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“THE SORT . . . OF PEOPLE TO WHICH I BELONG”:

ELIZABETH GASKELL AND THE MIDDLE CLASS

By

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“The Sort . . . of People to Which I Belong”: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Middle Class

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In this thesis, I examine Elizabeth Gaskell’s development as a middle-class author, which is a position that most scholars take for granted. Moving away from traditional Marxist readings and drawing on revisionist class studies, I reconsider Gaskell as the typical bourgeois woman of her era by looking at her relationship with the middle class and its ideals over the course of her career. Overall, her large body of work reveals an increasing awareness of, and willingness to engage with the divisions within the middle class. In turn, as Gaskell explores such tensions and negotiates middle-class boundaries and values in her writing, she becomes more confident as a class spokeswoman. To illustrate this progression, in this study I focus primarily on three of Gaskell’s works: the social-problem novel *Mary Barton* (1848), the short Christmas book *The Moorland Cottage* (1850), and the biography of her fellow novelist *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857).

In the introduction, I contextualize Gaskell as what modern critics deem “middle class” and provide a brief overview of the class issues that arise in Gaskell studies. In chapter one, I consider the notable absence of the middle class in the author’s first novel, *Mary Barton*, which separates society into the rich and the poor and thereby ignores the complex range of incomes and social positions in Victorian England. Within a few years however, Gaskell begins exploring the diverse population between rich and poor, and my reading of *The Moorland Cottage* in chapter two evaluates this Christmas novel in light of its middle-class characters, concerns, and genre. I then skip over several years in Gaskell’s career to address in the final chapter the author’s most famous piece of non-fiction, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. In this biography, Gaskell names the middle class outright and presents herself as an authority on its shared values in her effort to save the reputation of Brontë in both gender and class terms. Together, these three works represent a general trend in Gaskell’s writing towards increasing confidence, and they serve to remind how writers contribute to the making of class identity.

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INTRODUCTION

The present splendid brotherhood of fiction-writers in England . . . have described every section of the middle class from the ‘highly genteel’ annuitant and Fundholder who looks upon all sorts of business as vulgar, to the little shopkeeper and lawyer’s clerk. And how have Dickens and Thackeray, Miss Brontë and Mrs. Gaskell painted them? As full of presumption, affectation, petty tyranny and ignorance; and the civilized world has confirmed their verdict with the damning epigram that it has fixed to this class that ‘they are servile to those above, and tyrannical to those beneath them.’

—Karl Marx¹

I

Nineteenth-century novelist Elizabeth Gaskell is typically understood as a middle-class author, a quintessential Victorian, with a talent for acute social observation. In her 1866 novel *Wives and Daughters*, for example, Molly Gibson, the daughter of a doctor, protests the “impertinent” attitude that aristocrat Lady Harriet displays toward the local townspeople: “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” (161). Lady Harriet meets this unexpected rebuke from her young friend by explaining, “I talked after my kind, just as you talk after your kind. It’s only on the surface with both of us. Why, I daresay some of your good Hollingford ladies talk of the poor people in a manner which they would consider as impertinent in their turn, if they could hear it” (161-62). In this scene, Gaskell writes with confidence and reflective insight about the Victorian social spectrum; she defends the middle class along with Molly and offers a caveat through Lady Harriet that while the growing middle classes expect and deserve respect from the traditional aristocracy, they do not necessarily extend this respect further down the social scale. Throughout *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell displays this nuanced understanding of class that acknowledges its relativism and external, “surface” nature as Lady Harriet

terms it, yet such social observations represent the culmination of nearly two decades of writing on, and much thought and revision about, the middle classes of society.

In *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*, historians Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall contend that Victorian writers, along with other middle-class professionals, “spent their lives manipulating words, explaining the middle class to itself” (264). By looking at Elizabeth Gaskell’s work across time and genres, we see the author caught between critique and celebration as she writes about and for her social peers.² In her earliest fiction, Gaskell evades recognizing the middle class by separating society into only the rich and the poor, but as her writing progresses, she offers greater introspection about the middle section of society in which she moved. In her representations of the middle classes, Gaskell often exposes “the anxieties, envy, insecurity, snobbery, and kindred psychological malaises that stemmed from the ambiguities of rank and wealth in a time of social flux” (Altick 17), yet she also appeals to her contemporaries by offering ideal visions of the middle class and affirming its place in English society.³ In this process, the writer does more than, in the language of Davidoff and Hall, explain the middle class; rather, Gaskell participates in the making of it. As E. P. Thompson affirms in his seminal study *The Making of the English Working Class*, “class is a relationship, and not a thing,” and as such it “happens” rather than exists (11, 9). Going a step further, in *Desire and Domestic Fiction* Nancy Armstrong connects the making of the English middle class directly to literature, and as a popular writer of her era, Gaskell is certainly part of this class formation. Over the course of her literary career—traced in this project primarily through *Mary Barton*, *The Moorland Cottage*, and *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*—Gaskell moves from a position of anxiety to

one of authority in her identification with the Victorian middle class and gradually gains confidence as a class spokeswoman, constructing the boundaries of and claiming a space for that “sort . . . of people” (*Wives* 161).

II

Influenced by Marxist theory, class-based studies of Elizabeth Gaskell (and of other Victorian authors), typically focus on representations of the working classes and fictional “solutions” offered to the “Condition of England Debate”—a phrase taken from Thomas Carlyle and used by modern critics to describe the “set of controversies about English social, material, and spiritual well-being” in the wake of “expansion of industrial production in early-and mid-nineteenth century England” (Gallagher xi). Applying a Marxist theoretical perspective to Gaskell seems natural because she has earned fame as a social-problem novelist, touted on the back of the recent Norton Critical Edition of *North and South* as “the social conscience of Britain as the full effect of the Industrial Revolution took hold.” Yet as promising as such Marxist readings appear, they typically lead to a variation of Marx’s own “damning” conclusion about “fiction-writers in England” and condemn Gaskell as committed to her own class position (“English” 664), a mere voice of the bourgeois hegemony trying to prevent revolution in England. By shifting the focus away from the working classes—“the privileged subject” of scholarly analysis (Dimock and Gilmore 1)—and towards the middle classes to which the writer and most of her readers belonged, we can find new and potentially more fruitful ways to evaluate Gaskell’s understanding of social class. Such a shift, however, also requires moving beyond the Marxist view of the middle class or bourgeoisie as oppressors, and

instead embracing the instability and even relativism of revisionist class studies. If we recognize, along with scholars such as Wai Chee Dimock and Michael T. Gilmore, “that the boundaries of class are unstable” and “that the experience of it is uneven” (2), we can begin to appreciate how Victorians such as Gaskell genuinely grapple with the confusions inherent in their own social position, not merely reproduce bourgeois ideology.

Sociologist and historian Immanuel Wallerstein remarks that in academic scholarship, “it is as though the bourgeoisie were a given, and therefore acted upon others: upon the aristocracy, upon the state, upon the workers” (333). Similarly, in Gaskell studies, the social position of the author as a “typical” middle-class woman often appears as a given. Even J. A. V. Chapple, the editor of Gaskell’s letters and an expert on the full range of the author’s life and thoughts, reduces Gaskell to the typical angel in the house, asserting that “it was from her standing as wife and mother that she derived her considerable authority in matters of ordinary conduct and uncomplicated belief” (123). Thus, as a woman who chose marriage and motherhood before she began writing professionally, Gaskell has been critically neglected compared to her contemporaries the Brontë sisters or George Eliot because, as Deidre d’Albertis remarks, she “lacks the biographical prerequisites for full feminist approval” (9). While this image of the conservative and quaint “Mrs. Gaskell” is changing, it still lingers in the criticism as scholars try to defend her work and seek out its radical, subversive potentials. Consequently, critics have thoroughly analyzed and reanalyzed Gaskell’s politics in relation to the poor, as well as the feminist implications of her gender depictions. Yet only a few studies, notably Rosemarie Bodenheimer’s *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction*, Elizabeth Langland’s *Nobody’s Angels: Middle-Class Women and*

Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture, and Susan E. Colón's *The Professional Ideal in the Victorian Novel*, evaluate Gaskell's work explicitly in the context of middle-class politics and identity.

Gaskell's life as captured in her many personal letters and biographies such as Jenny Uglow's *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, certainly resounds with Victorian bourgeois respectability and activity. Gaskell was born in 1810 and by the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign in 1837, she had moved from the southern town of her childhood to the northern industrial city of Manchester where she lived with her husband, a prominent Unitarian minister, and their four daughters. Balancing the roles of wife, mother, and eventually author, Gaskell managed servants, made numerous social calls, traveled around Britain and Europe, attended lectures, participated in charity work, kept abreast of current philosophies from political economy to evolution, read canonical and popular literature, and amazingly found time to write nine novels and nearly fifty stories and essays in less than two decades.⁴ As part of a solidly middle-class family by historical definitions in terms of profession, income, and the employment of servants, Gaskell nonetheless does not always present herself as such. Rather, the novelist defines herself in multiple ways as she experiments with various fictional voices and reconciles her "great number" of selves; as she claimed in a letter to her friend Eliza Fox, "one of my mes is, I do believe, a true Christian—(only people call her socialist and communist), another of my mes is a wife and mother . . . Now that's my 'social' self I suppose. Then again I've another self with a full taste for beauty and convenience" (*Letters* 108). In a sense, this personal conflict mirrors the middle class's own crisis of identity during the nineteenth century and serves as a reminder of Gaskell's complexity as an individual and

a writer. In turn, epithets such as “the high priestess of mid-Victorian domestic fiction” (d’Albertis 10), belie Gaskell’s uneven and, at times vexed, identification as a middle-class author, which this study aims to address.

III

Although what we would today classify as the middle class constituted only a fraction of the population in nineteenth-century England, this segment of society became an enduring symbol of the Victorian era.⁵ In the words of Wallerstein, “what represents bourgeois civilization more in our collective consciousness than Victorian Britain, workshop of the world, heartland of the white man’s burden, on which the sun never set—responsible, scientific, civilized?” (326). Likewise, most of the famous literature of the era perpetuates this association, because as Richard D. Altick estimates “90 per cent of the characters in the Victorian fiction which is read today belong to the middle class and the gentry” (33). The factory owners, clergymen, doctors, engineers, scientists, wives, widows, and genteel spinsters that populate Gaskell’s fiction prove no exception. Yet as much as we would now label all of these people middle class, Gaskell rarely does so directly. In fact, in all of her writing, the terms “middle class” and “bourgeois” appear in only a few notable instances, while more often she signals the social position of characters through occupation, dress, speech, and manners.⁶ In the previously quoted conversation from *Wives and Daughters*, neither Molly Gibson nor Lady Harriet mention the middle class although they reference it obliquely as “the class of people to which” a doctor’s daughter belongs (161), somewhere between a titled aristocratic and a common wage laborer.

As Raymond Williams points out in *Keywords*, the vocabulary of class in English is riddled with confusion and controversy, although “by the 1840s . . . middle classes and working classes were common terms” even if their usage was neither standard nor fixed (55). When it comes to the middle classes specifically, historians offer various takes on the language of social position. Eric Hobsbawm suggests that “the term ‘middle class(es)’ established itself in British political and social discourse some time between 1790 and 1830, first as a synonym for ‘the middling people,’ ‘the middling sorts,’ or ‘the middling ranks of people’” (127), while in contrast, Dror Wahrman sees less significance in the “distinctions between ‘class’ or ‘rank’ or ‘order’” and instead claims that “what constituted the bone of contention was the existence, the relevance and the consequences of a social *middle*” (15). Such contention is visible in both the fiction and non-fiction of the period. For example, an anonymous 1864 article in *Cornhill Magazine*—printed adjacent to a segment of Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters*—asks readers, “what, in fact, is the middle class of which we speak so glibly? It is no wonder if there is confusion and haziness in our discussions if we are all talking of different sorts of people under the same name” (“Middle-Class Education” 411).⁷ As the first of a two-part series on education, and a follow-up of a similar piece from 1861, this article on the schooling of boys reveals both that “middle class” was a commonly used term in nineteenth century literature, and more importantly, that even at the height of the Victorian era the middle classes *felt* undefined. Tellingly, the author of the piece writes possessively of “our own middle class,” of which the boys at least “are to be the backbone of the nation” (411, 417), while at the same time, he questions the middle class as a cohesive social category.

Although Gaskell approaches the subject with greater subtlety than this *Cornhill* essayist, her writing engages the same underlying uncertainty about “what, in fact, is the middle class” (“Middle-Class Education” 411), and depending on the point in her career and the constraints of a given genre, Gaskell offers various answers to this question, gradually revising her ideas and refining her social observations over time. In Gaskell’s earliest writing, we witness a hesitancy to acknowledge the middle class, while by the end of her career Gaskell openly aligns herself with this segment of society and employs middle-class virtues as a means to tie individuals together in the face of expanding capitalism and the decline of traditional status markers. According to Davidoff and Hall, these economic and social changes associated with the middle class received a mixed welcome in the early nineteenth century, for “the growing commitment to new commercial forms among sections of the middling ranks jostled with fears and anxieties of the dangers inherent within them” (20). Consequently, sorting out the boundaries and the values of the class became a priority, and for Gaskell, even when she confirms Marx’s view of the English middle class “as full of presumption, affectation, petty tyranny and ignorance” (“English” 664), she typically does so in a conscious, critical manner, as part of this process of class-identity formation.

IV

The aim of this study is not to enter the debate between historians about the origins, boundaries, or even reality of the Victorian middle class, but rather to trace how Gaskell relates to and represents the middle classes over the course of her literary career. To accomplish this in any complete sense would require far more space than is available

here. Consequently, in an effort to do justice to her diverse body of work and resist the “urge to identify Gaskell’s writing achievement almost exclusively with a single title” (Hamilton 178), this thesis examines three of the writer’s works in different genres that represent turning points in her relationship to the middle class. The canonical social-problem novel *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (1848), the relatively forgotten Christmas book *The Moorland Cottage* (1850), and the controversial biography *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), highlight Gaskell’s increasing comfort as a class spokeswoman. In analyzing these three works, I draw on the scholarship of historians such as Davidoff and Hall and on literary critics including Bodenheimer, Colón, and Langland who have legitimized the Victorian middle class as a relevant area of inquiry. Of most importance, however, are Gaskell’s own words and the choices she makes in evading or embracing the middle class, negotiating her role as a voice in the contemporary search for class identity.

In the first chapter, I examine Gaskell’s debut novel *Mary Barton* and argue that the conspicuous lack of the middle classes in this story reflects the author’s anxiety about a middle social category. By representing English society as a dramatic divide between rich and poor, Gaskell conveniently combines the middle classes with the upper, thereby creating greater distance from the working class—the “powerful monster” that the novel purports to defend (*Mary* 170). In turn, Gaskell has little responsibility in this novel to address the confusion or instability characteristic of the middle class that the writer in *Cornhill* acknowledges, or that Gaskell herself begins to explore only a few years later. Accordingly, in the second chapter I look at Gaskell’s 1850 Christmas book, *The Moorland Cottage*, which modern critics typically dismiss for its melodrama, but which

constitutes the author's first substantial engagement with middle-class issues. In this novel, we witness Gaskell striving to deliver both the social critique and moral uplift that Christmas literature prescribed. Furthermore, its positive contemporary reception attests to the role *The Moorland Cottage* played in establishing Gaskell's popularity with middle-class readers, which would eventually give her the authority to write *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* seven years later. In the third chapter, I consider this famous two-volume biography from 1857 that celebrates the genius and rescues the reputation of Brontë, and in so doing, demonstrates a high point in Gaskell's identification with the middle class. From an unmentionable in *Mary Barton*, the middle class becomes a point of identification in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* that Gaskell seizes and uses to her own ends.

CHAPTER ONE – *MARY BARTON* AND THE MISSING MIDDLE CLASS

In the middle classes we note an almost universal unfixeness of position. Every man is rising or falling, or hoping that he shall rise, or feeling that he shall sink.

—W. J. Fox, 1835¹

I

Unlike the more famous Brontë sisters, George Eliot, or Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell began her writing career, at least ostensibly, in response to a social rather than personal impulse. In 1838, Gaskell's radical literary friend William Howitt urged her "to use her pen for the public good" (qtd. in Uglow 121), and the tone and subject matter of her early stories—published nine years later in *Howitt's Journal of Literature and Popular Progress*—certainly conform to this kind of moral objective in their romanticized depictions of the lower classes.² With her first novel, *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life*, published anonymously in 1848, Gaskell pushed her social critique further to uncover not only the virtues of the poor, but the desperation of those who live "a hopeless life, with daily cravings of the body for food" (169). With its sympathetic portrayal of the working classes, *Mary Barton* sparked controversy in industrial Manchester and established Gaskell as a voice of reform in the "condition of England" debate.³ Nevertheless, as a female offering criticism on the masculine realm of politics and industry, Gaskell felt wary of her literary endeavors. Her letters during the months after publication reflect concern about how *Mary Barton* will shape her image as a woman belonging to a particular social sphere, along with annoyance at "the impertinent and unjustifiable curiosity of people" as she lamented to her publisher Edward Chapman (*Letters* 64). Thus, while *Mary Barton* earned Gaskell praise and acceptance into literary circles (despite her initial efforts at anonymity), it also exposed her to the public, and her

anticipation of such eventual exposure helps illuminate how she tackles the issue of social class in this first novel.

As Benjamin Disraeli does in the well-known subtitle to his 1845 social-problem novel *Sybil*, in *Mary Barton* Gaskell separates English society into “the two nations” of rich and poor. This binary certainly highlights the growing disparity between the haves and the have-nots during an era of industrialization, yet as historian Norman Gash asserts of “the Two Nations concept” that Disraeli made famous: “the contrast is too stark and artificial. In fact no such absolute gap existed. An immense and complex gradation of classes and incomes stretched between the very rich and the very poor” (2). Educated and financially comfortable albeit not wealthy, Gaskell and her family certainly fit somewhere in this amorphous middle section of society, and her later writing becomes more introspective about her own position as she confronts the confusing range of social and financial realities that Gash describes. In her first novel, however, the middle class, much less classes cannot be named. Rather, *Mary Barton* betrays Gaskell’s initial anxiety about the middle class—as an unstable bridge between those above and below—in the unresolved tension between her language that polarizes society into the rich and poor, and her characters that traverse these social extremities and gesture at class instability.

II

The reformist impulse behind *Mary Barton* naturally invites critics to discuss the novel’s politics and overall effectiveness, and in turn, critical opinions, largely influenced by Marxism, range from the relatively forgiving to the brutally skeptical.⁴ Critical analyses of *Mary Barton* in terms of bourgeois or middle-class politics, however, are

essentially non-existent, probably both because the novel features few characters in these social positions (unlike *North and South*, for example), and because contemporary literary criticism derives its political and social framework from Marxism and its privileging of the working classes. While, as Jenny Uglow explains, some of Gaskell's Manchester neighbors "were outraged and mortified" by *Mary Barton* because "they felt the novel vilified the masters and glorified the workers, willfully ignoring market forces and the capitalists' share of the risks" (214), it seems improbable that any modern critic would make a similar argument, although some have praised Gaskell's second social-problem novel, *North and South*, as an instance of "the balancing of workers' and manufacturers' views" (Henry 149). Even though scholars such as Penguin editor Macdonald Daly recognize Gaskell's "bourgeois class" along with her "Unitarian faith" as "the two prime determinants of her ideological formation" (xii), these biographical elements nearly always serve to support claims of Gaskell's conservatism and commitment to "the capitalist order" (xxvii), rather than invite discussion on how the author represents the middle and upper classes, or what effect her polarized language has on the issue of class tension at the heart of the novel.

While this chapter does not aim to defend a paternalistic middle-class perspective on the condition of England question, or to second the complaints of nineteenth-century readers who found the novel overly sympathetic with workers' interests, it does seek to investigate why Gaskell, often considered a quintessential Victorian middle-class woman, avoids mentioning or exploring her own social sphere in this novel *about* class conflict. To examine the absence of the middle classes in *Mary Barton*, I will first give an overview of Gaskell's three basic character types—the virtuous poor, the monstrous poor,

and the villainous rich—that beyond the intrusive narrator leave little room for people such as herself: intellectuals and professionals of moderate means. Next, I will turn my attention to the binary language of rich and poor that Gaskell employs both to dramatize the issue of unequal fortune, but also ultimately to distance the working classes from the rich, which in this case includes everyone in the upper and middle social strata, regardless of income. Finally, in the last two sections, I will consider a lingering tension in the novel that develops between the binary language of class and the few characters that move between the two poles, and in the process, suggest the existence of a middle territory.

