

MRS GASKELL'S YOUNG WOMEN

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Mrs. Gaskell knew a lot about women. She had four daughters herself – “My girls, my darlings *are* such comforts – such happiness”, she told her correspondent, Charles Eliot Norton, in January 1860. She had described them to him in a letter some months before (9 March 1859 – No. 418). (He had stayed with the Gaskells in Manchester in 1857). Flossy and Julia, the two youngest, were still at school. Julia was the lively one, “the chatterbox and perpetual singer” (485 – 16 April 1861) though given to moods, as her mother described her. But the main interest of the account to Norton and of a letter a fortnight later to her friend Tottie Fox lies in what Mrs. Gaskell has to say of the two elder daughters – the eldest, Marianne, said to be “as practical and humorous as ever. Her quick decision always makes me feel as if she was a kind of ‘elder *son*’ rather than daughter” (ibid., 418), but to Tottie Fox somewhat regretfully Mrs. Gaskell confessed: – “*Only*, Tottie, she never reads or settles to anything”. It seems clear that Meta, the second daughter, was her mother’s favourite – said to be “turning out such a noble beautiful character – Her intellect and her soul ... are keeping pace, as they should do ... [She] reads carefully many books, – with a fineness of perception and relish which delights me professing to be ‘very old’ at twenty two ... and declining to be called a ‘*young*’ woman saving she is ‘middle aged’ ”. (ibid., 418) Meta had suffered a broken engagement in 1857 and, though her mother told Tottie Fox that she did not think that Meta “ever thinks of her year of engagement” (ib. 421), I just wonder whether that pretence

of middle age might not have something to do with it.

It was, however, not only what she knew of her own daughters but also what she saw and knew of the lives of other girls of other classes both in Manchester and elsewhere that informed her vision and stimulated her imagination. Thus, though she speaks of her main concern in writing *Mary Barton* being her desire to publicise the experience of the “careworn men” as she called them, the factory workers whose lives oscillated between work and want with each successive revolution of the economic cycle, she was also determined to consider the situation of young girls exposed to possible sexual exploitation as a result of their unprotected innocence. It is significant that all Mrs. Gaskell’s major heroines are either motherless or able only to resort to inadequate maternal advice.

This is all the more pathetic in the case of Mary Barton, because the loss of her mother strengthened the link with her father by “that mysterious bond which unites those who have been loved by one who is now dead and gone” (*M.B.*, c.3), but ironically that increased her father’s indulgence so that “he left her, with full trust in her unusual sense and spirit, to choose her own associates, and her own times for seeing them”. (*ibid.*) That last phrase is ominous for the reader, for, though Mary does show “unusual sense and spirit”, we have just heard of her Aunt Esther who has just disappeared and whose “giddiness[and] lightness of conduct” without specific reference is alluded to. The reader must inevitably wonder whether Mary might go the same way.

We are not re-assured when a few pages later we read of Mary’s careful choice of a dress, admittedly for the prospect at this stage only of seeing Margaret Jennings, but Mrs. Gaskell adds the generalising statement— “But Mary liked making an impression, and in this it must be owned she was pretty often gratified”. (c.4) There are other ominous signs— her consciousness of her beauty, for instance, and her strong will which together lead her to decide that work as a dressmaker is to be preferred not only to the mills but also to domestic service. In the same passage in which all this is described Mrs. Gaskell further informs us that “there were always young men enough, in a different rank from her own, who were willing to compliment the pretty weaver’s daughter as they met her

in the street" (c.3) and adds of Mary's ambition that "she had early determined that her beauty should make her a lady". (ibid.) The stage is set for Harry Carson.

After Mary has begun her association with Carson Mrs. Gaskell reinforces this emphasis on Mary's ambition, never forgetting either to link it with what Mary thinks has been the social success of her aunt Esther, an irony all the more pathetic because *we* know that Esther has been deserted and is now a prostitute. Her ambition is expressed in day-dreams of having her own carriage, ordering her gowns from the woman who is at present her employer, associating with Harry Carson's sisters, acknowledged beauties. But at the same time Mrs. Gaskell emphasises Mary's constant intention of using her social elevation to assist others. Mary is a good girl. Even in the early stages of her affair with Carson she can forget a meeting with him to comfort Mrs. Davenport as her husband is dying (c.6), and likewise a principal objective in any marriage with Carson would be to ease her father's lot (c.7).

