born, and into which they are absorbed before they are well aware, forms chains which only one in a hundred has moral strength enough to despise, and to break when the right time comes--when an inward necessity for independent moral action arises, which is superior to all outward conventionalities. (R 2)

Though Gaskell claims that her subject here and in the rest of Ruth is "the formation of character" in bygone times, the setting and time of the novel are not very far removed from her own place and time. The January night which discovers Ruth Hilton at a window with the moonlight on her was not "now many years ago" as Gaskell claims, but not much longer ago than the 1830s. Events in the novel point to the election after the 1832 Reform Bill and travel by railroad (Shelston 459). Though Gaskell implies that the events of Ruth happened long ago, to ease the burden of her message to her contemporaries, less than twenty years separate Ruth and the Bensons from those in the pew with her at Cross Street Chapel. In questioning and testing their dearest beliefs and prejudices, Gaskell is subtle, but she is ruthless. At any time the world may prove false, and it is always open to interpretation.

[1] In Chapter 1, page 35, I quoted a passage from a review of Mary Barton in which the author resorted to the biblical injunction that the poor will always be with us. Appeal to scripture was his last resort as he reacts with unease to the power of Gaskell's case for reform.

[2] Harriet Martineau found the paradox of this belief one reason for her abandoning Unitarianism, claiming it "is a mere clinging, association and habit, to the old privilege of faith in a divine revelation, under an actual forfeiture of all its essential conditions" (qtd. in Mineka 21).

[3] References are to the Oxford Press edition of Ruth, edited by Alan Shelston. Future references will be abbreviated R.

CHAPTER III

LYING AND THE LAW: "IT WERE SHAME FOR T' FIRE BELL TO BE TELLIN' A LIE"

"Speak truth to power" is a saying which is rarely carried into practice except in a utopia (Scott 1). Instead, according to James C. Scott, subordinate groups create what he calls "hidden transcripts" or "critique[s] of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" (xii). These constructs, Scott says, may take the forms of "rumors, gossip, folk tales, songs, gestures, jokes, . . . theater" (xiii), and even such nonverbal critiques as the following Ethiopian proverb reveals: "When the great lord passes the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts" (v). The official version of truth is often a lie put out by the dominant group, which penetrates the community and becomes reality. Vaclav Havel has put it this way:

> The official interpretation consequently merges with reality. A general and all embracing lie begins to predominate; people begin adapting to it, and everyone in some part of their lives compromises with the lie or coexists with it. Under these conditions, to assert the truth, to behave authentically by breaking through the all-englobing web of lies--in spite of everything, including the risk that one might find oneself up against the whole world--is an act of extraordinary political importance. (qtd. in Scott 206)

According to Scott, the truth spoken by subordinate groups or

representatives comes from a sociological reality, not from an epistemological status (9-10). Scott thus works on the sociological level to draw the same parallel Sissela Bok does in distinguishing epistemological truth from moral truthfulness (6). People find true what their own experience confirms, but it may not be the same truth that dominates the culture.

After Elizabeth Gaskell's first novel Mary Barton aimed at the truth about Manchester life and was angrily received by the ruling middle class, particularly by at least half of the factory owners of that city, Gaskell became more subtle in speaking truth to power. In Mary Barton, she had forced questioning of moral absolutes, as Jenny Uglow points out,

> asking continually 'Whose doing is it?' . . . Is it a 'sin' for a father to steal to feed his dying son? For a mother to give opium to starving children, or turn to prostitution to buy medicine for her daughter. (193-94)

In Ruth, by posing the questioning of the status quo through a lie, Gaskell led rather than forced readers to question the status quo. When a woman falls, is it right for society to cast her out and her child too? What is the Christian response to Ruth's sin? What would the law of Christ require? In fact, Gaskell's short fiction and novels reveal that she is constantly pitting the laws of man against the laws of Christ and finding very little harmony. As her conscious artistry matured, Gaskell became more and more

convinced that both laws and lies are verbal and rhetorical constructs. Increasingly, her works--particularly those published between 1855 and 1863--show how official manipulation of the law can subvert justice and serve class and property rights, and how a wild justice can emerge from hidden transcripts to demonstrate the need for change.

Institutional injustice abounds in Gaskell novels, from Mary Barton on. The most egregious examples of state-sponsored tyranny occur in "Lois the Witch," which tells of one hundred and fifty women imprisoned as witches in Salem and more than twenty executed, including the story's heroine Lois Barclay; in "A Dark Night's Work" and Mary Barton, which both bring innocent men to the brink of public execution; in Sylvia's Lovers, which draws its conflict from the press-gang's full legal rights to kidnap seamen on land or sea--many in sight of wives and family awaiting their arrival home after months of whaling--to serve in the royal navy; in the essay, "An Accursed Race," which details laws of church and state persecuting the Cagot people of Spain and France to the point of genocide; and in North and South, which hinges on Frederick Hale's opposition--judged mutiny--to the tyranny of his ship's captain on behalf of the men so abused by his arbitrary power that one died.

Gaskell also develops tyranny on the family level in several stories. In "The Grey Woman" a woman finds herself married to a robber who, when he is discovered accidentally to be a murderer, pursues his pregnant wife to murder her.

The law is useless to protect the wife, and she must live the rest of her life in disguise. Male relatives poison and stab an aristocratic woman in "French Life." In the short story "Lizzie Leigh," a father disowns his daughter and thereby forces her into prostitution. While fathers turn tyrants in Ruth and Cranford, brothers also can use their positions in family hierarchy to abuse their sisters: Edward Browne in "The Moorland Cottage" and Richard Bradshaw in Ruth are such brothers who find that the indulgence of their families does not protect them from prosecution as forgers. Clearly Gaskell questions these abuses by authority, and for a period between 1855 and 1863, she wrote many stories, which, as Edgar Wright maintains, show a "concentration on gloom and morbidity" (172). Wright claims that the possibility of some deeper emotional disturbance cannot be discounted" (173) to explain the predominance of "infanticide, parricide, filial hatred, murder, bigamy, suicide, [and] unfaithfulness" (172) in these novels and stories. Wright does explain that Gaskell had been experiencing illness, strain from overwork; she was disturbed by the cotton famine brought on by the American Civil War and by the aftermath of the Crimean War (172). But, in Wright's eagerness to explain the "pervading tone" of misery in these stories, he can only come up with the emotional disturbance and restlessness that must have accompanied Gaskell's going through "the change of life" at this time (173)!

I see a different cause both for the grim tone of these stories and for the turn to historical settings in many of the shorter pieces and in the novel Sylvia's Lovers. Gaskell was preoccupied with the slow movement of society toward justice in her own time. The novels Mary Barton and Ruth testify to the gap between true justice and the law or between the laws of Christ and the laws of men. Gaskell gathered examples of unjust laws and secret subversions from all the places she visited. Most of the tales of this time period show the necessity for change both in public laws and in private human behavior. Meanwhile, since all change in institutions is slow and since she understands the resistance to change, Gaskell is interested in recounting in these stories subversions to laws or subtle underminings of authority. Stories written in this time tell of witches from the point of view of the witch; of curses from the point of view of the curser; of poachers in the forests and in their own cottages; of women trapped in marriages with no legal identity or rights to protection of the law; and of sisters or half-brothers treated as servants. Gaskell takes us where the law is inadequate and truth suborned, but she also leads us to the responses of the disadvantaged or to what Scott calls "hidden transcripts." In short, Gaskell is speaking truth to power through the subtexts of these stories.

Moreover, while Gaskell's turn to historical settings may problematize readers' direct application of these stories to the contemporary scene, yet their conflicts of law and

justice are directly applicable to issues of class, economics, and gender in her own times. And her narrators make clear through irony that the present times have yet to show moral progress. As Jane Spencer has written, Gaskell

> turn[ed] away from topical industrial relations and unmarried motherhood--to less obviously immediate social questions and a historical narrative form that would not be interpreted as political . . . . she ensured both that she could express more rebellion and that she would not be read as rebellious" (101).

What Wright noticed in the works of Gaskell between 1855 and 1863 is not, I believe, the result of her passing through "the change of life" in her own body, but her matured method for effecting a change of life for the body politic.

Courts of law in Gaskell's fiction are important for bringing into public many truths, but rarely for bringing in justice. In Mary Barton the trial of Jem Wilson becomes a spectacle with "Mary on display before the middle-class world" (Bodenheimer, "Private" 212). Rosemarie Bodenheimer claims that Gaskell is uncomfortable with Mary's public role in the courtroom. She allows Mary to confess her love for Jem in a public speech that any Victorian woman would find "unmaidenly" in private (210). But Gaskell spares Mary from having to lie in a court. Instead Will Wilson delivers her at the last moment by coming back from his sea voyage to provide Jem with an alibi. Lying is not necessary for Gaskell's heroine; instead Gaskell saves the indictment of lying for the judicial system itself.

Once Will Wilson appears in the courtroom and Mary is carried out of it in convulsions, Gaskell breaks the account of the principal actors in her plot to concentrate on the lawyers and the language of the law. The defense lawyer, for example, was excited--not to see Jem's innocence achieved by the new testimony--but to display his own "forensic eloquence" (MB 395). This lawyer imagines his own dramatic rhetoric to follow: "a gallant tar brought back from the pathless ocean by a girl's noble daring," "the dangers of too hastily judging from circumstantial evidence" (MB 395). Meanwhile, the prosecuting counselor

> prepared himself by folding his arms, elevating his eyebrows, and putting his lips in the form in which they might best whistle down the wind such evidence as might be produced by a suborned witness, who dared to perjure himself. (395)

Gaskell's irony is unmistakable as she condemns the courts for offering justice for hire:

> For, of course, it is etiquette to suppose that such evidence as may be given against the opinion which lawyers are paid to uphold, is any thing but based on truth; and 'perjury', 'conspiracy', and 'peril of your immortal soul', are light expressions to throw at the heads of those who may prove (not the speaker, there would then be some excuse for the hasty words of personal anger, but) the hirer of the speaker to be wrong, or mistaken. (395-96)

Gaskell reminds her readers that lawyers are involved in the play of words in a rhetorical genre. M. M. Bakhtin has

discussed the importance of treating others' speech as a subject of analysis in rhetorical situations in Discourse in the Novel. The following passage applies directly to Gaskell's presentation of the two lawyers' thoughts as Will Wilson takes the stand:

> In the rhetoric of the courts, for example, rhetorical discourse accuses or defends the subject of a trial, who is, of course, a speaker, and in so doing relies on his words, interprets them, polemicizes with them, creatively erecting potential discourses for the accused or for the defense (just such free creation of likely, but never actually uttered, words, sometimes whole speeches--"as he must have said" or "as he might have said"--was a device very widespread in ancient rhetoric); rhetorical discourse tries to outwit possible retorts to itself. (353)

Following the forensic method of ancient rhetoric, the prosecuting lawyer is ready with his "creative retort" to Will's story as he suggests sarcastically that Will has been hired, coached and finally perjured in his testimony. Will cannot at first understand the charge because of the sarcasm. Gaskell claims he needed "a minute to extract the meaning from the garb of unaccustomed words in which it was invested" (397). His answer, however, turns the paid perjury charge against the lawyer himself as Gaskell completes her assault on the system of justice:

> Will you tell the judge and jury how much money you've been paid for your impudence towards one, who has told God's blessed truth, and who would scorn to tell a lie, or blackguard anyone, for the biggest fee as ever lawyer got for doing dirty work. Will you tell sir? (397)

Will rests on his own truth before God and the evidence of the boat pilot who brought him to shore. But Gaskell enjoys one more irony at the end of Will's speech when he asks if the pilot's evidence is admissible: "There's O'Brien, the pilot, in court now. Would somebody with a wig on please to ask him how much he can say for me?" (397).

Those "with the wigs on" control the discourse in the court, and, as Will charges, they are under hire. In fact, Mr. Carson, the one who has paid the prosecutor, sits in the courtroom seized with frustrated vengeance. Gaskell compares him to a beast of prey who sees "his victim taken from his hungry jaws" (396) and "slip through the fangs of justice" (398). Gaskell joyfully celebrates the forensic victory of the plain-speaking sailor and the working-class girl and her lover as the tone of the trial disparages the judicial system.

Such celebration of the victories of working-class or poor people against the forces of law can be seen in other Gaskell stories which are set in the wild northern counties of Lancashire and especially in north Wales. "The Well of Pen-Morfa," for example, begins with an interesting initiation into what Gaskell calls the "Welsh Welsh village" of Pen-Morfa--"it is so national in its ways, and buildings, and inhabitants"(C 242). Here names are given in such a way that members of families have different surnames, based in a mysterious system on the first names of their fathers and

grandfathers. Gaskell explains that in a family she is acquainted with,

> the eldest son's name is John Jones, because his father's was John Thomas; that the second son is called David Williams, because his grandfather was William Wynn; and that the girls are called indiscriminately by the names of Thomas and Jones. (C 243).

Gaskell tells of the villagers baffling the barristers at Caernarvon assizes when they deny the name on their subpoenas. Gaskell concludes before going on with her story, "I could tell you a great deal which is peculiar and wild in these true Welsh people" (C 243). "Peculiar and wild" they may be, but outwitting the law even to the point of the identity of a witness appeals to Gaskell rather than appalls her. Her selection of such anecdotes from her research in Wales, where her family often vacationed, and later in the wild Bronte country often includes wild subversions of the law.

In Sylvia's Lovers,[1] Gaskell assumes a similar tone and attitude toward the landed gentry who uphold the unjust laws of the press-gang. With subtle irony she shows the basis in economy and class for landowners in the Monkshaven area to support the institutional violence of the press-gang. The merchants and ship captains have access to money through hard work and risk-taking, while the gentlemen sit on their lands and do nothing:

> There is a sort of latent ill-will on the part of the squires to the tradesman, be he manufacturer merchant, or shipowner, in whose hands is held a power of money-making, which no hereditary pride, or gentlemanly love of doing nothing, prevents him from using; . . . but really the whale-fisheries of Monkshaven had become so impertinently and obtrusively prosperous of late years at the time of which I write, the Monkshaven shipowners were growing so wealthy and consequential, that the squires, who lived at home at ease in the old stone manor-houses . . . felt that the check upon the Monkshaven trade likely to be inflicted by the press-gang, was wisely ordained by the higher powers. . . to prevent overhaste in getting rich, which was a scriptural fault, and they also thought that they were only doing their duty in backing up the Admiralty warrants by all the civil powers at their disposal. (SL 8)

Gaskell is careful in providing many such tongue-in-cheek motives for the continuing of the unjust press-gang laws, including the providential influx of officers of the gang who appealed to parents of marriageable daughters (9).

In this first chapter of Sylvia's Lovers, Gaskell unfolds two messages: one is historical and implies that such blatant disregard for justice, such tyranny occurred in the past in regard to the specific law of the press-gang. The other more subtle point is that there might be laws in existence in the present which are equally unjust and equally defended by self-serving economic and class-specific excuses. Gaskell's tone is a study in protesting-too-much about the historical distance of 1793 from 1863:

> Now all this tyranny (for I can use no other word) is marvellous to us; we cannot imagine how it is that a nation submitted to it for so long, even under any

> warlike enthusiasms, any panic of invasion, any amount of loyal subservience to the governing powers. (SL 7)

Similarly, Gaskell could not imagine how factory owners of her own times submitted to the law-sanctioned conditions of the workers in Manchester. Those workers sound very similar to Daniel Robson and other spokespersons for the victims of the press-gangs. Moreover, Gaskell's narrator presents just the slightest suggestion that she has other times and places in mind where the animosity of the classes is a fact: "Perhaps something of the ill-feeling that prevailed on the subject was owing to the fact which I have noticed in other places similarly situated" (SL 8). The ill-feeling she speaks about is that of established power against the forces of rebellion when unjust laws are allowed to remain through the moral inertia of the powerful who are served by those laws.

It is unfortunate that few have remarked on the irony in Gaskell's narrative voice, especially in Sylvia's Lovers. John Kucich thus has called "shocking" Gaskell's "counseling of social resignation" and even more shocking her "reactionary authorial pronouncements" and "cold-hearted authoritarianism." In fact, Kucich believes that the narrator "underscores the great fear underlying Gaskell's moral platitudes and confirms her consistent support for legal authority" (200). John Lucas also seems unwilling to grant Gaskell irony in her treatment of legalized violence in

Sylvia's Lovers. Lucas claims that Gaskell at her worst evades the implications of conflict between the law and rebellion against it (Literature 21). Lucas seems intent on splitting the author into Mrs. Gaskell, who tries to reconcile all conflicts of class and clashes with authority, and another anarchic force in Gaskell, which he will not allow to be conscious.

Two examples from Sylvia's Lovers will emphasize the importance of irony in Gaskell's authorial voice. The first occurs when Darley is killed resisting impressment and the Anglican vicar is forced to preach the funeral sermon. The dead Darley is the son of the vicar's own gardener, a man to whom the vicar has almost family ties. The vicar, who has been presented as an old man who hates strife and has "two bugbears to fear--the French and the Dissenters" (SL 66), cannot rise to the conflict before him--of comforting the grieving father and of upholding "his Majesty's service . . . in beating those confounded French" (SL 67).

> But again the discord between the laws of man and the laws of Christ stood before him; and he gave up the attempt to do more than he was doing, as beyond his power.(SL 67)

He mumbles a few words, which do not satisfy either the father or the angry parishioners; "yet no one felt anything but kindly towards the old vicar" (SL 67). Clearly, they feel kindly because his actions are more charitable and less

Tory than his words. Finding this passage to be Mrs. Gaskell at her worst, however, John Lucas retorts to her evocation of kindly feelings,

> Really? Surely that remark once again indicates Mrs. Gaskell's wish to impose a notion of reconciliation on matters that cannot be reconciled; it attempts to deflect attention from the crucial issue of how law comes into violent and inhuman conflict with individuals. (Literature 21)

Lucas should turn the page for Gaskell's own sermon, preached, as she says, "in place of Dr. Wilson's," and addressed not to the listeners of his funeral sermon in 1796 but to the people of Gaskell's own day.

I quote at length from Gaskell's sermon to point out both her scorn of platitudes when dealing with unjust institutions and her own sense of history's direct application to action against unjust authorities in her own times:

> In looking back to the last century, it appears curious to see how little our ancestors had the power of putting two things together, and perceiving either the discord or harmony thus produced. Is it because we are farther off from those times, and have, consequently, a greater range of vision? Will our descendants have a wonder about us, such as we have about the inconsistency of our forefathers, or a surprise at our blindness that we do not perceive that, holding such and such opinions, our course of action must be so and so, or that the logical consequence of particular opinions must be convictions which at present we hold in abhorrence? It seems puzzling to look back on men such as our vicar, who almost held the doctrine that the King could do no

> wrong, yet were ever ready to talk of the glorious Revolution, and to abuse the Stuarts for having entertained the same doctrine, and tried to put it in practice. But such discrepancies ran through good men's lives in those days. It is well for us that we live at the present time, when everybody is logical and consistent. (SL 68)

"Holding such and such opinions," Gaskell implies, people of her own times should act morally whenever they see injustice institutionalized. Her irony is potent and conscious, as Uglow and Lansbury confirm (510; 164-7). Her tone reminds me of an exchange in Flannery O'Connor's "The Life you Save May Be Your Own." When Mr. Shiftlet says that "the monks of old slept in their coffins," Lucynell Crater responds, "They wasn't as advanced as we are" (59). Far from advocating the blind acceptance of law, Gaskell argues for recognition of "the discord between the laws of man and the laws of Christ."

In another passage in Sylvia's Lovers tone is important in understanding Gaskell's attitude to the law. The press-gang has acted deceptively in Monkshaven by ringing the fire-bell to draw out the able-bodied men whom they then seize and impress. Thus, as Daniel Robson judges, the press-gang told a foul lie in falsely ringing the bell, and his own action comes as a response to legalized lying. He leads the remaining men in a riot on the Randyvowse, where the impressed men are held. Later, he says with satisfaction, as he views the results of fire at the Randyvowse: "That comes o' ringin' t' fire-bell . . . it were shame for it to be

tellin' a lie, poor oud story-teller" (SL 264). Gaskell ends the chapter called "Retaliation" with these words, implying that the authorities cannot tell lies to suit their own lawless purposes and then be unwilling to face the consequences when the fire keeps them from the "shame" of lying!

The next day the authorities come down hard on the rioters, arresting Daniel Robson. Gaskell recounts the action on both sides, giving first the Monkshaven's people's view that the rioters had delivered "due punishment inflicted in wild justice on the press-gang and their abettors" (SL 283). Then she explains how the magistrates, on appeal from the naval officers, had called out the militia and had taken severe steps to quench the riots. The tone of the following sentence has been much misunderstood in my view:

> So the authorities were quite justified in the decided steps they had taken, both in their own estimation then, and now, in ours, looking back on the affair <u>in cold blood</u>. (SL 283) [my emphasis]

Beginning with Terry Eagleton in 1976, critics have read this passage as Gaskell's agreement that the law must be upheld no matter how unjust it is (25-26). John Lucas also claims that Gaskell's attempt at fairminded judgment of the riots and subsequent arrests is inadequate.