III

On the surface, *Mary Barton* lacks the presence of the middle classes, and certainly the few non-working class characters—the factory owner Mr. Carson, his family, and the anonymous, happy faces on the street that taunt poor men such as John Barton—do not elicit much sympathy from the reader. Instead, the novel centers around the working-class Barton family, early reduced to just father and daughter, along with their friends and neighbors. The tensions of the story derive from John Barton's radical Chartist politics that eventually lead him to murder, and from the romances of his daughter Mary, who initially enjoys the attentions of the factory owner's son, Harry Carson, but learns to value the love of Jem Wilson, a hard working man of her own status. These two plots and two protagonists, which many critics beginning with Raymond Williams see as simplistically opposed, converge when Barton murders Harry in the service of his political union, and Jem, the known romantic rival of Harry, is apprehended as the prime suspect. By this point, Mary realizes she loves Jem rather than

Harry, and she exerts all her effort, in a very public manner, to prove Jem's innocence, while also concealing the truth of her father's guilt, which she discovers through the silent aid of her Aunt Esther, a fallen woman excluded from the Barton family.

Ultimately, the jury acquits Jem, and a dying John Barton confesses to Mr. Carson, who after a religious awakening forgives his son's murderer and gradually improves "the system of employment in Manchester" (388). With the tragic hero of her novel dead, Gaskell concludes the story with the union of Mary and Jem who immigrate to Canada to start afresh and escape any stigma from involvement in the murder scandal.

With this diverse cast of lower class characters in the novel—the morose John Barton, the scientifically minded Job Legh, the blind but angelic singer Margaret, the selfless washerwoman Alice, the repentant prostitute Esther—Gaskell shows, in her famous phrase, "how deep the romance might be" in the lives of England's poor (3), but she also delineates between model and monstrous, or "Frankenstein," laborers (170). Jem Wilson falls into the first category, and as I will discuss in the final section, Gaskell rewards him accordingly. John Barton, however, the tragic hero for whom Gaskell wanted to name her novel, embodies the latter type of worker who "grew bitter and angry, and mad" (386), and as the novel argues, such men warrant kinder treatment primarily to prevent revolution. In contrast to the individuality Gaskell bestows on these poor people, the few characters who do not belong to the working class community are far less developed and serve minor or purely antagonistic roles, provoking one contemporary reviewer from the *British Quarterly Review* to lament that the novel "gives a one-sided picture" in privileging the interests of the workers over those of the manufacturers (113). Factory owner Mr. Carson and his son Harry share none of the

complexity that Gaskell later gives to the self-made industrialist John Thornton in *North and South*, which helps explain why “few readers in the 1840s or since have been convinced by Carson’s conversion or have felt that his unspecified improvements . . . will be more than a drop in the ocean” (Uglow 210).

With the wealthy Carson family capturing little interest or confidence from readers, perhaps the most “present” and influential middle-class figure in *Mary Barton* is the narrator herself, the “I” that repeatedly intrudes in the text to mediate between “this dumb people” at the heart of the narrative (3), and the “you”—at other times, “we”—that constitutes the Victorian readership. Indeed, Hilary M. Schor states, “Gaskell’s narrator is certainly present in the text” (41), and many critics comment on the tone and purpose of this intrusive narrator, such as Robyn R. Warhol, who links Gaskell with Harriet Beecher Stowe and George Eliot for their use of engaging, rather than distancing, narrators who serve “as their authors’ surrogates in earnestly trying to foster sympathy for real-world sufferers” (813). Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund offer yet another perspective, rooted in the notion of Gaskell’s trepidation as a novice writer, noting that the narration “begins in uncertainty and only gradually moves toward a more confident stance at the work’s conclusion” (35). Yet even when the narrative voice falters or seems open to skepticism, such as the rarely believed claim to “know nothing of Political Economy” (4), readers and critics still recognize the tone of the novel as sincere rather than satiric or hypocritical.⁵ Furthermore, despite differences, various opinions about the narration in *Mary Barton* all take for granted that the narrator, like Gaskell, is a voice from the Victorian middle class.

Despite her charity work in Manchester, which as Uglow explains did *not* include being “a home visitor” and concentrated instead on “the Unitarian educational programme” (90), Gaskell’s authority to speak for the poor is rather suspect. Nonetheless, some scholars see the narrator of *Mary Barton* acting as more of a translator than a usurper of voice. Jill L. Matus for example suggests that by calling the poor, “this dumb people,” Gaskell “addresses not so much the opposition of speech and silence but that of orality and textuality” (“*Mary*” 33). Working-class culture, while rich and complex as painted by Gaskell, remains oral, and thus Matus argues that “the articulation of [workers’] distress in literary form is the task of the middle-class novelist addressing her largely middle-class reader” (“*Mary*” 34). If Matus is correct, then *Mary Barton* invites a reading that considers this middle-class perspective, especially considering that for all the assumptions that this narrator represents the middle class and writes for them, throughout the novel she works to deny the existence of a social middle. Instead, the narrator’s language of class binaries, of inclusion and exclusion, encourages readers to identify with an unnamed collective “us” and “we” that is not a broad middle category but that stands securely in opposition to, in the words of one contemporary reviewer, “our ‘dangerous classes’” (Forster 68).

For example, in one of her characteristic intrusions into the text, the narrator rationalizes the welcome “oblivion” some members of the poor find in opium, asking readers “can *you* expect the uneducated to count the cost of their whistle? . . . But have *you* taught them the science of consequences?” (169; my emphasis). Here, as in similar narrative interventions, the “you” that Gaskell’s narrator invokes does not “signify any actual reader,” as Warhol suggests of the addresses “Reader” and “you” (813), but more

specifically readers who are *not* members of the working class, not poor and uneducated, and not opium users. The “you,” as with the narrator, clearly means middle and maybe upper-class readers, which is certainly a broad, diverse group, but one that presupposes difference from the characters at the heart of the novel. Likewise, after the famous passage in which Gaskell links the uneducated working classes with “Frankenstein, that monster of many human qualities,” the narrator aligns herself with readers and separates herself from the poor in asking, “why have *we* made them what they are; a powerful monster, yet without the inner means for peace and happiness?” (170; my emphasis). In a later section, the narrator similarly reflects on the “less innocent and less praiseworthy” members of the poor and assumes “*you* and *I*, and almost *every one*, I think, may send up our individual cry of self-reproach that *we* have not done all that *we* could for the stray and wandering ones of our brethren” (269; my emphasis). Throughout the novel, these references to a collective “we”—and the conceit implied in Gaskell’s “almost every one” that is of course *not* everyone in the nation—are coupled with the “them” of the working class to reinforce the social divide between “rich” and “poor” and ensure that narrator and readers belong to the first category.

IV

When, as Matus and other scholars suggest, Gaskell writes explicitly for the middle classes, we might ask why the novelist uses this binary language to create an exaggerated view of society that blatantly ignores the middle classes? As I noted in the introduction to this thesis, Gaskell did not lack the vocabulary to describe a middle stratum of society, as terms including “middle class” and “middling ranks” were in

common use. Yet as historian Dror Wahrman finds in his examination of middle-class political rhetoric, the use of “middle class” as a term ebbed and flowed with changing political conditions, and in the 1840s after the repeal of the corn laws, “rather suddenly, the language of ‘middle class’ appears to have receded far into the background of British politics,” not to resurface again until the second Reform Bill in the 1860s (410).

Consequently, Gaskell’s linguistic division of class into only two categories in *Mary Barton* may reflect the political climate in 1848. At this time, the people that historians now deem middle class may have felt more secure after successes such as the 1832 Reform Bill and the 1846 Manchester based Anti-Corn Law League, and in turn, they may have felt less need to define themselves as a rising and politically deserving social stratum.⁶ Accordingly, if “the language of ‘middle class’ lost perhaps some of its appeal and political potential” in the late 1840s and 1850s as Wahrman suggests (410), then it follows that Gaskell had little to gain by drawing attention to or naming the middle class in *Mary Barton*. Indeed, to stay silent on the subject allows Gaskell to place herself, along with readers, into the seemingly untroubled “rich” side of the two nations, away from any messiness, such as insecurity and problematic definition, associated with the middle classes.

In the words of Unitarian minister W. J. Fox, the father of Gaskell’s close friend Eliza Fox, “in the middle classes we note an almost universal unfixeness of position. Every man is rising or falling, or hoping that he shall rise, or feeling that he shall sink” (qtd. in Gash 24), and this sense of instability explicitly linked with the middle classes could hardly have been appealing. In quoting this passage from Fox, Gash points out that the minister “was expressly excluding the professions and the farming community” in his

categorization of the middle classes (24), or in other words, excluding himself by virtue of his profession as a minister. In turn, this suggests that William and Elizabeth Gaskell, fellow Unitarian professionals who moved in the same general social circle as Fox, would implicitly have excluded themselves from this middle-class category as well. We might wonder, then, how Gaskell saw herself in terms of social and economic position.

Certainly, she did not consider herself aristocratic or particularly rich, and in one letter from 1862, she sympathized with an aspiring female writer, confessing, “I have known well what it is to be . . . wanting money” (*Letters* 694). Rather, in the spirit of “elegant economy” practiced by the ladies in her 1853 novel *Cranford*, the well-educated and socially connected Gaskell might have presented herself as genteel despite her limited means. Interestingly, the narrator of that novel, Mary Smith, explains in Cranford society, “though some might be poor, we were all aristocratic” (7), which defines the concept of poverty quite differently than how Gaskell employs the term in *Mary Barton*. In the earlier novel, however, Gaskell glosses over such social nuances and financial realities, giving “the lottery-like nature” of life only to the poor (3), by whom she means the working, ungentleel, and typically uneducated members of society rather than the Cranfordian Miss Smiths or Miss Jenkynses of the world. In turn, the text seems to ask why, unless it is politically useful, one should reveal oneself as middle class and susceptible to the kind of instability associated with that label, especially when readily available binaries such as rich and poor allow one to be far more securely classed.

In *Mary Barton*, this implicit conflation of the middle and upper classes into the single category “rich” suggests that Gaskell, like her peers, did not want to think of herself as “middling” and liable to fall, and in turn, she creates greater distance from the

poor by taking away that symbolic bridge of an intermediary class. Rather ironically, this rich-poor divide becomes both the underlying problem and the final solution in the novel. As she writes of her hero: “John Barton’s overpowering thought . . . was rich and poor; why are they so separate, so distinct, when God has made them all? Is it not His will that their interests are so far apart. Whose doing is it?” (169-70). Similarly, in an earlier conversation with his friend George Wilson, Barton asks of the employers such as Mr. Carson: “how comes it they’re rich, and we’re poor? I’d like to know that. Han they done as they’d be done by for us?” (65). Yet these fundamental questions about the source of inequality remain unresolved and unanswered in *Mary Barton*. Instead, Gaskell’s narrator absolves herself from grappling with such a philosophical issue by presenting herself as an objective reporter who records the feelings of the poor, “however insane, and without ground of reason” (181). The narrator realigns herself with the rich half of society and assures readers that she does not endorse laborers’ claims of injustice, but rather “what I wish to impress is what the workman feels and thinks” (24).⁷ Consequently, when it comes to the resolution of the novel, Gaskell has no responsibility to solve the mystery of social inequity or address its consequences—namely, abject poverty alongside immense wealth. Instead, she uses the scene of forgiveness between Mr. Carson and John Barton to fantasize about a mutual acceptance of class division in which “rich and poor, masters and men, were then brothers in the deep suffering of the heart” (366).

Significantly, in this scene of reconciliation, Gaskell’s language, by repeating those binaries, maintains the problematic social division that triggers class strife and violence to begin with. As Daly rightly contends, for Gaskell “no dissolution of the class structure is imaginable, no abolition of the bourgeoisie, as prophesied by *The Communist*

Manifesto: she does not envisage a society without ‘masters and men’” (xii), and this relative conservatism fuels much of the scholarly disappointment in the novel. Thus *Mary Barton* shows Gaskell caught between her professed desire to ease social tensions, for she recognized it as “wicked . . . to do anything to excite class against class” (*Letters* 67), and her commitment to a binary class system that collapses the middle and upper ranks, creating greater distance from the working poor.

V

Although Gaskell utilizes a binary social structure in *Mary Barton* and obscures the middle classes that readers so associate with Victorian England and with Gaskell herself, the novelist also ruptures any notion of complete fixedness in this system by alluding to social mobility. With her three basic character types, Gaskell grapples with movement across the rich-poor divide in both the nouveau riche industrialist and the virtuous laborer. For Gaskell, the first exemplifies the dangers of social ascent and an open society, while the latter allows for a romanticized image of the poor as essentially middle-class in ideology but working-class in economic and political opportunity. Thus, despite what appears an impassable gulf between rich and poor in the language of the novel and during the final scene of reconciliation, this theme of social mobility surfaces throughout the story to destabilize the either-or social class system the narrator constructs. By first discussing how the Carsons serve as Gaskell’s warning against social mobility, and then secondly considering how Jem Wilson holds the promise of gradual improvement that does not upset class distinctions, I will suggest that despite her efforts to polarize and fix social categories, Gaskell alludes to and betrays an interest in the

middle class by sentimentalizing its ideology of self-help, summarized by a character in George Eliot's 1874 novel *Middlemarch*: "it's a good British feeling to try and raise your family a little" (82).

Without ever naming a third or middle social category, Gaskell acknowledges its presence in the Carsons' narrative of social mobility—a rags to riches story that in the cultural imagination was clearly not uncommon. After lamenting the divide between rich and poor, John Barton tells George Wilson that "there's many on 'em has had nought to begin wi'; there's Carsons, and Duncombes, and Mengies, and many another, as comed into Manchester with clothes to their back, and that were all, and now they're worth their tens of thousands" (66). In the story of the Carsons, the only industrialist family readers meet in the novel, working class people moved from one side of the binary, poor and employed, to the other side, rich and able to employ others. In the eyes of a factory worker like Barton, this transformation places Mr. Carson solidly on the "rich" and powerful side of the social divide, just as Mary considers his son Harry "a gentleman" (81). In reality however, such self-made Victorian "captains of industry" occupied a tenuous social position, notwithstanding their riches—a theme Gaskell later explores in *North and South*—which invites us to ask, are the Carsons, once workers but now possessors of "tens of thousands" as Barton imagines, upper or middle class, and do they merit the name of gentility that Mary bestows?⁸

Ultimately, Gaskell evades addressing, let alone answering these questions in *Mary Barton*, yet they haunt the text nonetheless. As Rosemarie Bodenheimer explains of Victorian industrialists, they constituted a new "source of wealth and authority which had nothing to do with the order of inherited rank or station, which posed the possibility that

real social power might be separated from the codes of upper-class behavior” (108). In particular, those industrialists such as Carson who rose from a low position, called into question traditional English social hierarchies as well as any sort of natural division between rich and poor that Gaskell’s novel endorses along with its call for greater sympathy and even “love . . . between masters and men” (388). The lingering question then, is why Gaskell provides this background for the Carsons, drawing attention to them as social risers and destabilizers of the system, while she also espouses the “two nations” metaphor of English society? One answer, of course, is that Gaskell wishes to represent the reality of self-made industrialists—the very kind of men who attended her husband’s congregation in Manchester. According to historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, “by ‘moralizing’ the idea of the gentleman, the Victorians democratized it as well, extending it to the middle classes and even, on occasion, to the working classes” (46). This liberal understanding of status certainly prompts Gaskell’s character Jem to acknowledge of Harry Carson: “what was birth to a Manchester manufacturer, many of whom glory, and justly too, in being the architects of their own fortunes?” (167). Jem’s democratic sentiment fits perfectly with the Victorian notion of self-help, famously described by Samuel Smiles’ 1859 book of that title, as well as with some of Gaskell’s later fiction including the 1858 novel *My Lady Ludlow*, in which, as Susan E. Colón shows, Gaskell advances a meritocratic ideal of professionalism that supersedes one’s hereditary class status. Yet this appealing explanation hardly satisfies when held up to the rest of *Mary Barton*; instead of openly celebrating social mobility in this first novel, Gaskell questions, if not outright condemns it through her vilification of both Carson men.

Although the Carsons consider themselves genteel, Gaskell certainly suggests otherwise in depriving them of the common Victorian “moral virtues” that Himmelfarb identifies as “integrity, honesty, generosity, courage, graciousness, politeness, [and] consideration for others” (46). Significantly, it does not appear that such virtues, theoretically available to laborers as well as titled nobles, led to the Carsons’ financial and social success. In fact, as Smiles insists a decade after *Mary Barton*, “the making of a fortune may no doubt enable some people to ‘enter society’, as it is called; but to be esteemed there, they must possess qualities of mind, manner, or heart, else they are merely rich people, nothing more” (192). Gaskell’s narrator never mentions *how* the Carsons rose and attained wealth but instead provides a puzzling insight into the way their social ascent affects their behavior: “it is well known, that there [are] . . . no masters so stern, and regardless of the interests of their work-people, as those who have risen from such a station themselves” (172). While the narrative strains to mitigate his harshness and teach Mr. Carson that “the interests of one were the interests of all” and that “it was most desirable to have educated workers, capable of judging, not mere machines of ignorant men” (388), the narrator’s blatant stereotyping of self-made industrialists serves to caution against dramatic social rising. In the position of “masters,” Gaskell reasons, former workers lack the knowledge or skill for effective and humane management, presumably because they are blinded by their newly found power. Furthermore, it appears that cultural virtues may have little relation to material success, if a stern and harsh man can “help” himself and rise from the lower to upper ranks as Carson does, becoming what Smiles terms “merely rich, nothing more” (192). This potential for material wealth without the accompanying “qualities of mind, manner, or

heart” that Smiles encourages (192), provides Gaskell with an argument that flexibility in the class system, which enables a worker to become a master in a single generation, hardly benefits industrialism or the condition of England.

Along with this argument that a laborer inherently makes for a bad employer, Gaskell underscores the undesirability of social ascent by exposing the hypocritical snobbery of the Carsons, particularly as it manifests in Harry’s relationship with Mary. Harry’s attempts to identify himself as rich and of high (though unspecified) “rank,” along with his desperate “sacrifice of prejudice” marriage proposal to Mary (138), confirm his detestability. Like his father, Harry has taken all the benefits from status but accepted few of the responsibilities, practical or moral, and like his mother he appears “without education enough to value the resources of wealth and leisure” (202). While Mary learns from Mrs. Wilson that when Mr. and Mrs. Carson married, the now wealthy factory owner “warn’t so much above her, as they’re both above us all now” (120), this truth about the humble origin of Harry’s parents does not facilitate his romance with Mary or convince him of the impermanency or flexibility of social status. Rather, young Carson considers himself unimpeachably elite, asserting that his “father would have forgiven any temporary connection, far sooner than my marrying one so far beneath me in rank,” and when Sally, the lovers’ intermediary, notes “sir, your mother was a factory girl” (138), Harry provides a vague excuse in answering, “yes, yes!—but then my father was in much such a station; at any rate, there was not the disparity there is between Mary and me” (139). In a pragmatic sense, Harry recognizes what scholar Elizabeth Langland sees as the vital role of the Victorian angel in the house: “the bourgeois wife must fulfill a range of representational functions. A lower-class wife, a working girl, would not be

sufficiently conversant with the semiotics of middle-class life and could not, therefore, guarantee her husband's place in society" (9). In other words, a marriage with Mary could jeopardize Harry's own class status, although he presents it as solid, and in this, he betrays the anxiety about social falling that Fox considers inherent in the middle class.