All this time, of course, we have witnessed the faithful love of Jem Wilson, of her own class, a good workman and a devoted son. We are told that "he loved on and on, ever more fondly : he hoped against hope ; he would not give up" (c.5), perfection that is still further applauded by his bravery at the mill-fire (Carson's, be it said !). It is strange that virtue is so difficult to make convincing in fiction. Jem Wilson is impeccable—and dull. And there is the difference with Carson ; there is no excitement in him. Mary's father cannot understand her sudden coolness towards Jem. He does not know what is happening—literally.

The crisis comes complicatedly in the eleventh chapter. Not long before we have been told that Mary's love for Carson was "a bubble, blown out of vanity ; but it looked very real and very bright" (c.10). Within pages she receives two proposals of marriage, and the very juxtaposition Mrs. Gaskell must have intended to impress. First, it is Jem, speaking out of new-found economic security, honest, careful, responsible—and Mary refuses him and is immediately heartbroken. Truth had dawned that she really loved Jem ; and all Carson's attractions became, of a sudden, worthless baubles. Then she meets Carson to tell him all is over. He sees

her (his words, and what a difference to Jem Wilson's sobriety !) as a "little witch", a "sweet little coquette", "a darling little rascal" (c.11). He can't – and here is the irony – he can't take her seriously, but it provokes him to such seriousness that he is led to propose marriage, what he never intended, and yet another one too late ! The only difference was, as we might expect, that Jem took the rejection seriously and Carson did not.

Here is neither the place nor time to follow out the rest of Mary Barton's history beyond nothing the desperate courage of her actions in Jem's trial for the alleged murder of Carson, the strain it placed upon her, and her collapse. In this catastrophe Mary matures, her girlish egotism purged away in the flames of disaster, her nobility emerged in selfless commitment to saving Jem. At the trial as she entered the witness-box spectators looked for a superficial beauty who had provoked a murderous rivalry. Instead they saw a "face that was deadly white, and almost set in its expression, while a mournful bewildered soul looked out of the depths of those soft, deep, grey eyes. But others recognised a higher and stranger kind of beauty ; one that would keep its hold on the memory for many after years" (c.32). In the hour of literal trial Mary found strength and proved finer than any might have thought.

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All Mrs. Gaskell's major works carry titles indicating their major female characters with the exception of *North and South*, and we know that she wanted to call that novel *Margaret Hale* and referred in her letters to it as 'Margaret'. *Mary Barton*, however, was as much, if not more, about John Barton than Mary. Mrs. Gaskell's next novel was more properly entitled with its heroine's name, for it really is about Ruth. Like so many of the others, it traces a girl's development through the transition from a child to a woman in the progress from inexperience to knowledge. For Ruth that is both sudden and traumatic, not least because, alone of all the novels, it takes her through sexual initiation to motherhood, and unmarried motherhood at that.

Taking up perhaps the hints that came from *Mary Barton*, through Esther, a fallen woman, and the unprotected position of young girls

working in the dressmaking trade, Mrs. Gaskell adds to the exposure of Ruth by making her an orphan as well. She knew she was treading on dangerous ground, and in one of her letters she speaks of the novel being a forbidden book in hers as in many another household. The irony for us is that, though its subject might seem immoral to so many of its contemporaries, the book suffers from an over-serious didactic intent in its emphasis on the purity and innocence of Ruth and her subsequent selflessness even to death. And here again *Ruth* is unique among its creator's major fictions in having the central woman character die. We need also to note that, by contrast with Esther and others who overstepped the sex threshold of the time, Ruth does not decline into prostitution but – and, of course, one must recognise her good fortune in securing the protection of the Bensons – recovers and redeems herself.

As Wendy Craik has said, *Ruth* raises complex questions, “questions of how far a sin done in ignorance is a sin,... how long it is before sin is purged, how far the sins of the parents are to be visited on the children” and many others. (*Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel*, 1975, p. 50). Ruth is a serious, sensitive, lonely girl, lacking protection and care, and finding in her seducer Bellingham someone who appears to love her. Again to quote Mrs. Craik, she sins “not only out of circumstance but for love”. (ibid., p. 53) That love involves nursing Bellingham in illness at first, as duty and commitment will involve her similarly at last, in both instances demonstrating the self-sacrificing nature of her character to someone who did not deserve it and whom she knew to deserve it least when she gave most by fearlessly tending him and catching the disease from which he recovered but from which she died.