> For of course she cannot afford to investigate the rightness of that feeling which 'ran strongly against'

> the authorities. No wonder. After all, in writing about Daniel Robson as she did, Mrs. Gaskell went a good deal further than she could possibly have intended. (Literature of Change 23)

Lucas cannot grant Gaskell the power of intending to write what he claims is "so fine a novel" without attributing her success to "the anarchic element in her imaginative make-up" (24), which operates without conscious artistry. John Kucich reaches the same conclusion as Lucas and Eagleton. The "authorial pronouncement" above is "reactionary . . . . cold-hearted authoritarianism" (200). But Kucich quotes the passage out of context, saying it is "the narrator's remarks on the hanging of Daniel Robson" (200). In fact, this passage occurs after Daniel's arrest but before any of his family, friends, or the reader knows that he will be hanged. The passage refers only to the calling up of the militia in response to property damage and at the request of the naval officers. Gaskell is also most certainly ironic as the last few words of the phrase indicate: "in cold blood" reveals the kind of cold-hearted authoritarianism that Gaskell has repeatedly exposed and the only way that the authorities could be "quite justified."

At the same time, however, that Kucich condemns Gaskell's "consistent support for legal authority" (200), he argues for the anarchic energies of what he calls Gaskell's favorite transgressions--lying and impulsiveness (202). Kucich accounts for the "moral and sexual 'ambivalence'"

apparent to modern readers of Gaskell by a "confusion endemic to bourgeois consciousness, which is hardly as static and ordered as it is usually made out to be" (202). By expelling "transgressive energies," Gaskell is unconsciously doing away with the very psychological strengths she approves of to help "revitalize" the society (Kucich 202). I believe Kucich recognizes the energy in Gaskell's texts and has correctly identified lying as a subversive source of it; however, he fails to credit Gaskell with a complex and conscious literary project. He believes her goal is "to uphold bourgeois standards of social order" (202), while I believe her tone and the content of her novels show a decided undermining of the social order of her day despite the historical setting of some of them. If there are anarchic forces which strike both Lucas and Kucich and force Eagleton to claim for Sylvia's Lovers a kind of accidental "putting of its own controlling ideology into question" (27), then I suggest that Gaskell intended, if not anarchy, at least a radical questioning of the law.

The press-gang forms only the background for the romance and family story which is the focus of Sylvia's Lovers, but it is an important thematic background with political and economic implications for Gaskell's own time. The acquiescence of the gentry to the press-gang laws is based on economic jealousy, as Gaskell indicates. Magistrates uphold property rights over human rights. The romantic plot, therefore, has political implications as it moves out of

sexual jealousy to center on a lie. Philip Hepburn withholds what he knows about Charley Kinraid's impressment so that he can marry Sylvia. Philip's lie is like that told by the fire-bell. It flushes Sylvia out of her shelter in the promise of marriage with Kinraid. Moreover, it receives added backing from her father's treatment at the hands of the law. Sylvia feels pressed to provide for her mother the security of a home with Philip. Government policy provides the climate in which Philip's lie can be effective. Through his lie, as Jane Spencer puts it, Philip "press-gangs Sylvia into marriage" (100). Terry Eagleton stresses the way legality ties the novel's family concerns with its government concerns:

> The issue of legality. . . opens out, in fact, into a wide range of preoccupations with fraudulence and fidelity, honesty and deceit, truth and trickery, in the substance of both personal and social relations. (22)

Gaskell's portrait of Philip, however, is not condemning. Less rigid than the press-gang law or the magistrates and gentry of Monkshaven, Philip nevertheless is associated with the law. When Sylvia would rush out and help the men seized by the gang, Philip restrains her saying, "Sylvie! you must not. Don't be silly; it's the law, and no one can do aught against it, least of all women and lasses" (SL 28).

Philip argues for the law also in the discussion he has with Daniel Robson. Philip backs the law, as many unthinking people do, simply because it is the law. Defending the press-gang, he submits, "But, asking pardon, laws is made for the good of the nation, not for your good or mine" (40). Daniel's response stirs the blood of anyone who values the rights of individuals:

> Nation here! nation theere! I'm a man and yo're another, but nation's nowheere . . . I can make out King George, and Measter Pitt, and yo' and me, but nation! nation, go hang! (SL 41)

Sylvia is her father's daughter, and when her mother turns the conversation away from the press-gang and onto the scarlet cloak she bought against Philip's advice, Daniel Robson backs his daughter:

> She's a good lass at times; and if she liked to wear a yellow-orange cloak she should have it. Here's Philip here, as stands up for laws and press-gangs, I'll set him to find us a law against pleasing our lass; and she our only one. (SL 43)

With her father's support, Sylvia cannot resist throwing back at Philip that despite his "preaching laws, all t' way home" his practice is to conspire with the Fosters to smuggle "silks an' lace an' things" for their dry goods store (SL 43). Philip flushes, not because he is embarrassed by the

smuggling charge--"everyone did that"--but because his cousin shows such delight in throwing it in his face. This exchange reveals that Philip upholds the law when it is convenient to him, but he is also a member of the middle-class merchant opportunists, who defy the law to smuggle goods. Uglow points out the irony in Philip's stance before the law: "Sylvia, his prize, is also contraband, brought into his house under false pretenses" (509).

Gaskell's ringing the changes on the press-gang law suggests several symbolic applications of this injustice. Philip press-gangs Sylvia into marriage, and, in so doing, suggests the way many women were married against their will and to their harm. Although Gaskell does not suggest that Philip intends harm to Sylvia, Uglow claims that the lie is "akin to murder, killing Kinraid in fantasy and denying Sylvia's independent choice, destroying the very part of her he loves" (507). Philip suffers for his lie because, as Eagleton argues, "the lie of pretending Kinraid is dead becomes the lie of his married life; yet it is through that lie that Philip is able to articulate his richest resources of feeling" (23).

In the atmosphere of fear and outrage it brings with it, the press-gang also calls forth images of the crime of rape.[2] The dehumanized seizure of human beings as if they were commodities to be put in the holds of ships brings out the same emotions as a mass rape. Gaskell pictures a scene much like the Rape of the Sabine Women:

> Pressing around this nucleus of cruel wrong, were women crying aloud, throwing up their arms in imprecation, showering down abuse as hearty and rapid as if they had been a Greek chorus. Their wild, famished eyes were strained on faces they might not kiss, their cheeks were flushed to purple with anger or else livid with impotent craving for revenge. Some of them looked scarce human; and yet an hour ago these lips, now tightly drawn back so as to show the teeth with the unconscious action of an enraged wild animal, had been soft and gracious with the smile of hope; eyes, that were fiery and bloodshot now, had been loving and bright; hearts, never to recover from the sense of injustice and cruelty, had been trustful and glad only one short hour ago. (SL 29)

The press-gang parallels rape in its specter of gang action in the name itself. Even though inverted in the seizing of the sailors, the crime is suggested by the outrage of the crowd. The scene suggests the law is a vehicle for gender and class-based oppression. Gaskell always shows the effect of laws on families, in homes, and in streets--whether it be in Monkshaven, Manchester, or Cranford. In this scene the rape of the men occurs in the town; but Kinraid's impressment illustrates an individual and private rape. Even the bit of ribbon left behind in this scene suggests a sexual rape.

A final symbolic meaning of the press-gang could apply to either men or women. Like the grim reaper, the press-gang descends upon the unwary and drags them away. No resistance or excuses keep the gang from their mission. As Molly Corney says when reporting of the first scuffle, "T' gang's among 'em like t' day of judgment" (28). Later, when the firebell

summons the townspeople to its false fire, the mystery of its tolling strikes the assembled men as if it were the summons to death: "no one to speak and tell them why they were summoned--where they ought to be. They were at the heart of the mystery, and it was a silent blank" (SL 256). Once the men realize the lie tolled by the fire-bell, one man complains about the group's dullness in catching on to the hoax:

> A man can but die onest, and we was ready to go int' t' fire for t' save folks' lives, and yet we'd none on us t' wit to see as we might ha' saved yon poor chaps as screeched out for help. (SL 257)

And thus they talk themselves into the riot in order to answer the bell's summons, which they see as a call to justice. It is clear that Gaskell has found a historical situation that ties in well with her themes: the injustice of the laws of man; the difficulty in knowing the absolute truth; the need for moral action; and the accountability of all before God.

But for all the similarities between Philip's lie and the shared lie of the ruling community, Gaskell does not condemn him or his position. In fact, it is Charley Kinraid who is the lesser man when the novel is said and done. He marries well soon after learning of Sylvia's marriage and rises to a fortune opportunistically. Far from condemning Philip, Gaskell shows him to be her hero because he points

the way to her readers of repentance and reform. On his deathbed Philip reaches what Gaskell calls "the perfect vision of the perfect truth, when his naked, guilty soul shrank into the shadow of God's mercy seat out of the blaze of His anger against all those who act a lie" (499). Gaskell presents this death vision in alternations of "then" and "now." "Then" is the time of his boyhood when his mother, the cowslips, and biblical good men beckoned to him to be good and "now" is "his life ended, his battles fought, his time for 'being good' over and gone--the opportunity, once given in all eternity, past" (SL 498). "Then" and "now" are the symbolic times of Sylvia's Lovers. "Then" is the time when all life lies before one where to choose, as Philip dreams of setting out with good intentions from his boyhood; but "now" tells of the end of possibility, the rendering of moral accounts. But "then" can also be the historical past of the novel's setting and "now" the present of Gaskell's readers. Like the other historical novels published by the time of Gaskell's planning this one in 1859 (Scenes of Clerical Life, Adam Bede, and A Tale of Two Cities), Sylvia's Lovers shows how private life is affected by public events. Gaskell's 1863 readers, moved by Philip's deathbed scene and the couple's mutual forgiveness of trespasses, are asked to close the book and seek to right the wrongs of their own times.

Coral Lansbury believes that Sylvia's Lovers is "a necessary preface" to the earlier industrial novels, Mary

Barton and North and South. Gaskell viewed the turn of the nineteenth century as the "nexus of later historical developments." Because the Napoleonic wars pressured governments into repression of radicals in both politics and religion, many arbitrary laws were imposed (Lansbury 160). Lansbury further argues that "it was the penal laws that made revolt seem an Englishman's natural right and duty" (160). In taking a historical approach to change, Gaskell is therefore arguing for a contemporary consciousness of the need for change also. Lansbury points out that just as Whitby--the Monkshaven of Sylvia's Lovers--had changed from the whaling capital to a sleepy seaside resort by the time of Gaskell's own visit in 1859, so Manchester's "cotton-spinning monopoly" was about to be threatened by American cotton production (181). Lansbury shows how Gaskell may be read today when she concludes, "What Whitby had become in Elizabeth Gaskell's time, Detroit may be in our children's lives" (181).

Overcoming injustice may be Gaskell's chief goal--and it will be achieved, she maintains, when people of good will see what is in front of them. In 1858, Gaskell published a short novel on the subject of social change. In My Lady Ludlow, Gaskell pits the need for social change against a gentle representative of traditional English benevolent despotism. Lady Ludlow is an autocrat to her household and neighborhood, but she meets with such automatic respect among all her constituents that no one goes against her word. However,

young Mr. Gray, who newly holds the living at Hanbury and who wears his own hair with very little powder (MLL 21), suggests to Lady Ludlow that the magistrate who has imprisoned Job Gregson, "a notorious poacher," is wrong and is committing an injustice. Lady Ludlow cannot imagine that a member of her class might commit an injustice, even if he is a new, inexperienced magistrate. All the other magistrates "hang so together that they can't be brought to see justice" and are sending Job to jail "out of compliment" to Mr. Latham, the new magistrate (MLL 23). Lady Ludlow argues that Mr. Gray is not even responsible for the poachers and squatters on Hareman's Commons because it is extra-parochial. Mr. Gray's reported response to Lady Ludlow indicates that he feels "responsible for all the evil he did not strive to overcome" (MLL 26).

The seed planted in Lady Ludlow's mind by Mr. Gray takes root when she herself visits Job Gregson's poor cottage on Hareman's Commons and talks with his wife. Here Gaskell requires that Lady Ludlow read the context of the problem. Then after she sees and hears the story, she recognizes the injustice and, with the shoe on the other foot, this time her dainty high heeled aristocratic foot, she confronts Squire Latham about Job Gregson's imprisonment. Latham uses all the arguments she herself had used to answer Mr. Gray, but he stubbornly keeps coming back to the argument of law. Lady Ludlow's comment on this appeal to law might be Gaskell's to her readers:

> Bah! Bah! Bah! Who makes laws? Such as I, in the House of Lords--such as you in the House of Commons. We, who make the laws in St. Stephen's, may break the mere forms of them, when we have right on our sides. (MLL 30)

Though Gaskell could never speak so forcefully to her readers, she reminds us with characteristic irony how human laws are made and how they might be changed.

My Lady Ludlow has been criticized for being episodic, and especially for the long digression into a tragic story of romance and adventure during the French revolution. Edgar Wright claims that "the whole episode would be better out of the way; if it were cut out . . . we would be left with a small gem" (156). To me, however, this episode is another subtext or hidden transcript which reports of the danger of not changing the laws. Lady Ludlow tells the story to illustrate her point that the underclasses should not be taught to read or write, but the whole story illustrates how Lady Ludlow must be taught to read the signs of her changing society. The point of the long digression about the horrors of the French Revolution is that England must not ever resist change to the extent of forcing revolution. Despite his objection to the flawing digression, Edgar Wright recognizes the point Gaskell is making about the need for social change:

> Nevertheless the change is an adjustment of social values, not a social upheaval, while the result is a vindication of moral values and standards which are in the long run common to all. Lady Ludlow still holds her

> position by virtue of innate goodness and personality as well as rank, the society is still a stable and well-ordered one with its gradations of rank, duties and obedience clearly understood. But it has moved itself out of the eighteenth century while preserving its continuity with the best qualities of its past. (MLL 159)

My Lady Ludlow contrasts in many ways to Sylvia's Lovers, but both are historical novels which nonetheless are addressed to Gaskell's contemporaries. Gaskell has an ear for the hidden transcripts, the mutterings of discontent among the ignored classes. She can be identified with Mr. Gray when he feels himself "responsible for all the evil he did not strive to overcome" (MLL 26). My Lady Ludlow has no beginning, no middle, and no end, as its narrator claims (MLL 1), because it is social history that is still moral history unfolding. Readers would only be lying to themselves if they failed to see the application of this history to their own world.

Gaskell's urge to reform the laws of her times can be seen directly in North and South where the setting is contemporary with Gaskell's own time. Margaret realizes when she moves to Milton (Manchester) and reads the context of the worker's lives, that the lives of the farmers of the South are just as precarious. Her education begins, however, when she changes her attitude toward the poachers in the fields near the vicarage in Helstone. Formerly, she had admired "the wild adventurous freedom of their life . . . she felt inclined to wish them success" (NS 54). She had romanticized

poverty. But with her new sense of suffering, which dates from her father's crisis in faith, she is fearful of the poachers (NS 25). From cottages that she sees as picturesque and needing to be sketched, Margaret moves to the city where she realizes the poverty that both North and South share.

It is a tribute to Margaret's growth and education in Milton that she does not lie about the squalor she remembers there when Nicholas Higgins wants to take the fatherless Boucher children to a better place. Margaret paints a different picture to Higgins at this point in her life from what she would have before experiencing city life and its problems:

> You would not bear the dulness of the life; you don't know what it is; it would eat you away like rust. Those that have lived there all their lives, are used to soaking in stagnant waters. They labour on, from day to day, in the great solitude of steaming fields--never speaking or lifting up their poor, bent, downcast heads. The hard spade-work robs their brain of life; the sameness of their toil deadens their imagination; they don't care to meet to talk over thoughts and speculations, even of the weakest, wildest kind, after their work is done; they go home brutishly tired, poor creatures! caring for nothing but food and rest. (NS 306)

Higgins says, responding to Margaret's surprisingly revised version of the South:

> God help 'em! North an' South have each getten their own troubles. If work's sure and steady theer, labour's paid at starvation prices; while here we'n rucks o'

> money coming in one quarter, and ne'er a farthing th' next. For sure, th' world is in a confusion that passes me or any other man to understand; it needs fettling, and who's to fettle it? (NS 307)

Gaskell would agree with Higgins that the world needs "fettling," or putting in order, but it needs people like Margaret Hale and Lady Ludlow, who are capable of changing and of separating myth from reality. Both are able to read the context and not be blinded by idealizing memory. Both are compelled by close inspection of their worlds to recognize the need for reform. Hareman's Commons, through which Lady Ludlow picks her way in her high heels to visit Job Gregson's wife, has much in common with Helstone of North and South (Wright 160).

Changing attitudes toward poachers are hidden transcripts Gaskell traces in several of her works in order to wake up readers to reform laws. Emphasis on poachers is a sign in both Helstone and Hanbury of the changes that took place in the eighteenth century in the laws against and punishments for poaching. Scott reports that estate owners and the Crown put new restrictions on the usual rights of peasants to "forest pasturage, hunting, trapping, fishing, turf and heath cutting, fuel wood gathering, thatch cutting, lime burning, and quarrying" (189), on what used to be considered common land. Scott goes on to say "that yeomen, cottagers, and laborers considered this breach of customary law to be an injustice" (189). E. P. Thompson, in his book

on the origins of The Black Act, makes clear the position of the law in the eighteenth century: "The British state . . . existed to preserve the property and, incidentally, the lives and liberties, of the propertied" (21). The Waltham Black Act, however, was extraordinary in making capital between 200 and 250 categories of offences (23). The passage of this act in 1723 gave England the dubious distinction of possessing a criminal code that surpassed that of any other country in capital crimes (23). Thompson maintains that it "signalled the onset of the flood-tide of eighteenth-century retributive justice" (23).

Writing over one hundred years later, Gaskell reveals that her sympathies lie with the poachers and not with the repressive laws. She refers to poachers not only in My Lady Ludlow, where acceptance of change can be measured by the rise of the son of a poacher to be vicar of the parish, and in North and South, but also in "The Heart of John Middleton." John Middleton is a poacher's son who gives up the outlaw life out of love for a girl, who inspires him first to go to school (if only to see her), then to work in the cotton mill, then to church. Once married and with a baby, John is thrown out of work by failure of the cotton crop. His family faces Christmas day with no food, and John decides to return to the poaching life to save his loved ones from starvation. He meets an old friend of his father on the way to the poachers' meeting-place. The friend asks if he returns to "the old trade" as "the better business now that

cotton has failed." John Middleton answers him in tones that recall John Barton, "Ay . . . cotton is starving us out right. A man may bear a deal himself, but he'll do aught bad and sinful to save his wife and child." But the old friend will not allow him to call poaching sinful. "Nay, lad, "said he, "poaching is not sinful; it goes against man's laws, but not against God's" (C 396).

As the Christmas bells begin to sound midnight, the kind old friend gives John Middleton five shillings and a neck of mutton, provided he stays away from the poachers "with thy rights and thy wrongs. We don't trouble ourselves with such fine lawyer's stuff, and we bring down the 'varmint' all the better" (C 397). With his generosity, John's father's friend saves the young man from a return to the outlaw life. The main plot of "The Heart of John Middleton" sets Old Testament vengeance against New Testament forgiveness but does not offer a better example of Christian charity than that practiced by the old poacher.

"An Accursed Race," Gaskell's nonfiction account of the persecution of the Cagots in France and Spain, also pits outlaws against the laws that oppress them. Cagots had been outcasts in Europe at least since the middle ages. In the sixteenth century, Gaskell reports that some Cagots, cast out from civilization everywhere, had taken refuge in a deserted castle. Not accepted as neighbors but treated almost as vermin (MLL 215), the Cagots retaliated, confirming one of their stereotypes as magicians of the forests.

> By some acoustic secrets which were known to them, all sorts of moanings and groanings were heard in the neighbouring forests, very much to the alarm of the good people of the pure race; who could not cut off a withered branch for firewood, but some unearthly sound seemed to fill the air, nor drink water which was not poisoned, because the Cagots would persist in filling their pitchers at the same running stream. Added to these grievances, the various pilferings perpetually going on in the neighborhood made the inhabitants of the adjacent towns and hamlets believe that they had a very sufficient cause for wishing to murder all the Cagots. (MLL 216)

And murder them they did. Through the deception of an undercover member of the "pure race," the Cagots are trapped and murdered--and all is lawfully done.

In the essay "An Accursed Race" Gaskell has created with psychological realism the horrors of church and state-sponsored persecution. Her analysis of the "pure race" and its laws predicts Nazi Germany's persecution of the Jews or segregation in the pre-civil rights South. For example, in many towns, Gaskell tells us, Cagots were compelled to wear a piece of red cloth sewed on their clothes or "the foot of a duck or goose hung over their left shoulder." Finally these two signs were combined in a "piece of yellow cloth cut out in the shape of a duck's foot" (MLL 213). Furthermore, Cagots were not to drink of any water, even in public fountains, except for that of the Cagot fountain "in their own squalid village" (MLL 213). The church was no better than the state in repulsing the Cagots even though they were

good Catholics and regularly attended mass. A separate low door was made for them, so entry required a humble obeisance; once in the church, they had a separate holy water basin and either were denied communion bread or served it on a long fork.