Gaskell presents Mary's possible marriage to Harry as problematic not only because his intentions lack the honor expected in a man of high status, but also because this possible union threatens to perpetuate such social-rising that led to the Carsons in the first place by elevating another working-girl into the ranks of the wealthy. After Mary's flirtations with Harry lead indirectly to Jem's arrest, the narrator, in an echo of the heroine's internal dialogue, chastises her feelings of social ambition: "why did she ever give her ear to her own suggestions, and cravings after wealth and grandeur? Why had she thought it a fine thing to have a rich lover?" (230). Readers may like Mary—although according to scholars, many do not—but they do not expect a Cinderella story for her. Both Langland and Nancy Armstrong note that the marriage plot "between a working-class woman and a higher-class man" becomes, in Langland's words, "non-narratable" in nineteenth-century English fiction (1). Arguing for the disciplining function of Victorian domestic novels, Armstrong classes Mary with the many Victorian heroines who are tamed or rehabilitated over the course of a narrative, such that after the murder trial and her illness, she "recovers her health but not her sensuality as she looks forward to marriage" with Jem (201). Similarly, as Langland maintains about *Mary Barton*: "the romance plot is revealed to be less about boy meets girl than it is about the right boy meeting the right girl" (147).

Just as Mary is saved from “the great error of loving one above her station” (164), thereby curtailing further social ascent, Gaskell notably punishes Mr. Carson with the loss of his son rather than economic ruin and social decline, which might further perpetuate ideas about the fluidity and instability of social class. As Langland argues of the limited class mobility that Gaskell depicts in *Cranford*, “those who can become disciplined to the routines, rhythms, and refinements of middle-class life may find the path to gentility open before them, especially if they help to bar the gates behind” (131). The Carsons, while not truly genteel in Gaskell’s opinion, are certainly doing their part in limiting any further social rising, and with this nouveau riche family Gaskell does not criticize such efforts “to bar the gates behind,” so much as the opening of the gate in the first place. Thus, even as rather flat characters, the Carsons serve an interesting role in *Mary Barton*: they destroy the illusion of two distinct, impermeable social classes, and at the same time, they reveal Gaskell’s concerns about the consequences of such social mobility in both the public sphere of industry and the private sphere of domesticity. The Carsons’ wealth and power, gained in a single generation, along with their evident class-anxiety, attest to the unstable social situation in nineteenth-century England and the reality of movement between the “two nations.”

VI

Along with complicating the rich versus poor distinction through her narrative of the Carson family, Gaskell less dramatically, although perhaps more positively, hints at social mobility and its implications for middle class identity—such as self-help, and the ability to provide a comfortable home and conform to the ideology of separate spheres—

in the character of Jem Wilson. Within the confines of Gaskell's binaries, Jem is undoubtedly of the poor, laboring class, and his marriage with Mary at the end of the novel provides a suitable alternative to her potential alliance with one above her. Furthermore, rather than a resolution indicating social success, critics often view the young couple's emigration to Canada at the end of the novel as a sort of punishment for their association with the murder; in the words of Raymond Williams, "there could be no more devastating conclusion" (*Culture* 91). Likewise, as Carolyn Lesjak summarizes, "once threateningly discordant to the harmony of middle-class industry, Jem and Mary, as happily resigned members of the working class, now become fully part of the English nation as they head off in the service of the British Commonwealth" (58). Certainly then, Jem and Mary do not threaten class boundaries with their marriage, but as a model laborer, in contrast to John Barton, Jem also embodies Victorian middle-class virtues, which give his story the seeds of respectable social rising. Such a reading of his character admittedly challenges typical interpretations of the novel's resolution, but it also accords with the findings of scholars such as Armstrong and Bodenheimer who discuss the middle-class romance plot in Victorian fiction.

In a chapter on "Gentility and the Dangers of Aspiration" Bodenheimer examines several Victorian novels, although none of Gaskell's, and finds a common plot that "works against individual ambitions to rise in class status or social power. Damping the lust for social mobility, it substitutes a hope for gradual evolutionary development of each class within itself which leaves the hierarchical order of society intact" (70). Although *Mary Barton* is not the kind of middle-class novel of gentrification that Bodenheimer discusses, it achieves similar aims in the way it properly redirects desire

into a marriage between equals and, furthermore, presents this lower class union within the framework of middle-class domestic ideology. Jem's career and his union with Mary seem to promise non-threatening, "gradual" improvement within the lower class, as opposed to dramatic social rising without reference to moral virtues evident in the Carsons' story.

From the beginning of the novel, Gaskell's narrator guides readers toward a favorable opinion of Jem, describing him first as "our old friend" who "shot up into the powerful, well-made young man, with a sensible face enough" (28-29), and later as "a steady workman at a good trade, a good son to his parents, and a fine manly spirited chap" (44). Unlike Mary, Jem has no "cravings after wealth and grandeur," no ambitious "castles in the air" about a prosperous future and the opportunity of "doing all the elegant nothings" that indicate wealth and status (230, 81). Moreover, his character challenges the "social ideology" of the era that "inscribed the lower classes as inherently less moral" (Langland 41), and as such, he works against Gaskell's "Frankenstein" metaphor of the lower classes as well. During the climatic courtroom scene, when Jem's fate remains uncertain, the narrator explains that "it was a fixed idea in the minds of all, that the handsome, bright, gay, rich young gentleman"—meaning Harry Carson—"must have been beloved in preference to the *serious, almost stern-looking smith*, who had to toil for his daily bread" (323; my emphasis). Here Gaskell mentions how the trial spectators feel, and even how middle-class readers might naturally feel when presented with Mary's two suitors, only to disabuse them of any lingering preference for Harry over Jem. The former may have the upper hand in externals and wealth, but as the novel reveals, the internal elements of character, in other words, moral virtues, are far more important. Even being a

“smith” does not tarnish Jem’s reputation but rather the opposite, for although middle-class Victorians avoided manual labor associated with the lower class, “‘industry’ and ‘work’ were holy words in the contemporary lexicon” and championed by respected public-figures such as Thomas Carlyle (Altick 168). Likewise, historians Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall state that “perhaps the single greatest distinction between the aristocracy and the middle class was the imperative for members of the latter to actively seek an income rather than expect to live from rents and the emoluments of office” (20). Thus, Jem as a serious, humble laborer merits middle-class approval, although not middle-class status or even perhaps the name of gentleman, unlike the idle Harry Carson, aping the aristocracy and “unfettered by work-hours” (80).

Beyond his commendable willingness to work, Jem also stands out from the common lower-class character in Victorian fiction. Obviously, he provides a contrast to the fanaticism of John Barton, but he also shows more promise and ingenuity than Nicholas Higgins, Gaskell’s central working-class character in *North and South*, or Stephen Blackpool and Rachel in *Hard Times*, the latter of whom Charles Dickens describes as “a woman working, ever working, but content to do it, and preferring to do it as her natural lot, until she should be too old to labour any more” (287). While Jem is content to labor, his life is not bound by such a sense of repetition and resignation. Instead, without any ostentatious ambition, he distinguishes himself in his moral uprightness—evidenced by his efforts to rescue men during a fire and his restraint around the provoking Harry Carson—and in his occupation as a mechanic.⁹ Originally just another laborer, another member of the masses struggling “to give all the family their fill of food” (75), Jem soon, in the words of his aunt Alice, “found out summut about a crank

or tank” and “th’ master’s made him foreman,” which ensures “he’s good wage now” (121-22). Later Mrs. Wilson clarifies this success, boasting to Mary that Jem is “doing well, for he’s gotten four or five men under him” and created an “invention for doing away wi’ the crank . . . His master’s bought it from him, and ta’en out a patent, and Jem’s a gentleman for life wi’ the money his master gied him” (142). Mrs. Wilson’s claim that “Jem’s a gentleman” certainly exaggerates the case, for as Himmelfarb finds, “not everyone so enlarged the idea of the gentleman as to bring it within the compass of the working classes” (50). However, his success relative to the average worker is noteworthy; along with the financial gain, to have invented something reveals Jem’s intelligence, while the distinction of having several “men under him” means that Jem does not occupy the lowest position, professionally or socially. Certainly this achievement pales in comparison to that of Mr. Carson, the factory worker turned owner, but in his modesty, Jem reaffirms the middle-class values of diligence and self-help.

Along with this trajectory of self-improvement, Gaskell reinforces Jem’s social and professional success through Victorian gender ideology, which would appeal to her middle-class readers who, unlike many members of the working class, had the luxury of mentally and often practically dividing their lives into the masculine and feminine “separate spheres.” In their research on gender and class, Davidoff and Hall devote a chapter to the imperative of work or enterprise in middle-class masculinity, specifying that “to become adult men within their own terms they must provide a livelihood which made possible a domestic establishment where they and their dependants could live a rational and morally sanctioned life” (229). In *Mary Barton*, this ideal becomes a reality when his employer recommends Jem as “an intelligent man, well acquainted with

mechanics, as instrument-maker to the Agricultural College they are establishing at Toronto, in Canada” (375). Significantly, as Jem’s employer elaborates, “it is a comfortable appointment,—house—, land, —and a good percentage on the instruments made” (375)—all signs that Jem will have the means to provide his wife and mother with a secure home of the kind Davidoff and Hall discuss. Peering into the future, the image Gaskell leaves readers with at the end of *Mary Barton* is one of middle-class domestic happiness in accordance with separate spheres: the Wilsons live in “a long, low, wooden house, with room enough and to spare” and “a garden around the dwelling,” while Mary waits at the door with their son, “watching the return of her husband from his daily work” (392, 393). With Jem manfully employed and Mary out of the workplace and presiding as the angel in the house, Gaskell constructs an ideal of middle-class love of the kind Armstrong links to the social empowerment of the middle classes, and which would particularly appeal to the novelist’s contemporary readers.¹⁰

This concluding scene of bourgeois domesticity is not to say that Gaskell consciously intends to make Mary and Jem emerging members of the middle class. Indeed, because the world of *Mary Barton* lacks a middle social category, even in his success and his middle-class values, Jem falls into the lower of the two nations, and consequently, what E. P. Thompson understands as the “relationship” of class does not change (11). What we would today term the Victorian middle class forms part of Gaskell’s generalized “rich” category, and thus, the young Wilsons do not appear to be truly rising or moving up in class status; they do not elevate themselves to the higher social stratum and are far from becoming the next generation of Carsons. Instead, Gaskell makes Jem and Mary middle class in terms of the values that structure their characters

and marriage, but not in a way that requires the author to revise her “two nations” view of society to account for a third, or even multiple “nations” within the English population. Additionally with this maneuver, Gaskell figuratively attests to Karl Marx’s belief that the bourgeois class, without granting rights or notions of equality to workers, still “compels them . . . to become bourgeois themselves” through its pervasive ideology: “in one word, it creates a world after its own image” (*Communist* 59).

Although clearly informed by certain middle-class values such as separate-sphere ideology and (limited) self-help, *Mary Barton* will never be considered a novel that overtly explores the intricacies of the middle class in the way that some of Gaskell’s later works do. It is not the characters and themes of the novel, so much as the author herself, who betrays anxiety and contradictory feelings about a social middle, and her own potential place in it. While through her narrator Gaskell identifies the “feeling of alienation between the different classes of society” as a serious problem (85), the novelist shows herself unready, not merely to champion the cause of workers in any radical Marxist sense, but to call on the middle class, of which she and her friends (not to mention most readers) represent, as emerging social leaders or a bridge between the estranged rich and poor. Instead, by not naming the middle class, Gaskell conveniently unites everyone we would now place in that category, including herself, under the broad definition of rich, which then stands at a greater distance from the poor, solidifying the two nations and dampening social mobility.

Along with being unrealistic, this view of the English social situation was unpalatable to some Victorian readers who were less critical of social mobility and did not necessarily want to hear about characters at the social extremities. Gaskell soon

discovered that her largely middle-class audience did not need the label of “rich” to feel secure, especially as many of them were wealthy only in a relative sense. Rather, these people, like Gaskell herself, claimed a position in the fortunate half of society based on other, and often conflicting, criteria including moral virtue, professionalism, and “elegant economy” (or genteel poverty). These various factors of class, especially associated with the Victorian middle class, are relevant in much of Gaskell’s fiction that follows *Mary Barton*, including *The Moorland Cottage* and *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* that I consider in the next two chapters. Works such as these attest to the developing nature of class issues in Gaskell’s writing, and they reveal her increasing confidence as a public and popular voice, willing to explore the middle class and its concerns that complicate the simple rich-poor divide of her first novel.

CHAPTER TWO – MARKETING TO THE MIDDLE CLASS
IN *THE MOORLAND COTTAGE*

A strengthening little story . . . so truthful in its portraiture of every-day characters that it will be equally appreciated by all classes.

—“A Gossip about the Christmas Books”¹

I

Just months after the especially public publication of *Mary Barton*, which threw Elizabeth Gaskell and her politics into the spotlight, the novelist clearly determined that the benefits, including financial gain, of publishing outweighed its drawbacks; as she noted in an 1841 letter to her sister-in-law about William and Mary Howitt, “my word! authorship brings them in a pretty penny” (*Letters* 44). Between the summer of 1849 and the autumn of 1850, Gaskell published several short pieces, and surely the success of these along with *Mary Barton* prompted her publishers Chapman and Hall to solicit a Christmas book from Gaskell in 1850, which she at first determined she could not complete. However, perhaps heeding the entreaties of friends such as Charlotte Brontë who urged Gaskell, “if the report about the Christmas Book is not true—make it true. I am hungry for a genuine bit of refreshment” (*Letters of Charlotte* 476), the author ultimately produced *The Moorland Cottage* in December of that year. This short novel remains one of the least analyzed of Gaskell’s works, and the Oxford World Classics edition from 1995 is now out of print.² The flaws scholars find in the novel, along with Gaskell’s oft-cited disappointment in the story, can be misleading. As Rosemarie Bodenheimer claims in defense of forgotten works of Victorian social fiction, what we now deem “bad novels unfold particularly clear examples of social fantasy; better ones may rely on similar fantasies even as they criticize and complicate them” (10). Thus, even if not another “perfect miniature nestling among the great Victorian three-volume

novels,” as Jenny Uglow describes Gaskell’s 1864 *Cousin Phillis* (Foreword vii), *The Moorland Cottage* deserves reconsideration, especially regarding Gaskell’s evolving relationship to the Victorian middle class.

In *The Moorland Cottage*, Gaskell takes her fiction in a new direction by turning away from the romanticized lower-class subjects of her early writing and instead creating characters that might have moved within her own social circle—the kind of characters that she would return to in her many novels and stories that follow. This Christmas book traces the maturation of a virtuous middle-class girl, Maggie Browne, living in the countryside with her widowed mother and spoilt brother, neither of whom appreciates her worth. As the Brownes develop a relationship with the wealthy neighboring Buxton family, Gaskell depicts the tensions that arise from business and love across hazy class lines. Readers familiar with Victorian fiction will readily see that the characters and plot details of *The Moorland Cottage* echo George Eliot’s 1860 novel *Mill on the Floss* as well as Gaskell’s crowning masterpiece, *Wives and Daughters*, and invariably all criticism on the short novel points out these intertextualities. Beyond its apparent relation to more famous works, however, *The Moorland Cottage* reveals Gaskell’s initial exploration of the Victorian middle class—its divisions and corruptions, as well as its moral potential. No longer merging the middle class with the upper to form a single category distanced from those below as in *Mary Barton*, this second novel begins to uncover “the inner truths of . . . households” (*Moorland* 20), and to demystify the fortunate half of society for middle-class readers who desired such self-reflexive social insight as part of their Christmastime entertainment. With *The Moorland Cottage*, Gaskell begins to shed her anxiety about the middle class and adopt the role of a

consciously middle-class author, planting the seeds for many of her later works as she negotiates between the social critique and the sentimentality expected in Christmas literature.

II

The general escalation in Gaskell studies over the past decades makes the lack of criticism on *The Moorland Cottage* particularly surprising. Unlike Gaskell's other stories and short novels such as *My Lady Ludlow* or *Cousin Phillis*, *The Moorland Cottage* is the subject of only two scholarly articles, while in book-length studies of the author, scholars typically devote the occasional sentence, paragraph, or footnote to the story, mostly remarking on how unremarkable it is in Gaskell's oeuvre. For example, Shirley Foster, who only footnotes *The Moorland Cottage* in her essay on "Elizabeth Gaskell's Shorter Pieces" in the *Cambridge Companion*, asserts in her biography of the author that "as a story it is unconvincing, and the highly melodramatic ending which brings all to a happy conclusion . . . is particularly unsatisfactory" (85).³ In the two principal analyses of *The Moorland Cottage* Alan Shelston discusses the story along with its illustrations—an important selling point for a Christmas book—and Ramona Lumpkin offers a feminist reading that compares Gaskell's heroine with Maggie Tulliver from *Mill On the Floss*. In turn, this means that minimal attention has been given to issues of class in the novel. Nancy Henry, however, uses *The Moorland Cottage* as an illuminating starting point in her general overview of how social change, both gradual and violent, resurfaces throughout Gaskell's fiction. Henry isolates a conversation between Maggie Browne and her suitor Frank Buxton in which the couple debate the corruption of England and the

merits of possible emigration. In referencing this conversation from *The Moorland Cottage* about how “to redeem a corrupt society” and “remodel a nation” (148), Henry uncovers an element critics have neglected and confirms that Gaskell does not merely stoop to melodrama and sentimentality in this work but also considers the condition of England just as in her more obvious social-fiction.

The work of Tara Moore in a recent doctoral dissertation helps clarify this combination of social observation and what Shelston calls “awkwardly contrived fictional circumstance” in *The Moorland Cottage* (46). Moore analyzes mid-Victorian Christmas books as “units of middle class-ideology” (3), and her investigation of this deliberately unrealistic and commercial genre offers valuable context for reading and appreciating *The Moorland Cottage* among Gaskell’s works. While Moore focuses on the theme of nationalism and discusses how Gaskell adapts the typical Christmas scenario in which immigrants return home, her extensive, original research on the seasonal book tradition and its place in middle-class Victorian reading practices is crucial to the analysis I offer in this chapter. Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* of course remains the most famous example from this Victorian subgenre, but unlike this still-loved holiday story, the Christmas associations of *The Moorland Cottage*, such as its December release and publicity, as well as its publication as an ornamental volume, complete with a Christmas-themed frontispiece, have been lost. Consequently, modern readers simply cannot experience this novel in the same way that middle-class Victorians did in 1850, and without the explicit Christmastime setting as in Dickens’ work, readers of *The Moorland Cottage* today have proven less willing to participate in the sentimentality and lack of realism that both works entail.

To reevaluate *The Moorland Cottage* in its original context, I will first provide an overview of the Christmas book genre and the contemporary reception of Gaskell's story as a means to reconsider the author's frustration with the project and to frame the ensuing reading. As mid-Victorian Christmas books explicitly scrutinize social problems within the middle class and promote a hopeful message of reform or redemption, I will look at ways in which Gaskell first connects to middle-class readers and then offers relevant social critique. In turn, I will consider how her resolution, so often dismissed by critics, both reflects and resists the conventions of the genre. On the one hand, unlike modern readers, Victorians expected melodramatic conclusions to their Christmas tales that reaffirmed middle-class values and helped foster a sought after cathartic sentimentality as Moore discusses. On the other hand, although *The Moorland Cottage* ends happily, it does not forward a message of redemption, typical of Christmas books in the Dickensian tradition; in Gaskell's version of the Christmas novel, middle-class values cannot wholly change or redeem an imperfect society. Therefore, I will close the chapter by suggesting how Gaskell casts a shadow on the final domestic hearth scene, which leaves unresolved themes and characterizations to revisit through more productive genres later in her career.

III

Understanding Gaskell's transition into a consciously middle-class writer and her representation of the middle class in *The Moorland Cottage* invites, first, a discussion of the publication of the book itself, which took the author into the unfamiliar terrain of the holiday gift-market and economically, as opposed to socially or personally motivated, writing. More so than *Mary Barton*, which Gaskell could defend in a letter to Mrs. Greg

as originating from an earnest impulse and growing “up in my mind as imperceptibly as a seed germinates in the earth” (*Letters* 42), *The Moorland Cottage*, as Suzanne Lewis notes, was an overtly commercial project “commissioned specifically for the lucrative seasonal trade” (vii). Shelston describes these Christmas books as “very much a phenomenon of the eighteen-forties” thanks to Dickens’ success with *A Christmas Carol* in 1843 (42). As the scholar goes on to explain, books such as Dickens’ and Gaskell’s “were only one manifestation of the accelerating enthusiasm for this kind of festive celebration; the various journals, for example, usually offered double or additional numbers for Christmas, and there was a whole range of seasonal published material” (42), which was particularly marketed to middle-class readers.⁴ Thus, sold as a stand-alone volume, complete with seventeen illustrations as Shelston notes, and selling more than two-thousand copies as Gaskell’s letters confirm, *The Moorland Cottage* was very much a product, blurring the line between commodity and art, as with much fiction—Victorian or other.