Between the first and the last there is the meeting once again when he would supposedly make amends for his previous behaviour and marry her. One consideration alone weighs with her, as it did from the moment she discovered her pregnancy, the consequence for her (and their) son, Leonard. In himself the boy is not a particularly convincing character, but what matters is Ruth's commitment to him. She is ever conscious of what she conceives as her sin before God, but she is determined to protect Leonard at all costs. “Her whole heart was in her boy. She often

feared that she loved him too much— more than God himself”, writes Mrs. Gaskell, who then continues : — “And so, unconsciously, her love for her child led her up to love of God, to the All-knowing who read her heart”. (c. 19) When therefore Bellingham re-appears, Ruth has a problem, put succinctly thus : — “He has no love for his child, and I will have no love for him ... Oh, my God ! I do believe Leonard’s father is a bad man, and yet, oh ! pitiful God, I love him : I cannot forget— I cannot”. (c. 23) When, however, she has met him, observed his behaviour and gathered his view of their past, she is resolved : — “I do not love you. I did once. Don’t say I did not love you then ; but I do not now. I could never love you again ... If there were no other reason to prevent our marriage but the one fact that it would bring Leonard into contact with you, that would be enough.” (c. 24)

Such was her disapproval of Bellingham’s moral attitude that she says that, knowing, as she had said at the beginning of the chapter, that Bellingham had the legal right to take the child away. No wonder her dreams, more like nightmares, so often found her terrified by Leonard’s being borne away from her. Dream plays a prominent part in this novel, because for one thing it enables us to learn things about Ruth that she could not easily reveal to others and for another it allows Mrs. Gaskell to emphasise the fearful in Ruth’s experience. Not surprisingly therefore after the rejection of Bellingham we read of one of Ruth’s most terrible experiences of this kind : —

She dreamed that she was once more on the lonely shore, striving to carry Leonard from some pursuer— some human pursuer[surely Bellingham]— she knew he was human and she knew who he was, although she dared not say his name even to herself, he seemed so close and present, gaining on her flying footsteps, rushing after her as with the sound of the roaring tide. Her feet seemed heavy weights fixed to the ground : they would not move. All at once just near the shore, a great black whirlwind of waves clutched her back to her pursuers : she threw Leonard on to land, which was safety ; but whether he reached it or no, or was swept back like her into a

mysterious something too dreadful to be borne, she did not know, for the terror awakened her. (c. 25)

There is the terror : but there is also the pity that finds its culminating expression in the scene where Bellingham looks on the corpse of Ruth, “the beautiful, calm, still face, on which the last rapturous smile still lingered, giving an ineffable look of bright serenity. Her arms were crossed over her breast ; the wimple-like cap marked the perfect oval of her face, while two braids of the waving auburn hair peeped out of the narrow border, and lay on the delicate cheeks. He was awed into admiration by the wonderful beauty of the dead woman”. (c. 36) Bellingham was hardly the most appropriate person for that sight. He is no more sensitive now than he had ever been, but that only increases the pity of the scene. Near the end of the chapter we hear the minister, Benson, Ruth’s patron in her distress, quoting aptly : “These are they that have come out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes”. She is at peace with God, whose reconciliation she has sought rather than any such with man.

Earlier Mrs. Gaskell has had Benson set out her didactic message that “not every woman who has fallen is depraved : ... Is it not time to change some of our ways of thinking and acting ? ... to every woman, who, like Ruth, has sinned should be given a chance of self-redemption” (c. 27), but the necessity for such a change of attitude comes not through preaching but through portrayal of experience, through the pity and terror that suffused poor Ruth’s suffering existence.

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With Margaret Hale in *North and South* Mrs. Gaskell moved in yet another dimension—an educated girl of some sophistication, called to undergo a total transformation in her way of life, to support her parents in their varying necessities and to play a part in the public affairs of a place in which she has only just arrived. It is an experience that piles trial upon trial until the suffering is cruel and prolonged. She impinges upon, or perhaps more accurately, her life is impinged upon by nearly every

character in the novel, and a list of them – her parents, her brother, the Higgins, Thornton – is sufficient to remind us of the demands made upon her, the problems she faced and the hardships she endured.

