

# A Study of Women's Labor in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*

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**Abstract**—The present study aims at studying women's labor in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*. For this purpose, it will start by tracing the writer's historical, social, and critical background, the milieu which shaped her perspectives and henceforth her work. Besides, it will discuss the writer's response to the changes which occurred in her lifetime and at the same time served as a strong agent for change. The following part will shed light on Gaskell's contribution, reputation and writing career. Unlike her contemporaries, she presents the process of finding one's vocation as central to a women's life. Further, the study will examine women's labor in *Mary Barton* where the writer's focuses on working-class society in which young women were drawn from the conventions governing feminine behavior, since they lived outside the boundaries of gentility. One of the problems addressed by the novel is the *separation* between classes and genders; Gaskell's novel tends to bridge the boundaries between her characters and her readers and discourage the middle-class sense of complacent superiority.

**Index Terms**—labor, *Mary Barton*, working –class, woman, feminine, conventions

## I. INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning of her career, when Elizabeth Gaskell explores the industrial novel, she foregrounds the world of labor, brining new concerns into the world of the novel. Moreover, her novels may in fact be seen as radical because they challenge widely held assumptions about the nature of women, their proper sphere, and their participations in labor. Gaskell's treatment of work, in particular, is revealing, for it can serve as testing ground for her attitudes and purposes. Work, after all, is a site where the dominant ideology operates as it encodes separate roles for men and women. Brodestsky Tessa (1986) observes about Gaskell:

*Gaskell endeavored faithfully to portray the deplorable conditions of the working class. Empowered by her belief system, Gaskell, a woman, became a potent agent of social change, effectively drawing the attention of England's populace to the poor's situation.*(67)

In her fiction, Gaskell focuses on the problems of working conditions in factories and employs the realities of her day to elucidate the plight of the downtrodden. These social issues brought forth many visible atrocities and, as such, presented Gaskell with material highly conducive to the moral theme so prevalent in her fiction.

As Shinwell Julia (1994) opines:

*Gaskell lived in a century that was riddled with change; her fiction is in many ways a response to changes that were occurring in her lifetime and at the same time is an agent of change. Capitalizing on her respectable status as the wife of a minister and mother of four, Gaskell entered the Condition of England debate to make new claims for women.* (56)

Gaskell offers her readers empowered female protagonists who, strengthened by their faith and personal principles, move out of their private spheres and have an impact on their communities. Highlighting female influence, *Mary Barton*, Molly Gibson and Margaret Hale, illustrate how women can achieve a type of social reformation within the traditional construct of the marriage plot. Francoise Basch( 1990) observes that:

*Gaskell is the only one among the major writers of the first half of the Victorian period to have dealt fully with the subject. Gaskell is interested in all kinds of occupations, those held by middle-class girls as well as held by working women. Perhaps because she was the mother of four daughters –two of whom never married- Gaskell was particularly sensitive to the plight of unmarried women, whose identities could not be shaped by their roles as wives or mothers and who consequently needed to acquire self- definition through other mean.* (43)

Gaskell's industrial works emphasize faith as grounds for action. The dilemma of the industrial poor prompted Gaskell to write *Mary Barton*, and Gaskell's characters reflect this belief that faith and social action go together. In *Mary Barton* Gaskell is interested in presenting her female characters as powerful; by exploring the process by which they choose a direction for their lives, Gaskell links women's work with their empowerment.

The fragmentation in Gaskell criticism arises from an overemphasis on her social problem novels. A reader of many critics might never know that Gaskell was a prolific writer of (what are now called) novellas and short stories as well as a biography; that her most successful novel, *Cranford*, was an idyll; and that her most critically praised work, *Wives and Daughters*, has been compared to the works of both Jane Austen and George Eliot. Many critics are perplexed by *Sylvia's Lovers* because, as an historical novel, it is difficult to fit this work into any obvious grouping. Chapman Alan (1994) writes:

*Mrs. Gaskell had neither the intellectual equipment nor the artistic power of George Eliot, but she was a shrewd observer, with a tolerant sympathy and a strong sense of humor. Curiously enough, she never did full justice to her humorous faculty, save in Cranford, which beyond a doubt is her highest achievement if fiction-an entirely fresh and delightful sojourn in a sleepy little country town. There is a pleasant aroma of fresh butter and dried lavender in its pages. The characterization is rich in happy little touches, reminiscent of Jane Austen's art, yet with a more whimsical play of humorous fancy than would have tolerated.*(526)