While Shelston deserves credit for contextualizing *The Moorland Cottage* within the Christmas book phenomenon (unlike most Gaskell scholars), his discussion of this genre is somewhat limited. Noting that the story contains only a few passing references to Christmas, Shelston finds the plot details “strange material to be incorporated within the Christmas tradition” (44). Moore’s research, however, indicates that even without centering on the Christmas season, Gaskell’s story engages important elements of the holiday genre, including offering “challenges to mainstream society” as well as “exciting emotions like compassion and hearth-love” (6, 11). As Moore explains, Christmas books filled a cultural need to fantasize about an ideal society rescued by middle-class virtues;

the books “allow the reader to temporarily imagine that the Scrooges, the greedy emigrants, and the Tackletons are redeemable, regardless of the reality of this supposition” (8). Thus, although Dickens did much to initiate and popularize the genre, his use of a Christmastime setting was not essential for the underlying goal of producing sentimentality as befit the season. In fact, “A Gossip about the Christmas Books” in *Fraser’s Magazine* announces several works for the 1850 Christmas season but only features one or two explicitly holiday-themed stories. Moreover, the anonymous reviewer confirms that a Christmas book may come in many guises: “it may be a fairy story; it may be a story of real life; it may be a piece of broad humor; it may be a social satire. No two of them are exactly alike,” although they generally satisfy two characteristics: “the charm of novelty and the profession of a purpose” (38).⁵ In other words, as this combined advertisement and review reminds us, Christmas books depend on a balance of joyful entertainment and social relevance, such that middle-class Victorian readers wanted criticism along with their escapism.

This background to the Christmas books allows us to reconsider Gaskell’s correspondence related to *The Moorland Cottage*, which critics often cite as evidence of the work’s mediocrity or failure. Certainly, some of Gaskell’s letters referencing the tale ring with frustration and disappointment and help support Foster’s claim that Gaskell “recognized . . . how writing to order, as with *The Moorland Cottage*, could produce, at best, a mediocre piece” (71).⁶ Yet other of Gaskell’s letters hint at more positive feelings about the story, such that, as in much of her writing, both personal and public, it becomes difficult to discern the true nature of Gaskell’s feelings among, in her own words, her many “‘Mes,’ for I have a great number, and that’s the plague” (*Letters* 108).⁷ Ultimately,

then, Gaskell's ambivalent letters only tell a partial story about the success and worth of *The Moorland Cottage*, for once published, readers and reviewers offered their own judgments of the book, which appear to have countered the author's prediction, confided to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth, that the story would "not be worth reading" (*Letters* 132). The "Gossip" reviewer in *Fraser's* commends the tale as a "most refreshing contrast" to some of the other books that season (42), while Henry Fothergill Chorley, writing anonymously in the *Athenaeum*, calls it "a story of such deep interest and wholesome moral" (1338). Additionally, Gaskell felt confident enough in the finished product to send a copy to Charlotte Brontë, who had encouraged her friend's contribution to the Christmas genre earlier that year. After reading the story, Brontë responded to Gaskell twice in January 1851, first claiming that she found "the commencement . . . as sweet, as pure, as fresh as an unopened morning daisy," and later praising the ending that "finishes like a herb—a balsamic herb with healing in its leaves" (*Letters of Charlotte* 544, 560). Another famous Victorian author, Matthew Arnold, also enjoyed Gaskell's story, for according to his sister Mary Forster, Arnold spent part of his holiday that year "stretched out full length on the sofa, reading a Christmas tale of Mrs. Gaskell's which moves him to tears" (qtd. in Uglow 252). Even sixteen years later, *The Moorland Cottage* lingered in readers' memories, for as Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund report, "in a number of [Gaskell's] obituaries it is 'The Moorland Cottage' as much as *Cranford* that is associated with charm and rusticity" (185n7).

This knowledge about the positive contemporary reception of the novel may not alter the opinion of modern critics, but it does confirm that Gaskell's original middle-class readers found something compelling in *The Moorland Cottage*, and that as a

Christmas book it fulfilled its mission of stirring the sentiments. Accordingly, I want to suggest that the author's feelings of inadequacy and frustration with the work reflect not so much the pressure to "write about virtues to order" as critics interpret her letters (*Letters* 132), but rather Gaskell's typical feelings of anxiety with any new publishing endeavor. Indeed, in 1850 Gaskell already had experience delivering moral lessons and portraying virtuous characters in *Mary Barton*, "Libbie Marsh's Three Eras," and notably, in her first holiday offering from 1848, "Christmas Storms and Sunshine." While *The Moorland Cottage* is the only Christmas book of Gaskell's career, she wrote a few short stories for holiday issues of periodicals, including "Christmas Storms," published anonymously in *Howitt's Journal of Literature and Popular Progress*. This story tells a humorous, sentimental tale of neighboring families with opposing political views. After a series of unexpected events including the illness of a baby and a naughty cat that eats all the holiday sausages, the two couples mend their differences in "the very best way in the world" by sharing a Christmas meal (120). In case readers miss the message of her tale, in the second to last paragraph Gaskell's narrator lightheartedly moralizes: "if any of you have any quarrels, or misunderstandings, or coolnesses, or cold shoulders, or shynesses, or tiffs, or miffs, or huffs, with anyone else, just make friends before Christmas,—you will be so much merrier if you do" (121).

With such a clichéd end to this virtue-laden story, which Gaskell never complained about in any known letters, it becomes difficult to view her reservations about *The Moorland Cottage* as evidence of the work's inevitable failure. Instead, they speak to the challenges Gaskell faced, but ultimately met, from the demands of the genre and the expectations of readers such as Brontë who were looking for "a genuine bit of

refreshment” (*Letters of Charlotte* 476). The targeted middle-class audience for Christmas literature, along with its double aim of social critique and class affirmation, presented Gaskell with an opportunity to not only further her career as a popular writer, but to think critically about her own social sphere. That she felt anxious during the writing process is hardly surprising, and in this sense, *The Moorland Cottage* pushed Gaskell’s fiction beyond the potentially more comfortable but personally removed working-class realm of *Mary Barton*, and as such, speaks to the author’s growing willingness to write about and advocate for, her own middle class.

IV

Perhaps lounging on the sofa on a winter evening like Matthew Arnold or sharing *The Moorland Cottage* aloud to the assembled family, readers meet Maggie Browne as a young girl, neglected by her mother, the widow of a clergyman, who saves all her love and energy for her son Edward. The visit of Mr. Buxton in the opening chapter initiates the Browne’s lifelong relationship with the neighboring family, as Mr. Buxton aids Edward educationally and professionally, while the invalid, angelic Mrs. Buxton befriends Maggie until her sentimental death. As the years pass, Edward renounces the church in favor of the law, and Maggie captures the heart of Mr. Buxton’s son Frank, to the disappointment of the father who hopes his son will marry his rich niece Erminia. This romantic problem intensifies when Edward disgraces his family and enrages Mr. Buxton by forging the latter’s signature in a business transaction and rationalizing that he “was but borrowing money” (66). The heroine eventually calms Mr. Buxton and convinces him not to pursue her brother. Instead, Maggie offers to accompany Edward to

America (a punishment of banishment) and give up her relationship with Frank, now tainted by this scandal, only if *he* desires it. In carrying out this design, however, the ship on which Maggie and her brother sail goes down in flames, and the selfish Edward perishes while Maggie is miraculously saved by Frank, who had set out to follow his beloved upon hearing of her selfless journey. After this melodramatic rescue, disliked by most critics, Maggie and Frank reunite with Mr. Buxton, who now welcomes the heroine into his family, calling her “my dear! my daughter!” (99). As Uglow rightly concludes, *The Moorland Cottage* “could not have been more different, in subject and tone as well as setting, from *Mary Barton*” (252).

Apart from the shift in location from the slums of Manchester to the idyllic countryside and the very different cast of characters in *The Moorland Cottage*, even the narration of this story differs from that in *Mary Barton*. In this short novel Gaskell still employs a narrative “I” that pops in and out of the story—unlike her later use of character-narrators such as Mary Smith in *Cranford* or Paul Manning in *Cousin Phillis*—but this narrator is far less present or intrusive than the one in her first novel. In perfect keeping with a Christmas story, the narration of *The Moorland Cottage* resembles the delivery style that, in a letter to Eliza Fox, Gaskell claims to have used for *Mary Barton*: “as if I were speaking to a friend over the fire on a winter’s night and describing real occurrences” (*Letters* 82). This storytelling quality in turn fosters a sense of equality and common values between narrator and reader, which means that the narrator has no need to refer to “us” and “we” to solidify a shared class perspective as in *Mary Barton*. Registering this shift in focus from the lower to the middle classes, Chorley remarks that “unlike ‘Mary Barton,’ it is not a tale of class suffering” (1337), while the “Gossip”

reviewer suggests that “this simple tale is superior to its more ambitious predecessor” because “it is not painful in its details; there is no impediment in the way of dialect or local colour to interrupt the enjoyment of the reader; and it is so truthful in its portraiture of every-day characters that it will be equally appreciated by all classes” (42). Similarly, in her letter imploring Gaskell to make the Christmas book rumor true, Brontë asked her friend “not to pierce one with too keen-edged emotion” in this next book, for “there are parts of ‘Mary Barton’ I shall never dare to read a second time” (*Letters of Charlotte* 476). While the relative reputations of *Mary Barton* and *The Moorland Cottage* today confirm that later readers have not agreed with these reviewers or Brontë, their opinions on the improvement of Gaskell’s writing between her first and second novels reveals that her contemporary audience welcomed this turn towards more familiar and less painful subjects. Essentially, these middle-class readers wished to read about themselves and about issues of relevance to their own lives, since confusion and anxiety about class did not only manifest in the sensationalized rift between the “two nations” of rich and poor.

Importantly, then, the “impediments” the “Gossip” reviewer finds in *Mary Barton* are precisely the elements that relate to its working-class focus: the scenes of urban misery and the Lancashire lower-class dialect, which both, as Gaskell certainly intends, oblige readers to reflect on “the care-worn men . . . the poor uneducated factory-workers” (*Mary* 3). In contrast, what both the *Fraser’s* and *Athenaeum* reviewers deem as “every-day” characters in *The Moorland Cottage* apparently allow for a less distressing reading experience, meaning that the Brownes and Buxtons are easier to relate to than either the radical John Barton or the villainous factory owner Mr. Carson (“Gossip” 42; Chorley 1337). Essentially, their ordinariness as perceived by the reviewers implies that these

characters are middle class. Furthermore, instead of being aligned in the economic categories of “the employers and the employed” (*Mary* 171), the characters in *The Moorland Cottage* are described primarily by familial and domestic relationships: mother, sister, brother, father, niece, neighbor, and “faithful old servant” (45). This emphasis on the family and the home, perfect for the Christmas season, encourages a sense of commonality, leading the “Gossip” reviewer to conclude that the story “will be equally appreciated by all classes” (42). Whether this judgment contains any truth is perhaps less relevant than the fact that it betrays how readers find comfort in the familiar and often equate it with the universal. The reviewer quite openly admires *The Moorland Cottage* for its focus on middle-class people and values, which particularly at Christmastime help the largely middle-class reading public feel connected to a larger national family.

To achieve this rapport with typical Victorian readers in *The Moorland Cottage*, Gaskell who still is unready to identify the middle class by name as in her first novel, instead signals the middling social position of the Browne family, and hence their familiarity as “every-day characters” (“Gossip” 42), in numerous details from the onset of the novel. Even before readers hear of the Brownes themselves, the narrator provides a telling description of their home at the end of the traveler’s journey on the moor:

there stands a dwelling, which is neither cottage nor house, but something between the two in size. Nor yet is it a farm, though surrounded by living things. It is, or rather it was . . . the dwelling of Mrs. Browne, the widow of the late curate . . . there she lived with her faithful old servant and her only children. (3)

This simple description of the home reveals much about the social position of the family at the heart of the ensuing story. The dwelling is medium in size and difficult to categorize, being “neither cottage nor house,” and such in-between status links the home

to the middle class, which is not quite the working or lower class, but also not quite the gentry or upper class. Moreover, the statement that “nor yet is it a farm” further clarifies that this is not a family from the yeomanry—another social category of later relevance to the tale that fits somewhere in between the lowest and uppermost social spheres. The next clue, that “the widow of the late curate” occupies this amorphous dwelling, indicates an educated family in a respected profession, even if as a curate the late Mr. Browne ranked below a vicar or rector.⁸ Additionally, as Anglicans, the Brownes automatically gain status relative to dissenters, such as the Unitarian Gaskells whose non-conformist faith constituted a “social handicap” (Altick 31). Finally, the “faithful old servant” provides the family with an important public symbol of their middle-class status and their financial ability to employ the labor of others.

Although this opening to the novel might set middle-class readers at ease as it romantically situates the Brownes “as secluded in their green hollow as the households in the German forest-tales” (3), part of the reason to purchase and read a Christmas book is to be reminded of social ills in order to later rejoice in a happy, idealistic conclusion that erases the class tensions of real life. In *The Moorland Cottage*, therefore, Gaskell highlights several social and national issues that would resonate with mid-Victorian readers: “the mysterious corruptions and evils of an old state of society such as we have in England” (61), the enticing possibility of emigration, the unequal treatment of men and women, and the confusion of class and status in a culture of capitalism. In her dissertation, Moore investigates the first two of these issues and finds that Gaskell gives readers “the desired consolation of a story that spouts a rhetoric of staying at home and righteously working for the improvement of the mother country” (68). Considering

another angle of Gaskell's critique of the "old state of society," I intend to examine the confusion about social class and position that Gaskell locates within the broad confines of the middle class, the social category prone to the most change as it absorbed those from above and below when "every man is rising or falling" as W. J. Fox had claimed fifteen years earlier (qtd. in Gash 24).

While some Christmas books engage social questions by employing overt satire, such as William Makepeace Thackeray's *The Kickleburys on the Rhine* that "is only meant to make people laugh for half-an-hour over the Christmas fireside" ("Gossip" 40), *The Moorland Cottage* offers its criticism quite subtly. Certainly at times, the limited space of the Christmas genre—a single volume of about a hundred pages—along with its formulaic sentimentality means that Gaskell can "only create caricatures of real-life character types and social problems" (Moore 87). Yet the author also impresses readers, both Victorian and modern, with the naturalness and gentleness of the story, which means that not only the melodramatic plot but also the small details of *The Moorland Cottage* merit closer attention, for they allow us to see how the author gradually unfolds a class drama and captures the emotional interest of her readers "in most refreshing contrast with the jaded life of these extremely wearisome fribbles" in Thackeray's story ("Gossip" 42).

In construing the various relationships between the Browne and Buxton families, Gaskell underscores the perceived gradations within the middle class and invites readers to consider whether a traditional view of inherited class with its fixed hierarchy holds up in the progressive Victorian era. In the opening chapter, Mr. Buxton visits the Brownes and provokes anxiety in the widow, presumably due to his (as yet unspecified) higher status. Catching a glimpse of her visitor from the window, Mrs. Browne quickly enacts a

performance of gentility, explaining to her servant, “I’ll only run up and change my cap; and you say you’ll come up and tell me, Nancy; all proper” (9). This brief scene between mistress and servant, sure to draw smiles from middle-class readers attuned to the nuances of servants and social calls, anticipates similar ones in Gaskell’s later novel *Cranford* and constitutes what Elizabeth Langland identifies in that work as a “scripting of a middle-class scenario” (122). Yet rather than an established ritual of class performance as in *Cranford*, in which the narrator Mary Smith explains that the hostess of a tea party “knew, and we knew, and she knew that we knew” of the many levels of pretense or performance (7), Mrs. Browne and Mr. Buxton appear to be meeting for one of the first times, making this social call of vital importance in establishing each participant’s relative status.

Mr. Buxton clearly possesses the upper hand in this scenario, for he appears relaxed and jovial while Mrs. Browne “was sitting on the edge of her chair, speaking in unusually fine language, and with a higher pitched voice than common” (10). Additionally, Mr. Buxton, with “right of presentation” to select the local clergyman, comes to offer young Edward an education so that he may one day succeed his late father, and this assistance, while given “for my dear old friend’s sake” as Mr. Buxton claims (10), nonetheless confirms his power and wealth. In the following chapter, after extending an invitation for the Brownes to visit his home—thus giving Mrs. Browne “so decent an excuse for following her inclination” to socialize (11)—the precise details of his position emerge, but of course, only to complicate any traditional understanding of class. For rather than fitting into a fixed hierarchy, the Buxtons and Brownes might be ranked differently depending on the criteria used to determine social worth, and this

looseness or room for interpretation in social standing was of course particularly germane to people in the middle class, plagued by anxiety about rising or falling, or about the impreciseness of their in-between position.

Just as Gaskell uses their home to introduce the Brownes, the narrator begins the history of the Buxton family by remarking on their house, which “was in reality a mansion, and needed not the neighbouring contrast of the cottages on either side to make it look imposing” (14). As the narrator elaborates on the Buxton residence—“all the house told of wealth—wealth which had accumulated for generations, and which was shown in a sort of grand, unostentatious way” (15)—readers see that it sharply contrasts with the Brownes’ middling-sized “house of decent frugality” (7). These descriptions suggest that Mr. Buxton belongs to the landed gentry, or is at the very least the kind of wealthy, middle-class manufacturer who successfully moves to the country to emulate the gentry. In turn, critics tend to refer to Mr. Buxton as a squire, perhaps recognizing that he prefigures Squire Hamley of *Wives and Daughters*. Yet this label, which denotes a position within the gentry and which Gaskell herself never uses, oversimplifies the situation. As readers soon learn, Mr. Buxton is not of an established “county” family. Rather, his genealogy captures the fluidity of class and social position in England during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries—the fluidity that Gaskell appears anxious about in *Mary Barton* with its anti-rising message. Yet in *The Moorland Cottage*, Gaskell recognizes that mobility would particularly interest middle-class readers whose families were often part of this general social evolution, and she more fully explores its implications here than in her first novel.

Thus, shifting from the luxurious house to the Buxtons themselves, Gaskell's narrator explains that:

Mr. Buxton's ancestors had been yeomen; but, two or three generations back, they might, if ambitious, have taken their place as county gentry, so much had the value of their property increased, and so great had been the amount of their savings. They, however, continued to live in the old farm till Mr. Buxton's grandfather built the house in Combehurst of which I am speaking, and then he felt rather ashamed of what he had done; it seemed like stepping out of his position. (15)

As the narrator goes on to explain, while Mr. Buxton's modest grandparents tried to minimize their disturbance of the traditional hierarchy, under Mr. Buxton's parents "gradually the rooms" of the Combehurst house "assumed an inhabited appearance," and eventually "in the process of time [Mr. Buxton] succeeded his father, and married a sweet gentle lady, of a decayed and very poor country family" (15). Therefore, unlike the Hamleys from *Wives and Daughters* who boast that they have "been on the same land for hundreds of years" (306), the Buxtons belong to the newer wealth and power of the country that gave rise to the thriving middle class associated with the Victorian era.