Margaret possesses a striking Junoesque physical presence : ‘queenly’ Mrs. Gaskell describes her early in the novel (c. 3) and reference is constantly made to the haughtiness of her appearance. She has come from an exalted social background. Even though she has not found it satisfying, her London experience is sufficient for her to look down on wealthy people who have made their money from trade, “shoppy” people as she calls them ; and at this time labourers’ cottages were a subject for her sketching rather than a matter for beneficent concern. Margaret has to learn a lot. And it all happens suddenly and shockingly.

With her father’s resignation of his living and removal to the manufacturing town of Milton Northern Margaret finds herself having to comfort her disconsolate and querulous mother, to help nurse her through her terminal illness, to help shelter her fugitive brother on his short visit home and to support her father in his distress. As Mrs. Gaskell remarks, “Poor Margaret ! ... She had to act the part of a Roman daughter.” (c. 30) To her home troubles were added those of Bessy, the invalid daughter of the worker Nicholas Higgins, whose combined tribulations and those of their neighbours Margaret did all she could to alleviate. Here is a ready and abundant sympathy.

Most of all, there is her relationship with the manufacturer John Thornton, Mr. Hale’s new pupil. Margaret’s Southern reserve becomes for him standoffish haughtiness and from one meeting he departs convinced : – “A more proud, disagreeable girl I never saw. Even her great beauty is blotted out of one’s memory by her scornful ways.” (c. 10) When, after coming to recognise her qualities and prompted by her spontaneous shielding of him during the attack on his mill, he not only thanks her but declares his love, she condemns his views about his workmen and spurns his offer with confident dismissal : – “No one yet has ever dared to be impertinent to me, and no one ever shall.” (c. 24) Then, to shield her brother Frederick, she has to tell what Thornton

knows to be a lie and to leave him suspecting that she loves another. She is plunged into the depths of misery and, out of character with her usual resilience, she considers herself "very miserable. Oh, how unhappy this year has been ! I have passed out of childhood into old age. I have had no youth—no womanhood ; the hopes of womanhood have closed for me—for I shall never marry ; and I anticipate cares and sorrows just as if I were an old woman, and with the same fearful spirit. I am weary of this continued call upon me for strength." (c. 39)

There are, of course, many other things in *North and South* than Margaret's personal history, and that works out well in any case, but Wendy Craik is right to stress the "long succession of deadly and enervating distresses" with the emphasis upon "the anxious and distressing, ... arising more from states of helplessness and suspense than from opportunities for action" (op. cit., P. 98). The world of *North and South* is altogether more complicated than anything that had preceded it, and the situations that confront Margaret are frustrating because she is often helpless, a condition all the more restricting when one considers her strengths and positive qualities. The world was too much with her until the final stages when matters were satisfactorily resolved.

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As they would not be in *Sylvia's Lovers*. Here is a novel with characters passionately committed and inevitably driven to disaster. With characters in the grip of irresistible destiny the novel possesses the stark outlines of Greek tragedy. Finding the right husband, Mrs. Gaskell said, is "*the subject in a woman's life*". Of her heroines only one makes the wrong choice. That is Sylvia, and she does it in tragic circumstances and with tragic results. Only *Wuthering Heights* of the novels I know provides any valid comparison. To quote Wendy Craik again, "She is a girl who grows from childishness to tragic maturity" (op. cit., p.183)—and in the speed and completeness of that transformation lies the power of the novel.

When we first meet Sylvia, she is a spirited girl, "a wilful wench" as her father calls her, altogether too lively for the "steady young fellow",

her cousin and suitor Philip Hepburn, and resentful of his attempts to teach her to read and write, an inability that is significant later in her history. Far more attractive is the dashing sailor, Charlie Kinraid. Philip pursues a careful campaign, learning from the mistakes of rejected advances. Kinraid needs no campaign at all. When he returns months after his first visit, Sylvia shudders at the excitement of his presence—“dizzy with happiness” is Mrs. Gaskell’s phrase (c. 16)—and consents to an engagement immediately. It is all a variation on the triangle in *Mary Barton*. After Kinraid’s disappearance, captured by the press-gang, and Philip’s assistance during the time of her father’s trial and execution for attacking the gang, Sylvia has to consider the decision whether to marry Philip or not. Kester, the farm labourer, with homely wisdom warns her against marriage with “a man as thou’s noan taken wi’”, especially as Kinraid may still be alive (c. 28), but Sylvia marries out of a sense of duty. At this point also she refuses to forgive the dying Simpson, whose evidence had convicted her father. It is an ominous incident, for Philip has lied to Sylvia in telling her that Kinraid was dead. It is a dismal marriage, Sylvia still attached to and mourning Kinraid, dreaming about him and calling on his name. When Philip comforts her, she declares that she has seen him in her dream and “I’m sure he’s alive somewhere ; he was so clear and life-like”—and Philip repeats the lie (c. 31). Kinraid returns, the truth is out, Sylvia will not forgive, Philip leaves home, enlists as a soldier, very coincidentally indeed saves Kinraid’s life, comes back and saves his and Sylvia’s child from drowning at the cost of his own life and is reconciled to Sylvia. In the meantime Kinraid has married. Sylvia recognises at last the respective worth of her two suitors—too late, one of the titles Mrs. Gaskell suggested for the book.