Gaskell's tone in the essay is similar to the ironic understatement of the narrative passages in Sylvia's Lovers. The squires' and magistrates' acceptance of the abuses of the press-gangs parallels "the pure race's" acceptance of the laws of church and state against the Cagots. Again she seems to make the contemporary scene immune to the extreme prejudice practiced on the Continent. But she makes clear that she does intend for the English to take heed. "An Accursed Race" begins, "We have our prejudices in England. Or, if that assertion offends any of my readers, I will modify it: we have had our prejudices in England" (MLL 211). Gaskell goes on to enumerate the English persecution of the Jews, Catholics, Protestants, witches, wizards, and Puritans. But, as she puts it, "I do not think we have been so bad as our Continental friends" (MLL 211). However, her list of atrocities committed against the Cagots, has a moral, she says at the end of the history. The words are from an epitaph on the grave of Mrs. Mary Hand, who is buried at Stratford-on-Avon:

> What faults you saw in me,
> Pray strive to shun;
> And look at home; there's

Something to be done. (MLL 228)

Here Gaskell spells out her moral. The collection of stories that contains "An Accursed Race" and My Lady Ludlow, also includes "Doom of the Griffiths," "Half a Life-Time Ago," "The Poor Clare," and "The Half-Brothers." All the stories share similar themes of injustices done to individuals or groups and the need for changes in the laws of nation, church, and family. In all these stories, Gaskell makes her readers aware of injustices through the hidden transcripts of people marginalized by law.

Also published in 1859 was "Lois the Witch," a story seething with incantations, folk stories, interpretations of visions, curses, rumors, and gossip. Gaskell had always been fascinated with the community hysteria that caused the condemnation of women and men in America's witch trials. Her first three stories were published in Howitt's Journal under the name Cotton Mather Mills, "a complex cover" (172), as Jenny Uglow calls it. Cotton Mather was a Puritan minister whose sermon on witches Gaskell quotes in "Lois the Witch." At the time she chose the pseudonym, Gaskell was probably playing verbal games with the "cotton mills" setting (Manchester) for two of the stories and the domestic subject matter of all three which the pun on mother-mather suggests (Uglow 172).

In the story "Lois the Witch," linguistic play turns deadly. In the community of Salem, turned in on itself, all good principles and all just language are distorted. Conviction as a witch is based on the uttering of prayers with hesitation, on the version of the prayer book one can read, on the efficacy of curses and accusations, and on the truth of visions and prophecies as interpreted and put in words by fanatics and lunatics.

Hidden transcripts identify three oppressed groups in the story, each struggling for the power to survive in an uncertain political climate. First is the curse of the old woman in England who catches sight of Lois, the vicar's daughter, while the old witch is being tortured and drowned in the Avon River. Striking out verbally at the helpless four-year-old child, the old woman exerts the only power she has to reproach the church, which she understandably feels should help her: "Parson's wench, parson's wench, yonder, in thy nurse's arms, thy dad hath never tried fr [sic] to save me, and none shall save thee when thou art brought up for a witch" (CP 116). Her words gain psychological power over Lois and ring in her ears long after. In Lois's dreams the old woman's cat says them over again (CP 116). The wild justice of her curse catches Lois when she comes to the wild place called America. The old woman represents those women without men who come from no one knows where and live no one knows how. The mystery of their ability to live on nettles

and scraps of oatmeal leads people to suspect they owe their existence to supernatural means.

The second type of hidden transcript takes the form of the folk tales told by the native American women who are servants to the Puritans. Before Nattee's condemnation as a witch, she holds the girls in the Hickman house spellbound as she tells them tales of two-headed snakes under the power of Indian wizards. The snakes ensnare white girls with their gaze, forcing them to run off into the woods seeking Indian men. Nattee

> took a strange unconscious pleasure in her power over her hearers--young girls of the oppressing race, which had brought her down into a state little differing from slavery, and reduced her people to outcasts on the hunting-grounds which had belonged to her fathers. (CP 127)

There is little difference between Nattee's sexually suggestive stories of the power of Indian wizards and the voice which Manasseh claims comes from the "spirit of prophecy," and which tells him to "marry Lois." Lois says, "The voice, as you call it, has never spoken such a word to me" (CP 137).

The third oppressed group, identified as witches by the books they can read, are the Irish. Dr. Cotton Mather speaks of a witch he recently confronted in Boston. He claims this witch's guilt was proven by her ability to read the Book of Common Prayer and all other "popish books" but her inability

to read the Puritan Assembly's Catechism (CP 170). Mather says he trusts the words of the children who accused this Irish witch, believing God has "ordained truth" from "the mouths of babes and sucklings" (CP 170). Gaskell strikes close to English prejudice with this Irish witch. The Irish were hated, not only because they were Catholic, but because in Gaskell's times cheap Irish labor broke strikes in the cotton mills.

Lois, however, is an unexpected witch. Gaskell's readers identify with Lois. An Anglican vicar's daughter of scarcely eighteen years is not an old, strange woman like the witch of so many years ago; nor is she a heathen like Hota and Nattee; nor is she suspicious by being Irish and Catholic. Lois is like the reader of any time in being a victim who accepts the ideology of her place and time. Lois believes in witches as Gaskell reminds her readers: "You must remember, you who in the nineteenth century read this account, that witchcraft was a real terrible sin to her, Lois Barclay, two hundred years ago" (CP 177-78). Lois even believes for a moment that the charge against her might be true, that her sins had been coopted by the Devil and turned to curses. But then the pain of the iron on her ankle brings her back to judge her guilt as a delusion. Later when asked if she wants to confess and live, Lois cannot lie.

> Sirs, I must choose death with a quiet conscience, rather than life to be gained by a lie. I am not a witch. I know not hardly what you mean when you say I

> am. I have done many, many things very wrong in my life; but I think God will forgive me them for my Saviour's sake. (CP 184)

No one in Salem who hears Lois can tell her truth from the lies that control the whole community. Questioning the logic of her guilt just dimly reaches the jailer who hears her singing the evening hymn and repeating the Lord's Prayer. "And a dull thought came into his dull mind" (CP 179), but he gives up trying to understand how a condemned witch can be thankful for blessings, repeat the Lord's Prayer, and still be a witch. As Gaskell puts it, "His mind stopped short at this point in his wondering contemplation" (CP 179). Gaskell's presentation of Lois, the English witch, cautions her readers to avoid dull thoughts in dull minds, to exercise their reason in questioning the controlling ideology.

Gaskell's message in this story as in all her historical works is that lies can gain power at any time. The chilling realization of helplessness before the power of official lies comes to any reader of "Lois the Witch," Sylvia's Lovers, or "An Accursed Race." Courts and corrupt lawyers may put justice up for sale as in Mary Barton. Repressive laws and hard economic times may oppress women, workers, poachers, witches as they do in North and South, "Lois the Witch," and "The Heart of John Middleton." But Gaskell avoids cynicism about hard times and official injustices while placing hope in individual moral actions like those of Lady Ludlow and

Margaret Hale and insisting that the hidden transcripts be read and the official lies be questioned.

In the early 1870's when he wrote "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," Friedrich Nietzsche was to explain the logic of public, law-sanctioned lying in terms that would be chilling to Gaskell:

> We still do not yet know where the drive for truth comes from. For so far we have heard only of the duty which society imposes in order to exist: to be truthful means to employ the usual metaphors. Thus, to express it morally, this is the duty to lie according to a fixed convention, to lie with the herd and in a manner binding upon everyone. Now man of course forgets that this is the way things stand for him. Thus he lies in the manner indicated, unconsciously and in accordance with habits which are centuries old; and precisely <u>by means of this unconsciousness</u> and forgetfulness he arrives at his sense of truth. (891).

Gaskell's mission in the historical novels and stories of 1855-1863 was to take control of the law out of the grip of Nietzsche's herd and the dull minds of those like the jailer in "Lois the Witch" and restore lying to its moral sense. Then language would be made to serve the truth and law to serve justice.

[1]References to Sylvia's Lovers are to the Oxford University Press edition, edited by Andrew Sanders. Future references will be abbreviated SL.

[2] I am indebted to Anne Chandler for the idea of associating the press-gang with rape. I heard her paper at the Carolinas Symposium on British Studies at Duke University, 17 October 1992, but I have not read it. She also draws different conclusions from mine.

CHAPTER IV

LITERACY, LEARNING AND LYING: DYING IN ONE'S OWN LANGUAGE

In her search for subjects and settings, Elizabeth Gaskell haunted the margins of her society. "All through her life, she loved to linger in the borderland," wrote Mrs. Ellis Chadwick in 1910 (127). She listened to the tales and dialects of people who lived unknown at the margins of her society. Gaskell found her stories on the streets between the city's suburbs and its cellars, among the law-abiding and the law-ignoring citizens, within the conforming and the dissenting sects, and with the educated and the illiterate folk. She sought the northern coast of Yorkshire and the fringes of Manchester. In "Company Manners" she implies that she values having balm and black currant leaf tea with an old Welsh herb-woman in her cottage more than enduring elegant but stuffy entertainments among people of higher class (505).

Gaskell explores the edges of her society in order to teach how to read change as it is happening, and in her society nowhere is change more vital than in the educating of the masses. As a Unitarian, Gaskell believed in universal education, and both William and Elizabeth Gaskell taught in working-class schools. Gaskell is precise in making clear the educational level of every one of her

characters. However, she sets up no simple privileging of the literate over the illiterate characters, or the lettered over the oral traditions. In fact, the oral culture in Gaskell's novels is vital and admirable in its energy; the written is often confining and regimented through law and prohibitions. Literacy, however, is important because all people need to read both the texts and the contexts of their culture.

In all her works, Gaskell teaches the reader the many languages of truth in the times and places of transition. She was passionate about truth, but she knew that the people in power set it within narrow, confining boundaries. Susan Morgan claims that Gaskell

> shows us what kinds of members of a community now can teach us, whom we must listen to. They are the dissenters, the simple Christians, the women . . . In this man's world, this real world, they are the very people we consider out of touch with truth. (126)

Gaskell searched for truth in these untrodden ways, and she often used the lie to gain access. She offers alternative readings of circumstances and events. In addition, her works suggest that some people--either wittingly or unwittingly--are caught by change in unfortunate, even life-threatening, situations by a failure to read their world correctly. Reading contexts in Gaskell's novels becomes the requisite literacy for people living in times of transition.

Gaskell began in Mary Barton to follow the workers as they moved from one culture to another. Moreover, her interest in education is never simply to raise the rank and status of the educated (Craik, "Lore, Learning" 21). The Carsons' rank improves until they own mills and a fine home, but their "grand and golden" family Bible lies unread, its "leaves adhering together from the bookbinder's press" (MB 438). Reading and writing for Gaskell lead in the best of situations to better thinking, clearer interpretation of events, wise feeling, and reforming action. Literacy lies at the heart of Gaskell's project, but it is a literacy of the heart.

Significantly, Gaskell begins both The Life of Charlotte Bronte and Sylvia's Lovers with folk tales of the wild country which fostered Charlotte Bronte and Sylvia Robson. Their communities form the contexts that explain their lives. Jenny Uglow describes Monkshaven as "an enclave even more isolated than Haworth, home of a 'wild North-Eastern people', where self-destructive passions flourish" (509). Imposed on this natural oral culture in Monkshaven and Yorkshire are the laws of the state and the stifling standards of proper society. Gaskell moves from context to text in her presentation of these women whose oral cultures fueled their imagination and passion. Walter Ong has described the movement from oral to lettered culture

as "the spatialization of sound" (47), but the movement to print brought about the "locking of sound in space" (47).

Some in the oral culture, however, found the "lock" of written language to be confining because imposed by law and its distant arbitrators. In Sylvia's Lovers, the semi-literate Daniel Robson reports how he preferred to lose a finger of his hand rather than be impressed into military service for his country against the Americans. His reason for such a desperate action Gaskell curiously puts in a linguistic metaphor: "I could na stomach the thought o' being murdered i' my own language" (SL 38). Ironically, when Daniel Robson is hanged later for his part in the "Randyvowse" riot, it can be said that he is murdered in his own language: laws lock in his fate. There are, however, many ways of dying in one's own language. Gaskell's project reveals that old conflict between the letter and the spirit of the law.

The characters in Mary Barton have links to their oral and rural roots in the older generation. Alice Wilson and the senior Wilsons and Bartons do not write, as Wendy Craik points out ("Lore, Learning" 18). In a complicated piece of stage business involving the handwriting of two of the younger generation, Gaskell sets up a paper trail which almost serves as conclusive evidence to convict the innocent Jem Wilson of murder. Both Mary's and Jem's handwriting is on the piece of paper--Jem's, because he sent a valentine to Mary, complete with her address; Mary's, because she copied

a poem by Samuel Bamford for her father and used Jem's valentine as scrap paper, not knowing she loved him at the time and not valuing his valentine. This same scrap of paper is used by Mary's father as wadding in the gun at the time he kills Harry Carson. The paper, dropped at the scene of the crime, is luckily recovered not by the police, but by Mary's Aunt Esther, who turns it back to Mary. Mary fits the pieces of the paper puzzle together and knows her father is the murderer (MB 300). This same bit of paper speaks the language of love, muffles the sound of hate, and--if it had fallen into the hands of the police--would have committed an innocent man to the gallows. Gaskell's point, painstakingly developed in this palimpsest, is that literacy locks in the word and also that it can be misused or can misfire, depending on the heart and knowledge of the reader. The police would not have been able to read the scrap of paper with understanding, but as circumstantial evidence, it could have "murdered Jem in his own language."

Harry Carson's caricature drawing makes a similar point later in the same novel. At the meeting of masters with the leaders of the trades' union, Harry Carson, answering for "the violent party" among the masters, speaks harsh words which break off all communication (MB 234). The workers silently leave, never speaking a word. But Harry Carson makes one other contribution to the meeting. He draws a caricature of the workers, revealing them to be "lank, ragged, dispirited, and famine-striken. Underneath he wrote

a hasty quotation from the fat knight's well-known speech in Henry IV" (MB 235). All the other masters see the caricature and smile as it is passed around. The quotation, though Gaskell does not specify it, is no doubt the one where Falstaff calls his soldiers "good enough to toss; food for powder" (Gill, MB n. 482). Carson's mocking of the workers through the idle drawing turns out to lock in his doom, when the paper itself is picked up by a worker and used later to draw lots for Carson's assassination. His failure to read the context of his world leads to his providing the means of being murdered in his own language.

While in Mary Barton Gaskell describes an earlier time of transition from the rural and oral traditions, in North and South she presents a broader definition of learning that moves beyond simple literacy in a new spirit of inquiry to embrace an imaginative reading of text and context. Mr. Hale sets the theme in motion by leaving the ministry to become a tutor of the classics. Thornton, the factory-owner, is his pupil, but he brings to the texts a kind of practical learning which Gaskell respects. In a small but telling scene, Margaret returns to Helstone, accompanied by Mr. Bell, the Oxford don, and together they visit the parochial school. Persuaded to lead a parsing lesson, Margaret is embarrassed to be caught with the "wrong" name for the article a. The children had been taught to call it an "adjective absolute" (NS 392). To Margaret's disappointment, the goals of education in Helstone are not

literacy but literalism. Margaret finds through this event that her parents' replacements in the parsonage are "quick, brisk, loud-talking, kind-hearted, and not troubled with much delicacy of perception" (NS 393). Literalists with little imagination now lead the flock her father had so carefully nurtured.

On the same trip to Helstone, however, education by folklore or what Mr. Bell calls "practical paganism" is revealed to be lacking in imagination of another sort. Betty Barnes had followed "savage country" superstition (NS 390) and burned a cat to enable her to find her husband's Sunday clothing, which she had witlessly loaned to a gypsy fortune teller. Such cruelty pains Margaret and causes her to regret "such utter want of imagination" (NS 391). The empty education and equally empty superstition which Margaret discovers on her trip "home" to Helstone reveal Gaskell's goals for education. As Wendy Craik puts it,

> The learning in North and South is not a matter merely of reading and writing, but of training in thinking, from the evidence of the here and now. . . . It is evidently education in this area that both masters and workers know they need, a joint knowledge of mutual difficulties and their causes. ("Lore, Learning" 30)

In a discussion with her father and Thornton, Margaret tells a tale of a man in Nuremberg who had kept a child in ignorance, "taking it for innocence" (NS 121). The danger of such an education is that a man, kept from learning by

fear of his falling into temptation, is led, as Margaret points out to Mr. Thornton, to the "practical paganism" of riotous living. "He could not even use words effectively enough to be a successful beggar" (NS 121). Margaret's parallel is pointed: the workers too are a greater danger if kept in ignorance.

But there is an ignorance of learned people too, an obsession with the literal and a corresponding failure to read the context and to learn from inspecting everyday life. Mr. Hale compartmentalizes his learning, never leaving his study to walk and read the streets the way Margaret does. He withdraws from life and is even afraid to tell his wife of his decision to leave the ministry and move to Milton. The effect of the move to Milton on Mrs. Hale is devastating. Margaret is the one who must cope with living in Milton. She educates herself by reading the streets and homes of both masters and workers. The novel tells of her education--and her tutors are Higgins and Thornton. As Craik affirms, "Classics . . . do not offer an interpretation of life in Milton" ("Lore, Learning" 26). Fredrick Hale also is forced to learn to read in a foreign country and among foreign people. His alternative seems more drastic; he would literally die in his own language if he were apprehended in England. But in North and South, Gaskell reveals that both brother and sister are developing the same literacy: they are surviving by learning to read the contexts of their worlds.

In My Lady Ludlow, Gaskell also shows her concern for literacy and social change. She traces the slow progress of educational reform through what Edgar Wright calls "two types of revolution" (xi): in one, individuals adjust peacefully to changes in religious practices and class relationships; and in the other, violence erupts into the French Revolution. In a nest of tales, Gaskell returns to the method and structure of Cranford (Wright x). Universal education threads its way through both revolutions. In France, violent consequences occur to two young aristocrats when a servant betrays them through his ability to read. In England, the poacher's son progresses through education to the position of rector on Lady Ludlow's estate. Gaskell balances her mockery of Lady Ludlow's aristocratic resistance to change with her approval of her eventual willingness to tolerate. The closed-minded reactionary in Lady Ludlow comes out in her immediate response, but her more mature reflection leads her to react with her heart. The reader carries vivid pictures of Lady Ludlow slamming shut her newly glazed pew window whenever "Mr.Gray . . . spoke in favour of schooling and education" (MLL 14), and of Lady Ludlow at the end of the story placing her handkerchief in her lap as the dissenting baker's wife uncouthly does, thus silencing the sneers of footman and snobs alike (MLL 210).

The sly undermining of the forms and traditions of prejudice is accomplished in My Lady Ludlow by peasants and

women assuming unaccustomed power. The narrator of the story is a crippled woman, Margaret Dawson, who as a girl was taken from her poor family after her rector father's death to be educated and maintained by Lady Ludlow. Gaskell places Dawson's narrative in a collection called Round the Sofa. The narrator of Round the Sofa is a young woman who also lives apart from her family while she improves her health, and who finds the health of her spirits much improved by her attendance "round the sofa" at Margaret Dawson's soirees. The stories told by Dawson and her guests educate the young girl as no written lessons can.

In My Lady Ludlow, Margaret Dawson values the traditions she learns from her aristocratic benefactor. At the same time, however, her narrative reveals the breaking down of those traditions. Margaret begins the story with a lecture on the writing and reading of letters and how they have changed from "great prizes" to be "studied like books" to "short jerky notes" with "just a little sharp sentence" (MLL 1). She ends this collection of loosely connected tales with a letter she received from Miss Galindo, who surely could never be accused of anything short or jerky. The letters and tales, which make up the novel, are all in one sense about reading and writing and are all told or written by women. The theme of literacy may seem a minor note struck in the gradual change in the world order accomplished at the turn of the century, but as orchestrated by Gaskell, it is responsible for the harmony of that change

in England. The danger of universal education is held up against the danger of revolution. But the languages that Gaskell privileges are the female tales of Margaret Dawson, Lady Ludlow, and Miss Galindo. Masculine tongues are silent or speak through agents of absent or dead landlords, whose property proves to be mortgaged. The vital languages are those that speak through women from the heart.

I have said that all Gaskell's novels are novels of education, but two works, written in close succession, focus particularly on the value of literacy and learning, though they approach the subject from opposite directions. Both works, published within a year of each other,[1] also turn upon lies and point out the danger of being locked into illiteracy. Sylvia is illiterate, but her mother wishes her to acquire the skills she herself never had and so favors the evening sessions with her cousin Philip Hepburn. Sylvia resists her education as useless:

> Mother! . . . what's the use on my writing "Abednego," "Abednego," "Abednego," all down a page? If I could see t'use on 't, I'd ha' axed father to send me t' school; but I'm none wanting to have learning. (SL 93)

Phillis Holman of Cousin Phillis, on the other hand, approaches learnedness in her study of Latin, Greek and Italian. The cousins of the two girls--Philip Hepburn and Paul Manning--react to the literacy level demonstrated by Sylvia and Phillis. Philip spends his evenings with Sylvia

trying by candlelight to teach her reading, spelling, geography, and love for him. Paul, on the other hand, is shamed by Phillis's learning to admit the little training in and small remembrance of his own Latin lessons. Paul is appalled to find Phillis's name in the books on the shelf, including Virgil, Caesar, and a Greek grammar (CP 275). He tries to rationalize her superior learning by calling her books "her dead-and-gone languages" (CP 276).

But if the women are the pupils of language study in these novels, the men are also learners. In knowing Sylvia and Phillis, Philip and Paul learn the literacy of the heart. They learn how to apply the vitality of the oral tradition and carry the values of the lettered past into times of change. Uglow argues that in both Sylvia's Lovers and Cousin Phillis,

> Gaskell counterpoints forces which forge lives, settling the gradual accumulation of years against the violent shock of the new and in both she asks what values can sustain humanity through uncertainty, pain and change. (540)

In Sylvia's Lovers the genres of oral cultures--the ballad and tall tale--prove false to reason but true to the heart, while in Cousin Phillis, allusions to Virgil, Dante, and Wordsworth present a pastoral Eden with a lurking well-read glib-tongued serpent. Gaskell demonstrates that those who speak with the tongues of men and of angels need also to speak with love.