This history of the upwardly mobile Buxton family merits consideration as part of Gaskell's social critique when we remember the limited space the holiday gift book affords. As Moore explains, "the Christmas reading experience means that readers are more willing to participate in the speedy transmission of emotional impetus, and that back-story and detail rife in serialized novels can dwindle here" (99). Certainly, Gaskell could have avoided this digressive backstory without sacrificing her romantic dilemma by simply establishing the Buxtons as landed gentry or even of titled rank and unquestionably above the Brownes. Instead, she specifies an ancestry for Mr. Buxton that calls into question the superiority he assumes when his son falls in love with Maggie. As

Mrs. Browne summarizes the situation, referring to the logic of traditional status, “Maggie’s father was a clergyman, and I’ve seen ‘yeoman,’ with my own eyes, on old Mr. Buxton’s . . . carts; and a clergyman is above a yeoman any day” (52). To provide perspective on the changing attitudes about social categories such as “yeoman” and “clergyman” in the Victorian era, Jane Austen’s 1815 novel *Emma* offers a relevant comparison. In that story, the wealthy and genteel heroine explains to her protégée:

The yeomanry are precisely the order of people with whom I feel I can have nothing to do. A degree or two lower, and a creditable appearance might interest me; I might hope to be useful to their families in some way or other. But a farmer can need none of my help, and is therefore in one sense as much above my notice as in every other he is below it. (24)

As a gentlewoman who moves in an exclusive circle of landowners such as Mr. Knightly and clergymen such as Mr. Elton, Austen’s heroine Emma Woodhouse can only associate with those she deems below her in the role of Lady Bountiful. Yet by the time that Gaskell writes several decades later, social positions appear far less prescriptive. As Gaskell’s story suggests, a wealthy family of yeoman ancestry, much like a wealthy captain of industry in the city, may now be far less unnoticeable in having something to offer the gentry. This may be an economically beneficial marriage as in the case of Mr. Buxton and his genteel but impoverished bride, or a relationship of patronage as Mr. Buxton develops with Edward, the son of a genteel clergyman.

In *Emma*, the heroine’s protégée Harriet Smith—an orphan of dubious class background—eventually marries the yeoman farmer Robert Martin whom Emma initially refuses to take notice of, and while the Martins do not attain gentility, they anticipate Victorian characters such as Mr. Buxton’s yeoman grandfather who begins the process of gradual social mobility that results in his wealthy, powerful grandson in the Victorian era.

In highlighting both the decline of the gentry and the rise of formerly lower groups in *The Moorland Cottage*, Gaskell reminds readers of the changing power dynamics of the past several decades, only the beginning of which Austen witnessed. These changes included not only political initiatives such as the 1832 Reform Bill that extended the franchise to upper-middle class males, but also economic consequences of the Napoleonic Wars, such that in the early decades of the nineteenth-century, “war profits buoyed up many a business and farming family, fuelling the desire for social recognition” (Davidoff and Hall 19). Yet in *The Moorland Cottage*, unlike in *Mary Barton*, Gaskell does not disapprove of this recent class mobility and loosening of traditional status markers. Instead, she focuses her critique on the obsession with money and external appearances that appear to follow these social evolutions.

V

As in Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, greed and the cultural emphasis on wealth become targets of critique in Gaskell’s Christmas book. In *The Moorland Cottage*, Gaskell laments along with her character Frank “that money should have such power to corrupt men,” and that England has become “a nation whose god is money” (60, 61). Drawing on Thomas Carlyle’s famous attack of capitalism, Regenia Gagnier points out that for Victorians “the problem was not the essential or relative status of money, but that money had come to be the sole perspective through which human value could be judged, the sole nexus between people” (56). In Gaskell’s novel, this contemporary concern about money as the determiner of human value figures in the tensions between the Buxton and Browne families, such that the wealthy Erminia initially looks down on the shabbily

dressed Maggie, and Mr. Buxton finds Maggie's lack of wealth sufficient grounds to disapprove of her as a daughter-in-law. However, Gaskell most hyperbolically illustrates the corrupting power of money in Edward Browne, the closest the novel has to a villain. Edward is an undeniably flat character—the classic Christmas book caricature—and nobody except for Mrs. Browne mourns over his death at the end of the story. Rather than a character in his own right, Edward is used to various ends: he exemplifies middle-class greed, exposes a culture that illogically privileges men over women, and contrasts with Frank Buxton as a potential model for middle-class masculinity.

In choosing the law over the church, Edward clearly worships the national god of money and recognizes that a career as an attorney offers greater economic opportunities than the genteel profession of his father. In one sense the law was on par with the church and medicine as the three traditional and nominally genteel professions in Victorian England, nevertheless, as Norman Gash explains, “by 1815 the old predominance of [these] professions was being challenged on many points,” including the rise of dissenting faiths and alternate routes into professional life that did not require a university degree (23). As an attorney rather than a barrister, Edward actually joins “the more numerous but less fashionable section of the legal profession” (Gash 24), which indicates his willingness to sacrifice a classical education and genteel status for money—particularly money made quickly and easily. As Edward rationalizes to his disappointed mother:

one toils away for four or five years, and then one gets a curacy of seventy pounds a-year, and no end of work to do for the money. Now the work is not much harder in a lawyer's office, and if one has one's wits about one, there are hundreds and thousands a-year to be picked up with mighty little trouble. (31)

In response, Mrs. Browne points out the social rather than economic advantage of a religious career, for “you know your father was always asked to dine everywhere,—to places where I know they would not have asked Mr. Bish,” an attorney who “makes his thousand a-year” (31). Unlike her more modern son, Mrs. Browne clings to traditional notions of status, which place an Anglican clergyman of however little means above a wealthy attorney, just as he is also above a yeoman. Edward, however, recognizes that he lives in the meritocratic Victorian age with many chances for advancement, and he ultimately hopes to become Mr. Buxton’s agent since “a thousand a-year might be made of it” (32). Yet this possibly admirable sense of egalitarianism that allows the son of a curate to be unfazed by the prospect of working for a man of yeoman ancestry is nonetheless tainted by his selfish pursuit of wealth, implying a criticism of Victorian professionalism, but one that Gaskell does not take the time to develop here.⁹

In contrast to Edward, Frank Buxton offers an alternative model for the next generation of middle-class men, based not on material ambition and “flashiness of manner” (40), but as his name implies, on earnestness and duty. With their two contrasting natures, Edward and Frank represent respectively the materialism and idealism of Victorian professionalism. According to Susan E. Colón, the middle-class professional ideal included both a “belief in a meritocratic system of rewards” that Edward obviously latches onto, as well as a commitment to “overlapping religious, ethical and transcendental convictions . . . including a belief in ‘character’ or personal moral agency” (13-14), which Gaskell highlights in Frank. Drawing on the ideas of historian Stefan Collini, Colón also notes “that the Victorian moral vocabulary often required morally exemplary actions to be counter to economic self-interest” (9), and this

presented a conflict with contemporary notions of laissez-faire capitalism. Gaskell exaggerates this tension with the two young men as well, for “worldly success was [Edward’s] standard of merit” (38), while Frank, well provided for and groomed to become a gentleman, admits to a curious desire for poverty. As Frank confesses to Maggie, “I dread riches. I dread the responsibility of them. At any rate, I wish I had begun life as a poor boy, and worked my way up to competence” (60). This romanticizing of poverty reflects the moral idealism of the Victorian age, and Frank essentially worries that he will become what Samuel Smiles later describes as “the youth who inherits wealth” and has “life made too easy for him, and he soon grows sated with it, because he has nothing left to desire” (191). To avoid this apathy and moral degeneration associated with the hereditarily wealthy, Frank envisions working his “way up to competence,” which reveals his desire to participate with other middle-class men in the cultural experience of self-help.

While Edward clearly represents an unbalanced professionalism that favors the material over the ideal, Frank, during this crucial conversation with Maggie about money and emigration, represents the possibility of excessive idealism. In resolving this “professional quandary,” as Colón terms it (15), Gaskell abandons any hope for the materialistic Edward, but she also rejects the notion that wealth dooms a middle-class man such as Frank and that he will automatically “be liable to this fault into which . . . rich men fall, of forgetting the trials of the poor” (*Moorland* 61). Through Maggie’s dialogue, Gaskell urges financially privileged middle-class men such as Frank to “bravely face these evils, and learn their nature and causes” (61), promoting a message of responsible wealth that again matches that of Smiles, who claims that even without the

benefit of rising upward “the rich man, inspired by a right spirit, will spurn idleness as unmanly; and if he bethink himself of the responsibilities which attain to the possession of wealth and property he will feel even a higher call to work than men of humbler lot” (191). In forwarding this notion of dutiful employment without financial motive as the marker of middle-class manhood, writers such as Gaskell and Smiles gave Victorian readers an ideal to aspire to, and one that seemed to reconcile the modern importance of money with the middle class’s alleged commitment to moral virtue.

In criticizing capitalism and greed (a common Christmas theme), Gaskell does not simplistically aim to equate money with evil and in turn advocate poverty as morally superior. Such an extreme view would belie the fact that writing *The Moorland Cottage* was an economic transaction for the novelist, earning her fifty pounds upfront “for 2000 copies, & half profits on any sold after that number” (*Letters* 484). As a participant in the contemporary professional culture, Gaskell would hardly think of condemning money outright; instead she takes a moderate approach similar to Smiles’ notion that “although money ought by no means to be regarded as a chief end of man’s life, neither is it a trifling matter, to be held in philosophic contempt, representing as it does to so large an extent the means of physical comfort and social well-being” (180). Likewise, Gaskell does not ask her readers to go back to a previous mode of life, in which the curate always outranks the yeoman or the attorney. Rather, Gaskell locates the virtues that come from both sides of the middle class—those falling down and those rising up. In this way, Gaskell moves beyond the simplistic rich-poor divide of *Mary Barton* and forwards a more progressive message about class than some authors whose “Christmas books nearly always support a status quo—occasionally a status quo of the eighteenth century—

regarding the hierarchy of social relations” (Moore 7). Although she is clearly interested in social change in *The Moorland Cottage*, Gaskell rejects the “nostalgic status quo” that Moore sees in some Christmas literature (8), for she neither privileges the clerical Brownes over the yeoman Buxtons nor discourages the progressive social mobility that Buxton’s grandparents effected and Frank wishes for himself.

In the end, because Gaskell does not write about characters at the extremities of the social scale in *The Moorland Cottage*—titled aristocrats or the working poor—she can fantasize about class harmony through the marriage of Maggie and Frank. Gaskell accomplishes a similar end in her 1855 novel *North and South* through the union of the gentlewoman Margret Hale and the capitalist John Thornton. In that novel, as critics stress, “Margaret’s and Thornton’s marriage is a business arrangement” as much as an emotional exchange (Parker 1). Yet in her earlier Christmas novel, Gaskell glosses over the issue of money and emphasizes love as the foundation of middle-class marriage; as the narrator asks, “if marriage were to be made by due measurement and balance of character, and if others, with their scales, were to be the judges, what would become of all the beautiful services rendered by the loyalty of true love?” (53). The notion of love as central to marriage hardly seems novel, but it contrasts with the overt expediency in other fictional Victorian unions, as well as the long tradition of marriage being conceived almost solely as an economic transaction. By comparison, Langland argues that *Wives and Daughters* includes a “substantial revision of cherished ideas, such as that substance counts for more than surface,” in the way that Mrs. Gibson orchestrates the socially and materially advantageous marriages of her daughter and stepdaughter (142). *The Moorland Cottage* of fifteen years earlier however, still dwells in such “cherished ideas,”

suggesting that Gaskell understands her holiday readers do not want to remember the economic realities of their lives. Instead, as Moore contends, “the Christmas season allowed the audience of celebrants to enjoy a communal catharsis of their normal commercial greed” (101). After criticizing the excesses of capitalism, with the marriage of Maggie and Frank, Gaskell then allows readers to indulge in a vision of sacred love, “answerable . . . to God” (83), which is beyond the dictates of family, money, or class. Although she later revises and even dismantles this ideal in later works such as *Wives and Daughters*, in keeping with the Christmas season, Gaskell resorts to clichés in offering love as a salve for social ills and a more powerful human tie than money.

VI

As much as sentimentality and melodrama threaten to spoil the conclusion of Gaskell’s novel (particularly for modern readers), the author actually refuses to provide a completely perfect ending. The marriage of Maggie and Frank symbolically and rather superficially dissolves inter-class tensions, but Gaskell nonetheless leaves, what Moore would deem, two significant “challenges to mainstream society” lingering at the end of her story (8). For one, Gaskell rejects the possibility of reform or redemption that Dickens popularized, and secondly, she betrays skepticism about the family ideal, even while she celebrates the marriage of her protagonists. These deviations from the norm in *The Moorland Cottage* support the “Gossip” reviewer’s contention that each of the current Christmas books has “its own intrinsic interest . . . no two of them are exactly alike” (38), and they also point to Gaskell’s unwillingness to conform to all expectations or provide a formulaic story. In *Victorian Publishing and Mrs. Gaskell’s Work*, Hughes

and Lund employ a metaphor from “Christmas Storms and Sunshine” to argue that Gaskell found “‘vacant spaces’ in the ideology of her day, spaces into which she could slide things of value,” such that even when working in particular genres, “she always altered the tropes that generated these forms so as to make the final product uniquely her own” (1-2). Although these scholars do not consider *The Moorland Cottage*, certainly, as Gaskell’s one Christmas book, this work constitutes an engagement with a unique vacant space—an opportunity for Gaskell to make her own version of the Christmas book that offers challenges to its dictates while still reaching a large audience. To accomplish this, Gaskell essentially strikes a compromise with readers: she will provide the desired happy ending by uniting Maggie and Frank safely at home in England and not reduced to poverty, but she will not wholeheartedly endorse fictions such as that “Scrooges . . . are redeemable” (Moore 8), love conquers all, or that family provides a comforting shelter from the corruptions of the public world.

Reform and redemption were staples of Victorian literature, particularly at Christmastime, and Moore notes that “often, the characters’ ‘conversions’ take the form of a cynic’s transformation into a humanitarian” (13), as famously occurs with Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, or even as Gaskell tries to portray with Mr. Carson of *Mary Barton*. Yet of the three unlikeable, if not villainous, characters in *The Moorland Cottage*—Edward, Mrs. Browne, and Mr. Buxton—only the latter undergoes any transformation in finally admitting that he “can’t be blind to [Maggie’s] goodness” and sanctioning her union with Frank (89). As the “Gossip” reviewer rightly notes, although Mr. Buxton initially disapproves of his son’s romantic choice, “the wealthy father . . . is, nevertheless, a good, honest, and kindly-hearted man in the main” (42), which renders his acceptance

of Maggie less than miraculous or suggestive of society-wide reform. Still, even if Mr. Buxton's change of heart encourages Christmas readers to believe in the possibility of moral transformation, it remains overshadowed by the absence of a similar change in either Edward or Mrs. Browne. As with Mr. Buxton, Mrs. Browne is not a thoroughly bad character, merely "a weak woman" who "oppresses her gentle daughter" ("Gossip" 42). In turn, we might expect that she will also experience a moral revelation after the shipwreck and finally appreciate the goodness in Maggie, now her only surviving child. Mrs. Browne, however, fails to rejoice in Maggie's rescue and instead focuses her attention on the lost Edward, and as the narrator explains, "to this day it is the same. She prizes her dead son more than a thousand living daughters," although "Maggie treats her with such tender sympathy, never thinking of herself" (100). As the unrepentant mother, then, Mrs. Browne calls into question the family ideal that was not only typically espoused in the final scenes of Christmas literature, but was a self-defining feature of the English middle class as Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall find in the historical record.¹⁰

More so than Mr. Buxton and Mrs. Browne, Edward stands out as the villain of Gaskell's tale, both for his criminal activities and his selfish conviction that Maggie should "give up all thoughts of Frank" so that he will not "be taken and tried" (74). Obsessed with money and completely self-centered, Edward is the perfect candidate for a miraculous Christmas conversion. Indeed, Moore finds that "a major theme in Christmas books of the 1840s and 1850s [is] the fragmentation of the family," and "early samplings from the Christmas book subgenre privilege the tension over the lost son above all other subplots" (47). Victorian readers, then, might anticipate that Edward will recognize the

error of his ways, gain professional integrity, and learn to appreciate his devoted sister. Likewise, along with Maggie, readers would possibly entertain the hope that Edward “might yet repent, and be saved” (82), which would then attest to the redeeming power of middle class values. Yet Gaskell does not allow this expected transformation that would restore Edward to his family and society or resolve his unprincipled professionalism. Instead of steering Edward on a morally redemptive track, Gaskell simply kills him off during the shipwreck and thereby makes the “fragmentation of the family” permanent (Moore 47). As one of her resistances to the Christmas genre, Gaskell, unlike her character Mrs. Browne, ultimately fails to “privilege . . . the lost son above all other subplots” (Moore 47), and instead she asks readers to focus on the neglected daughter, which I will touch on briefly in the next section.

Just as Mrs. Browne’s “refusal to be comforted by that sweet daughter” clouds the image of domestic happiness at the ending of *The Moorland Cottage* (100), Edward’s inability to reform and his death also leave the middle-class family circle incomplete. Consequently, along with betraying skepticism about the possibility of personal reform, with Edward dead and Mrs. Browne emotionally distant, the image Gaskell leaves readers with does not correspond to the domestic reunion of the frontispiece illustration, capturing the “hearth-love” that Moore finds so common in middle-class Christmas literature (11). Moore recognizes this image as a “fantasy” that does not depict the characters or events of *The Moorland Cottage*, but she oversimplifies by suggesting that through the story “Gaskell narrates . . . the family reconciliation leading to this happy fireside scene” (67). The novel does end with reconciliation and reunion, but in an incomplete sense that prevents the title page illustration from being accurately symbolic

in the way Moore suggests. Such skepticism about domestic love contrasts with Gaskell's earlier story, "Christmas Storms and Sunshine," in which the reconciled neighbors join as a temporary family for their Christmas dinner. Instead, *The Moorland Cottage* shows Gaskell revising this earlier optimism and offering sentimentality on her own terms: she invests hope in romantic, matrimonial love, but not in family love, and idealizes her heroine Maggie, but in a sacrificial sense that does not and cannot change the facts of a corrupt society. In this way, Gaskell provides some hope for the middle class, particularly in the next generation symbolized by Frank and Maggie, but she does not pretend that those cardinal middle-class virtues of "integrity, honesty, generosity, courage, graciousness, politeness, [and] consideration for others" always triumph over the problems in the world (Himmelfarb 46).

VII

Still remembering *The Moorland Cottage* eight months after its release, in an August 1851 letter to Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë compared Maggie Browne with the heroine of another story she was reading and suggested this fictional woman "would have been as true to Husband and Children as your leal-hearted little Maggie was true to Frank" (*Letters of Charlotte* 677). Even while interested in her development as a character, few modern readers express the same level of adoration for Maggie however. For example, in her feminist reading of the story, Lumpkin argues that Maggie transforms into a passive being in need of rescuing, and that her "ending holds disturbing overtones, suggesting that the price women in fact pay for community can too easily become self-obliteration" (439). Interestingly, while this sacrificial quality of her

character might make modern readers uneasy, Gaskell's contemporaries often welcomed it as an impetus for sentimentality. The "Gossip" reviewer asserts "the story is constructed with a view . . . to illustrate the beauty of self-sacrificing virtue" (42), while Brontë, perhaps drawing on personal experience, wrote to Gaskell that "no thought can be truer than that of Mrs. Brown's persistent, irrational but most touching partiality for her son" (*Letters of Charlotte* 560). Indeed, as she wrote her story, Gaskell may have thought about her new friend whose brother Branwell Brontë, like Edward Browne, became the family disgrace and met a premature death. Seven years later, in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Gaskell writes of the Brontë girls: "these are not the first sisters who have laid their lives as a sacrifice before their brother's idolized wish" (102), and while fictional, Maggie Browne certainly belongs in this category of sacrificial sisters whom Victorians tended to find more moving, and even true to life, than modern readers have.¹¹

The contemporary idolization of Maggie, "among the sweetest creations of English fiction" ("Gossip" 42), reveals how Christmas books, in their unreality and emotional excess, fulfilled the needs of middle-class Victorian readers. As Moore explains, these "readers do not self-associate with a character; rather, they self-associate with an ideology" (99), and Maggie of course is pure ideology. Rather than a "truthful . . . portraiture" of a young woman as the "Gossip" reviewer would like to believe (42), Maggie is an embodiment of middle-class feminine ideals. She allows Gaskell's middle-class readers to renew their faith in their own ideology, which seemed threatened by so many unpleasant realities. The Mrs. Brownes and Edwards of the world may remain unredeemable, but the sweetness and virtue symbolized by Maggie provides a balance and helps readers believe in "those rights which in Life count for so much" (Chorley

1338). Consequently, if as Moore contends, “reading about Scrooge’s philanthropy either cathartically alleviates one’s need to do the same or, encourages one to take similar steps” (101), reading *The Moorland Cottage* clearly generates a reaction of the first type. By precluding reform in the story and investing all of her sentimentality in the self-sacrificing Maggie, Gaskell does not provide a model of change for readers to follow such that they will alter their own behavior to become better middle-class professionals or finally honor moral virtue as a more important marker of personal worth than wealth. Rather, Gaskell’s characterization encourages readers to weep over the unappreciated heroine and feel relief in this display of their emotions, which then indirectly affirms a sense of collective class values, even if society, both in fiction and reality, remains the same.