During their engagement Philip remembered Sylvia as she once had been, the girl who was “captious, capricious, wilful, haughty, merry, charming” (c. 29). But she was also uneducated and instinctual, all of which increased the chances of her being seized by passion, as she was in her attraction to Kinraid. Like Ruth, she was spiritually and emotionally undeveloped when she encountered him with his superficial but powerful charm. Passion is not moderated by prudence, and she has

no principles to guide her. Thereafter she is swept along in the maelstrom of events and in marrying Philip she is governed only by considerations of expediency, slightly modified by a sense of gratitude. The sadness of losing Kinraid subdues her ; the discovery of Philip's lie inflames her wrath : and only, as events work themselves ruthlessly out, does she discover deeper truth and learn both suddenly and yet too late the maturity of wisdom. Too late she knew how wrong she was when in an unforgiving moment she told Philip that "Thee and me was never meant to go together". Destiny did mean that, but it took them to another end. In this novel Mrs. Gaskell shows that a young girl, humble and obscure, may by the passion of her being and the perversity of her circumstances rise to tragic stature. Dealing in elemental emotions—love and jealousy, hatred, revenge and ultimate forgiveness, she gives us a tale terrifying in its dimensions and terrible in its denouement.

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After *Sylvia's Lovers* the novella *Cousin Phyllis* may look like a miniature alongside a canvas. After tragedy comes a pastoral idyll, but it is also a story full of pathos. Sylvia is passionate ; Phyllis is quiet, reserved, withdrawn. She has fallen quietly in love with the railway engineer, Holdsworth, whose regard for her she knows only by report of her cousin, Paul Manning. When Holdsworth goes off to Canada and subsequently marries, Phyllis suffers a nervous collapse and has to be nursed back to health. This is the one work of Mrs. Gaskell's where I often feel that she may have had one or more of her own daughters in mind—Florence in her delicacy and withdrawn nature and/or Meta with her own broken engagement. And did such exchanges as the following owe anything to father-mother-daughter relationships in the Gaskell household : —

"I often wish I could wear pretty-coloured ribbons round my throat like the squire's daughters."

"It's but natural, minister ! " said his wife

"The love of dress is a temptation and a snare," said he, gravely.

"The true adornment is a meek and quiet spirit."

I have the impression that the voice of William Gaskell was sometimes

stern and patriarchal in his own household.

I have remarked on the way in which so many of Mrs. Gaskell's heroines tread the path from girlhood to womanhood. Phyllis does as well, but her own temperament is so retiring that this path is not so clear as elsewhere. Indeed, the delicacy of her delineation is almost Jamesian before James. Nothing much happens, but the little things that do, though seeming insignificant, are not so. But what is also important in this slice of a quiet life is that, instead of tracing this transition in a girl's life only from the girl's angle, Mrs. Gaskell takes the opportunity of noting the parents' reaction, or rather lack of it. They have not noticed – "They've called her 'the child' so long – 'the child' is always their name for her when they talk on her between themselves, as if never anybody else had a ewe-lamb before them – that she's grown up to be a woman under their very eyes". I mentioned earlier how many of these central young-women characters are deprived of mature adult advice by being either motherless or having inadequate mothers. Here Mrs. Gaskell reminds us that parental love can itself be blind. Phyllis did not lack affection ; she did not have the needful advice that a mature perspective might have supplied.

Indeed, the failure to treat her as an adult precipitates the crisis, for, when she confesses her love for Holdsworth to her father, he upbraids her with her willingness to leave her parents and to go away with "this stranger". His questions are : – "Phyllis, did we not make you happy here ? Have we not loved you enough ? " At this chiding Phyllis collapses with the onset of the brain fever that has been developing ever since she heard of Holdsworth's marriage. She recovers, but she is never the same. Her father acknowledges his error by bringing her some blue ribbons and reminding her of the conversation I quoted : her mother encourages her to go back to her Latin and Italian books – but in vain. "She seemed always the same, gentle, quiet, and sad". The last words of the story tell of her resolution to "go back to the peace of the old days", but that is beyond the tale and we shall never know.