Coming to Gaskell at the end of the twentieth century is both necessary and introductory, for the question of the role that work plays in a woman's life is still problematic. In her life, as well as in her fiction, Gaskell was interested in creating arrangements that would make it possible for women to have marriage and family, as well as some sort of separate vocation. Jenney Uglow (1993) points out:

*Gaskell used her fiction to draw attention to the plight of the factory worker in Manchester, and to argue for reconciliation between employers and workers. While Gaskell was not the first woman to tackle industrial strife and expose the suffering of the workers in fiction. Mary Barton painted a grim picture of working life in which mill owners grew rich on the back of their long-suffering workers. The novel turned a drama of conflict between classes into an examination of humanity's essentially divided nature.* (197)

To conclude, in her depiction of the working-class households within *Mary Barton*, Gaskell is recommending an alternative to the gendered organization of labor in the home. Moreover, since working-class men and women share in the labor outside the home, they are, Gaskell suggests, more successful at creating equitable arrangements within it (Haldane, 1990, p.78). Common participation in the workforce- a public act-impinges on the private domain of the home. In contrast, middle-class society is based on the separation of the sexes; men become producers in the waged economy while women remain at home and function economically as consumers.

## II. ELIZABETH GASKELL'S CONTRIBUTION, REPUTATION AND WRITING CAREER

### A. Gaskell's Life: Family Background:

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell (1810-1865) is one of the most beloved and critically acclaimed novelists of Victorian literature. She was the daughter of a Unitarian minister, William Stevenson who died in 1820. Mrs. Gaskell is often considered as a one-novel writer because of the immense success of *Cranford* (1853), a delicate picture of life in a village. "Cranford" is drawn from Knutsford in Cheshire, where Mrs. Gaskell was brought up by an aunt, Hannah Lamb.

The family background out of which Gaskell helped form her attitudes toward womanly potential. Gaskell's aunt served not only as an excellent mother-substitute but also as an important role model, showing Gaskell that a woman could live an independent and satisfying life. Gaskell grew up in a household of females, a household for all practical purposes headed by a competent single mother. Exposed early to female authority, she saw in her aunt an able, self-sufficient woman, who was capable of managing a wide range of tasks. As Robert Barnard (1988) opines:

*The rest of Mrs. Gaskell's output is very varied, but the best of it springs from her memories of childhood and girlhood in the small town of Knutsford, in the English Midlands. Her best-loved novel, Cranford, is series of vignette, charming yet clear-eyed, of a town in which the single woman dominates* (120)

Social problems play a part; they do so in her other novels, but *Cranford* will live longest. The life of the village, where the ladies of good family are poor, is described with immense skill.

After her marriage to William Gaskell, a minister of the same theological school in (1832). She and her husband lived for many years at Manchester, and from her experiences of Lancashire life, she found the material at hand for her first novel, *Mary Barton* and *North and South*. M. Brooks Howell (2007) points out:

*In 1821, at twenty-one years of age, Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell met the Reverend William Gaskell, an assistant minister at Manchester. The couple married in 1832.* (8)

Mrs. Gaskell's novels include *Mary Barton* (1848) which portrays the dreadful reality of life in the new industrial Victorian England. Also, *Mary Barton* is sincere and moving story, which might easily have been spoiled by sentimentality. *North and South* gives us a thoughtful study of the problems that arise out of the factory system, while there is excellent workshop in *Wives and Daughters* (1866). Here she captures the nuances of class relationship and social differences in a small town, and uses them to enrich her central subject, the study of two girls, step sisters, growing up within a family circle created by a disastrous second marriage. *Ruth* (1853) is the sad and tragic story of a girl whose parents are dead. *North and South* (1854) is a study of the different lives led by English people, especially the poor in the north and the happier ones in the south. The plot centers round Margaret Hale, a gentle girl from the south, who goes north and meets the problems of angry crowds of poor workpeople.

Gaskell left behind a rich literary legacy, including six novels, several short stories and non-fictional pieces, as well as the first biography of Charlotte Bronte. Her novels are beloved for their vivid characters and arresting portrayals of Victorian life. Gaskell was a vibrant new voice to the genre of industrial fiction. Her work helped reanimate Victorian society into aiding humanitarian causes.