The fact that at least some contemporary readers found Maggie Browne worth crying over signals the success of *The Moorland Cottage* as a piece of literature that brought together the Victorian middle class through a shared emotional experience. In turn, for Gaskell to participate in this holiday literary tradition of questioning but also endorsing certain class ideals marks her initiation as a middle-class author, and one who her readers were now eager to turn to as a voice of “truth” about lives like their own. In the opinion of one reviewer, *The Moorland Cottage* brings “the manner of our authoress . . . pleasantly before the public” (Chorley 1337), implying that Gaskell presents herself favorably in this work and gains the credibility of readers who may have felt unsure about the author of *Mary Barton*. Nevertheless, while the story might have met the needs of her contemporary middle-class readers, Gaskell clearly remained unsatisfied with the story’s resolution and the lack of depth in her social analysis, as she revisits several of the

character types and themes in later works and offers more nuanced portrayals of how class issues surface in everyday life.

The works that follow *The Moorland Cottage* reopen questions of particular relevance to the middle class such as: how do traditional notions of status comport with modern social mobility? How can we enjoy wealth but avoid its potential for corruption? Do widening professional opportunities encourage moral slackness, and how can we manage social errands without the novelistic convenience of catastrophe? In her quest for answers to such questions, the fact that Gaskell never returned to the Christmas book genre suggests that in writing *The Moorland Cottage* she determined that this annual tradition was not a space in which she felt particularly confident or comfortable. Again, this uneasiness may be less about the “virtues to order” than the delivery system itself: the truncated Christmas novel that depends on “the profession of a purpose” as well as idealism and emotional excess (“Gossip” 38). This is not to say that Gaskell never again wrote to order or offered packaged virtues, for she certainly appointed herself the task of creating or at least highlighting virtues expressly for the reading public in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* as my next chapter explores. Rather, in her growing interest in (and comfort examining) the tensions within the middle class, Gaskell found other genres, other spaces, more conducive to the social critique that the Christmas book requires but so formulaically stifles.

CHAPTER THREE – EMBRACING THE MIDDLE CLASS IN
THE LIFE OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË

Such a life as Miss Brontë's I never heard of before.
 —*The Life of Charlotte Brontë*¹

I

If *The Moorland Cottage* initiates Elizabeth Gaskell as a voice of and for the middle class, her fiction that follows only strengthens this association as she continues to negotiate a balance between tradition and progress and between a society stratified by rank and a society stratified by money. In *Cranford*, *Ruth*, *North and South*, *My Lady Ludlow*, *Sylvia's Lovers*, *Cousin Phillis*, and *Wives and Daughters*—not to mention her many short stories—Gaskell offers social critique along with visions of ideal middle-class behavior that combine the liberating elements of professionalism and social mobility with the traditional elements of paternalism and moral virtue. These major novels of Gaskell's career include increasingly complex middle-class characters and tensions that often resolve less dramatically than in *The Moorland Cottage*. As most of these works have already received ample critical attention, often touching on Gaskell's representations of class and her role in interrogating middle-class values, in this final chapter I turn to *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, first published in March, 1857.² Gaskell's non-fiction, including this famous, controversial biography, further demonstrates the author not merely passively explaining the middle class, but working to construct and affirm a shared middle-class identity. Critical readings of *The Life* typically focus on the biographical genre, the relationship between the two female writers, and the work's feminist implications or lack thereof.³ To include *The Life* in an analysis of Gaskell's evolving representation of social class, as with *The Moorland Cottage*, is far less

common, but it illuminates a point in her writing career when Gaskell most fully aligned herself with the middle class.

Scholars reading *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*—whether focusing on the author or on the subject of the biography—invariably emphasize that the Charlotte Brontë of Gaskell’s imagination is a construction based on “two parallel currents—her life as Currer Bell, the author,” and “her life as Charlotte Brontë, the woman” (*Life* 258-59), with Gaskell clearly privileging the latter. By highlighting certain elements of Brontë’s character and minimizing others, Gaskell acknowledges the “great genius” of her friend (52), but also transforms her into a suffering domestic heroine, much like Maggie Browne from *The Moorland Cottage*, in an attempt to distance Brontë from the negative associations of her writing. Until Gaskell’s intimate biography, the public generally knew more about Brontë as an author than as a woman, and while still cloaked under the anonymity of her male pseudonym, reviewers had judged Brontë based on her shocking first novel *Jane Eyre* (1847). Certainly, some contemporary reviews recognize the genius of Charlotte Brontë and to a lesser extent of her sisters Emily and Anne, but all three of the writers and their works had been labeled “coarse.”⁴ Most damaging to Charlotte Brontë was the scathing review of *Jane Eyre*, the book she provocatively subtitled “an autobiography,” by Elizabeth Rigby in the *Quarterly Review*, who speculates that the author, “if . . . a woman at all,” must be “one who has, for some sufficient reason, long forfeited the society of her own sex” (111). Additionally, Rigby detects “a murmuring against the comforts of the rich and against the privations of the poor” in *Jane Eyre*, and she suggests that the author belongs not to “civilized society”—meaning the middle and

upper classes—but to the discontented lower class “which has overthrown authority . . . and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home” (109-10).

Although Gaskell may not have believed negative reviews such as Rigby’s, on her first meeting with the Yorkshire novelist in 1850, the sociable wife and mother from a comparably privileged background claimed “such a life as Miss Brontë’s I never heard of before” (334). Consequently, her task in *The Life* seven years later becomes not only acquainting readers with the real Brontë, “this great, unknown genius, which suddenly appeared amongst us” after the publication of *Jane Eyre* (252), but at the same time making her life the kind that *was* heard of before and thus not outside the bounds of Victorian middle-class respectability. Taking a cue from one of Brontë’s own letters about Harriet Martineau, Gaskell’s biography essentially argues that her subject “is not a person to be judged by her writings alone, but rather by her own deeds and life, than which nothing can be more exemplary or nobler” (qtd. in *Life* 352). To accomplish this, Gaskell recognizes that only by portraying Brontë as the kind of “every-day” character critics admired in *The Moorland Cottage* can she counter the “hard judgments . . . passed by ignorant reviewers” (*Life* 397). In this process, Gaskell constructs Brontë not merely as feminine, as scholars point out, but also necessarily as middle class. For according to Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, “gender and class always operate together,” or in other words, “class always takes a gendered form” (13). To make Charlotte Brontë familiar to their shared middle-class readership and to refute charges of coarseness and social ignorance, Gaskell’s authoritative narrative in *The Life* removes Brontë from the objectionable associations of her upbringing and frames her life through shared values that ostensibly link the middle classes across Victorian England.

II

The Life of Charlotte Brontë figures prominently, although of course differently, in scholarship on Elizabeth Gaskell and on Charlotte Brontë. While Brontë scholars often criticize the biography as inaccurate and “riven with conflicts and contradictions” (Miller 83), Gaskell scholars typically consider the work as the author’s most substantial and interesting engagement with the figure of the woman writer. Additionally, many scholars see the biography as a turning point in Gaskell’s development as an author. Irene Wiltshire for example names *The Life* as a “watershed” in Gaskell’s career, and she argues that “without this experience [Gaskell] might not have developed the mature vision that is evident in her later works” (101). Yet along with stimulating Gaskell’s creativity and leading to deeper fictional characters and themes in her later novels as Wiltshire suggests, *The Life*, which became yet another frustrating publishing ordeal for Gaskell, also ushers in a more confident writerly voice, in which Gaskell finally identifies with the middle class. In the biography, ostensibly a work of truth, Gaskell cannot hide behind an equivocating narrator or profess ignorance about her subject. While she claims not to judge—although clearly she does—her defense of Brontë depends on intimacy with the misunderstood woman along with knowledge of “the ways of the world” that Brontë seemed to lack (243). Indeed, Maria H. Frawley identifies Gaskell’s simultaneous roles as an insider and an outsider in *The Life* as an instance of ethnography as well as biography. For example, in reading the long description of the population in Yorkshire that opens *The Life*, Frawley argues that as a well-known middle-class woman, “Gaskell . . . positions herself as a kind of ‘elite overseer,’ to use Nancy Armstrong’s words—one uniquely able to provide readers with knowledge of ‘peculiar forms of population and

society’” (185). This supervisory role in turn implies that the novelist turned biographer recognizes that she writes for, and represents, a widely shared middle-class perspective.

Both Gaskell’s role as an “elite overseer” and her work, in editor Elisabeth Jay’s words, “‘composing,’ ‘arranging,’ ‘constructing,’ [and] ‘weaving’” (xvi), serve as the basis for my analysis in this chapter. Scholars have already documented Gaskell’s own references, in letters to friends and publishers, about her efforts to shape Brontë’s image through *The Life*, thereby establishing that she constructs, fictionalizes, and even mythologizes her subject. Starting from these assumptions and drawing on the similarities between *The Life* and Victorian novels, this chapter of the thesis addresses how Gaskell carefully sets the scene, introduces the characters, and charts the narrative of her protagonist Charlotte Brontë, all within a middle-class framework that encourages readers to empathize with “the plain, short-sighted, oddly-dressed” Yorkshire novelist (90). Essentially, Gaskell uses novelistic conventions to make Brontë as appealing as a fictional heroine on a journey from domestic repression to fame and matrimony. Throughout this process of establishing Brontë as inherently middle class, and thus not coarse or rebelliously Chartist as she had been labeled, Gaskell ultimately presents herself—the writer-narrator—as an authority on respectable middle-class life, and this growing confidence in her authorial position forms the final part of my argument.

III

Gaskell opens *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* with an extended setting of the scene, taking readers on a journey to the churchyard where, in 1857, all of the Brontë family lay except for the aging patriarch Patrick; Charlotte Brontë’s name does not even appear until

the end of this first chapter as Gaskell pauses over the most recent addition to “that mournful list” of departed family members on the church wall (16). Yet as Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund point out, this well-known introduction was not completely original to Gaskell’s biography. A memorial poem, “Haworth Churchyard, April 1855,” by Matthew Arnold, as well as an “obituary in *Sharpe’s [London Magazine]* indicate that the much-noted opening of the *Life of Charlotte Brontë* in part merely recirculated entrees to Brontë’s life already published,” including, ironically, a gossipy letter of Gaskell’s that wound up in the hands of the *Sharpe’s* journalist (132).⁵ Accordingly, the authors go on to discuss how “this recycling clarifies . . . the contrasting, and brilliant, rhetorical use Gaskell made of landscape in the full-length biography,” such that the uncivilized moorland and its inhabitants come to account for the eccentricities in Brontë’s fiction (132). As Hughes and Lund summarize, “in Gaskell’s hands the metaphor of coarseness circulated by obituaries is dissolved back into metonymic juxtaposition or sequence by displacing coarseness from Brontë and her fiction onto the landscape and local population” (133).

Such an assessment of the Yorkshire scenes supports Gaskell’s own rationale for this part of the biography, which she gives at the beginning of the second chapter:

For a right understanding of the life of my dear friend, Charlotte Brontë, it appears to me more necessary in her case than in most others, that the reader should be made acquainted with the peculiar forms of population and society amidst which her earliest years were passed. (17)

This belief in contextualization that Gaskell sees as crucial for Brontë actually echoes a passage from her 1853 novel *Ruth*, in which Gaskell suggests that “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” (6). Consequently, if the project of *The Life* were to succeed, Gaskell needed to present Brontë as that “one in a hundred” able to break from her peculiar childhood environment. By situating Brontë in her Yorkshire homeland, adopting the overlapping roles of biographer and ethnographer that Frawley discusses, Gaskell turns Brontë’s story into one of rare moral triumph of interest to her middle-class audience.

In her project of framing Brontë and eventually including her within the modern middle class, Gaskell explicitly draws the reader’s attention to the social atmosphere of Yorkshire and its lack of civility relative to the rest of the nation. Gaskell leads readers to associate “the gradual progress of the world” with a middle-class sensibility that has not yet reached the frontier of Yorkshire (19), which in turn explains any apparent, but not inherent, strangeness in Brontë. This link between the middle ranks of society and a collective understanding of modern, respectable life is established from the very start of the biography. In the opening paragraphs, Gaskell takes readers on a journey to the Brontë parsonage in Haworth that involves a visible retreat from civilization and everything familiar. Pausing in Keighley, the largest commercial center near the village of Haworth, Gaskell observes:

In passing hastily through the town, one hardly perceives where the necessary lawyer and doctor can live, so little appearance is there of any dwellings of the professional middle-class, such as abound in our old cathedral towns. In fact, nothing can be more opposed than the state of society, the modes of thinking, the standards of reference on all points of morality, manners, and even politics and religion, in such a new manufacturing place as Keighley in the north, and any stately, sleepy, picturesque cathedral town in the south. (11)

This passage, from the second paragraph of the biography, contains several notable elements: the naming of the middle class, an initial definition of who is included in the

this category, and a contrast between north and south that echoes Gaskell's last major work before *The Life*, the social-problem novel *North and South*.

Gaskell's mention of "the professional middle-class" here stands out due to her typical silence on this social category. Whereas *Mary Barton* divides society into only the rich and the poor, and *The Moorland Cottage* subtly hints at the middle-class status of its characters, the explicit introduction of a middle social category at the beginning of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (which also occurs in the opening of *Ruth*) attests to Gaskell's willingness to move beyond unrealistic class binaries.⁶ As one of only half a dozen uses in all her writing, the specific term "middle-class" in this passage suggests an attempt to ground *The Life* deliberately in a middle-class perspective. By making the lack, or rather the apparent lack, of doctors and lawyers noteworthy, Gaskell in turn affirms the importance of the middle class that these professionals represent, while her use of the word "necessary" links them to modern life. Gaskell plays on an assumption that readers will agree with her about the necessity of the medical and legal professions in any respectable community, and that in turn these readers will view the Yorkshire of Brontë's youth as detrimentally devoid of these civilizing features. Likewise, Gaskell underscores the alien nature of Yorkshire by affirming that "nothing can be more opposed than the state of society" and all it entails in the north compared to the south. Her readers, Gaskell assumes, come from the south, or at least not from Yorkshire, which makes their reference for "morality, manners . . . politics and religion" non-northern; and by affirming that this northern culture is "opposed" to that of the rest of the country, Gaskell encourages readers to view it as inferior, which the ensuing depictions of Yorkshire as harsh and violent quickly confirm.

In invoking this contrast between north and south, however, Gaskell reveals the flexibility or relativity of these categories, which she uses to foster a shared middle-class vantage point. In the context of *The Life*, “north” refers to the backward Yorkshire, while several years earlier in *North and South*, “north” refers to the industrial city Milton (analogous to Manchester), and the north-south divide in that novel reflects clichéd oppositions of industry and agriculture, of new money and old money, of progress and tradition. These contrasts reappear in *The Life*, but Gaskell redraws the boundaries in this work, such that northern industrial cities including her home of Manchester now fit into the general southern category in being relatively civilized compared to the wilds of Yorkshire. In reality, Haworth parsonage was only about thirty miles from Manchester, but it might as well have been a hundred, in signifying the difference between, in Brontë’s own words, “civilization” and “barbarism, loneliness, and liberty” (qtd. in *Life* 456n‘a’).⁷ As the narrator of the biography, Gaskell takes care to position herself as a “stranger” and “foreigner” in Yorkshire (17, 11); even in her proximity in terms of miles, Gaskell does not belong to the “wild, rough population” of the north (17), but to the civilized, generalized south, along with most readers. Any aberrations in “the state of society” or “the modes of thinking” in Manchester, which remains a far cry from a “picturesque cathedral town in the south” (11), become trivial when compared to a place as uncultured as Yorkshire. Thus, employing and redefining the common oppositions associated with north and south, Gaskell both creates a boundary that places Yorkshire on the far side of civilization, and then throughout the biography, asks readers to let Brontë transcend this boundary and be welcomed into the fold of the Victorian middle class.

As Gaskell continues the biography and eventually introduces the Brontë family living in “the midst of this lawless, yet not unkindly population” (31), she continues to remind readers of the association between middle-class life and civility, which she appears to be an expert on as the author-narrator. In launching into a description of “the people of Haworth,” Gaskell provides a brief but telling overview of the available goods and services based on the range of occupations other than common laborers: “a few were mill-owners and manufacturers in a small way; there were also some shopkeepers for the humbler and everyday wants; but for medical advice, for stationery, books, law, dress, or dainties, the inhabitants had to go to Keighley” (39). Here again, Gaskell suggests that Yorkshire is devoid of a thriving middle class, for in the small village of Haworth those staples of middle-class society, doctors and lawyers, are truly missing, as opposed to simply lacking visibility as in Keighley. While Gaskell acknowledges the presence of “mill-owners,” which might recall wealthy, commanding figures such as her character John Thornton from *North and South*, with the words “small way” she clearly tries to minimize them as a potential sign of a Yorkshire middle class. She cannot deny that capitalism and industry have reached the region, but Gaskell tries to preserve the impression that these elements exist in a crude, nebulous form, as “the intercourse of trade failed, for a long time, to bring amenity and civilization into these outlying hamlets, or widely scattered dwellings” (20).⁸

In the same breath as she discusses this professional makeup of the community, Gaskell observes the absence of prestigious goods in Haworth such as “stationary, books . . . dress, or dainties” (39), which would signal the presence of lower-middle class shopkeepers in the village, as well as require middle-class purchasers aware of the

fashionable products available in other parts of the nation. Thus, as this description of the local economy suggests, the Brontë children lacked acceptable peers with whom to interact, as well as the commodities of middle-class life associated with literacy and appropriately feminine household management. As with the north-south distinction, the assumption here is that Gaskell and her readers belong to, and possess the knowledge of, this middle class culture that she establishes as a standard. Hence, in passages such as this we see Gaskell both aligning herself with the English middle class and contributing to its evolving definition by endorsing a sense of class-identity based on common knowledge and on criteria such as geography, professional life, and consumer goods.

Underscoring the lack of social equals for the Brontës, along with confirming the general backwardness of the region, motivates many of Gaskell's Yorkshire anecdotes and character sketches. The biographer explains that the Brontë girls "grew up out of childhood into girlhood bereft, in a singular manner, of all such society as would have been natural to their age, sex, and station" (44), and while part of this deprivation reflects their early motherlessness, Gaskell clearly wishes to show that the family also lacked opportunities to socialize. Overall, Gaskell gives the impression of an excessively masculine society in Haworth and the surrounding moorland, in which the possible social equals for the Brontës prove to be of the "savage yeoman" variety (24), characterized by drunkenness, inhospitableness, love of cock-fighting, and vengeful behavior. Indeed, it is not that Yorkshire lacks elites, but rather that the families at the top of the local society do not conform to the rational, professional, and moral ideals associated with the Victorian middle class as the nation's new and natural leaders. Rather, the wealthy or powerful of the region are backward and decaying, for "the land has often been held by

one family since the days of the Tudors,” but “the owners are, in fact, the remains of the old yeomanry—small squires—who are rapidly becoming extinct as a class” (23). Yet these “remains of the old yeomanry” have not transformed into respectable middle-class men such as Mr. Buxton and his son Frank from *The Moorland Cottage*, for as Gaskell goes on to explain, either such a squire loses his property after falling “into idle, drinking habits,” or he leaves “the old plodding life of a landowner with small capital” and “turns manufacturer” (23). Even in this latter case, which perhaps promises the civilizing influences of middle-class industry, Gaskell makes it clear that these novice manufacturers of the north still fail to embrace the broader economic and ideological changes in Victorian England.