The power of Sylvia's Lovers comes from Gaskell's ability to catch her characters as they live and in their own dialect. Annette Hopkins reports that Gaskell submitted her manuscript to General Perronet Thompson, a Yorkshireman, to correct the dialect (271). But her success suggests that it is a natural process or, as Hopkins continues,

> So naturally do the characters come to life through their racy, homely, picturesque idiom, that we get the sense of its having reached the author by direct, oral transmission. (271)

According to Craik, in the competition between Kinraid and Hepburn for Sylvia's love, Gaskell puts two ways of life at strife by opposing two codes: "The codes arising from natural impulses of human emotions and passions and the codes arising from spiritual self-awareness and education" (Elizabeth Gaskell 166). These two codes are represented also in the literary forms of courtship used by the two men. Charley Kinraid uses the male genre of whaling stories to fascinate Sylvia as her father fascinated her mother. Philip's tools are ruled tablets for copying "Abednego" and the text of The Sorrows of Young Werther. As Arthur Pollard puts it, "Kinraid's glamorous, and Philip is prosaic" (215).

Gaskell parallels the tall tales of whaling told by Kinraid and her father with the various smuggling devices practiced without guilt by men and women, whalers and merchants, alike. In smuggling the sailors join with the

merchants to evade the import laws. Gaskell pictures Sylvia and her mother listening to Kinraid and Daniel's account of the latest smuggling exploits:

> There was no question of the morality of the affair; one of the greatest signs of the real progress we have made since those times seems to be that our daily concerns of buying and selling, eating and drinking, whatsoever we do, are more tested by the real practical standard of our religion than they were in the days of our grandfathers. Neither Sylvia nor her mother was in advance of their age. Both listened with admiration to the ingenious devices, and acted as well as spoken lies, that were talked about as fine and spirited things. Yet if Sylvia had attempted one tithe of this deceit in her every-day life, it would have half broken her mother's heart. (SL 98)

Deceit is justified in the case of unfair government taxation. Gaskell goes on to defend the common people's resistance to the duty on salt, which was imposed in 1702 and revived in 1732 (Andrew Sanders, SL 521). "Government," Gaskell warns, "did more to demoralize the popular sense of rectitude and uprightness than heaps of sermons could undo" (SL 99). Standards of truth, Gaskell wants her readers to realize, grow out of their contexts: "It may seem curious to trace up the popular standard of truth to taxation; but I do not think the idea would be so very farfetched" (SL 99).

The lies in these two stories present another problem of interpretation. Storytelling, a vital function in oral societies, was Gaskell's strength. But, as Donald Stone notes, "Storytelling is the fabrication of lies and the

endorsement of acts of subterfuge" (164). Stone claims that Gaskell is torn by her sympathy for the two liars: Kinraid and his romantic lies about whaling and Philip and his down-to-earth lie, which presses Sylvia to marry him (164). To Stone, Gaskell's "split focus . . . becomes bothersome" (164). Kinraid's lies are judged "the stuff of romance," but Philip's lie has the makings of tragedy (164). Rather than seeing Gaskell's double attitude as a split, I prefer to see it as another instance of the opening up of grounds for truth. Gaskell's attitude toward storytelling is complex. She is a teller of stories herself and knows their power. Barbara Weiss has argued for the strength and integral purpose of Gaskell's tales, which convey emotional truths as they caution or inspire (276). Weiss further equates the telling of tales with the writing of novels. Both function "to reach the heart of the listener with a symbolic truth made powerful by imagination and art" (277).

Something almost magical is seen in Gaskell's presentation of the art of storytelling, but the magic is simply a sign of the power that language can and does assume. Weiss, for example, calls interpolated tales told by sailors Will Wilson in Mary Barton and Charley Kinraid in Sylvia's Lovers "the Othello courting motif" (283). Other powerful spellbinders are Peter Jenkyns, Matty's long-lost brother in Cranford; Job Legh in Mary Barton; and the conjurer's wife in Cranford. According to Weiss, the latter uses storytelling "to impose verbal control on a life in

which she otherwise has little power" (283). The magical power of storytelling is also suggested in Cranford by Miss Pole's study of conjuring in the encyclopedia. Her conclusion is "very clear indeed! My dear Mrs. Forrester, conjuring and witchcraft is a mere affair of the alphabet" (C 84). Hilary Schor has taken Miss Pole's cue to conclude that Gaskell "rewrites [the] marginality" of women's languages and by the subversion of literary traditions, "rewrite[s] the novel" (Scherezade 84). I agree with Schor's conclusion but would submit that truth-telling is Gaskell's larger purpose, which she achieves paradoxically by expanding the acceptable languages of truth. These languages include women's languages but are not limited to them. By use of tale telling, Gaskell completes the context necessary to understand the characters, but at the same time, she gives their viewpoints a validity that does not come from the literal truth of the stories. It comes from the truth of emotions and is comprehended by the literacy of the heart.

In Sylvia's Lovers, the title character moves from an oral culture to a barely literate one. As W. A. Craik points out, Daniel Robson has followed the life of impulse instead of the coded and more controlled life of the town dwellers. The townspeople are not more intelligent, but they rule their lives and emotions by more conscious codes. They have a higher level of education which includes the ability to read, write and keep books (Elizabeth Gaskell

180). Uglow argues that the culture of the farmers and whalers is "'natural' organic" but it is opposed by "the 'rule of law' in statues, the rules of Mavor's spelling book, which Philip gives Sylvia, [and] the ruled lines of the Foster's account books" (513). Sylvia naturally resists the regulated learning which Philip imposes on her. Uglow claims that "Sylvia's resistance to literacy may be foolish, but it is also understood as loyalty to the unregulated oral vigour of her class" (515).

Gaskell makes the reader realize that Sylvia belongs to an older culture. Her imagery elevates the occupations of women to the privileged positions of communicators of culture. As Sylvia sits spinning, Gaskell spins out a digression like an epic simile in which Sylvia's activity resembles harp-playing--or even, oddly, writing itself:

> People speak of the way in which harp-playing sets off a graceful figure; spinning is almost as becoming an employment. A woman stands at the great wool-wheel, one arm extended, the other holding the thread, her head thrown back to take in all the scope of her occupation; or if it is the lesser spinning-wheel for flax--and it was this that Sylvia moved forwards to-night--the pretty sound of the buzzing, whirring motion, the attitude of the spinner, foot and hand alike engaged in the business--the bunch of gay coloured ribbon that ties the bundle of flax on the rock--all make it into a picturesque piece of domestic business that may rival harp-playing any day for the amount of softness and grace which it calls out. (SL 41-2)

But while this "domestic business" attracts Philip, he is

unable to deal with the spirit of contradiction that lies behind Sylvia's "softness and grace." Knowing that Philip stares at her as she spins incites Sylvia's resistance: "She got herself ready for the first opportunity of contradiction or opposition" (SL 42).

Resistance is one attribute of the Yorkshire spirit which Sylvia inherits from her father. The narrator, in fact, recalls an example of the spirit of "passionate anger and thirst for vengeance" which distinguishes the people of the northern coastal area from their submissive southern neighbors:

> A Yorkshireman once said to me, "My country folk are all alike. Their first thought is how to resist. Why! I myself, if I hear a man say it is a fine day, catch myself trying to find out that it is no such thing. It is so in thought; it is so in word; it is so in deed." (SL 8)

It is this spirited response, to leap to opposition, which compels both Daniel and Sylvia to exercise their mouths and their wills in fruitless vengeance. Sylvia is "spiritually in a state of nature," as Craik puts it (Elizabeth Gaskell 163), but she is more active in it than Ruth was. When Sylvia vows she'll never forgive Simpson or the villagers who couple her name with Philip's, Kester comments, "Here's a pretty lass; she's got 'a'll niver forgi'e' at her tongue's end wi' a vengeance" (SL 320). Pollard pays particular attention to the tongue imagery when he comments

on this passage: "Up to this time, however, the words have often been at her tongue's end as a manner of speaking. Very soon they will come from her heart's core" (217).

In Daniel and Sylvia Robson's behavior there is a lack of awareness that Gaskell associates with the people of a time period half a century before her writing:

> It is astonishing to look back and find how differently constituted were the minds of most people fifty or sixty years ago; they felt, they understood, without going through reasoning or analytic processes, and if this was the case among the more educated people, of course it was still more so in the class to which Sylvia belonged. (SL 318)

Both Daniel and Sylvia put themselves at risk in reacting from their tongue's end. Craik argues that "in this [Sylvia's] original state . . . she is at the mercy of events in a way that the conscious moral being is not" (Elizabeth Gaskell 163). In the larger world beyond their own family, the Robsons are innocents and actually risk their lives in their failure to read the contexts of their times.

Gaskell values both the oral tradition, which produced the tall tales, and the written tradition. But, as in North and South, the most "literate" people are not those who can only read texts but those who can read contexts. Sylvia and her mother have successfully read the context of their home and understand the spirit of its law, which is to humor

Daniel Robson. They think nothing of allowing him to state lies to feed his illusion that he is in control of his own hearth. Daniel, for example, while confined to the house by rheumatism, has to be managed by the women for his own good. They tolerate his "ignorant" suggestions for running the house, even though they know the true value of his housekeeping knowledge. Sylvia once suggests they try one of these suggestions and feed her father the results, but Bell rejects the conspiracy. She knows Daniel cannot be taught (SL 46). They arrange for the tailor to visit to take up his time and provide male gossip. They indulge him with just enough liquor, then put him to bed. In an early scene a short exchange illustrates how Bell allows lies to flourish for the sake of her husband's ego. Daniel speaks first as he observes Sylvia come home in the company of Philip:

> "Tak' off thy pan o' milk, missus, and set on t' kettle. Milk may do for wenches, but Philip and me is for a drop o' good Hollands and watter this cold night. I'm a'most chilled to t' marrow wi' looking out for thee, lass, for t' mother was in a peck of troubles about thy none coming home i' t' dayleet, and I'd to keep hearkening out on t' browhead."
>
> This was entirely untrue, and Bell knew it to be so; but her husband did not. He had persuaded himself now, as he had done often before, that what he had in reality done for his own pleasure or satisfaction, he had done in order to gratify some one else. (SL 37)

Daniel's lack of awareness in reading the politics of his own hearth explains his ignorance of the politics of his

little world. He is caught by the letter of the law and murdered in his own language.

Sylvia's Lovers is set in a time of transition. Literacy and its accompanying self-consciousness and reflection were increasing. When Sylvia and Philip meet Hester, who comes from sitting at the bedside of Darley's sister during Darley's funeral, Sylvia automatically thinks how good Hester is. She does not condemn herself in comparison because according to Gaskell "In the agricultural counties, and among the class to which these four persons belonged, there is little analysis of motive or comparison of characters and actions, even at this present day of enlightenment" (SL 74).

Gaskell advocates an active moral life. Hester is the character who survives in Monkshaven to build almshouses for disabled sailors and soldiers after Philip and Sylvia are long dead (SL 502). Sylvia's Lovers, however, is not Hester's story. Sylvia is the one who moves from the marginal farm of Haytersbank to a position of wealth and property in Monkshaven, but her movement is her tragedy. Kinraid also moves to a new rank with added wealth. But, although Charley Kinraid is, as Andrew Sanders puts it, "the kind of self-helping, self-improving, self-made man of which the Victorians so approved, [he]is not Elizabeth Gaskell's real hero" (xvi). The real heroes of Sylvia's Lovers are those who can read the heart; and Sylvia, Philip and Hester are the only ones judged literate by the story's end.

The competing literary genres used by Sylvia's two suitors emphasize Gaskell's point that people at different times and in different circumstances use different languages. This basis for Gaskell's linguistic approach to truth appears when Philip tries in chapter ten to teach "A Refractory Pupil." Sylvia "was much more inclined to try and elicit some sympathy in her interest in the perils and adventures of the northern seas, than to bend and control her mind to the right formation of letters" (SL 107).

Letters lock in the thoughts and feelings and make possible more abstract thought as Jack Goody and Ian Watt have described in their article, "The Consequences of Literacy." But at the same time, Goody and Watt claim that "literate culture . . . is much more easily avoided than the oral one" (337). Abstract reasoning, logic and categorizing are not as deep and permanent as direct face-to-face experience in the oral culture (337). To Sylvia at the edge of literacy, the letters seem like fetters and the words a burden:

> It's bad enough wi' a book o' print as I've niver seen afore, for there's sure to be new-fangled words in 't. I'm sure I wish the man were farred who plagues his brains wi' striking out new words. Why can't folks just ha' a set on 'em for good and a'? (SL 107)

Philip's response to this outburst of frustration is to point out the many sets of vocabularies and languages that

exist for the different contexts and occupations of people even like herself:

> Why! you'll be after using two or three hundred yoursel' every day as you live, Sylvie; and yet I must use a great many as you never think on about t' shop; an t' folks in t' fields want their set, let alone the high English that parsons and lawyers speak. (SL 107-8)

Uglow points that "Sylvia's Lovers is full of such vocabularies, creating a complex, developing and competing universe through the words of land, sea, trade, church, state and war" (515). Gaskell is equally attuned to and at home with those who speak the many languages of Monkshaven's occupations and preoccupations.

Sylvia, however, must learn to read to get beyond the past and its mythologies and to have more control over her future. Significantly, she does not wholeheartedly begin to learn to read words until she softens her heart to her husband's sin. Then Alice Rose teaches her from the Bible. In Gaskell's view, literacy requires the training of the heart, which cannot be imposed by law or parental decree but must be approached through suffering. Sylvia cannot forgive her husband's lie until she understands the grounds for it. Sitting beside his deathbed, she reads his heart. Her earlier self had not been educated to read beyond the level of her father's literacy. After a similar deathbed scene in Mary Barton, Gaskell reveals a softening of Mr. Carson's

heart. As a youth, he had been given the Bible as a "task-book" to learn to read, but "he had become familiar with the events before he could comprehend the Spirit that made the Life." After sitting at John Barton's deathbed, Carson is able to read his unused fancy Bible, understanding its spirit as well as its letter (MB 439).

Cousin Phillis is another novella which deals with times of change through the metaphor of reading and understanding languages. The title character has been educated to read Latin and Greek by her minister father. The problems of reading faced by Phillis and her contemporaries are those of a later world. Phillis' isolated Eden-like world is about to be changed by the coming of the railroad. Both the narrator, Paul Manning, and his boss, Edward Holdsworth, work on the construction of the railroad. Holdsworth is a man in motion, who, as Uglow puts it, "translates" the pastoral Phillis "to a different state" (546). Like the railroad, Holdsworth is a sign of the times, and his stories, like Kinraid's, carry Phillis beyond her safe world. Holdsworth, however, while keeping his integrity in all but the most exact moral analysis, lies to Phillis. Like Philip Hepburn, he breaks a promise which he never said aloud. Philip had promised to tell Sylvia that Kinraid was seized by the press gang and would return. Since Philip never utters a promise to Kinraid, he reasons, technically he is not responsible for carrying the message. Holdsworth, in later more sophisticated times, never

promises his love to Phillis. Paul tries to excuse his friend from Betty's accusation of his doing harm to Phillis: "I don't believe Holdsworth ever spoke a word of--of love to her in all his life. I'm sure he didn't." Betty responds, "Aye. Aye! but there's eyes, and there's hands, as well as tongues; and a man has two of th' one and but one o' t'other" (CP 336). Phillis nearly dies as a result of her reading love in Holdsworth's eyes and hands.

In Cousin Phillis, the no-fault lie committed by Holdsworth is a sign of the changing times. The consequent suffering of Phillis, whose knowledge of foreign tongues qualifies her for her role of tragic hero, educates her cousin Paul and commits him and the reader to a more learned reading of the heart. As Angus Easson explains, "It is the absence of anyone culpable, which forces us to turn back and feel the suffering alone, that makes the story so painfully true" (225). And as Thomas Recchio explains in "A Victorian Version of the Fall," Hope Farm is an Eden waiting for the fall into difficult knowledge to happen (41-42). Recchio sees the central issue in the novel as a "tension between the stasis of the domestic Eden of Hope Farm and the natural impulse for knowledge and wider experience" (42). Phillis' somewhat unusual position as a woman with a classical education places her in the center of conflicting worlds: the one represented by the land-centered learning of her father, Ebenezer Holman, and the other represented by the more fluid, cosmopolitan knowledge of the

railroad man Holdsworth. Her father commands the tongues of ancient Greece and Rome, while Holdsworth commands the tongues of steel. Holdsworth moves at ease between the classical languages of his education and the modern language of contemporary Italy where he lived while building the railroad. Wendy Craik calls Holdsworth a "charmer from the world of new learning," the world of engineering and mechanics ("Lore and Learning" 76).

The changing times Gaskell describes in pastoral terms in Cousin Phillis demand, however, a new professional literacy, and Phillis and her father are at pains to acquire it. The degree and depth of learning of each character in the drama contribute to Gaskell's truthful portrayal of changing times. Conflict springs from characters who do not understand the language spoken by another. Through the metaphor of translation, Gaskell emphasizes the need for people to open their minds and hearts to understand different languages. Uglow puts it well: "Different kinds of men, and men and women, still do not understand each other's speech. They are trapped by the assumptions built into the language they use" (547). Paul is skilled in reading the language of mechanics and is helpful to Holman in explaining the technical vocabulary in a "volume of stiff mechanics" (CP 277). Paul's father, who was responsible for inventing "Manning's Patent Winch," opens his mind to learn farming terms when he comes to visit Hope Farm. Phillis, of course, struggles to translate Dante's Inferno, but she also

listens attentively to Holdsworth's practical suggestions for improving drainage. The changing times require that one open up the mind to apply it to new knowledge and new languages.

Paul's story forms Gaskell's primer for reading changing times. The reader follows Paul, who enters the world of Hope Farm and experiences what Spencer calls his "coming into manhood" (127). When Paul first comes to Hope Farm to visit his cousin Holman, he does not meet her husband, the Reverend Ebenezer Holman, until late in the day. Then their daughter Phillis leads Paul to the fields where her father is finishing a day of work with his fellow farm laborers and chapel members. Before greeting Paul, Holman begins singing what he calls a psalm: "Come all harmonious tongues" (CP 271). This hymn by Isaac Watts has as its subject "the passion and exaltation of Christ" (Watts 184), but its subtext is the spreading of the word through all nations. The last verse of Watts' Hymn LXXXIII, which precedes and accompanies "Come all harmonious tongues," makes the same point about the growing empire of the word:

> Live, glorious Lord, and reign on high,
> Let ev'ry nation sing,
> And angels sound, with endless joy,
> The Saviour and the King. (Watts 184)

These lines, filled with missionary spirit, link with the hymn which follows--Watts' composition on the same theme in

short metre: "Come all harmonious tongues,/ Your noblest musick bring" (Watts 184).

Significantly, Paul's first sight of Holman is of the farmer-preacher beating time to the hymn with his spade. But Paul is silent. He does not know the words to this hymn. The harmony of tongues in the dream world of pastoral simplicity at Hope Farm is about to be disturbed by the changes brought about, not by the railroad itself, but by the clash of discourse it facilitates. The spreading of the Word to all nations parallels the laying of the steel for the expanding railroad. But in that expansion of the empire both of church and state lie inherent problems and suffering for individuals along the way.

Holman, as his name suggests, leads a self-sufficient existence as farmer and minister to an unnamed dissenting sect. As Edgar Wright puts it, Holman "refuses to separate religion from honesty of feeling any more than from practical affairs, it is a personal faith that supports him, not the form of it" (201). When told by the simpler minister, Brother Robinson, that he must resign himself to his daughter's death, Holman responds that he cannot feel the need for resignation. "Till then I cannot feel it' and what I do not feel I will not express; using words as if they were a charm" (CP 351). Holman combines his preaching and the instruction of his flock with his farming, using the latest technology. He rises at 3:00 A. M. to get the farm

and household running, reading a little Latin with Phillis, if time permits (CP 270).

Holman finds the tongue of Virgil more harmonious to his way of living than the tongue of Brother Robinson, his fellow minister.

> It's wonderful . . . how exactly Virgil has hit the enduring epithets, nearly two thousand years ago, and in Italy; and yet how it describes to a T what is now lying before us in the parish of Heathbridge, county--, England. (CP 273)

Robinson criticizes Holman's learning, but the servant Betty knows that Brother Robinson would rather wrap his tongue around her victuals than try to keep up with Holman and his studies. Holman's "prodigious big appetite" (CP 278), however, is for learning. Through her imagery Gaskell unites food and knowledge in an echo of Paradise Lost. Like Milton's, Gaskell's story is about the increasing hunger for knowledge and experience. Like Milton, Gaskell explores the roots of the concept of sapience, but, unlike Milton, Gaskell finds the root of all evil to be the failure of the heart to read the languages of others. It is this failure that leads to dying in one's own language.

Holman's reference to Virgil's "enduring epithets" suggests a more subtle message, which Holman with all his learning fails to read. If Virgil's Georgics contain ancient agricultural methods, which describe "to a T what is

now lying before us in the parish of Heathbridge," so does the plot of his Aeneid point out the suffering that comes to some in times of transition, especially to those caught in the founding or expansion of empires. Aeneas abandons Dido to found the Roman empire, just as Holdsworth will abandon Phillis to expand the railroad in Canada (Easson, CP 363).