### B. Gaskell's Contribution, Reputation & Writing Career

The quality of Gaskell's writing is her personal disclosures, which contribute to accusations of the "awkwardness" of her writing and its 'embarrassing religiosity'. (Carol, 2001, p.90). Upon first consideration, they may seem distracting or

perhaps even quaint. However, via this narrative strategy, Gaskell advocates not only for her fictional characters but also for those who suffer in real life. These personal disclosures are not merely the result of a mismanaged narrative voice. Rather, they are guided by her careful hand. Describing her feelings that are evoked in the plot, Gaskell uses personal disclosures to simultaneously advocate for her characters and instruct her readers. (Howell, 2007, p.34).

Gaskell fits the image of the "superwoman", a term used in the 1970s to denote a woman who could effortlessly merge her public and private roles. The writer managed simultaneously to attend to her responsibility as a minister's wife, to bring up four daughters, and to secure a solid literary reputation for herself. Yet, Gaskell's career was not without its efforts, strains, or costs. Throughout her life she was plagued with severe headaches, especially when she was under the pressure to write, and she died an early death at fifty-five, probably at the height of her powers. To a modern reader, her life appears to be symptomatic of the stresses of a time in which women's notions about vocation were beginning to change.

Gaskell was a talented storyteller, as critics have noted, and those who knew her, spoke of her knack for telling tales about friends and family. (Carol, 2002, p.44). Her storytelling ability was partially due to her outgoing personality and her penchant for detailed observation of human beings. Jenney Uglow (1993) writes:

*In Gaskell's tales to family and friends (as in her more formal writing), truth mixed with fiction. Many characters and scenarios in her fiction are derived from real persons and events that Gaskell observed or heard about. Whether Gaskell had adapted a real life scenario or invented it, she used real-life inspirations to represent larger social realities- or truths- to her reading audience. She often defended her writing by saying that she had to tell the truth- to represent life as she knew it- despite the social repercussions. Her truth telling approach to fiction was mandated by her Unitarian faith and led her to craft the kinds of plots that allow for characters to engage in evidence gathering (184).*

Gaskell sensed that she was living in a period of transition, and she looked to the future for the resolution of some of the issues and dilemmas confronting women. As she wrote novels that addressed the issue of work for women, she took a hopeful view of the possibilities that would be available to women in later years, while remaining aware of the present difficulties. Much of Gaskell criticism has overlooked the subtle contributions that she made to the Victorian novel, specifically the ways that gave her female characters voice and credibility, a daunting task in the nineteenth century. Pinchbeck Ivy (1990) notes the:

*Prevailing patronizing attitude taken to Gaskell by many critics from the time of her death until well into the first part of this the twentieth century. (62)*

Margaret Ganz (2001, p.23), on the other hand, sees Gaskell as the victim of warring impulses, including an impulse toward social reform, humor, commemoration, didacticism, melodrama, mystery, idyll, and tragedy. She also believes that Gaskell falls short of being a great artist because she is not able to achieve the universality necessary for great literature. Although Ganz (2001) disagrees on Gaskell's ultimate achievements in fiction, she nevertheless shared a critical view that assumes that the messy texture of social life must be transcended and that the truly great will resist the temptation to inquire too deeply into contemporary problems. (24).

Much of Gaskell's fiction is filled with sentimentality. Ivy (1990) explains:

*Gaskell explains melodrama to express concepts of innocence, guilt and justice in ways which realism or- cool economics analysis- could not encompass. She always gave priority to duty towards human beings, 'real person', whom she opposed to the fictional persons that totally absorb the writer during literary creation, however, her insistence on seeing her literary pursuits as a vocation is striking. (76)*

Brodesky Tessa (1986) points out:

*Gaskell was the first major Victorian writer to explore in detail the subject of female labor. In her works we find nurses, dressmakers, factory worker, among others. (56)*

Gaskell wrote a large number of short stories and veering away from her realist tendencies, she wrote ghost stories; like many Victorians, she had a strong interest in the supernatural. While profit may have the motive for her, it would be interesting to see if the plots and themes in her ghost stories give us a better notion of her respect beliefs. As Jeanette Webber (1990) opines:

*Gaskell's fiction was an outgrowth of her philanthropy. Through her social work and person experiences, Gaskell became cognizant of the many problems in society, and she determined to resolve those problems. In fact, Gaskell judged her own fiction not on artistic or literary merits, but on the social message it relayed. (12)*

As the Victorian feminists knew-and as Gaskell knew- there is power in numbers. Herself a member of a network of writers and activists, Gaskell approves of female solidarity and made a major theme in her novels. Jeanette Webber (1990) points out:

*In Cranford, women have leaned to depend on each other, particularly in a crises. On one occasion the ladies deal with the possibility of robbery after several thefts break out in their town. (17)*

To conclude, in her own life, Gaskell constantly juxtaposed the public moment with the private one, writing about the composition of her latest novel alongside the purchase of a gown or a daughter, the death of the family cat, the problems of dandelions in the yard. In doing so, she was demonstrating the way that women's lives were lived out as they go about doing the work: painting the picture, writing the music, baking the bread. Both her life and her fiction testify to the truth. To quote Robert Barnard (1988):

*Mrs. Gaskell never moralizes, though she is a moralist of the subtlest kind. She deals not with tragedy or undying grief, but with grinding unhappiness and frustration, continued day after day. Her characters make no heroic gestures; they endure, they compromise, they make the best things, Wives and Daughters is one of the landmarks of the new, more realistic novel that was being written in 1850s and 60s (121)*

Gaskell died at the height of her popularity; however, by the end of the century, her stories had fallen out of fashion (*Cranford* being the noteworthy exception). The 1950s brought about a revived interest in Gaskell's industrial fiction. Today, the popularity of her work continues to grow. "It is studied and researched at universities across the world and her books are now available in more edition than they have been for years" (Barnard, 1988, p.43). In 1985 The Gaskell Society was founded to bring together like-minded scholars and Gaskell enthusiasts to promote and celebrate her work. BBC Television produced film adaptations of her novels *Wives and Daughters*, *Cranford*, and *North and South*, which further promoted interest in Gaskell's work.

### III. WOMEN'S LABOR IN *MARY BARTON*

#### A. *Mary Barton: At a Glance*

*Mary Barton* is perhaps the most powerful evocation of the industrial scene (and indictment of the industrial system) before the twentieth century. In spite of some melodrama, contrivance and sentimentality, the picture of working-class life in prosperity and depression convince by its honesty, its meticulously observation of the telling detail, its sympathy which never spills over into special pleading. Mrs. Gaskell is not merely concerned with the virtuous poor, the well-conducted chapel-goer who trips his hat to the right people; she takes in the idler, the rebel, the prostitute, the murderer, and she sees them against a meticulous described background of their hovels, their streets running with sewage, the grinding routine of their work, their holidays and small treats, their soul-destroying idleness and hunger during unemployment. It is all, inevitably, seen from the outside, but nobody else brought to the Victorian industrial scene so knowledgeable an eye or so sharp a brain (Barnard, 1988, p.134).

Gaskell's presentation of Mary, the main character of the novel. The readers' first glimpse of Mary reveals a young woman who is actively engaged, constantly doing. At the same time, Gaskell makes a point of presenting her as attractive and successful when she carries out traditionally feminine duties. Also, In her account of Mary's search for a vocation, Gaskell is acknowledging the significance that work has in women's lives and insisting that they should make their own career decisions.

#### B. *The Idea of Labor in the Novel*

In *Mary Barton* Gaskell emphasizes affirmative images of women working. While John Barton and his friend, Wilson, are discussing the fate of Esther, Barton's sister-in-law, whose vanity and love of finery have led her, Barton suspects, into ruin. In the novel, the idleness is viewed as evidence of moral defectiveness; working, on the other hand, is a positive value because it produces human sympathy and creates community. The novel's depiction of women at their work indicates that Gaskell views activity-not inertia - as appropriate for young women.

*Mary Barton* demonstrates the benefits of men and women sharing the workload.. The men in the novel combine traditionally male qualities of strength with traditionally female qualities of caring.; conversely, Mary develops male traits of independence and toughness. The result is an enlargement of identity and an increase in sympathy, on both sides. For Mrs. Gaskell is the first step toward improving society, as sympathy enacts itself on both private and public levels.

Through the various characters in *Mary Barton*, Gaskell addresses and dismisses the opposition, those who have serious reservations about women working. John Barton expresses the fear that work outside the home, especially factory work, can lead a young woman astray, reasoning that the ability to support herself might lead her to become vain and to overvalue finery, like his sister-in law Esther did. He also identifies as another potential hazard the freedom of movement that accompanies working (Carol, 2001, p.90). Yet Gaskell does not share her character's fears. Yet her social ambitions are justified in part by her concern for her father's comfort; her rise in position would enable her to remove the cares that continually oppresses him. Moreover, she does discover on her own the true state of her feelings-her preference for Wilson- and acts accordingly, setting forth to Mr. Carson her decision to sever the association with him. (Webber, 1990, p.67). On his turn Wendy Ann Craik (2003) comments on Mary's strength of character:

*Far from helpless in her normal life, she has been a competent housekeeper, who has coped with sorrow, shortage of money, death, illness, overwork, sleepless nights, and her own personal dilemmas, all over a long period, during which she has also had to act independently without help or confidante. (45)*

Based on her own experience as a mother who watched a daughter, Meta, break off an engagement, Gaskell knows that a young woman could not be protected from the daily realities and dangers, from making her own mistakes, even by a parent makes clear approval of female autonomy and self-reliance. (Patricia, 1994, p.62).