Typified in *The Life* as “independent, wilful, and full of grim humour,” as well as, more positively, “shrewd, sagacious, [and] energetic” (28), Yorkshire residents do not match what Gaskell sets up as the cultural norm or ideal: a virtuous middle-class professionalism of the kind she and her husband, the Unitarian writer and minister, embodied. Consequently, any hope for the Brontës, and for Charlotte in particular, depends on wresting her from the regressive, feudalistic society of her upbringing and promoting her innate affiliation with progressive, middle-class values including a “commitment to an imperative moral code,” which Davidoff and Hall see as “one of the strongest strands binding together urban and rural, nonconformist and Anglican, Whig, Tory and Radical, manufacturer, farmer and professional, wealthy and modest” into a collective English middle class (25). Indeed, although they were friends, Gaskell and Brontë differed greatly in terms of their political and religious affiliations and their personal backgrounds.⁹ Yet within *The Life*, as biographer and subject, the two women

become linked with contemporary readers in an affirming portrayal of the Victorian middle class that Gaskell now feels comfortable championing at this point in her career.

IV

With her setting in place, after the opening chapters Gaskell turns her attention to the characters that will play a role in her biographical drama and further illuminate her subject's character. Charlotte Brontë's correspondents, particularly her friend, the "respectable, unintellectual, ladylike" Ellen Nussey (Miller 66), and of course Gaskell herself, help situate Brontë in a network of middle-class peers beyond the confines of Haworth, but it is the other Brontës, the entire "rare family" (*Life* 100), that make the biography so memorable and novelistic. Lucasta Miller, for example, suggests that the biography creates a "myth" or "legend" of "three lonely sisters playing out their tragic destiny on top of a windswept moor with a mad misanthrope father and doomed brother" (62), and this apt summary of the biography's plot makes it easy to see how the Brontës of *The Life* resemble characters out of Gaskell's own fiction. By assigning the various family members specific and often unflattering roles, Gaskell creates vital contrasts to her heroine. As Suzann Bick summarizes, "Gaskell obviously felt that against a background of barely contained violence and overt eccentricity, Charlotte would appear as a rather normal young woman. There was no point, therefore, in suppressing—or softening—the oddities of Patrick, Emily, or Branwell" (38). Similarly, Miller explains that contrary to suggestions from her publisher George Smith, Gaskell "steadfastly refused to tone down her account of the 'domestic peculiarities' of Charlotte's childhood," including the harsh portrayal of Mr. Brontë that contributes to the image of Charlotte as the suffering

daughter (74). Both Bick and Miller rightly underscore how Gaskell employs the other Brontë family members as foils to Charlotte. Nevertheless, when it comes to class, Gaskell is unwilling to compromise the status of the family completely since she wants to maintain the distance between Charlotte and the roughness of the Yorkshire environment. With enough working against Brontë, Gaskell does not want to exacerbate any ambiguity about her social position by presenting her family as anything but middle class and respectable. *The Life* undoubtedly makes use of “instances of eccentricity” in Patrick Brontë (44), and in the children Branwell, Emily, and Anne, but even with their failings, the family remains essentially middle class and professional, and unlike the neighborhood “savage yeoman” types (24).

In her effort to contextualize Charlotte Brontë thoroughly, Gaskell provides brief histories of her parents, Patrick Brontë and Maria Branwell, whose backgrounds confirm their daughter Charlotte’s respectable, middle-class origins. As Maria Branwell (Mrs. Brontë) died in 1821 when Charlotte was only five years old, her history hardly seems essential to the biography of her daughter. Nonetheless, in the hands of Gaskell she becomes a brief character in her own right as “the gentle, delicate wife, whose health . . . was failing” (31), and then as the dead mother haunting the rest of the text. Beyond emphasizing the angelic nature of Mrs. Brontë, which conveniently passes down to Charlotte, Gaskell also investigates her class background and explains that Mrs. Brontë “was the third daughter of Mr. Thomas Branwell, merchant, of Penzance . . . and, both on father’s and mother’s side, the Branwell family were sufficiently well descended to enable them to mix in the best society that Penzance then afforded” (33). Presumably this concise genealogy suffices to establish Mrs. Brontë as from a middle-class family, yet,

curiously, Gaskell elaborates on Mrs. Brontë's origins (and her sister Miss Branwell's) by extensively quoting from John Davy's *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Humphrey Davy*. From this 1836 work, a biography of the author's famous scientist brother, Gaskell inserts a section characterizing the society of Penzance, which she calls "that primitive state" (33), at the time when the Branwell girls lived there. In the passage, Davy hints at the formation of the middle classes when "the younger sons of gentlemen were often of necessity brought up to some trade or mechanical art," but as Gaskell does regarding Yorkshire, he frowns on the fact that the interests of the "middle and higher classes . . . were rarely of a dignified or intellectual kind" (qtd. in *Life* 34).

Therefore, largely supported by this excerpt from Davy, the background of Mrs. Brontë and Miss Branwell appears to send mixed messages. On the one hand, Penzance sounds as uncivilized as Yorkshire, but on the other, the Branwells fit into the "best society" of the region and, as Gaskell asserts, "in the Branwell family itself, the violence and irregularity of nature" that Davy reports "did not exist" (35). This combination of environmental deprivation and personal virtue serves as a model for Gaskell's entire biography. Like her daughter Charlotte in Yorkshire, Maria Branwell lived in a limited and relatively uncivilized region but remained "patient, cheerful, and pious" with "a well-cultivated mind" as befit middle-class gender ideals (37). Contrary to Gaskell's claim that "this extract . . . bears some reference to the life of Miss Brontë" (34), such as illustrating that Aunt Branwell had limited social knowledge to offer her nieces, the introduction of the Branwells through a passage from Davy's biography actually reiterates the possibility of escaping environmental determination. Both the illustrious chemist Sir Humphrey Davy and the relatively unknown Branwell family invoked in this passage remind readers

that even at the margins of the nation exist individuals who by virtue of their professional brilliance or “refinement and purity of character” (35), belong to a collective English middle class.

While Mrs. Brontë and Miss Branwell have limited parts to play in Charlotte Brontë’s biography, the novelist’s father, Patrick Brontë, takes a starring role. Before introducing Maria Branwell, Gaskell recounts the basics of Patrick Brontë’s life, from his humble birth in a large Irish family, through his astounding efforts at self-education, his work as a tutor, and his degree at Cambridge that allowed him to join the clergy. Such a narrative of a marginalized boy rising to the profession of an Anglican clergyman echoes that of Harry Gregson, the illiterate poacher’s son who rises to become the vicar on a country estate, from Gaskell’s *My Lady Ludlow* published in 1858, and it also perfectly corresponds to the social implications that Davidoff and Hall associate with late eighteenth-century evangelicalism. As the historians explain, “a new claim was asserted, that *salvation* was the mark of gentility, that an artisan’s son from a rural backwater who managed to educate himself and become a minister, had as much right to that epithet as an aristocrat” (73). Thus, Mr. Brontë demonstrates the reality of changing social conditions and the loosening of absolute class boundaries that occurred in the traditional arena of the church as well as in the rapidly growing realm of industrial commerce.

Always guiding her readers, Gaskell’s choice of words in this passage focus less on the social implications of Mr. Brontë’s education, namely that he moves up in class, and more on how he illustrates professionalism and an open-society at its best—the consequences of which include class mobility. Interpreting Mr. Brontë’s history for readers, Gaskell explains that it “shows a powerful and remarkable character, originating

and pursuing a purpose in a resolute and independent manner. Here is a youth—a boy of sixteen—separating himself from his family, and determining to maintain himself; and that, not in the hereditary manner by agricultural pursuits, but by the labour of his brain” (32). As Gaskell recognizes, in early Victorian England, people, particularly men, no longer had to follow “the hereditary” path but could choose their own profession as best fit their interest and skill. Unlike the shameful upstart Mr. Carson in *Mary Barton*, who gains wealth without also gaining the mind and manners to occupy a position of middle or upper class leadership, Mr. Brontë, according to Gaskell, deserves his success due to the virtues of “intelligence,” “forethought,” and “character” associated with the ideal of self-help (32). In other words, Mr. Brontë’s history attests to the positive potential of social mobility, and in portraying him in this favorable light (as opposed to suppressing the story of his origins), Gaskell also necessarily endorses the upward rising she criticizes in *Mary Barton*.

Thus, as much as Gaskell tries to assign responsibility to the other Brontë family members for Charlotte’s social isolation, coarseness, depressed spirits, and recurring illnesses, in terms of the family’s social position Gaskell dare not present the Brontës as inappropriately risen out of their station or fearful of social backsliding. Rather, as presented by Gaskell, the narratives of both of Brontë’s parents speak to exceptionalism and the ability to retain or gain respectability independent of circumstances of birth. As portrayed in the biography, even the later family difficulties such as Branwell Brontë’s professional failures and sexual scandal, or the need for the Brontë girls to seek employment as governesses, lack the suggestion of class instability or the “universal unfixedness of position” that W. J. Fox recognized in the middle classes in 1835 (qtd. in

Gash 24).¹⁰ Similarly, the 1864 *Cornhill* series on middle-class education attaches no stigma to “the daughters of the most active, intelligent, practical and domestic class of English citizens” who must often become “educators, or professional workers” (“Middle-Class Education” 559, 567). By placing all of the Brontës in this respectable, professional middle class, Gaskell never hints that the family, like the fictional Carsons of *Mary Barton*, do not deserve their social position or lack the morality it requires. Instead, notwithstanding their undue share of tragedy, linked back to the harsh environment, Gaskell familiarizes the Brontës as a typical middle-class family: intellectual and charitable, “Protestant to the backbone” with a “warm regard for Church and State” (174, 142), caring employers of servants, and keepers of a modest but comfortable home.

V

As characters, the Brontë family members play a vital role in the biography, but the protagonist of *The Life* of course remains Charlotte Brontë herself. In one sense the dilemma Gaskell faces with Charlotte Brontë echoes the one in *North and South* that she gives to her heroine Margaret Hale, who “tried to settle that most difficult problem for women, how much was to be utterly merged in obedience to authority, and how much might be set apart for freedom in working” (377). Yet unlike a fictional character that Gaskell can easily maneuver into a narrative of proper middle class-romance or abandon to unconventionality with few consequences, the real person of Charlotte Brontë required, in Gaskell’s opinion, moral vindication. Consequently, showcasing her “obedience to authority” takes precedence over her “freedom in working.” In the words of Miller, “Gaskell’s determination to detach Charlotte from all that was ‘coarse’—even

if that meant dissociating her from her own writings—was absolute” (73). Thus, *The Life* strains to highlight the womanly, self-sacrificing elements of Brontë’s character that the public knew less about. To accomplish this in the most persuasive manner, Gaskell allows Brontë to speak for herself through extensive excerpts from letters, which as Miller explains, creates an unprecedented level of intimacy for a nineteenth-century biography. This personal correspondence suggests authenticity while obscuring Gaskell’s role in selecting, excerpting, and framing, but still, with so much original material, we cannot dismiss Gaskell’s biography as an outright fiction. Instead, we must realize, even as Gaskell herself did, that *The Life* offers a strategic view of Brontë’s life, aimed at making it the kind that middle-class readers associated with respectability.

Recognizing the connection between a career in the Anglican Church and upper-middle class, if not genteel status, we might expect that as the daughter of a clergyman Charlotte Brontë’s social position would be uncomplicated and unquestioned. Yet this was evidently not the case, particularly because her efforts at anonymity meant that reviewers could judge Brontë solely on her writing. For example, in her review of *Jane Eyre*, Rigby does not hesitate to point out where the novel’s heroine makes social errors, and in turn, the reviewer assumes that the novelist possesses “a total ignorance of the habits of society” (111). This criticism in the review amounts to an accusation that Brontë did not move in proper social circles or understand the codes of respectable behavior, the latter of which, as feminist scholar Elizabeth Langland points out, was an essential part of middle-class womanhood. As Langland argues, in the Victorian era “status became a fluid thing, increasingly dependent upon the manipulation of social signs” (26), and this “work of managing the class question and displaying the signs of middle-class status”

devolved primarily on women (8-9). Yet whereas Brontë had apparently not mastered this process of class signification, Gaskell was already an expert, and her writing continually reveals an awareness of “the habits of society” that Rigby mentions and of the assumed connection between behavior and social class, between outward actions and relative social worth.

In *Wives and Daughters*, for example, one of the town gossips discusses the heroine’s suspicious meetings with the land agent Mr. Preston, and although she does not know the true (innocent) nature of these encounters, Mrs. Goodenough quickly links actions with status, criticizing Molly Gibson for “going out at dusk to meet her sweetheart, just as if she was my Sally or your Jenny . . . she might as well be a scullery-maid at onest” (501). While Molly regains the trust of the community and does not suffer any real loss in status from this episode, it nonetheless serves as a reminder that behavior attests to class, and some actions are only seen as acceptable for people of certain social spheres. Brontë may never have had clandestine meetings with young men that would threaten her social standing, but certainly many aspects of her life and fiction did not immediately speak to respectable, middle-class behavior. While Gaskell’s entire characterization of her subject aims to “show what a noble, true, and tender woman Charlotte Brontë really was” (396), meaning middle class and feminine, I will touch on two illustrative instances, dress and love, the knowledge and handling of which attest to Gaskell’s middle-class status as much as Brontë’s.

Dress stands out as one of the many seemingly trivial matters that Gaskell highlights in her biography in an effort to help middle-class readers, particularly of course women readers, relate to Charlotte Brontë. Modern feminist scholars are

particularly inclined to recognize clothing as a socially meaningful element of Victorian life, and according to Langland, “details of dress, always associated with status, took on increasing subtlety as indicators of class rank within the middle classes” (34). Likewise, dress historian Rachel Worth believes that “the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell are extremely enlightening . . . for their delineation of class as construed through specific styles of dress and specific fabrics” (58).¹¹ In *The Life*, then, clothing presents a possible problem as a sign of Brontë’s failure in the realm of middle-class femininity, since, for example, her sister “Emily had taken a fancy to the fashion, ugly and preposterous even during its reign, of gigot sleeves, and persisted in wearing them long after they were ‘gone out.’ Her petticoats, too, had, not a curve or a wave in them, but hung straight and long, clinging to her lank figure” (166). Furthermore, beyond this association with her unfashionable sister, Brontë had apparently failed to clothe her fictional characters appropriately, for in her review, Rigby insinuates that the author must be a man as “no woman attires another in such fancy dresses as Jane’s ladies assume” (111). Through careful maneuvering on Gaskell’s part, however, such alleged ignorance of flattering and socially-appropriate apparel serves as another illustration of how Brontë eventually transcends the disadvantages of her early life. Recurring references to clothing function first as a sign of Brontë’s early social deprivation, then as learning experience, and ultimately as evidence of her “gentle breeding” rather than social ignorance (311). As in many of her fictional works, including *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters*, in *The Life*, Gaskell reaffirms the importance of dress as a marker of class status and femininity, drawing on the specifically upper middle-class “emphasis . . . on subtle understatement in apparel” rather than ostentatious displays of fashion (Langland 35).

To reach the point where readers see Brontë as simply and elegantly dressed as befitting her middle-class position, Gaskell first has to grapple with the public knowledge that as children the Brontë girls had “strange, odd, insular ideas about dress” (166), as their Belgian schoolfellows noticed when Charlotte and Emily Brontë lived abroad to study French. To account for this social ignorance in terms of fashion, Gaskell locates several contributing factors, including the lack of shops for “dress, or dainties” in Haworth (39), the early death of Mrs. Brontë which left Mr. Brontë to raise daughters (nearly) without female aid, and their spinster Aunt Branwell’s hopelessly out-of-date sense of style. Thus, in writing about Brontë as a teenager, Gaskell asks her readers to “think of her as a little, set, antiquated girl, very quiet in manners, and very quaint in dress” (75), though, importantly, through no fault of her own. For one, as an evangelical clergyman, “Mr. Brontë wished to make his children hardy, and indifferent to the pleasures of eating and dress,” and as the knowledgeable Gaskell confirms, “in the latter he succeeded, as far as regarded his daughters” (42). Likewise, Aunt Branwell “on whom the duty of dressing her nieces principally devolved, had never been in society since she left Penzance, eight or nine years before, and the Penzance fashions of that day were still dear to her heart” (75). Noble or kind as their intentions may have been, neither Mr. Brontë nor Aunt Branwell manage the household with the kind of success Gaskell imagines in her character Mrs. Gibson from *Wives and Daughters*, who recognizes the importance of selecting appropriate, class-signifying clothing for the young women of a middle-class household.

Fortunately, at least in Gaskell’s opinion, Brontë rectified this early disadvantage in terms of clothing once she experienced the wider world and discovered her innate

“feminine taste” and “love for modest, dainty, neat attire” (356), which could so appropriately signal her position as a respectable woman of limited means. To show this transformation from “very quaint in dress” to fashion-conscious, Gaskell brilliantly allows Brontë to speak for herself through quotations from personal letters. In 1851, for example, Brontë wrote to her friend Ellen Nussey, requesting assistance with the purchase of some “lace cloaks, both black and white,” and she spends a full paragraph enumerating the details involved in this fashion decision (qtd. in *Life* 356). Of this letter, Miller suggests that it “lets us share an everyday private moment between two female friends, but is also used by Gaskell as proof of Miss Brontë’s ‘feminine taste’ and ‘love for modest, dainty, neat attire,’ moral indicators of her irreproachable womanliness” (67). While Miller correctly assesses how the letter contributes to Gaskell’s feminine picture of Brontë, we should remember that this instance is one of the more positive references to dress in the biography, occurring late in the second volume, and after the publication of *Jane Eyre*.

The earlier passages in *The Life*, in which Gaskell deliberately mentions the poor and strange clothing the Brontës wore, make such later references to cloaks, bonnets, gloves, and scarves all the more relevant. In the manner of Gaskell’s fictional heroine Molly Gibson, as the protagonist of *The Life*, Brontë matures in her sense of style and thus her womanly appeal. In turn, tainted by a penchant for “preposterous” sleeves and petticoats, Emily Brontë, as Jay suggests, is once again “offered up as the scapegoat” (xx), while her more sociable sister Charlotte learns how to present herself properly and in accordance with modern taste. A sign of Brontë’s true success in mastering the art of dressing is the reaction, or rather lack of one, from the ever style-conscious Gaskell upon

their first meeting. Although she gossiped freely in her letter to Catherine Winkworth about Brontë's "*undeveloped*" body, "altogether *plain*" face, and unique childhood, Gaskell apparently found nothing to criticize in terms of dress in the "little lady in a black-silk gown" (*Letters* 123).¹²

While dress provides Gaskell with a feminine, class-signifying detail to trace throughout Brontë's life, in the manner of a fictional heroine, "one of the deepest interests of her life centres naturally round her marriage" (396), and this ultimately determines her success as a middle-class woman. In her fiction such as *North and South* and *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell often increases the drama by entangling her heroines in accusations of sexual impropriety, but she also easily resolves these scandals as mere misunderstandings. Charlotte Brontë's romantic past, however, as that of a real person, required great discretion to avoid any hint of personal scandal, which meant the deliberate suppression of details about her infatuation with Constantin Heger, a married teacher she studied with in Belgium. Critics routinely point to the handling of the Heger relationship as evidence of Gaskell's misrepresentation of the truth in *The Life*, and Miller even suggests that Gaskell highlights the sexual scandal of Charlotte's brother to deflect attention from Heger: "Branwell's adulterous affair was thus neatly made to stand in for the unrequited feelings Charlotte herself had for a married man, leaving the heroine of the *Life* unsullied by any hint of sexual passion" (78). In terms of the biographer's commitment to represent Brontë as middle class, it suffices to say here that a romantic attachment to a man with a wife and family did not constitute the kind of proper behavior readers associated with middle-class womanhood. Rather, it would speak to the kind of "gross vulgarity" that Rigby and other reviewers attached to the title character of *Jane*

Eyre (107). Consequently, the potentially tragic story of unreciprocated love in Brontë's life has no place in Gaskell's biography.