During his first visit, Paul Manning finds out, to his dismay, that Phillis is as well read as her father. Paul feels inferior to his better educated cousin, and she is disappointed that he cannot help her to translate Dante. Phillis' ambition to read Dante parallels the hunger of her imagination stirred by her learning. Unfortunately, as Recchio points out, she gains not only a knowledge of the Italian words of Dante but also of the experience of suffering he described. Paul's boss, Holdsworth, therefore, is responsible for opening not only the book of the Inferno to Phillis but also its experience of suffering (47).

Holdsworth brings a classical education but also the experience of travel in the contemporary world to the isolated farm. Uglow explains that he is an alien--wearing his hair differently and talking with his Southern drawl (546). Moreover, his stories, like Kinraid's, cast a spell that captures even Holman in spite of his better judgment:

> Yes . . . I like him, and I think he is an upright man; there is a want of seriousness in his talk at times, but, at the same time, it is wonderful to listen to him! He makes Horace and Virgil living, instead of dead, by the stories he tells me of his sojourn in the very countries where they lived, and where to this day,

> he says--But it is like dram-drinking. I listen to him till I forget my duties, and am carried off my feet. (CP 305)

Holdsworth, for his part, cannot understand the language spoken at Hope Farm. In arguing for Manzoni's I Promessi Sposi as his choice of Italian reading material for Phillis, Holdsworth claims it is "as pretty and innocent a tale as can be met with. You don't suppose they take Virgil for gospel?" (CP 304). Holdsworth jokingly argues with Paul about the different standards of truth possessed by the Holmans and himself. After Paul admits that Holdsworth is not "quite of their kind of goodness," Holdsworth quibbles with Paul about "kinds of goodness." Holdsworth finally accuses Paul of talking metaphysics after "the clown's definition: when a man talks to you in a way that you don't understand about a thing which he does not understand, them's metaphysics" (CP 296).

Paul can speak the same language as the Holmans when it comes to "kinds of goodness," though he cannot read any foreign tongues. He is also right about Holdsworth--his is not the kind of goodness that the Holmans expect. They expect truth in word and deed. Holdsworth gauges words to match what effect he intends on the hearers of the word. He admits to Paul that he has to think when talking with the minister:

> I was on the verge of displeasing him once or twice, I

> fear, with random assertions and exaggerated expressions, such as one always uses with other people, and thinks nothing of; but I tried to check myself when I saw how it shocked the good man; and really it is very wholesome exercise, this trying to make one's words represent one's thoughts, instead of merely looking to their effect on others. (CP 303)

Holdsworth is guilty, according to Wendy Craik, of "a careless lack of thought about social, personal and moral questions" ("Lore and Learning" 79).

Holdsworth is a calculator of more than engineering calibrations. He never shows any interest in Paul's trips to Hope Farm until he catches the words "pretty mouth" from Paul's father as Holdsworth interrupts their talk of Paul's possible marriage with Phillis. From that time on Holdsworth shows an active interest in meeting Phillis. But he always freezes Phillis in an attitude of beauty. He pictures her as a pretty mouth, then does an abortive sketch of her head, and finally refers to her as a Sleeping Beauty whom he may awaken when he returns from Canada in two years.

Gradually Paul begins to read Holdsworth for what he is. Paul's first step is to see him as a coxcomb, when Holdsworth spins his fairy-tale ending to his relationship with Phillis: "I shall come back like a prince from Canada, and waken her to my love. I can't help hoping that it won't be difficult, eh, Paul?" (CP 315). Then, after reading Holdsworth's letters and seeing the reduction of Phillis' place in them to a postscript, which combines her with his

"kind friends at Hope Farm," Paul becomes impatient with "his happy egotism, his new-fangled foppery" (CP 331). The truth is that Paul as well as Phillis must move beyond the power exerted by Holdsworth. Gaskell compares Holdsworth's hold on Paul to empire-building when she has Paul admit in an early evaluation: "My hero resumed all his empire over me by his bright merry laugh" (CP 293). And Holdsworth does go on to Canada, building his railroads and his empires and leaving a shattered world at Hope Farm. Gaskell's text suggests that he is an ignorant empire-builder who resumes and extends power across oceans without the sensitivity to read the impact of change in times of transition. As well-read and cosmopolitan as he is, Holdsworth lacks the literacy of the heart.

Holdsworth's view of Phillis reveals the tendency of every man in her life to objectify her. Holdsworth isolates the parts of her in images that deny her an active life of the mind: she is a talking head, or a pretty mouth, or a Sleeping Beauty. Even her father sees her frozen in childhood. Paul is shocked to find his full-grown cousin still wearing a child's pinafore over her dress (CP 266). But Paul too objectifies Phillis as he quotes Wordsworth's poem comparing his cousin to the Lucy whom there were none to praise and very few to love (CP 327). Immediately, however, Paul has the sense to realize she is not like Lucy, nor is Paul--to his advantage in the comparison--William Wordsworth. Moreover, in Uglow's view, "Phillis is a Lucy

with intellect, heart, and bodily yearning of her own. It is for her we feel, not her beholder" (549). Uglow argues that Phillis is trapped by "the Romantic identification of women with 'nature' and the Victorian rhetoric of woman as child" (547). But Phillis is not silenced as Wordsworth's Lucy was. Jane Spencer aptly points out that Gaskell is interested in "Lucy's subjectivity and survival" (126). Holdsworth moves on with the railroad to Canada where he marries another girl, one really named Lucy, and we realize, as Stoneman argues, that he "responded to Phillis as a type rather than an individual" (165).

The silencing of Lucy or the censorship of any speaker is not Gaskell's way, though she had to fight Victorian ideology in presenting the scholar Phillis. Stoneman cites Ruskin's "Of Queens Gardens" as one of the works that aimed to preserve woman in "majestic childishness" (165). Victorians wanted to equate innocence with immaturity (Stoneman 162). Thus, in Stoneman's reading, Phillis re-enacts Eve's loss of innocence, not as a "fact of nature but an ideological concept" (161). Though every man tries to objectify Phillis to suit his reading of the incidents that eventually bring her to death's door, Gaskell rewrites the Lucy-script to have Phillis survive. Unlike her erstwhile suitor, she holds her own personal worth and corrects their reading.

Minister Holman has much to learn from the visit of Holdsworth and its effect on his daughter. Gaskell gives

Holman every grace of learning, an awareness of shades of meaning, and an acute sense of humor, that at times is self-directed. He has named his front door "the rector" and his side door "the curate," but he himself answers to the title of "minister." He prides himself in being up-to-date in the vocabularies of mechanics and farming. Nevertheless, Holman is thrown by the new man Holdsworth; he hesitates to judge him hastily. When he first says Holdsworth's words are like dram drinking, he admits, "I thought in my vanity of censorship that his were not true and sober words" (CP 328). Holman compares his own suspicion about Holdsworth's words with Brother Robinson's evaluation of Holman's own learned quoting from the Georgics as "vain babbling and profane heathenism" (CP 328). Robinson, in Holman's view,

> went so far as to say that by learning other languages than our own, we were flying in the face of the Lord's purpose when he had said, at the building of the Tower of Babel, that he would confound their languages so that they should not understand each other's speech. (CP 328).

Holman here denies his own hostility to learning other living languages and hastens to correct his automatic response to Holdsworth's words. But his self-reflection does not extend to his view of his daughter. He does not realize how he has held Phillis in place. Lucas comments that "his world isn't sufficient for Phillis" (32). Both

Phillis and her father face what Lucas calls "a crisis of identity" forced on them by social change (33).

Paul Manning is caught in the middle when the crisis comes to the Holman family. Holman blames Paul for giving false hopes to Phillis, for in fact even speaking the unspeakable to a Victorian daughter. Paul Manning has been reviled by critics, too. Annette Hopkins sees Paul as incongruous and his narration as the flaw of the novel (276). Peter Keating claims that Paul "lacks any truly sympathetic understanding of the lives and events he describes" (28). And Weiss claims that Paul has good intentions but the effect of "his blundering ignorance" causes "the bleak ending of Cousin Phillis" (285). But Weiss and Keating are too eager to claim insight only for female narrators like Cranford's Mary Smith. Paul Manning is definitely a male narrator,[2] with the male tendency to objectify women. He fears the learned Phillis who stands taller than he not only physically, but also--he suspects--intellectually. In this novel about reading, Paul Manning is the learner who parallels the reader.

Though he may begin in ignorance--not able to read the dead-and-gone languages or to sing the words of "Come all harmonious tongues," not alert to his boss's engineering of his ambitions, not knowing when he has blundered in telling Phillis of Holdsworth's supposed love--Paul Manning does ultimately read the story with understanding and with his heart. What is more, he never cuts himself off from

learning--whether his teacher is Minister Holman or the servant Betty or Half-wit Tim. In Cousin Phillis, Gaskell presents a Great Chain of Learning that does not neglect the least of her characters. Betty makes Paul aware of Holdsworth's "beguiling" and puts poor Paul in his place as she advises him to manage his own relationships with women better:

> Don't you be none of 'em, my lad. Not that you've got the gifts to do it, either; you're no great shakes to look at, neither for figure, nor yet for face, and it would need be a deaf adder to be taken in wi' your words, though there may be no great harm in 'em. (CPP 337)

After giving Paul a whipping with her tongue, Betty promises to keep Phillis' secret: "I give you leave to cut out my tongue, and nail it up on th' barn door for a caution to magpies, if I let out on that poor wench" (CP 338).

Paul also takes verbal abuse from the half-wit Timothy Cooper, but he learns from him also. When Phillis is near death, Paul escapes from the sick watch to walk down to the road to Hornby. There he finds Tim sitting by the bridge. Tim had been dismissed by Minister Holman, who in his distraction had lost patience with his stupidity. But Tim had been keeping the carts off the bridge all day to guard the quiet needed by the sleeping sick girl. Paul is dense when Tim tries to teach him the goal of his day-long watch over the bridge: "I reckon you're no better nor a half-wit

yoursel" (CP 353). Holdsworth had visualized Phillis as a Sleeping Beauty with himself as rescuing prince. Half-witted Tim knows she is a human being who can heal with rest. And Paul is open to what Tim can teach him.

Paul eventually proves himself better than a half-wit as he comes to read the truth. The crisis comes when Holdsworth leaves and Paul discovers Phillis' love by reading the margin of her book. Paul had been unaware of the reason for the change in Phillis after Holdsworth's abrupt departure, but when he visits at Christmastime, he finds out her secret. Significantly, she is reading a book when he catches her sobbing. As she runs out into the cold, Paul looks at the book and finds it is "one of those unintelligible Italian books," with Holdsworth's penciled handwriting in the margin (CP 321-22). Paul learns to read the margin and suddenly knows the reason for the change in Phillis. He tells her of Holdsworth's spoken love for her and feels he has done right and spoken the truth. But later Holman accuses Paul of disturbing Phillis' innocence: "To put such thoughts into the child's head . . . to spoil her peaceful maidenhood with talk about another man's love; and such love too" (CP 345).

Paul, however, has not been responsible for what has happened. He has read the margins of the experience even if he is slow and cannot translate the main text yet. He knows what has happened at Hope Farm. He recalls the pinafore Phillis wore past her childhood,

> as if her parents were unaware of her progress toward womanhood. Just the the same way the minister spoke and thought of her now, as a child, whose innocent peace I had spoiled by vain and foolish talk. I knew that the truth was different, though I could hardly have told it now. (CP 345)

Phillis' thirst for a wider experience has carried her beyond the harmony of Hope Farm. Her fall from innocence has broken that harmony. As Paul comments about the conversation at the dinner table, "Until now everything which I had heard spoken in that happy household were simple words of true meaning" (CP 340). Paul had not caused the change, but Paul can understand and feel the impact of the changing world which brings discord to Hope Farm.

In deciding on the ending for Cousin Phillis, Gaskell did not allow the changes in Victorian society and the expansion of empire to bring about the death of Phillis; Gaskell rejected the script she inherited from the Romantics. Though Phillis is educated beyond her rank and station in Victorian society, this education does not protect her from the utilitarian language of the lie as Holdsworth practices it. Consequently, she suffers and draws close to death. But Gaskell will not permit the calculating, no-fault lie to become a sign of changing times, nor does she imply that learning in itself is harmful to women or anyone. Women as well as men need to be

educated to read the contexts of their world and to be able to translate their moral life into new contexts. No one can be sheltered by location, or gender, or class in times of change.

In an ending to the story which Gaskell did not write but which she projected in a letter, Phillis was later to apply her knowledge of drainage, learned from Holdsworth on his visit, to modernize the village and protect it from the dangers of typhus fever. The letter also reveals that Gaskell imagined Phillis with orphaned children under her protection (qtd. in Chapple, "Elizabeth Gaskell: Two Unpublished Letters" 184). This letter, which Gaskell sent to her publisher George Smith before finishing the story,[3] also reveals Paul's position in the story, not as a bungler, but as a reader. Gaskell writes in her narrator's voice, "Phillis hearing her father's loud voice comes down, a cloak over her nightdress, & exculpates me by telling out how I had seen her fretting & read her heart" (qtd. in Chapple 184, my emphasis). In the ending of the novel Gaskell actually published in the Cornhill Magazine, readers know only that she survives the attack of brain fever. Gaskell would not permit her to die, but in print she did not project Phillis' future activities into building drainage ditches and adopting orphans.

In Cousin Phillis as in Sylvia's Lovers, Mary Barton, North and South, and My Lady Ludlow, Gaskell has shown the interaction of multiple literacies: illiteracy,

professional literacies, and various degrees of classical education. But rather than seeing the clashes of the many resulting discourses as an invitation to continuing misunderstanding, Gaskell reveals the mediating literacy of the heart, which is acquired not by reading but by suffering. In pushing her readers to question the Victorian standards of educations proper for their class and gender, she promotes universal education. She argues for the reading of contexts as well as texts, but most of all she argues for the literacy of the heart.

[1] Sylvia's Lovers was published in February of 1863 and Cousin Phillis appeared November 1863 through February 1864 in the Cornhill Magazine (Uglow 619).

[2] Bonaparte argues that both of Paul Manning's names proclaim his masculine point of view, but to Bonaparte Paul serves as "a surrogate self" for Gaskell "through whom the demon can be finally possessed" (231).

[3] Chapple dates the letter December 10, 1863. Cousin Phillis' last two episodes appear in the Cornhill Magazine in January and February, 1864.

CHAPTER V

LYING AND THE PATHOLOGICAL USES OF INFORMATION: WIVES, DAUGHTERS AND "MORAL KANGAROOS"

St. Paul, writing to his bishop Titus in Crete, characterized the Cretans by quoting one of their own poets or prophets: "One of themselves, even a prophet of their own, said, the Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies. This witness is true" (KJV Titus 1. 12-13). Paul is not the first to repeat what has become known in logic as the Liar Paradox, "perhaps the most famous paradox of all time," according to Robert Rafalko's text, Logic for an Overcast Tuesday (136); the "Cretans are liars" pronouncement was well known to the ancient Greeks.[1] To me, however, the interesting issue is not the logic of the Liar Paradox but its narrative setting. The indictment of Cretans comes from within their culture, specifically from "one of themselves, even a prophet of their own." According to Alan Ross Anderson, the Cretan poet Epimenides, who lived about 600 B. C., is credited with the original condemnation of his own people, but also with its logical impossibility (3). How can one believe him if he is a Cretan and all Cretans are liars? Moreover, he was a poet or prophet, one who supposedly knew his people but who stood outside their ranks to reform them.

Elizabeth Gaskell in her last novel Wives and Daughters, takes on the role of a nineteenth-century Epimenides, a prophet who speaks from inside her culture to indict its members. Gaskell's liars, in this her last treatment of lying before she died, are its title characters--the women of Victorian England's upper and middle classes. Like Epimenides, Gaskell is severe in her condemnation of women who lie, but it is not the women alone who receive the blame. The entire culture and its ideology are responsible for the condition of women, their education, their occupations, their status, and thus their route to power through lying. As is her habit when dealing with deceit, Gaskell looks to the context of the lies, explores the causes, and reads her culture with a literate heart. Wives and Daughters, might be called a conduct book for daughters, and was in actuality a literal legacy to her unmarried daughters (Uglow 586). Patricia Spacks calls Wives and Daughters "a treatment of the special dilemmas of femininity" (88); Gaskell's own subtitle is "An Every-Day Story," but the novel might just as well have been given Adrienne Rich's title, On Lies, Secrets and Silences.

In its broadest sense, Wives and Daughters is a novel about the proper handling of information in an age when an explosion of information was being facilitated by developments in postal service, rail travel, a credit economy, and scientific study (Uglow 580). It was published from 1864-66, a time of transition, when the distinction

between reliable and false information was becoming increasingly important for men in settling business and government affairs. Reports abound in Wives and Daughters, as Hilary Schor points out: "At the novel's center are systems of information, ways of organizing thought and judging behavior--and. . . scientific thinking" (Scheherezade 183). Science also introduces the need for dependable reports, reports that tell of repeatable experiments with predictable results. The honesty of the report depends upon observable details. Therefore, Roger Hamley must travel around Africa to make field reports, just as Gaskell's cousin Charles Darwin traveled in South America.[2]

But scientific reports are not the only exchanges of information that make up the daily lives of the people of Hollingford. Lady Harriet, for example, accuses Preston of damaging Molly Gibson's reputation by being seen alone with her: "You give rise--you have given rise--to reports" (WD[3] 583). Gossip is the female form of the handling of information. Gaskell shows that--circumstantial evidence to the contrary--gossip does not maintain the truth of any situation, but merely the power of those who promulgate it (Schor, Scheherezade 199).

Other reports in Wives and Daughters take the form of secrets known to a few but withheld from those most interested through attachments of family and feeling. Mr. Gibson hides a secret about his true love Jeannie, who was

not Molly's mother. At first Osborne Hamley's failure in school seems his only secret, but then Molly becomes the accidental possessor of the secret of Osborne's marriage to a French nanny. Later Molly hears of Cynthia's secret engagement to Mr. Preston and his consequent blackmail of her. Hilary Schor maintains that Wives and Daughters, "like the gossip it collects and the secrets it reveals, is [itself] the 'report' that comes from studying every-day life" (Scheherezade 199). If we approach the novel as these reports lead us, we find it to be far more interesting as a cultural critique than Lucas, to name one critic among several, would want to admit. He claims Gaskell loses her "realistic grip" and lapses into "liberal pieties" in Wives and Daughters and Cranford, novels he dismisses as "idylls or remembrance of things past" (Literature of Change 1-2). Gaskell, according to Lucas, strives for reconciliation that is "intolerably complacent" (10). But as a study of the handling of information, Wives and Daughters is far from complacent. It challenges the old control of truth that depended upon status, class, and gender and introduces a new way of testing the truth of reports based on feeling, close observation, and educated understanding. Most importantly, it warns that pathological uses or suppression of information can threaten the mental and even physical well-being of individuals and communities.

Wives and Daughters, which Uglow judges "as political in a broad sense as Mary Barton" (602), is, in its most

interesting and deep sense, an analysis of the exchange of information in a credit economy. But it is an economy which gives women of the upper and middle classes no kind of credit--either monetary or moral. In this economy the very definition of honesty is split to mean one thing for men and another for women. This economy puts marginal women--such as widows and governesses--into the position of maneuvering a place for themselves. It demands passivity even of those women who achieve a woman's chief or only goal, a place as a wife. It gives women of the upper and middle classes nothing of value to do. Lying, therefore, becomes a way of life for women who are maneuvering their ways or their daughters' ways toward matrimony and economic security. Lying becomes the only way a woman can exercise her wits and fit in cultural norms. Unfortunately, such manipulation of the truth required for obtaining economic security transforms a woman into what Gaskell calls a "moral kangaroo" (WD 258). In Wives and Daughters, therefore, Gaskell argues for a single standard of honesty that will serve both women and men, wives and husbands, daughters and sons.

Surprisingly, with this fairly heavily laden agenda, the novel is a comedy. As W. A. Craik has commented, "Elizabeth Gaskell sees both the comedy and the pity of the stupid and limited" (Elizabeth Gaskell 256). This double edge to her satire has escaped some critics. For example, Marilyn Butler, in a comparison of Maria Edgeworth's Helen

with Wives and Daughters, finds Gaskell's novel an inferior, less deep development of lying than Edgeworth's earlier and similar novel. Butler maintains that Gaskell merely "hand[s] down" the "injunction--thou shalt not lie" without examining it or qualifying it (290). Butler says Gaskell does not develop the relationships between Molly and Cynthia or Cynthia and her mother "because when dealing with her favourite precept, that lying is invariably wrong, she is not prepared to admit the fine shades of naturalistic writing" (286). When Butler maintains that Gaskell omits "the details that would justify Cynthia" (287), I cannot believe she read the same novel I did, for Gaskell describes not only every circumstance of Cynthia's abandoned youth, but also her mother's reasons for treating her as she did. Butler concludes that no severe consequences follow upon the lies or the gossip in Wives and Daughters: "Gossip doesn't affect [Molly] at any profound level" (287). To Butler "Mrs. Gaskell fails to make the sunny spaciousness of [her] universe . . . impinge at a really interesting level upon the moral drama of her central characters" (288).