#### C. *Gaskell's Concept of Women's Labor.*

In *Mary Matron* (1854), Mrs. Gaskell portrays and depicts that in the strict rules in Victorian society to which aim at defining class boundaries. However in her novel, Mrs. Gaskell did, in some ways, for The North what Charles Kingsley for the South. She is not the industrial reformer that Kingsley was, but she knew out the fullness of her own experiences

the bitterness and misery arising from these early conflicts between capital and labor. The importance of Mrs. Gaskell's *Mary Barton* lies not merely in its spiritual achievement of industrial dramas but in the method of dealing with working women.

In *Cranford* Mrs. Gaskell presents a community of women who are self-sufficient. Those women have chosen to lead single lives and are happy in their choice. Although the inhabitants of Cranford are not wealthy, they do control property. In spite of their limited financial resources, the ladies of Cranford manage to create ritual and ceremonies that allow them to function comfortably, even on wafer bread and butter and sponge-biscuits. Furthermore, when disasters arise, they are able to find solutions and even to embark on new projects in old age. When the bank that serves Miss Matty fails, she faces the prospect of penury. Yet, after a conference with her friends, she decides to support herself by selling tea, a scheme that flourishes due to the backing of her community. It is telling that Mrs. Gaskell claimed this novel as her favorite, the one that gave her most pleasure. It is her most complete representation of a community of women who are content and able to pursue their own enterprises.

Gaskell is not solely preoccupied with her own pain. Her principal purpose is to depict the distance between the classes and the pressures under which working-class people lived. In particular, Gaskell is concerned with working women, the largest group in Victorian England whose labor was not fully recognized or sanctioned. (Basch, 1990, p.67). Drawing on the pain she felt during the loss of her own children, Gaskell attempts to express in *Mary Barton* the difficult situation faced by Victorian women within a culture that neither recognized nor rewarded their labor.

The novel's depiction of women at their work indicates that Gaskell views activity-not inertia- as appropriate for young women. (Webber, 1990, p.90)

Gaskell's picture of a young factory girl, Mary Barton who derives satisfaction as well as maturity from her occupation, is rare among Victorian images of working-class women. *Mary Barton* focuses on the career of a young, vital girl who is able to accomplish what she desires. Mary's father recognizes the importance of a vocation for his daughter and defers to her when she expresses an interest in becoming a seamstress. When Mary's mother dies, Mary, left to her own resources, becomes independent, making purchases on her own and conducting a romance with a young man of her own choosing. Mary's labor outside the home strengthens her to such an extent that she is able to execute a leading role in the public acquittal of her lover. At the end of the novel, Mary gets everything she wants-and she is confidently managing it all.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

*Mary Barton* closes with a quiet family scene, in which letters from England are joyously received. They bring the news of the upcoming marriage of Margaret and Will and of the successful operation that restored Margaret's sight. The last image of the novel- a woman recovering her vision- is an interesting note to end on, for it is the image of a woman being empowered. Early in the novel, Margaret sings a moving song about the Oldham Weaver, and even Mary is amazed at the powerful performance of her friend. In spite of the independence and strong will she demonstrates in her actions, Margaret for the most part accepts the feminine ideal of passivity, advising her more impetuous friend. Gaskell also appears to prefer Mary's energy to Margaret's patience, giving Mary a central role in the plot while Margaret is confined to the periphery of the novel.

Mary Barton, a seemingly simple factory girl, represents, despite her disarming looks, a powerful force, for she bears the ideological weight of her class, women who work and who become strong in their labor. In this novel, Mary is a persuasive argument for female vocation.

To conclude, in her depiction of the working-class households within the novel, Gaskell is recommending an alternative to the gendered organization of labor in the home. Through *Mary Barton*, the writer is criticizing a society that withholds from women opportunities for fulfilling work. Throughout her career Gaskell attempted to redefine femininity by associating it with the performance of labor and autonomy.

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