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In *Cousin Phyllis* the central character is a young woman alone without

contemporaries of her own age and sex. That is unusual in Mrs. Gaskell. There are nearly always minor characters to put alongside the heroine. Mary Barton has the vulgar workmate and errand-girl for Henry Carson, Sally Leadbitter, on the one hand, and the blind singer Margaret Jennings, on the other. Ruth has, for contrast, the spirited Jemima Bradshaw ; Margaret Hale has, for different contrasts, the weak and spineless Fanny Thornton and the brave, pious, dying Bessy Higgins ; and Sylvia has the quiet, sober, elder Hester Rose and the common, money-seeking Molly Corner. In none of the novels I refer to, however, is there a balanced and equally developed juxtaposition of two young women. That had to wait for the final novel. *Wives and Daughters* with Molly Gibson and Cynthia Kirkpatrick, balanced off against each other – and that dreadful woman, Cynthia’s mother, Mrs. Gibson, Molly’s stepmother superficial, artificial, hypocritical and snobbish. These are characters of whom Jane Austen would have been proud.

The novel is indeed about a central theme of Jane Austen’s – integrity. In a crucial passage Cynthia says to Molly : – “I’ve never lived with people with such a high standard of conduct before : and I don’t quite know how to behave”. (c. 37) Molly reminds Cynthia that her fiancé, Roger Hamley, is “quite as strict in his notions of right and wrong”, and Cynthia replies : – “Ah ! but he’s in love with me” – Mrs. Gaskell adding : – “with a pretty consciousness of her power”. On the one hand, there are Molly and her father with other established local families, especially the Hamleys, subscribers to, and guardians of, settled values. On the other, and into their midst comes Cynthia and her mother and alongside them the estate-agent Preston, to whom under financial obligation Cynthia had engaged herself as a girl of sixteen.

Mrs. Gaskell puts Molly and Cynthia over against each other. Molly is cultured, intelligent, interested in things around her and, as her part in the brief conversation I have quoted shows, utterly scrupulous. Cynthia is “very beautiful” (Mrs. Gaskell’s phrase) (c. 19). but, she adds, “no one with such loveliness ever appeared so little conscious of it”. She is conscious, however, of not being able to live by the highest standards and of not being able to love unreservedly. She knew too that she was

not always truthful, but, Mrs. Gaskell adds, there was no calculation or self-seeking in her deviations. The reader does not condemn her, because the author all the time suggests that there is some mystery in her life, a mystery that ultimately reveals itself in her unwilling obligation to Preston. In addition (and, given what we see of her mother, the more we can believe it), she complains of the lack of love in her growing-up and at one point she tells Molly about how neglected she had been “at a time when I wanted friends most”, adding significantly : – “Mamma does not know it ; it is not in her to know what I might have been if I had only fallen into wise, good hands” (c. 40). Here is another girl who failed for lack of maternal advice. As a result of not being loved she recognises her own inability to love properly, and thus prepares us for the central episode of the novel—her engagement to Roger Hamley.

Cynthia has an unflinching capacity to attract men, as later episodes with Coxe, the silly young doctor who had first been interested in Molly, had the barrister Henderson whom she first rejects but who quickly returns at her call, abundantly demonstrate. Not surprisingly therefore, when initially there has been quite a close acquaintance between Molly and Roger Hamley (and certainly she has been led to declare : – “I like him He has been very kind to me” (c. 21), he falls in love with Cynthia. Mrs. Gaskell handles the responses of Molly and Cynthia to this central episode with superb insight. In particular, she neatly intermingles the mystery in Cynthia’s past experience, which appears to have some connection with Preston but we do not know what, with some shortcoming in Cynthia’s nature. The reader is constantly confronted with various questions. Is there some event in the past which has created Cynthia’s reservations ? Or do these reservations derive from something in her own nature ? Cynthia accepts Roger, but unenthusiastically, and on subsequent occasions expresses both her insistence that the engagement be kept secret and to Molly that she thinks it unlikely that she will marry Roger.