The moral judgment Gaskell levels at her society is subtle and again requires that readers leave the mythical, convention-bound Mrs. Gaskell behind. Margaret Ganz is surprised most at "the absence of a sustained moral judgment" (162) but recognizes that Gaskell goes beyond the conventional in again examining "a dilemma connected with telling the truth" (163). Ganz still finds Gaskell limited

(164) and calls any subtlety surprising. David Cecil, however, would be the most surprised at recent critics' readings of Gaskell's critique of her culture for he found her "no more capable of questioning [Victorian] standards than she was of flying" (168). Cecil would certainly marvel at Hilary Schor's evaluation of Gaskell's irony and her undermining mission:

> Nowhere does Gaskell seem to be more conscious of the complicity of fiction, of her fiction, with ideology, and nowhere more ironic about the impossibility of rewriting fictions, in a world where novels exist only as status, with no possibility for transforming women's lives, or of themselves being transformed. (Scheherezade 204)

But, as gloomy as Schor sounds about Gaskell's hopeless task of transforming her society, Wives and Daughters is her best attempt to do so.

She wrote this novel for her daughters in more ways than one. She was secretly paying for a house, The Lawn, for her husband and unmarried daughters with the proceeds from this novel when she died before writing its last chapter. As Uglow puts it, "Wives and Daughters could almost have been written on banknotes" (586). In her concern for her unmarried daughters' having a secure home of their own, she received the impulse to explore other marginal women's need for economic security and the way they have been forced to maneuver to get it. So cynical was

Gaskell about the honesty of her society that she put in the mouth of one of her straightest-talking characters, Lady Harriet, the injunction, "Tell the truth, now and evermore. Truth is generally amusing, if it's nothing else" (WD 199). But she also put in the mouth of the most devious liar, Mrs. Gibson, the following revelation: "If there's one thing that revolts me, it is duplicity" (WD 617). Duplicity did revolt Elizabeth Gaskell, but nothing short of a revolution in the way her society treated women and the way women took responsibility for themselves would do away with it.

The nineteenth century was, however, a time of revolutions. One of the most relevant revolutions in reading Gaskell took place in the handling of information. Alexander Welsh, in his fascinating book, George Eliot and Blackmail, offers an invaluable look at the information revolution which he claims is as difficult to describe as the industrial revolution (37). Of history's three information revolutions--writing, printing, and computing, the first did not cause widespread change until the literacy explosion of the nineteenth century. Welsh measures the revolution through growing literacy rates, the production of paper, improved printing presses, and even beginning work on calculating machines and Boolean algebra that prepared the way for computers (37-39). The handling of information in what Welsh calls the "days of Old Leisure" was quite different from the new demands of a self-regulating economy. Because knowledge operated further from work and people were

more distant from each other, Welsh claims "credit had to be reliable, as did communications. . . . Credit depends on the reputations of unseen persons" (72). Moreover, distance places new demands on trust (72).

Gaskell set Wives and Daughters in the 1820s, on the cusp of the new credit economy. That time of transition came just before the Reform Bill, the penny post, the railroad ("We shall all be spinning about the world; 'sitting on teakettles', as Phoebe Browning calls it" WD 616). Welsh contrasts this period with earlier times:

> In the days of Old Leisure there were no penny post and telegraph, no preventive system of law, and fewer reasons to keep records about anyone. A different consciousness of social life prevailed; more depended on first hand acquaintance and less on information. Reputations were supported, in Lord Ellenborough's phrase, by "the ordinary free will of a firm man," and occasionally were repaired by the use of a sword or pistol. (108)

On the other hand, in the new economy, honesty is even more important, as Georg Simmel, a German sociologist of the late nineteenth century, explained:

> Our modern life is based to a much larger extent than is usually realized upon the faith in the honesty of the other. Examples are our economy, which becomes more and more a credit economy, or our science, in which most scholars must use innumerable results of other scientists which they cannot examine. We base our gravest decisions on a complex system of conceptions, most of which presuppose the confidence that we will not be betrayed. Under modern conditions, the lie, therefore, becomes something much more

> devastating than it was earlier, something which questions the very foundations of our life . . . for modern life is a "credit economy" in a much broader than a strictly economic sense. (qtd. in Welsh 73)

Gaskell is aware of the economic importance of honesty, the reliability of sources of information, and the risks of betrayal. Wives and Daughters contains more secrets than any of her earlier novels. In the time of transition, about which she writes, control of knowledge, literacy, and information was shared more and more among middle class professionals rather than exclusively dictated by the aristocracy. Still Gaskell shows Hollingford to be in spirit still enjoying the patronage of the Towers. Thus Lady Harriet becomes Molly's champion and, in what she jokingly calls her playing Don Quixote to Miss Phoebe's Sancho Panza (WD 581), she squelches the gossip and, by her mere presence, restores Molly's reputation. But the Cumnors and their Old Leisure style of control belong to the past of feudal romance. Gaskell's deeper concern is to warn of a new control by what Welsh calls the "pathology of information" (title of Section II, 31). Simmel suggests that the modern virtue required by the nineteenth-century information revolution is discretion, "comprised of both awareness and respect for privacy" (Welsh 73). Being accountable for information possessed in whatever manner and understanding the impact of its release upon a given audience contributes to the "modern" virtue of discretion.

In Wives and Daughters, Gaskell presents a society in transition between the old feudal system of control of knowledge and modern communication which depends upon discretion. But unlike Welsh, whose research[4] makes no gender differentiations, Gaskell focuses on the differences in standards of honesty for men and women which she detected in her society and which Adrienne Rich outlined in her 1975 address, "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying." Rich contrasts "the old, male idea of honor. A man's 'word' sufficed--to other men--without guarantee" with "women's honor, something altogether else: virginity, chastity, fidelity to a husband. Honesty in women has not been considered important" (186). Rich claims women "have been depicted as generically whimsical, deceitful, subtle, vacillating. And . . .[they] have been rewarded for lying" (186).

Rich's insights put in the form of theory what Gaskell had illustrated in Wives and Daughters over a century before. Moreover, Gaskell's analysis, like Rich's, focuses on women but does not exclude men. Rich says, "Men have been expected to tell the truth about facts, not about feelings. They have not been expected to talk about feelings at all" (186). Gaskell's analysis of her society is holistic. If women are forced to tell lies to maneuver a place for themselves, it is at the expense also of the men and children who closely touch their lives. Gaskell's analysis goes further than Rich's to reveal the changing

concept of honor for men in the nineteenth century's growing credit economy. Women, however, remained even more dependent on men for economic security during this time. Gender distinctions in standards of honesty, therefore, were even more pronounced as men developed the new virtue of discretion and women continued to rely on calculations and maneuvers.

Mary Wollstonecraft had identified the same problem more than half a century before Gaskell was writing this novel. In her Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Wollstonecraft argued that their education brought women to believe cunning was the only form in which their intellect would serve them:

> Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, every thing else is needless, for, at least twenty years of their lives" (100).

Wollstonecraft might have been describing Hyacinth Clare Kirkpatrick Gibson or Cynthia Kirkpatrick. By the time we meet Mrs. Kirkpatrick, her cunning is sharpened into a habit of lying that she is the last to recognize. Her survival has depended upon it, and she is about to succeed to her object--financial security in a second marriage.

Wollstonecraft takes two educators to task for their published advice about women's education. Dr. John Gregory's conduct book, A Father's Legacy to His Daughters, "actually recommends dissumulation, and advises an innocent girl to give the lie to her feelings" (Wollstonecraft 112). Rousseau is another educator who receives Wollstonecraft's scorn for his separate principles of education for women and men:

> Educate women like men, says Rousseau, and the more they resemble our sex the less power will they have over us. This is the very point I aim at. I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves. (156).

It is possible that Wollstonecraft's arguments were on Gaskell's mind when she was writing Wives and Daughters, for we know she had read her.[5] At any rate, her legacy to her daughters, unlike Gregory's to his, advocates a different kind of education, more in keeping with Wollstonecraft's principles:

> It follows then that cunning should not be opposed to wisdom, little cares to great exertions, or insipid softness, varnished over with the name of gentleness, to that fortitude which grand views alone can inspire. (109-10)

Gaskell's legacy to her daughters encourages wisdom over cunning, feeling over calculation, self-direction over

dependency. But this mother's legacy covered all bases. While Gaskell located and furnished her unmarried daughters' future home and saved her own money for their financial security, she wrote the novel that would describe a way of living whereby a woman of the middle class could keep her moral integrity.

Wives and Daughters has been variously described as Molly's rite of passage in fairy tale form (Stoneman 172); her "initiation to the 'grown-up world'" (Uglow 578); her hard lesson in "learning how to be a woman" (Spacks 89); "an autobiography of a suicide" (Bonaparte 56); and "the developing story of language" representing for daughters a "shift from the language of one kind of mother to that of the other" (Homans 263, 269). Like Margaret Homans and Jenny Uglow, I believe that Molly's story initiates her to a new awareness of the uses of language in her culture. But unlike Homans and Bonaparte, I believe Molly's learning a new way of communicating does not come at the expense of or coopting of herself. I agree also with Spacks that Molly is offered various female models for her education into womanhood (89), but rather than following Homans in believing Molly enters "the symbolic order . . . presided over by the new Mrs. Gibson . . . along the chain of the father's desire" (257), I maintain that Molly forges a new use of language that sets her in the modern age, apart from her father and the older class-based power in Hollingford. The marriage of Molly, the new communicator, and Roger, the

new scientist, at the novel's end offers what Rich advocates--a new understanding of truth. Rich claims that

> in speaking of lies, we come inevitably to the subject of truth. There is nothing simple or easy about this idea. There is no "the truth," "a truth"--truth is not one thing, or even a system. It is an increasing complexity . . . This is why the effort to speak honestly is so important. (187-88)

This complexity called truth is both understood and spoken through language. As I have argued in chapter 4, Gaskell's heroines must learn to read their society with a literate heart. Molly Gibson learns to read her society and to take control of her future by speaking out with directness and discretion. In order to avoid--or work around--the pathological uses of information, as Welsh calls them, people literate enough to feel and educated enough to understand each other must create truth.

As a child, Molly Gibson had always been an avid reader. This was despite her father's instructions to her governess, Miss Eyre:

> Don't teach Molly too much; she must sew, and read, and write, and do her sums; but I want to keep her a child, and if I find more learning desirable for her, I'll see about giving it to her myself. After all, I'm not sure that reading or writing is necessary. Many a good woman gets married with only a cross instead of her name; it's rather a diluting of mother-wit, to my fancy; but, however, we must yield to the prejudices of society, Miss Eyre, and so you may teach the child to read. (WD 65)

The irony of Mr. Gibson's yielding to society on the point of Molly's learning to read cannot escape readers of Gaskell's complete works. Society is more likely to uphold Mr. Gibson's first instinct to leave Molly illiterate and in complete and undiluted possession of her "mother-wit." This feminine quality of mind we suspect much resembles cunning and is shown to perfection by Molly's stepmother, another governess and teacher of young girls. Knowing no more than she ought to, the female pupil is prepared for her future role. Mr. Gibson, after his marriage, is disappointed in the "standard of conduct" of his new wife. He finds it quite different "from that which he had upheld all his life, and had hoped to have inculcated in his daughter" (WD 432, my emphasis). Mr. Gibson does not realize that his own theory of education as inculcation does not lead to high standards of conduct any more than his wife's example. He reproaches himself only for choosing the wrong wife, not for his own poor understanding of a woman's worth and potential. Miss Eyre, for her part, serves her master to the letter and spirit of his instructions to teach Molly only to read and write: "she tried honestly to keep her back in every other branch of education" (WD 65). But Molly, "by fighting and struggling hard," gains a better education by insisting on French and drawing lessons and by reading every book in her father's library (WD 65-6). Reading books, however, does not provide quite enough education for Molly to read her complex society.

As the novel opens, twelve-year-old Molly is put into a situation which tests her poor powers of education in reading her society. For the first time she is made aware of "unseen powers" who use languages that she is not accustomed to read. Gaskell uses the language of fairy tales to introduce her heroine to a new experience:

> To begin with the old rigmarole of childhood. In a country there was a shire, and in that shire there was a town, and in that town there was a house, and in that house there was a room, and in that room there was a bed, and in that bed there lay a little girl; wide awake and longing to get up, but not daring to do so for fear of the unseen power in the next room--a certain Betty, whose slumbers must not be disturbed until six o'clock struck. (WD 35)

Though eagerly anticipating the School Visiting Day at Cumnor Towers, Molly is not prepared for any power other than the familiar Betty who rules her childhood order. Lost on the grounds and sick and tired, Molly is subjected, one after another, to adult characters from her reading. Lord Cumnor, whom she already has classified as "a cross between an archangel and a king" (WD 39), becomes the big Father Bear with his deep voice (WD 53). Though intending only kindness, he frightens the Goldilocks-substitute. Abandoned by her fairy godmothers, the Miss Brownings, Molly meets with several women's dazzling use of language that she cannot translate. All she knows is that she is put at fault for acts she is not responsible for. Molly is laughed at

for "over-eat[ing] herself" (WD 49), when Clare ate all of her lunch. She is wrong for "over-sleep[ing] herself" (WD 54), when Clare was supposed to wake her up. She is judged stupid when she fails to respond to one guest who, finding Molly "wild and strange" and thus probably foreign, addresses her in French (WD 53). Clearly Molly is not accustomed to the unseen powers of language spoken at the Towers which put her in the wrong.

The rest of the novel shows the depth of the problem, which Molly only glimpses on that first day, across her whole society. Those in power can say what they like; others less strong must maneuver to hold their own even to acquire the very necessities of life like food and rest. Bewildered by her day at the Towers, Molly is shown in almost surreal or nightmarish detail the power relations that rule her society and the way language facilitates them. Her evaluation of the experience, spoken to her father on the way home, reveals how threatening her experience was: "I felt like a lighted candle when they're putting the extinguisher on it" (WD 58). Molly's experience at the Towers brings home to her that reading her society correctly can be a question of life and death. Uglow emphasizes that in the world of Wives and Daughters there is a "need [for] a strong sense of self to survive. The deeply held view that the chief role of women is to serve, please and succour is potentially lethal if taken to extremes" (588). And Hilary Schor points out that "to be female is primarily to be an

invalid, to be passive, to suffer victimization" (Scheherezade 190). Both Molly and Cynthia attempt to get out of the suicidal script written by their society.

Molly learns what will be in store for her as an adult woman when she leaves home. Her lessons come from visits not only to the Towers, but also to Hamley Hall. There through the example of Mrs. Hamley, Molly is introduced to one of her role models. Squire Hamley's wife and the mother of Osborne and Roger is a perfect example of a woman whose candle has been extinguished, to use Molly's metaphor. Married to a man who loved her but whose own education was not equal to hers, Mrs. Hamley had diplomatically given up all association with people of culture in order to keep her home harmonious.

> Mrs. Hamley was a great reader, and had considerable literary taste. She was gentle and sentimental; tender and good. She gave up her visits to London; she gave up her sociable pleasures in the company of her fellows in education and position. Her husband, owing to the deficiencies of his early years, disliked associating with those to whom he ought to have been an equal; he was too proud to mingle with his inferiors. He loved his wife all the more dearly for her sacrifices for him; but, deprived of all her strong interests, she sank into ill-health; nothing definite; only she never was well. (WD 74)

The pathology of Mrs. Hamley's condition was similar to that of many Victorian wives. At Hamley Hall Molly learned the pace of an invalid's life--days spent lying in pleasant

surroundings only punctuated by doses of medicine and visits from the doctor. Mr. Gibson's visits were personal but professional as well, for Mrs. Hamley had a real ailment, not an imaginary one. Gaskell puts Mrs. Hamley's condition in such terms as to suggest both the physical and the cultural oppression she endured: "There was real secret harm going on all this time that people spoke of her as a merely fanciful invalid" (WD 76). In the case of Mrs. Hamley, Gaskell does not spare her readers the knowledge that that secret harm leads to death.

When Molly goes to the Hamleys, she is identified by her father as "a little ignoramus" (WD 88). Readers remember that Mr. Bellingham had called Ruth a "beautiful ignoramus." But what these women learn of life and their place is more than the men who define them bargain for. At Hamley Hall Molly sees the operation of secrets and subterfuges designed to keep the truth from those most concerned. But she also sees that the containment of information is not healthy. Hamley Hall is the "moated grange" (WD 116), and danger lies in Molly's becoming a Mariana and adopting a position there as a replacement for their dead daughter Fanny.

The crisis comes for Molly when she learns that her father will remarry. Then she receives advice from Roger, who as a scientist may have a new way of looking at things, but who sees women's roles conventionally. From Roger Molly learns the proper role for a woman is to take after the

example of his mother and Harriet, a fictional character who finds herself in much the same situation as Molly when her father remarries. Roger's advice is "to try to think more of others than of oneself" (WD 152). Molly, however, is not willing to give up her own will to others even though she sees the conventional wisdom of Roger's advice. She refuses to admit she will be the happier for living as Roger advises her:

> It will be very dull when I shall have killed myself, as it were, and live only in trying to do, and to be, as other people like. I don't see any end to it. I might as well never have lived. And as for the happiness you speak of, I shall never be happy again. (WD 170)

At Hamley Hall, Molly grows up through two influences: the example of Mrs. Hamley coupled with the advice of Roger to think of others. When Gaskell describes Mrs. Hamley's death later in the novel, we can see echoes of Molly's lament, "I might never have lived:"

> At length . . . the end came. Mrs. Hamley had sunk out of life as gradually as she had sunk out of consciousness and her place in this world. The quiet waves closed over her, and her place knew her no more. (WD 256)

Wives and Daughters inquires on every page what that place in the world is for women. Molly intends to fight for her place and to be conscious of understanding it. She will not sink out of consciousness.

The Squire is already aware that Molly is sensitive and literal in her interpretation of words: "You shouldn't take up words so seriously, my dear" (WD 105). And to his wife Squire Hamley comments, "One had need to be on one's guard as to what one says before her" (WD 107). The Squire's background is as close to uneducated as a person of his rank can attain. His father, having failed at Oxford, vowed his son would never be sent to university. But as Ganz says, the Squire represented "the collision of a narrow mind with a warm heart" (178). His prejudices against the French, the Catholics, and the newly rich and his bewilderment at changing times make him gruff and awkward among the women he meets. His ages-old family name (reaching back before the Romans or even the pagans as Mrs. Goodenough pronounced), is good enough he thinks to credit him with every honor. He is, in fact, "the soul of honour" (WD 73). However, in a credit economy, his family name is not good enough to pay the bills for Osborne or for reclaiming the land by drainage. He is unable to make payments to the government for the money he borrowed for land reclamation. Then he learns that Osborne is borrowing on the event of his (the Squire's) death.

It is clear that words and family names do not have the same exchange value as they used to, and the Squire is bewildered after his wife dies. When his second son, Roger, writes an article, refuting a French scientist's work, the Squire is justly proud at Roger's fame but confused as to

the necessity of such an article. To him a Hamley's word to the French should suffice: "We had to beat 'em, and we did it at Waterloo; but I'd not demean myself by answering any of their lies" he tells Roger (WD 393). The poor Squire, as he himself realizes, cannot understand the world he finds himself in. As he tells Roger about talking to Osborne, "He and I have lost each other's language, that's what we have!" (WD 392). The dream of a common language haunts the pages of Wives and Daughters, but it is only a dream. Gaskell reveals that father and son, husband and wife, and also neighbors all speak their own separate languages with their implied hierarchies of power.

Molly may not take in all the language lessons that are displayed at the laboratory of Hamley Hall, but she returns to her father's house, now redecorated with new furnishings, including a new wife. There she is faced with her stepmother, Hyacinth Clare Kirkpatrick Gibson, who is according to Ganz "a triumph of characterization through style" (166). Mrs. Gibson indulges herself without knowing herself. It is as if she has succumbed to a lifetime habit of lying and no longer has any awareness of what she says. As Craik argues,

> The unexpectedness of Mrs. Gibson's illogical mind, and the richly varied triteness of her expression, are what prevent this brilliantly humorous character from the tedium that would seem almost inescapable from a mind with so few ideas in it. (Elizabeth Gaskell 265)

From her stepmother Molly learns the insidious means to power practiced by many women in the Victorian upper and middle classes. As Patsy Stoneman says, "Molly is being taught to attain power not through knowledge or action but indirectly" (174). Stoneman argues that Mrs. Gibson is "not showing idiosyncratic villainy or caprice," but is justified by her society's assumptions that a woman's failure to marry is like a failure in business (175). From the start, Mrs. Gibson's second marriage is, in her mind, a business deal. She dreams about

> how pleasant it would be to have a husband once more;--some one who would work while she sate at her elegant ease in a prettily furnished drawing-room; and she was rapidly investing this imaginary breadwinner with the form and features of the country surgeon. (WD 138 my emphasis)

At the Towers, Mrs. Kirkpatrick had realized that "money is like the air they breathe," and she considers it is not natural that she "go on all [her] life toiling and moiling for money" when it is the husband who should have "all that kind of dirty work to do" (WD 131). Patricia Spacks points out the uniqueness of Gaskell's treatment of Mrs. Gibson.

> One rarely encounters in literature so sympathetic an understanding of a woman who marries for money; not for wealth and power, but for money as creating the only possibility for relative freedom. The reader is not allowed to feel simply scorn for the new Mrs. Gibson, unattractive though she is. Her predicaments, emotional and financial, are real; her solution for them is the only one available to her. (91)

From Mrs. Gibson Molly could have learned what her daughter Cynthia picked up, the devious twisting of language to serve selfish ends.