Cynthia has two qualities. She is a realist and she is possessed of unflinching self-knowledge. Thus with Roger’s brother where the relationship was purely social she was “gay and sparkling” ; with Poger

she was “soft and grave”. And she knows how differently she and he feel about each other : –

To him she was *the* one, alone, peerless Cynthia was not capable of returning such feelings ; she had had too little true love in her life, and perhaps too much admiration to do so ; but she appreciated this honest ardour, this loyal worship that was new to her experience.(c. 29)

Molly looks on, all anxiety and concern : –

“Cynthia ! you do love him dearly, don’t you ? ”

to which Cynthia replies : –

“I’ve often told you I’ve not the gift of loving I can respect, and I fancy I can admire, and I can like, but I never feel carried off my feet by love for any one”. (c.34)

Molly’s concern is another mark of her generosity of spirit. She has seen and understood Roger’s attraction to Cynthia, but when the news of the engagement is broken, she is stunned, so much so that Mrs. Gaskell uses the very language of Wordsworth’s Lucy poem : – “What could she understand ? Nothing. For a few moments her brain seemed in too great a whirl to comprehend anything but that she was being carried on in earth’s diurnal course, with rocks, and stones, and trees, with as little volition on her part as if she were dead”. (ibid.) Nevertheless, she remains loyal to Cynthia, and even helps her at cost to her own reputation in repelling Preston. Molly, however, knows Cynthia’s limits as well as she does herself. “Cynthia was ... kind, sweet-tempered, and ready to help, professing a great deal of love for[Molly]”, but there was no more than this “superficial depth of affection”, beyond which Cynthia’s “reserve began, and her real self was shrouded in mystery”. (c. 38)

Whatever be her limitations, Cynthia is clear-sighted enough to know that she is not good enough for Roger and that he will find that out for himself. He will forgive, and that is something she does not want. She breaks the engagement, to Roger’s deep hurt. “It was such pain to see him, he suffered so ”, says Molly ; to which Cynthia replies : – “I don’t like people of deep feelings. They don’t suit me ... I’m not worth his caring”. (c. 56) She is accepting Henderson at that very moment, telling

Molly that she has been perfectly frank about her feelings with him. There *is* something crude about so sudden a switch. She can envisage the same about Roger, for, as she tells Molly of the end of her engagement, she predicts that he will marry Molly. Molly is outraged, is crimson with shame and indignation. "Your husband this morning ! Mine to-night ! What do you take him for ? " Molly may have been outraged and, because the book was unfinished when Mrs. Gaskell died, we do not know whether that was to happen, but we shrewdly suspect with Frederick Greenwood, the editor of *The Cornhill* in which *Wives and Daughters* was being serialised, that it would indeed come to pass. Cynthia is a realist and to Molly's question "What do you take him for ? ", she bluntly answers : - "A man ! And therefore if you won't let me call him changeable, I'll coin a word and call him consolable". (c. 51)

Wives and Daughters the book may be called and Mrs. Gibson is an impressively unpleasant person and Molly an admirably dutiful daughter, but the central and most interesting character is undoubtedly Cynthia Kirkpatrick, a young woman with an incident in her past, an unguided and unguarded upbringing and for these reasons a scarred personality. There is much in her that is unsympathetic, and yet Mrs. Gaskell compels us to show sympathy for her. That sympathy is reinforced by the sisterly feelings of Molly, who in so behaving rises still higher in our estimation. In Molly Gibson Mrs. Gaskell has pulled off an unusual success in making a wholly virtuous character interesting. In this last novel, extending her range to take in subtleties of psychological exploration hitherto unattempted on her part, Mrs. Gaskell showed new possibilities in her art and invention of a kind that we can only regret that life did not spare her to develop further.

For the most part, Mrs. Gaskell's young women are, to borrow from Wendy Craik again, creatures of "good impulses and fervent passions" (op. cit., p. 31) Such are Mary Barton, Ruth, Margaret Hale, Sylvia Robson and Molly Gibson. Cynthia, as I have tried to illustrate, is an exception. All, however, are embroiled by circumstances in greater or lesser degree. To all of them Mrs. Gaskell extends her extraordinary gifts of sympathy ; she delineates their different characters and temperaments ;

she understands the manifold nuances of female nature, not least in loyalty and obligation, in commitment and love. She does all this as only a woman could. Four daughters she had in the flesh. She gave us several others, daughters of her imaginative creation, Mrs. Gaskell's young women.