Ironically, much of what her stepmother says really is believed and taken to heart by Molly. But to Mrs. Gibson it is just empty, self-serving talk. In one of her "educational" speeches to Molly, she advises her on the purpose of language:

> You should always try to express yourself intelligbly. It really is one of the first principles of the English language. In fact, philosophers might ask what is language given us for at all, if it is not that we may make our meaning understood. (WD 541)

The irony of most of Mrs. Gibson's pronouncements comes from everyone's understanding her meaning better than she thinks. The last words Gaskell wrote before dying come from Mrs. Gibson's whining complaint to Molly that her refusal of a new dress for herself has kept Mrs. Gibson from obtaining one for herself: "And now, of course, I can't be so selfish as to get it for myself, and you to have nothing. You should learn to understand the wishes of other people" (WD 705). Molly's whole education is to understand the wishes of others but her integrity lies in her not erasing her own principles in the process.

Molly is deep enough to understand the pathological deceit which rules every moment of Mrs. Gibson's life.

Because Molly possesses the secret of Osborne's marriage, she must bear in silence Mrs. Gibson's designs on Osborne as a husband for Cynthia. Molly also must bear the taunts which slight Roger although they "made Molly's blood boil . . . She read her stepmother's heart" and perceived her strategy (WD 356). Molly also reacts in disbelief when she perceives Mrs. Gibson is capable of thinking of others' deaths only in relation to her own desires or convenience. When the new Mrs. Gibson comes home and Molly has prepared a tasteful tea-dinner for the honeymoon couple, Mr. Gibson is called out to attend the dying Craven Smith, an old patient. Mrs. Gibson, of course, complains: "I think your dear papa might have put off his visit to Mr. Craven Smith for just this one evening." Molly responds, "Mr. Craven Smith couldn't put off his dying." Mrs. Gibson thinks Molly's concern is "droll" for she reckons that if Mr. Smith is dying, her husband need not have hurried--unless perhaps Mr. Gibson "expect[s] any legacy, or anything of that kind" (WD 209).

Mrs. Gibson is capable even of wishing for others' early deaths to advance her strategies. Osborne cannot die too soon to suit Mrs. Gibson after she learns of his heart condition and has promoted the second son Roger as Cynthia's husband.

> A young man strikes us all as looking very ill--and I'm sure I'm sorry for it; but illness very often leads to death. Surely you agree with me there, and what's the

> harm of saying so? . . . I should think myself wanting in strength of mind if I could not look forward to the consequences of death. I really think we're commanded to do so, somewhere in the Bible or the Prayer-book. (WD 475)

Later when Osborne's secret marriage is revealed after his death, Mrs. Gibson even proves herself capable of anticipating a child's death. When Osborne's son, the heir to Hamley, falls ill, Mrs. Gibson says, "When one thinks how little his prolonged existence is to be desired, one feels that his death would be a boon" (WD 695). Molly cannot accept her stepmother's explanation that thoughts of inheritance cannot help but cross people's minds because of "the baseness of human nature." Molly believes people can help discipline such thoughts as she replies to Mrs. Gibson: "All sorts of thoughts cross one's mind--it depends upon whether one gives them harbour and encouragement" (WD 696). Mrs. Gibson's mind is always harboring and encouraging the thoughts that feed her self. Like the lunch ordered for Molly, which "Clare" devours in the first episode of the novel, Mrs. Gibson uses every opportunity to gratify her own appetite for attention and then pretends innocence. She immediately forgets or glosses over any thought of others. But Molly's method of communicating is different.

Margaret Homans believes Molly adopts her stepmother's language. Homans describes "Molly's shift from true speech with single meanings to a language of displacements,

exchanges, and other slippages from signifier to signifier" (266). Molly's shift to her stepmother's language is "a fall," according to Homans, but "an adult woman's only chance for pleasure" (269). Cynthia and her mother use language

> in which words do not tell truths but, rather, enter into a free play of signifiers as figuration. This language is identified . . . with women's place in the chain of substitutions that makes up the economy of male desire, a place that the new Mrs. Gibson knows well and has just successfully exploited in maneuvering Mr. Gibson to propose. (Homans 258)

It is true that Molly learns from her stepmother, but she does not speak her language. Secrecy ensnares Molly, who would rather use her own straight way of talking to solve all problems. As Homans points out, Molly becomes a messenger or a go-between "in linguistic and symbolic exchanges" (264). However, to believe she sells out to Mrs. Gibson's language and thus to convention is to underestimate Elizabeth Gaskell's lifelong literacy project of teaching her society to read with the heart. Jenny Uglow is aware of this project when she claims that from her first novel, Gaskell had always

> been fascinated by the way that speech, which should be an open window, a means of communication, was so often a barrier; to live in harmony and grow in understanding we must constantly interpret and translate. (594).

I would agree with Uglow that Gaskell sees the need for interpretation and translation, but not that Gaskell was so naive as to believe that speech is or can be "an open window." Molly's education teaches her from the age of twelve the complexities of language and the unseen powers that control it. Perhaps when people meet face-to-face, they find it easier to read the context. Increasingly, during Gaskell's lifetime, however, information was being exchanged without direct personal contact. Like the credit economy, personal relationships must rely on honesty.

In reaction to her stepmother's language, Molly is forced to find a deeper way of communicating. Unlike Mrs. Gibson, she does not use "words like ready-made clothes . . . never fitted [to] individual thoughts" (WD 349). Nor does she, like her stepmother, cover her lack of knowledge with misquotations and cliches. Though secrets and silences lead Molly into involuntary deception, she never abandons her ability to translate herself into the position of her listener.

> Unwillingly Molly was compelled to perceive that there must have been a good deal of underhand work going on beneath Cynthia's apparent openness of behaviour; and still more unwillingly she began to be afraid that she herself might be led into the practice. But she would try and walk in a straight path; and if she did wander out of it, it should only be to save pain to those whom she loved. (WD 525)

Molly always analyzes her audience, but often finds nothing

that can "save pain" to them. Reading her listener is her occupation. "Molly knew her father's looks as well as she knew her alphabet" (WD 214). Molly serves as a go-between because she can translate others' feelings. Thus she translates Cynthia's feelings to Preston despite his unwillingness to hear them; she similarly translates Aimee's French letters to Osborne for the French-hating Squire Hamley upon his son's death. She stands up to her father and refuses to submit Cynthia's secret to his control. Far from being coopted by the language of deceit, Molly tries to work within her power to "avoid the practice" in order "to save pain" to others.

By the end of the novel, Molly learns to read her audience so well that she edits her conversation to stay within the demands of her position in it. One scene demonstrates her newfound sensitivity to the complexities involved in a simple exchange of information. She has just returned from the Towers, where she has spent the time of Cynthia's London wedding recovering from an illness. Molly is in the position of telling the Miss Brownings all about her exciting visit, but she has her stepmother's oversensitivity to her favor at the Towers to contend with; consequently, Molly feels compelled to alter her story:

> So Molly began an account of their sayings and doings, which she could have made far more interesting to Miss Browning and Miss Phoebe if she had not been conscious of her stepmother's critical listening. She had to tell it all with a mental squint; the surest way to

spoil a narration. (WD 680)

Molly has discovered what feminists have termed "telling it slant" after Emily Dickinson's poem.[6] Gillian Michell has defined "telling it slant" as "a way of speaking . . . forced on women . . . that conveys a message by distorting the truth somehow, so that what is conveyed is not the whole truth" (175). Michell claims that even though it falls somewhere between the truth and a lie, Sissela Bok would classify it as a lie because the intention is to mislead (175). Michell, however, takes the position of many feminists that in a male-dominated society women may be excused for telling it slant because the practice makes it possible to exchange information in a sexist setting (175-6). Gaskell presents "telling it with a mental squint" as a survival skill in Hollingford society. However, as she goes on to say, it spoils the narration. Michell's analysis also takes into account the long term disadvantage of telling it slant: "We tell it slant at the cost of perpetuating the situation that makes it necessary" (189). Molly's education develops her reading skills and her awareness of the present need to tell it with a mental squint.

Another role model for Molly in her growing awareness of the complexities of communication is Lady Harriet Cumnor. Lady Harriet belongs to the Old Leisure aristocracy and yet she shows independence from her family and a way of speaking

which is much more direct. Like her brother Lord Hollingford, Lady Harriet has determined on an independent course without outrightly rebelling against the ways of the family. She remains unmarried at twenty-nine, is determined to think for herself, and mixes more with the common people of Hollingford than her "unapproachable" mother (WD 37); indeed, she is more her father's daughter in mixing with the town's people. Lord Cumnor loves to go

> pottering . . . which, being interpreted, meant that occasionally the earl asked his own questions of his own tenants, and used his own eyes and ears in the management of the smaller details of his property. (WD 37)

Lady Harriet is not willing to give up the power of her presence, but she expresses the desire to move in some directions beyond the "very pretty amount of feudal feeling" which still lingers in the relationship of Hollingford with the Towers (WD 36). Lady Harriet, for example, actually listens when someone from the town talks to her. Her father would ask questions but would not listen to answers:

> Lord Cumnor seldom passed any one of his acquaintance without asking a question of some sort--not always attending to the answer; it was his mode of conversation. (WD 39)

But Lady Harriet did listen and in many cases acted upon conversations.

It is in her relationship with Lady Harriet that Molly first learns to appreciate her own power of speaking straight. Thrown together at the wedding of Molly's father and Lady Harriet's former governess, the two attend the wedding along with Lord Cumnor, who has sponsored the marriage all along. Lady Harriet explains to Molly the method of her old governess in governing her pupils:

> I used to think I managed her, till one day an uncomfortable suspicion arose that all the time she had been managing me. Still it's easy work to let oneself be managed; at any rate till one wakens up to the consciousness of the process, and then it may become amusing, if one takes it in that light. (WD 195)

Molly responds that she would "hate to be managed" and "should dislike being trapped" (WD 195). Lady Harriet's whole conversation with Molly implies that she finds language games amusing. She has the awareness of the power plays, and of course, can always pull rank and win at them.

But Molly pulls some surprises of her own and dares to challenge Lady Harriet's habits of condescension. At first Molly is puzzled that Lady Harriet would speak frankly to her when at the same time she talks down to Molly's class. She reveals to Molly that she calls Molly's godmothers Pecksy and Flapsy when they visit the Towers on School Visiting Day. Molly responds at first with bewilderment:

> Your ladyship keeps speaking of the sort of--the class of people to which I belong as if it was a kind of

> strange animal you were talking about; yet you talk so openly to me that--. (WD 196)

Molly is confused by Lady Harriet's way of talking, which, among other things, she judges impertinent. But Lady Harriet has analyzed the rhetoric of the classes as she knows them and presents Molly with this summary: "Don't you see little one, I talk after my kind, just as you talk after your kind. It's only on the surface with both of us" (WD 197). She observes that Molly must know people in her class who talk of poor people impertinently, and Lady Harriet herself has an aunt who talks in the same way of anyone who earns money "by exercise of head or hands" (WD 197). Lady Harriet remembers "how often her blood has boiled at the modes of speech and behaviour" of this aunt. Though she would not entirely forget rank, Lady Harriet knows she has found a valuable protegee in Molly:

> You at least are simple and truthful, and that's why I separate you in my own mind from them, and have talked unconsciously to you as I would--well! now here's another piece of impertinence--as I would to my equal--in rank, I mean; for I don't set myself up in solid things as any better than my neighbours. (WD 197)

Molly is not so easily won over, however, and refuses to have Lady Harriet visit her at the Miss Brownings': "because I think that I ought not to have any one coming to see me who laughs at the friends I am staying with, and calls them

names" (WD 199). Molly's direct answer draws an apology and promise from Lady Harriet to treat her good friends with respect, and Molly wins her ladyship's own respect.

The relationship of Molly and Lady Harriet is sealed by this exchange. The nature of this relationship puzzles Mrs. Gibson and causes her much deceit in "managing" her former pupil and her new stepdaughter. Visits from Lady Harriet, which Mrs. Gibson always flatters herself are made to her alone, are ruined when Lady Harriet asks for Molly. Mrs. Gibson, therefore, designs errands for both her daughters so that she can have the high-ranking visitor to herself. On one such visit Lady Harriet chooses to talk to Mrs. Gibson about telling lies. Lady Harriet has maneuvered to visit Mrs. Gibson by telling lies at the Towers to visitors she should be entertaining. Lady Harriet teases Mrs. Gibson with a question of whether she has not ever told even little white lies (WD 403-4). Mrs. Gibson's reply reveals her way of thinking of herself, not her practice in word or deed:

> I should have been miserable if I ever had [lied]. I should have died of self reproach. "The Truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth", has always seemed to me such a fine passage. But then I have so much that is unbending in my nature, and in our sphere of life there are so few temptations, if we are humble we are also simple, and unshackled by etiquette. (WD 404)

Mrs. Gibson would lead one to believe that simplicity leaves little space for duplicity when her every word gives the lie to that doctrine.

Lady Harriet, however, uses Mrs. Gibson for her own purposes almost as much as Mrs. Gibson plots to use her ladyship. Her escapes to visit the Gibsons and be pampered by uncritical adulation are calculated. But her relationship with Molly is special. Lady Harriet actually inconveniences herself on one occasion to help Molly escape the ill effects of gossip on her reputation. Lady Harriet cannot believe that Molly, "the child [who] is truth itself" can be correctly linked with Preston in a clandestine relationship (WD 578). After a confrontation with Preston in her father's presence, a visit to the Miss Brownings, and a march through the town with Molly in tow "like an inanimate chattel" (WD 585), Lady Harriet is satisfied that she has defeated the gossip.

But Molly does not always have her champion close by to save her from the lies with which she lives on a daily basis. She is very troubled by her awareness of her stepmother's constant deceit:

> At first she made herself uncomfortable with questioning herself as to how far it was right to leave unnoticed the small domestic failings--the webs, the distortions of truth which had prevailed in their household ever since her father's second marriage. (WD 407)

But Molly feels it is not her place to tell "her stepmother some forcible home truths." Her father is the one who should take care of his family.

Gaskell sets up an interesting contrast between the word of the father and the word of the (step)mother as guides to a daughter's education. Mr. Gibson is, in universal opinion, an honorable man. But his reasons for marriage are as self-seeking as those of his second wife. And Mr. Gibson harbors secrets about his past and about the love of his life that are never revealed to the reader, let alone to his daughter or to either of his wives. His neighbors know nothing of where he came from, though Mrs. Goodenough pronounced him "the son of a Scotch duke, my dear, never mind on which side of the blanket" (WD 69). He marries the daughter of his predecessor, Mr. Hall, but we are led to believe that marriage was also one of convenience. The Miss Brownings consider Mr. Gibson "faithful to the memory of his first love," as Miss Phoebe puts it, but Mr. Gibson winces on hearing this:

> Jeannie was his first love; but her name had never been breathed in Hollingford. His wife--good, pretty, sensible, and beloved as she had been--was not his second; no, nor his third love. (WD 178)

It is safe to assume that Mr. Gibson never realizes what a problem his silences and reserve about his feelings might bring him until he grows to know the ways of his second wife. Even when he realizes her style of manipulation, he believes he can keep her in a separate sphere. "He never

allowed himself to put any regret into shape, even in his own mind" (WD 214).

But when Mrs. Gibson moves into his professional affairs, eavesdrops on his professional conversation about Osborne Hamley, and even enters his surgery to pry into his professional vocabulary, he feels violated. Hilary Schor analyzes the impact of Mrs. Gibson's intrusion into the doctor's profession:

> This movement amidst his professional secrets seems to the doctor the most serious possible violation of trust, but it reflects also his concern with (male) authority, and with protecting a realm for unmanipulable, pure knowledge. Mrs. Gibson not only overheard the conversation but looked up the words in his dictionary, appropriating his knowledge. She then "traded" in that knowledge, attempting to "trade in a daughter's affection." (Scheherezade 194)

Despite his anger, Mr. Gibson retreats to his work and can do nothing to extricate himself and Molly from the new family of his own making. Molly senses that "there was not, and never could be in this world, any help for the dumb discordancy between her father and his wife" (WD 458).

In the case of his wife's eavesdropping, Mr. Gibson's anger against her comes on two accounts; both are centered on his view of himself as a professional man and as a man of honor. Mr. Gibson's medical conferences are confidential information: "If it would be a deep disgrace for me to betray a professional secret what would it be for me to

trade on that knowledge?" (WD 429), he asks his wife. In addition, he has just given his word to Squire Hamley that he knows nothing of any romance between his sons and the two girls at the Gibson house. If Mr. Gibson could see it, he might realize Gaskell's point, which comes quite accidently and poutingly out of Mrs. Gibson's mouth when her husband asks for the current state of the relationship between Cynthia and Roger: "I don't think I ought to tell you anything about it. It is a secret, just as much as your mysteries are" (WD 429). But in Victorian society, Mr. Gibson's mysteries of profession and manly honor do outrank Mrs. Gibson's and Cynthia's desire for secrecy in her engagement. "A man's promise is to override a woman's wish, then, is it?" Cynthia asks, and Mr. Gibson does not "see any reason why it should not" (WD 434).

Mr. Gibson, as a professional man, has always known his place in the community of Hollingford. He manages by secrecy about his past and his private life to be accepted by the town at the same time he proves by deference and tact to get along well with the Old Leisure class. Mr. Gibson manages his uneasy position as a link between town, on the one hand, and Tower and Hall, on the other, by following the ideal of honor at each. Thus his word to Squire Hamley is his bond. His silence in the town gives gossips a chance to romanticize his past, but meanwhile, he earns credit by marrying his predecessor's daughter. Thus Mr. Gibson does not see any reason why a man's word should not override a

women's wish. He does not credit women with the right to exercise discretion.

Gaskell did see reasons for woman's honor to be as important as man's honor. She also was strongly disapproving of dishonesty in women and men. She recognized the harm to men of what Patsy Stoneman calls the "masculine lie . . . [which] prevents humane emotion" (180). Mrs. Gibson is not entirely to blame for the lie of the Gibson marriage. Mr. Gibson's professional standards are high, and he is honorable for keeping them high, but he relies on his work to suppress his feelings. Women have nothing to do that can compare to Mr. Gibson's profession. Spacks argues that Molly, like other Victorian women, "occupies herself by 'taking care' of others and wishes only for something of her own to take care of" (95). She can only follow in her father's footsteps by taking care of others' words. In contrast to the meaningful work of Mr. Gibson, women's real work is conversation. In this occupation, women resemble the Old Leisure class. Rank among the participants rules, and rising and falling status is the only outcome of the activity. Of course, women stay occupied with sewing and fancy work, but as Spacks says, "the contrast [is] between necessary male occupations and unnecessary female ones" (88). But in the empty occupation of conversation, rank proves just as important as it does in any social setting.

Gossip is the operation of conversation which goes beyond its immediate purpose of conveying information to

have longer lasting credit and endurance in the judgment of people's worth. Homans argues that gossip is like money. It "is a chain of signifiers that can easily operate without referring to anything" (268). Gaskell's chapter on "Hollingford Gossips" could be a text on the way gossip works. Schor claims that gossip is "a form of social control, a small constant voice of reproach, a way of ordering the behavior of others that increases the power of those who advise and monitor" (Scheherezade 200). Gossip is part of the gauntlet of pathological information that Molly must run before she achieves marriage. Gossip is a lie to those who are most offended by it--like Miss Browning before she hears confirmation of the words--but it is a tallydiddle to Miss Phoebe who does not want to admit any harm is intended (WD 560). Gaskell's position is much like Miss Browning's advice to Mrs. Dawes about not repeating gossip even if she has it on good authority: "My dear, don't repeat evil on any authority unless you can do some good by speaking about it" (WD 563). But Mrs. Dawes has her position in society to earn, and nothing makes her more an insider than to best Mrs. Goodenough in repeating the juiciest gossip. As Schor points out, "Gossip . . . is generated out of the need to prove one's right to speak out" (Scheherezade 200). Molly refuses to get enmeshed in the power plays of Hollingford gossip. She has learned enough from the role models of Mrs. Hamley, Mrs. Gibson, and Lady Harriet to realize that there are greater dangers. Molly's

defense to her father expresses her belief that she has done nothing to violate morality: "What I did, I did of my own self. . . And I'm sure it was not wrong in morals, whatever it might be in judgment. . . If people choose to talk about me, I must submit; and so must you, dear papa" (WD 570).

Gaskell again has designed her novel with allusions to Spenser's twin characters, Una and Duessa. But in creating the two stepsisters--Molly Gibson and Cynthia Kirkpatrick--Gaskell does not view them as polar opposites, as the allusion implies. It is male characters who categorize the girls, and it says more about their desire to control women than it does about Molly and Cynthia. Mr. Gibson first refers to Molly as Una when disciplining Mr. Coxe after the father intercepts a love letter from the young apprentice addressed to his daughter. Mr. Gibson says, "Remember how soon a young girl's name may be breathed upon, and sullied. Molly has no mother, and for that very reason she ought to move among you all, as unharmed as Una herself" (WD 86). But Mr. Gibson would have his daughter move through life with no control by any man but himself. Even when he admits he "can't help" Roger's attachment to Molly and describes his losing his daughter as "a necessary evil," he thinks sadly, "Lover versus father! . . . Lover wins" (WD 701).

Cynthia is named Duessa by Roger in a conversation with Mr. Gibson late in the novel. Roger is trying to justify his changeable love by suggesting there was something evil and magic in Cynthia that temporarily captivated him. In

speaking of Molly, Roger says, "What must she think of me? how she must despise me, choosing the false Duessa" (WD 699). But as Jane Spencer claims, "Cynthia is not really a Duessa; she only appears so to disappointed men" (136). And Molly is not opposed to Cynthia. The two are more sisters than rivals, as the novel shows in the long run. Gaskell has been at pains in Wives and Daughters to show what barriers are set up against open and honest communication. She transforms Molly Gibson from an innocent to Molly the powerful communicator.

To achieve Molly's transformation into a woman of discretion, Gaskell created her finest portrait of a woman of depth and sparkle, as Mr. Preston describes Cynthia Kirkpatrick (WD 192). The creation of Cynthia Kirkpatrick has called forth praise for its subtlety and depth from such unexpected quarters as Henry James and Lord David Cecil (Butler 278). Rosamond Lehmann has gone even further: "Indeed, we may scan the length and breadth of Victorian fiction and find nothing to compare with her" (qtd. in Butler 278). But though Butler cites these praises of Cynthia's masterful creation, she herself is far from appreciating the purpose which Gaskell has for Cynthia in the novel. Cynthia has not been created in simple opposition to the innocent Molly, as Butler believes (286). Cynthia and Molly are opposites chiefly in the chances and circumstances that life has brought them. Like Ruth and Jemima, their backgrounds could have been exchanged, and who

knows what each girl would then have done or become? Gaskell is careful to develop justification for Cynthia's falling into blackmail and subterfuge. Cynthia is herself aware of her mother's style and manipulations, even to the point of recognizing the harm done to her own character. She tells Molly, "I'm capable of a great jerk, an effort, and then a relaxation--but steady, every-day goodness is beyond me. I must be a moral kangaroo!" (WD 258). Yet she does not put the blame on her mother. If Gaskell implies blame, it is directed at the unfortunate snares which prevent marginal people from full development of their moral beings. These snares most often occur in the breakdown of communication. Just as economic conditions, along with a weak character, force Hyacinth Clare into subterfuge, so the same forces control Cynthia's development as a moral agent. Gaskell's literary method explores every aspect of the context of the lie.

When Cynthia first comes under the control of Preston, the reason is that her mother has left no forwarding address. Homans claims that her mother is "a shifting signifier" who makes Cynthia "unable to 'refer to' her" (265). Cynthia, who was not yet sixteen, contracts a marriage with Preston, which she really intends at the time to honor, in exchange for a loan of twenty pounds. Though Cynthia denies she sold herself for twenty pounds (WD 512-13), the very concept of selling oneself is brought out in the open. The Gibson marriage was such a deal, though

neither participant in it admits such a blatant truth. Twenty pounds was a significant amount of money even to a woman who had a method of earning money, and, of course, Cynthia did not. Her mother would have been hard put to raise twenty pounds in a year. According to M. Jeanne Peterson, average salaries for governesses ranged from twenty pounds to forty-five pounds a year (8). Cynthia's ability to recover enough money by scrimping and saving to pay back twenty pounds with interest to Preston resembles Nora Helmer's efforts in Ibsen's A Doll's House. But it is not the money that causes the problem. It is letters which are put to pathological uses.

The letters Cynthia wrote to Preston in gratitude and appreciation were not discreetly written. But how would a fifteen-year-old girl understand what dangers her words could create? She tells Molly, "Those unlucky letters . . . only seven of them! They are like a mine under my feet, which may blow up any day; and down will come father and mother and all" (WD 523). In Cynthia's personal world blackmail will affect not only herself but also her family. By alluding to the surprisingly violent lullaby, "Rock-a-bye Baby," Gaskell reveals the deep-reaching danger of the pathological uses of information. Gaskell realizes that she cannot cure her society, but she shows how the mine of information becomes the "mine under the feet" of the unwary. Cynthia's marginal situation makes her susceptible to that chief pathology of information, blackmail. While her person

genuinely attracts Preston, her position makes her vulnerable.[7] Cynthia's personal situation says much about the trap society has set for women of her class. Welsh points out that "a blackmailer has this curious role, for a villain, of aligning himself with society and also befriending his victim . . . The blackmailer seems to be enforcing the kinds of behavior demanded by society" (84). Gaskell points out in Wives and Daughters that lying has the same function as blackmail in enforcing the standards that society thinks it values: cunning and passivity in women. Her project is like the Liar Paradox: to admit that women are liars, Gaskell, like St. Paul, confirms "This witness is true." But she also traces the causes of verbal pathology and suggests a way to healthier communication.

Healthier communication does not categorically rule out what Gaskell calls "telling it all with a mental squint." Nor does it rule out consciousness of power in controling the uses of information. Gaskell takes great care to educate her heroine Molly in reading her audience and in making informed choices about powerful communication that is at the same time moral. To avoid being victims, women need to take control of their lives. Molly reads her audience and sometimes must choose to tell it slant. In her confrontation with Preston, Molly is forced to use a power play to achieve her goal of obtaining Cynthia's letters. While Preston details the audience who may be shocked and dismayed to read them--Osborne Hamley, Mr. Gibson, and Mrs.

Gibson--Molly thinks of the audience that would similarly dismay Preston. Molly slyly concludes: "So I will tell it all, from beginning to end, to Lady Harriet, and ask her to speak to her father. I feel sure that she will do it; and I don't think you will dare to refuse Lord Cumnor" (WD 532). As Preston wonders "how she, the girl standing before him, had been clever enough to find" the exact way to blackmail him, the two are interrupted. Molly is not often given credit for this action. Preston admires her: "There she stood, frightened, yet brave, not letting go her hold on what she meant to do" (WD 533). Molly's resources are the lessons learned from Lady Harriet and even from her stepmother. And when her goal is just, she stands firm enough to beat Preston at his own game.

Gaskell's life ended before she had written the novel's last chapter. Molly and Roger had not yet married or spoken to each other about marriage. But in the two characters, Gaskell had created a workable match. Bonaparte claims that Roger is "a male version of Molly Gibson" (62). Both have suffered the disappointment of being rejected by their parents: Roger, in his second son status at Hamley, and Molly in the supposed rejection of her father when he remarries. Both also suffer from not achieving their first choice in love. Both read the world around them with care and close observation. Stoneman credits Roger with "maternal thinking" (178) and claims that the habits of natural history foster a more feminine way of looking at the

world:

> In all Elizabeth Gaskell's earlier novels, the nurturing impulses felt by men have been shown as repressed or distorted by the public languages of masculinity--impersonal, analytical, aggressive. But Roger's chosen discipline of natural history is presented as one in which there is no disjuncture between "science" and personal relations. (178)

It is appropriate, perhaps, that Gaskell did not live to "consummate" the marriage between the two young persons she educated to go forward together into a new age of information. On the grounds of protecting Molly's health, Mr. Gibson keeps Roger from speaking with her before he leaves on the extension of his interrupted African journey of discovery. And thinking the attention is directed at herself, Mrs. Gibson intervenes in Roger's and Molly's pantomine leave-taking through the window. The reader feels confident, however, that despite the risks to their health all around them like the air they breathe, Molly and Roger will survive the pathological uses of information that threaten a marriage of true minds. Adrienne Rich claims that relationships based on truthfulness and honor will come only when both "feel strong enough to hear [the other's] tentative and groping words," when both know and "are trying, all the time, to extend the possibilities of truth . . . the possibilities of life" (194).

[1] The historical case is also against the Cretans. According to Alan Ross Anderson, the ancient historians support Paul in his indictment. Livy, Plutarch, and Polybus, Strabo, Leonides, Diogenianus Psellus. and Suidas all report that Cretans are avaricious, ferocious, and fraudulent, and above all liars (3).

[2] In a letter to publisher George Smith, Gaskell confirms that she based Roger Hamley's trip around the world to study Natural Science on Charles Darwin's voyage (L 732).

[3] References to the text of Wives and Daughters will be abbreviated WD and are to the Penguin Books edition, edited by Frank Glover Smith, 1969.

[4] Welsh's research may seem to have little to do with Gaskell's novel, and indeed she is not a woman to theorize in abstract terms. As her biographer Uglow argues, Gaskell

> was a clever, widely read woman, whose intellect is underestimated because it is submerged rather than obtrusive. Her thinking, however, was not abstract or codified; she enacts and embodies rather than argues. And she cannot always answer the questions which disturb her. (603)

[5] In a letter to Anne Shaen, written in 1848, Gaskell mentions setting an Irish air, "a glorious speciman of man monarchy" to "a sentence out of Mary Wolstonecraft [sic]" (L 57).

[6] Emily Dickinson's poem inspired Tillie Olson and Adrienne Rich to use the expression for women's habit of not telling the whole truth. Dickinson's poem is as follows:

> Tell all the Truth but tell it slant--
> Success in circuit lies
> Too bright for our infirm Delight
> The Truth's superb surprise
> As lightning to the Children eased
> With explanation kind
> The Truth must dazzle gradually
> Or every man be blind--(qtd. in Michell 175)

[7] Bonaparte believes Cynthia should marry Preston after all: "A marriage between Cynthia and Preston is the only possibility in the novel's daemonic subtext" because Preston is the only man who knows "who Cynthia really is" (277-78).

CONCLUSION

Before I had cracked my first Gaskell novel, I was told by a friend that I would like reading Gaskell, that she was a cross between Jane Austen and George Eliot, both of whom, my friend knew, I would cheerfully accept as literary desert-island companions. But until I read her six novels, one biography, and over thirty short stories and essays, I never realized both the aptness of the comparison and some very significant points of difference among the three writers.

Not only does Gaskell lie chronologically between the two great portrayers of English provincial life, but her themes and her realistic style invite comparisons, as do individual characters. Gaskell, however, has appeared less severe than Austen and Eliot in condemning the stupid, the boring, and the morally lame. Austen is more intolerant of human weakness than Gaskell. Pride and Prejudices's Mrs. Bennet has been compared to Wives and Daughters's Mrs. Gibson. Both characters are comic and expose themselves through foolish and selfish words and deeds. Austen, however, does not waste one ounce of sympathy on Mrs. Bennet. Our laughter is not laced with compassion. Gaskell, on the other hand, calls for an understanding of Mrs. Gibson's situation that reaches more deeply into the

structure of society and the roles of women in it. Eliot too seems more concerned with uncompromising standards than Gaskell and, as W. A. Craik has noted, Eliot demands retribution (Elizabeth Gaskell 220). In Eliot's novels unprincipled characters, such as Arthur Donnithorne and Nicholas Bulstrode, suffer the consequences of their moral failures. Gaskell, on the other hand, as Craik argues, is concerned with "how wrong is caused, how the good can cause it and incur suffering, and how and in what ways redress is possible" (219). It cannot be said, however, that Gaskell gives her characters an easy ride morally; for as Craik concludes, "Gentler and less dismissive towards characters than most novelists, [Gaskell] is finally one of the least compromising about their natures and their fates" (244). Thus Gaskell is less stringent with individuals than Austen and less dedicated to exacting retributive consequences than Eliot. But she remains demanding of society as a whole and maintains unbending standards of morality.

Gaskell claimed a special relationship with George Eliot, at one time even playfully accepting the compliment of being mistaken for the mysterious writer. At the beginning of George Eliot's career, when everyone was trying to determine who she was, some had attributed her work to Gaskell. Not knowing George Eliot's identity and vastly curious herself about it, Gaskell wrote "Gilbert Elliot" a letter that Uglow calls "flirtatious" (462). Gaskell teases the instance of mistaken identity into a serious compliment:

> Since I came up from Manchester to London I have had the greatest compliment paid me I ever had in my life, I have been suspected of having written 'Adam Bede'. I have hitherto denied it; but really I think, that as you want to keep your real name a secret, it would be very pleasant for me to blush acquiescence. Will you give me leave? (L 559)

When Gaskell learned that her letter had been directed to the notorious Miss Evans, and not a Warwickshire man named Liggins who was the latest rumored Eliot, she reacted with dismay (Uglow 462-3). Eliot's works, however, pleaded against Gaskell's disapproval even if her way of life called forth an automatic response. She immediately wrote to George Eliot upon learning of Miss Evans' identity:

> Since I heard from authority, that you were the author of Scenes from 'Clerical Life' and 'Adam Bede', I have read them again; and I must, once more, tell you how earnestly fully, and humbly I admire them. I never read any thing so complete, and beautiful in fiction, in my whole life before. (L 592)

Though Gaskell had been tempted to condemn Miss Evans' life, she was gracious and, as always, baldly truthful in admitting even to Evans herself, "I should not be quite true in my ending, if I did not say before I concluded that I wish you <u>were</u> Mrs. Lewes" (L 592). To Harriet Martineau, she voiced the same personal reservations:

> I would rather they had not been written by Miss Evans, it is true; but justice should be done to all; & after

> all the writing such a book should raise her in every one's opinion, because no dramatic power would, I think enable her to think & say such /noble/ things, unless her own character-- . . . has such possibilities of greatness and goodness in it. I never can express myself metaphysically. . . (L 903)

In this last sentence Gaskell expresses the great difference between herself and George Eliot. Gaskell is less metaphysical, less intellectual, less dependent upon the power of philosophical argument than Eliot. Uglow's comparison of the two writers concerning their "historical vision" finds Gaskell "primarily theological and specifically Unitarian" while Eliot is "primarily secular and specifically positivist" (466). These differences in the quality of the writers' minds have raised Eliot, as she deserves, to the level of an intellectual giant among Victorian novelists. But before dismissing Gaskell--as she has so often been--as a "minor writer," "the minister's wife," or "the gentle story teller" (Schor, "Elizabeth Gaskell" 349), readers should recognize Gaskell's complex treatment of lying and its Janus-double the truth.

Nowhere does one see Gaskell's differences from her contemporaries more clearly than in her preoccupation with the uses and consequences of lying among good people. In her apparent indulgence towards lying and her seeming complicity with liars Gaskell is sounding a new note in nineteenth-century fiction. Gaskell's realistic style plunges deeply into the contexts of her worlds--whether they

be set in the historical periods of press gangs or witch trials or in the contemporary streets and cellars of Manchester's slums. Evenhandedly she admits conflicting points of view, but underhandedly she privileges the silenced voices who speak from the margins of her society. More daring than has been recognized in attacking her society's dearly held beliefs and prejudices, Gaskell airs a subversive political agenda.

Gaskell dared to believe that truth wore more than one guise, spoke more than one dialect, and appeared in more than one setting. While keeping to a strict moral code, she induces readers to empathize with and gradually persuades them to admit as romantic heroes working-class people. Manchester society heard Mary Barton and her father speak uncomforting truths. In Ruth, Gaskell reveals how the lie compels a new attitude toward fallen women and challenges the notions of sin, guilt, and the double standard. In Sylvia's Lovers, through public and private lies, Gaskell pits the laws of man against the laws of God and suggests new approaches to achieve justice, both domestically and nationally. In North and South, Gaskell introduces a new type of romantic heroine, one who walks the streets to talk with the workers, lies to save her brother's life, and ushers in a new relationship between workers and owners. Finally, in Wives and Daughters, Gaskell indicts a society that prizes and encourages cunning and mendacity among middle-class women who want only to claim a secure place in

a credit economy. Wherever she places them, Gaskell's liars shake up the cultural norms and require new values to replace the old.

Through the Una-Duessa doubles of her fiction and through a thorough examination of women's points of view, Gaskell rewrites the heroine of the English novel. Thus her Margaret Hale from North and South replaces Scott's Jeanie Deans from The Heart of Midlothian. Jeanie Deans refuses to lie to save her sister's life--even after sensing urgings to do so from magistrates, her father's tacit permission, and her sister's heart-rending pleas. Jeanie argues with her father about whether interpreting the ninth commandment--"Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor"--can be in any way a "doubtful or controversial matter" (211). To Jeanie a commandment is not open to interpretation. Even though Jeanie considers her sister "as innocent . . . [of murdering her child] as the new-born babe itsell" (221), Jeanie prefers to walk to London barefoot to seek a pardon rather than to lie on the witness stand and break the ninth commandment. How different is Jeanie Deans from Margaret Hale, who compromises her integrity and honesty before the man she loves to tell a life-saving lie for her brother! But, as the difference between these two heroines indicates, the world had changed. Gaskell takes the lie into new territory--not to open up morality to looser, more relativistic standards but to open up society's interpretations of the truth.

As the information explosion, the increase in literacy, the development of railroads, and the credit economy changed the face of Victorian society, so language attempted to keep up with and to interpret values. Jeanie Deans admitted only the narrowest interpretation of the lie. But through the literary lie, Gaskell allows the possibility of interrogating current values and interpreting events without suggesting that the lying itself become a way of life. In Gaskell's works, therefore, truth and the lie go hand in hand to test society's values.

Moreover, Gaskell's treatment of lying serves as a preview of late-Victorian culture's cynicism concerning the shifting grounds of truth. Gaskell has more in common with Anthony Trollope in the adoption of lying as a major theme than she does with Scott, Austen, or Eliot. In his 1875 critique of society, The Way We Live Now, Trollope exposes society for adopting lying as the pervasive way of life. Except for two anachronisms, John Crumb and Roger Carbury, most of the characters lie as a matter of course--from Lady Carbury's literary "puffing" to August Melmotte's speculations. Trollope shows what happens when lying becomes a way of life without any reference to the truth. He reveals in the schemes of the capitalist Melmotte

> a new era in money matters . . . As for many years past we have exchanged paper instead of actual money for our commodities, so now it seemed that, under the new Melmotte regime, an exchange of words was to suffice. (188)

The market place in Trollope's novel becomes purely linguistic. In language, Barbara Herrnstein Smith argues, the basic assumption is the same that underlies currency exchange--that something of value lies behind the money. Smith explains, "When this assumption is violated by the speaker in natural discourse--when he palms off counterfeit linguistic currency--we say that he is lying" (100). Gaskell does not go so far as Trollope went to suggest that her characters' lies point to nihilism. She suggests, however, that readers examine what undergirds their values as they would investigate the basis for their investments.

Exploration of the language and grounds for lying also brings out the political undercurrents which lie beneath Gaskell's cultural critique. Like M. M. Bakhtin, Gaskell opposed monologue. During the 1930s, as Clark and Holquist explain, Bakhtin wrote from exile while Stalinism increased its repressive centralizing grip. Bakhtin was concerned about the way "language had become homogenized" under Stalin and one voice spoke the central rhetoric, the central truth (267). While Bakhtin disguised his cultural critique under "academic inquiries" (267), such as "Discourse in the Novel," his real subject was Stalinist ideology (268).

Similarly, Gaskell orchestrated the polyphonic voices of the mid-Victorian era. She opened up the grounds for truth by admitting the voices of dissent. She did such a good job of ventriloquism that her political subversion has scarcely been recognized. As Felicia Bonaparte has argued--

in support of her own analysis of Gaskell's subtexts--"it is important to 'read' the whole of Elizabeth Gaskell--her life, her letters and her fiction--as one continuous metaphoric text" (10). I have assumed for my purposes the lie to be the most important controlling metaphor of Gaskell's fiction. If her works are read as a whole, treatment of lying reveals her attitudes toward class, gender, politics and power. Gaskell does not admit lies because she believes they are the truth. She does not hoodwink her readers by presenting only one line. Instead, she admits the lie to test the truth and to invite new interpretations of it.

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, it became clearer that control of the truth had come more and more under the command of the powerful. Justification of acts of cruelty and exploitation for the sake of King Leopold II's property in the Congo brought Joseph Conrad to write Heart of Darkness after he had experienced first hand the abuses of power by Europeans in Africa. Conrad chose to end his indictment of economic and political European imperialism with a lie, calculated by Marlow to spare Kurtz's Intended knowledge of the brutal truth and give her something "to live with" (1816). Marlow's lie springs to his lips more readily because of his view of women: "They--the women I mean--are out of it--should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse" (1794). Marlow confirms that to him women are angels

in the house, who must be spared knowledge of the truth. By lying, Marlow suggests the triumph of a new world view where truth shifts its stance to accommodate what people are comfortable living with. Although Marlow claims that the Intended needs a comforting lie to live, he is the one who chooses to live with a lie--not about Kurtz, but about women, about truth, and about justice. Thus many Victorians chose the more comfortable prevailing lies rather than shake up their economic and political stability. For the ending of Heart of Darkness, therefore, Conrad chose an example of private lying to parallel his story about public lying. But, as he turns the corner into the twentieth century, he is no wiser than Elizabeth Gaskell in resolving the troubling questions of power and gender that accompany the public or the private lie.

In many respects, we are no further today in solving the problems that swift cultural change brought the Victorians more than one hundred fifty years ago. We accept almost with blase certainty that we live with lies, that our mother tongue is as adept at wrapping itself around a lie as around a truth. In the spirit of dialogue, we need to take out our Gaskell and listen to our mother tongues as she did.

Gaskell listened to the voices that spoke from the margins of her society. She heard the workers' complaints as well as those of the owners who sat beside her in Cross Street Chapel. She visited the prostitute in prison and listened to her story. She heard the soul-searching voices

of good people who automatically condemned the fallen woman as she herself had automatically condemned Mary Ann Evans. But, as she wrote to Harriet Martineau about Evans, "justice should be done to all" (L 903). Gaskell had reexamined her values in the face of the "greatness and goodness" of character evident in Evans' literary works. Gaskell was a curious inspector of her world; she ferreted out the information that compelled an interrogating of moral standards, not an abandoning of them. While she admitted the language of lying to test values, she did not advocate any cheap comfort bought by lies. On the contrary, Gaskell urges readers of her day and every day to be disturbed enough by lying to open up all the grounds for truth.

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