Gaskell's efforts to deemphasize any romance in Brontë's relationship with Heger have received ample critical attention, but fewer scholars have considered how Gaskell also fictionalizes when it comes to Brontë's eventual marriage with the curate Arthur Nicholls. Bick offers a typical analysis of this part in the biography in suggesting that "Gaskell believed that a proper handling of Charlotte's marriage could provide final 'proof' that while immoderate feelings of love and hate may have characterized Brontë heroines, such feelings did not govern the behavior of Charlotte Brontë, the woman" (40). Likewise, even Gaskell herself bluntly explains Nicholls' attachment as evidence of Brontë's femininity, writing that "the love of such a man—a daily spectator to her manner of life for years—is a great testimony to her character as a woman" (396). Among others, Bick recognizes how crucial the marriage was to the entire plot of Brontë's biography, but her notion of "proper handling" does not receive enough attention. Just as Gaskell knew more about the intimate details of Brontë's feelings for Heger than she reveals in the biography, she also privately viewed Brontë's marriage differently than how she portrays it in *The Life*.

Before examining how Gaskell construes Brontë's marriage with Nicholls in *The Life*, a passage from an 1854 letter Gaskell wrote to John Forster merits quoting as it reveals Gaskell's personal opinion of the marriage of her friend, and it also incidentally contradicts J. A. V. Chapple's assertion that Gaskell "knew little about some things, such as those private fantasies of self and sex the Brontë sisters were so expert in projecting"

(123). In the letter to Forster, Gaskell slips from publishing business to gossip, speculating about Brontë's future husband:

I fancy him very good, but *very* stern & bigoted; but I dare say that is partly fancy . . . with all his bigotry and & sternness it must be charming to be loved with all the strength of his heart as she sounds to be. Mr. Shaen accuses me always of being 'too much a woman' in always wanting to obey somebody—but I am sure that Miss Brontë could never have borne\not to be well-ruled & ordered/ . . . I mean that she would never have been happy but with an exacting, rigid, law-giving, passionate man. (*Letters* 280-81)

In this letter, Gaskell indulges in fantasy—or as she admits, “partly fancy”—and casts Mr. Nicholls as a kind of Byronic hero from one of the Brontë sisters' own “coarse” novels. Yet such references to passion and sternness, fantasized about in this confidential letter, are notably absent three years later in the Nicholls of the biography. In Gaskell's public version of the story, Mr. Nicholls is “a grave, reserved, conscientious man, with a deep sense of religion, and of his duties as one of its ministers,” and in turn, his feelings for Brontë contain minimal passion although he had “loved her long” (396). As Gaskell explains, “Mr. Nicholls was one who had seen her almost daily for years; seen her as a daughter, a sister, a mistress and a friend” (396). Here of course “mistress” refers to Brontë's managerial role as head of a domestic establishment and an employer of servants, while the associations of daughter and sister diminish the sexual connotations of Nicholls' feelings.

According to Gaskell's sanitized interpretation of their romance in *The Life*, as any sensible middle-class man Nicholls recognizes that in addition to an emotional companion, Brontë would prove an excellent domestic manager, able to “perform the ideological work of managing the class question and displaying the signs of middle-class status” (Langland 9). In constructing Brontë's and Nicholls' marriage in this way,

Gaskell stifles her darkly romantic fantasy of a few years earlier and also moves beyond the idealism of romantic, matrimonial love she depicts in *The Moorland Cottage*. Instead, Gaskell here offers the kind of transparency about marriage, social class, and the role of the wife as a “bourgeois household manager” that Langland finds more often in “nonliterary domestic discourses” than in fiction that has “the luxury of ignoring or obscuring” these social realities “in the romance plot of boy meets girl, boy wins girl, boy marries girl” (60). *The Life* includes an abbreviated version of this romance narrative, along with a dramatic episode of parental disapproval, but Gaskell is actually very open about Nicholls’ pragmatic desire for Brontë, which ultimately helps disassociate her from a novelistic heroine, such as the title character of *Jane Eyre*. Romance and love helpfully allow *The Life* to culminate in marriage before the final tragedy of Brontë’s death nine months later, but Gaskell nonetheless assesses that in this element of her narrative, Brontë requires fictionalizing in order to make her marriage with Nicholls *less* romantic, and therefore more telling of her desirability as an ordinary middle-class woman.

VI

The many choices Gaskell makes in crafting her story of Brontë’s life, along with her confident narrative voice that weaves in and out of the text with reminders of what she believes and has heard, contribute to a sense of authority often missing in her earlier writing. Clearly, the genre of biography propels Gaskell to assert herself as an author and to make use of her ethos, as a fellow writer and woman, able to understand Brontë on both levels. To convince readers of Brontë’s dutiful, feminine, and middle-class nature, Gaskell negotiates a delicate balance between knowledge of her peculiar subject and

knowledge of the broader culture, including social customs, dress, and the minutiae of domestic life. As she affirmed to Ellen Nussey in an 1857 letter, “I weighed every line with all my whole power & heart, so that every line should go to it’s [sic] great purpose of making *her* known & valued” (*Letters* 454). Such claims of deliberation and confidence, however, do not mean that *The Life* did not cause Gaskell her usual dose of frustration, nor that scholars such as Miller are incorrect in suggesting that the biographer harbored “underlying anxieties” about the Brontës (86). As Gaskell wrote in the above-mentioned letter to Nussey, referring to the threats of libel, “I am in the Hornet’s nest with a vengeance” (*Letters* 453). Certainly, then, annoyance and anxiety describe the writing and publication of *The Life* as much as *Mary Barton* or *The Moorland Cottage*. In this instance, however, Gaskell strives to banish any anxiety from the work itself and presents herself as a competent and knowledgeable biographer-narrator, able to “appeal to that . . . solemn public, who know how to look with tender humility at faults and errors; how to admire generously extraordinary genius, and how to reverence with warm, full hearts all noble virtue” (429). In this concluding paragraph of the biography, Gaskell sanctions the popular interest in Brontë and her controversial fiction, encouraging readers see the novelist as one of them—a tactic that apparently worked on George Eliot and her romantic partner G. H. Lewes, who read *The Life* and “thought it admirable—cried over it—and felt better for it” (qtd. in Peterson 71).

Such a reaction to the biography attests to the power of Gaskell’s characterization and her success in making Brontë’s life both familiar and tragic enough to inspire sentimentality in Victorian readers who might have believed the earlier misrepresentation of Brontë in the press. To commemorate Brontë properly, as her father Patrick

recognized, the popular and far less-scandalous fellow novelist Elizabeth Gaskell was perfect: “the best qualified for doing what I wish should be done” (qtd. in Barker 782). Along with being, in Mr. Brontë’s words, an “established Author,” Gaskell enjoyed a positive public image as a wife and mother that made her endorsement of Brontë all the more powerful, while the fact that Mr. Brontë asked Gaskell to “affix your name . . . so that the work might obtain a wide circulation, and be handed down to the latest times” (qtd. in Barker 781, 782), further confirms the reputation Gaskell had earned by this stage in her career. Moreover, the fact that Gaskell complied with this request—although she blatantly ignored many others—shows her willingness to both publically claim Brontë as a friend and claim her own status as a writer. Unlike all of her previous works, in the first edition of *The Life*, under the name of the biography and a mention of Charlotte Brontë’s novels, the title page reads: “By *E. C. Gaskell*, Author of ‘Mary Barton,’ ‘Ruth,’ &c.” (2; my emphasis). This direct claim to authorship is not that remarkable except for the fact that it initiates Gaskell’s use of her name on a piece of writing. Certainly, many readers of her earlier works, such as *North and South*, knew whom “By the Author of ‘Mary Barton,’ ‘Ruth,’ ‘Cranford,’ &c.” referred to (3), but such veiled references to her identity preserved a sense of, if not anonymity, then at least womanly modesty. *The Life*, however, undertaken with “the resolution of writing truly, if I wrote at all” (396), as Gaskell confides to readers, suggests a determination on the author’s part to confidently claim the position of spokeswoman.¹³

With her authorial confidence invested in Brontë and the project of familiarizing this misunderstood woman for readers, Gaskell necessarily defends the middle class and its shared values, which she appeared so reticent about at the beginning of her career. In

gentrifying Brontë as a crucial part of salvaging her reputation, Gaskell could not misrepresent the truth so much as to depict the Brontë family as hereditary elites or established gentry. Likewise, in the popular “two nations” view of Victorian society, “rich” did not offer an accurate description of the Brontës but nor did the label of “poor,” potentially associated with working-class “Chartism and rebellion” (Rigby 110). To solve this predicament of class ambiguity, Gaskell seizes upon and names the middle class as a capacious and thriving social space that makes allowances for financial modesty and even recent social ascent when supported by personal virtue, proper behavior, and outward appearance. To show Brontë as meeting these prerequisites despite her strange childhood in a wild, backward environment, turns *The Life* into a satisfying narrative of moral development expertly crafted by Gaskell to satisfy the sensibilities of middle-class readers. In this way, Gaskell further endorses and contributes to the making of the English middle class through her carefully considered, and often idealized, portrayals that provide Victorian readers with a sense of self-affirmation. Indeed, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* probably constitutes the height of Gaskell’s identification with the middle class, for in her return to fiction in later works, while still invested in the middle classes as a vital part of modern life, Gaskell finds greater freedom to question and subvert the class values she so depends on to venerate Brontë.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have traced Elizabeth Gaskell's growing confidence as a middle-class author as she moved from a position of anxious silence to one of greater authority, ready to employ middle-class values to her own ends. Writing for a primarily middle-class reading public, Gaskell came to understand that her role involved interpreting issues of class to her peers, and these introspective and rather insecure Victorian readers looked to writers who would not only offer insight into the condition of England but would engage with questions of personal relevance such as "what, in fact, is the middle class" ("Middle-Class Education" 411). At the beginning of her writing career, Gaskell appears reluctant to enter this debate, perhaps due to the endemic insecurity of the middle class that borders on the lower and upper classes and contains much social movement. Instead, in her first novel *Mary Barton*, Gaskell focuses her social criticism on the dramatic divide between rich and poor, which leaves the middle class unmentioned and undefined, and thus conveniently united with the rich who stand in opposition to the working poor. Two years later in *The Moorland Cottage*, Gaskell still does not name the middle class outright, but as she works in this specifically middle-class Christmas genre, Gaskell provides enough signs of class to make her "every-day" characters seem familiar to readers. Furthermore, she implies a harmonious merging of different elements of the middle class embodied in the new wealth of Frank Buxton and the genteel poverty of Maggie Browne. Finally, by *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* in 1857, Gaskell defines the middle class as professionals—doctors, lawyers, clergymen, and of course, writers such as Brontë and herself—and appeals to readers by associating this, their own class, with progress and moral virtue.

While I have looked at Gaskell's evolving engagement with the middle class in *Mary Barton*, *The Moorland Cottage*, and *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, these works represent only three significant points in her development as an author. Particularly between her Christmas book and her biography—with *Ruth*, *Cranford*, and *North and South*—Gaskell solidified her ethos as a voice that the middle class could turn to for truthful, though not uncritical, insight about their lives. In these novels and the many short stories published between them, Gaskell further dismantles the rich-poor divide of *Mary Barton* and confronts, with humour and with pathos, the tensions that middle class Victorians faced. Then, after *The Life* in 1857, Gaskell reached greater analytical and artistic heights with *My Lady Ludlow*, *Sylvia's Lovers*, *Cousin Phillis*, and *Wives and Daughters*, which each reveal the author's attunement to the gradations and nuances of class, in both the past and the present. In these works, Gaskell appears to have moved far beyond her initial anxiety about class instability and mobility, and instead, she dwells on characters and situations that, through their movement and evolution, gave rise to the middle class of the high Victorian era.¹

By neglecting many of these best-loved novels, however, I have gone in a direction I did not envision at the start of this project. Yet this unforeseen focus illuminates the lesser-known Gaskell, rather than the Gaskell that, helped by recent and romantic BBC film adaptations, now “has a dedicated popular following of the kind that the Brontës and Jane Austen attract” (Matus, Introduction 1).² The less popular or easily adaptable of Gaskell's works capture the progression of her ideas and often illuminate where the author fulfilled the needs of her Victorian, rather than modern, readers. The social perceptiveness and ambitious scope admired in *Wives and Daughters*, for example,

would simply not exist if not for Gaskell's earlier works, including *The Moorland Cottage*, in which she first outlines several of the later novel's characters and themes. Similarly, we can better appreciate the class tensions at work in the romance between the genteel Margaret Hale and the self-made John Thornton in *North and South* with the knowledge that in her first social-problem novel Gaskell allows for class tension only between rich and poor, rather than within these categories.

To witness Gaskell's increasing comfort as a class spokeswoman does not confirm that the author completely supported and wished to enforce a preexisting middle-class ideology, but rather, as her writing makes visible, that Gaskell's class status was a work in progress. Although scholars commonly apply blanket statements about her social position, asserting for example, that "in terms of background and perspective, Elizabeth Gaskell is, *unmistakably* middle class" (Worth 54; my emphasis), a closer examination of her works reveals not a static and unproblematic endorsement of the Victorian bourgeoisie. Rather, Gaskell is involved in a continual negotiation about whom and what this class category entails. In redefining the relationship of class throughout her writing career, Gaskell at times passes over the middle part of the social spectrum into which modern readers conveniently place her, while at other points she relies on and endorses this segment of society and its moral values. Yet only after much thought and careful criticism does the author eventually say, through her final heroine Molly Gibson, that this is "the sort of—the class of people to which I belong" (*Wives* 161).

Notes

Introduction

¹ “English” 664.

² According to Richard D. Altick, “the upper ranks formed a negligible fraction of the Victorian reading public,” and “the audience for the literature which continues to be read today was concentrated, therefore, in the middle class” (60, 62). Illustrating this, an 1861 article from the popular *Cornhill Magazine* does not strive to hide its un-aristocratic readership: “among the million readers of *Cornhill Magazine*, a very small minority can boast of having received their education at Eton, or at any other of our great public schools . . . these aristocratic seminaries” (“Middle Class and Primary” 50).

³ Altick names these as preoccupations of the leading male novelists: “Thackeray above all but closely followed by Anthony Trollope and by Dickens” (17). Yet women writers of the era, including Elizabeth Gaskell, also grapple with such social concerns, and some feminist scholars such as Elizabeth Langland go so far as to argue that as household managers, “women controlled representations of the middle classes,” and “in this dimension of cultural currency as opposed to economic capital, women dominated Victorian society” (7).

⁴ Lists of Gaskell’s works differ in number, as scholars cannot verify the authorship of some anonymous, short pieces, while other works were published first on their own and then again in collections, such as the individual chapters of *Cranford*. The count of nine novels includes Gaskell’s novellas, while her biography, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, obviously stands in its own category.

⁵ Norman Gash estimates, at the most, “a figure well under quarter of a million for the entrepreneurial, wage-and-salary-earning middle class (out a total of just over four and a half million adults males) at the time of the 1841 census” (21).

⁶ In all of Gaskell’s work, the term “middle class” appears only a few times: in the story “The Shah’s English Gardener” (1852), in the openings of both *Ruth* (1853) and *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), and in the travel piece “French Life” (1864). “Bourgeois” (or variations) occur in the story “Uncle Peter” (1853), *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, and “French Life.”

⁷ The placement of “Middle-Class Education in England” next to *Wives and Daughters* in *Cornhill* may not be coincidental. In their discussion of the serialization of *Wives and Daughters*, Linda K. Hughes

and Michael Lund see deliberate intertextuality in the various pieces in each issue of the magazine; as the authors claim, “some editorial principle was at work in each month’s layout, an index to the editor’s sense of how fiction, nonfiction, and poetry related to each other” (21).

Chapter One

¹ *Morality and the Classes of Society*. Qtd. in Gash 24.

² These short pieces include “Life in Manchester: Libbie Marsh’s Three Eras” and “The Sexton’s Hero” from 1847, and “Christmas Storms and Sunshine” from early 1848. “Libbie Marsh’s Three Eras” for example, tells a sentimental story of honest, charitable working-class people, living in Manchester “where their homes were, and where God has cast their lives, and told them to work out their destiny” (477).

³ As biographer Jenny Uglow notes, “as soon as it appeared *Mary Barton* sparked off furious arguments, especially, of course, in Manchester . . . Many local people, including some of the rich manufacturers in [William Gaskell’s] Cross Street congregation, were outraged” (214). In a letter to her publisher, Edward Chapman, Gaskell summarizes the division her novel caused: “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” (*Letters* 68).

⁴ For example, James Richard Simmons believes the novel “offers a stark look at the brutality, poverty, and oppression of working-class life,” and even “despite its flawed ending, *Mary Barton* remains a first-rate industrial novel, and one of the first written to remain even today a highly regarded account of factory life” (346). On the other end of the critical spectrum, Melissa Schaub argues that “in modeling sympathy for the working classes” the novel actually “functions disciplinarily, as sympathy for the suffering of others becomes the force that will prevent workers from rioting and will teach them self-command as members of an emerging modern body politic” (17).

⁵ This claim—“I know nothing of Political Economy”—comes from the novel’s preface (4), which the publishers compelled Gaskell to add “under protest, after the novel was finished” (Daly xviii). While it makes sense to consider this “I” as the same voice that narrates (and intrudes on) the story, critics often consider the statement untrue and ironic on biographical grounds, thus erroneously conflating author and narrator. For example, Macdonald Daly footnotes: “Gaskell’s father had, in fact, written expressively on

the subject . . . and she was also familiar with her Unitarian friend Harriet Martineau's famous *Illustrations of Political Economy*" (396n5).

⁶ Among other changes, the 1832 Reform Bill extended the franchise but only to upper-middle-class males; men of the sizeable lower-middle class, along with some men of the working class, would have to wait for voting rights until the Second Reform Bill of 1867. In her early twenties, the soon to be married Gaskell appeared rather ambivalent about the first law, writing to her friend Harriet Carr: "Oh! how tired I am of the Reform Bill" (*Further Letters* 11).

⁷ Gaskell places these questions in the mind and mouth of her hero Barton as someone on the oppressed half of society, yet she apparently felt some confusion, and even guilt, about social inequality as well. In an 1849 letter to Mrs. Greg, whose husband had reviewed *Mary Barton*, Gaskell wrote about the motive behind her novel: "the prevailing thought in my mind at the time . . . was the seeming injustice of the inequalities of fortune. Now, *if they occasionally appeared unjust to the more fortunate*, they must bewilder an ignorant man full of rude, illogical thought" (*Letters* 74; my emphasis).

⁸ Modern critics describe Mr. Carson and his son variously as capitalists, managers, captains of industry, and members of the bourgeoisie or of the upper class. Additionally, scholars often conflate Gaskell's "rich" category with the Victorian middle class: Daly revises Gaskell's binaries such as rich and poor to specifically "bourgeoisie and proletariat" (xvii), while Hughes and Lund move from "managers like Carson Sr." (37) to "the moneyed [class]" to "the middle class" within two paragraphs (38). This lack of consistency in scholars' language reflects the fact that Gaskell herself avoids specific class terminology and instead relies on the simultaneously vague and hyperbolic language of "rich" and "poor."

⁹ Altick explains that "the frequently met term 'mechanic' was originally applied to skilled industrial workers, including machine builders and repairmen, but later was downgraded to become almost synonymous with 'machine tender'" (34). As Jem Wilson invents and improves machinery, advancing in his occupation, Gaskell probably uses the term "mechanic" in its earlier, more professional sense.

¹⁰ Armstrong writes, "one may conclude that the power of the middle classes had everything to do with that of middle-class love" (4).

Chapter Two

¹ "Gossip" 42.

² While some scholars, such as the editor of the Oxford edition, Suzanne Lewis, consider *The Moorland Cottage* a short novel or novella, others including Nancy Henry deem the work a short story, punctuating the title as “The Moorland Cottage.” The Oxford edition cited here is ninety-eight pages, which is considerably shorter than Gaskell’s more famous novels but more substantial than many of the stories she wrote for periodicals such as *Household Words*. Gaskell’s division of *The Moorland Cottage* into eleven chapters and its original publication as a stand-alone volume argue in favor of considering the work a novel.

³ Overall, the minimal and generally slighting scholarship to-date on *The Moorland Cottage* appears self-perpetuating, condemning the work to relative obscurity even while its author enjoys renewed popularity. For example, in her recent book, *Servants and Paternalism in the Works of Maria Edgeworth and Elizabeth Gaskell*, Julie Nash never mentions *The Moorland Cottage*, although she looks at other “minor” pieces by the author. In *The Moorland Cottage*, the depiction of the Brownes’ servant Nancy, whom Mrs. Browne “half-liked and half-feared, and entirely depended upon” (13), certainly pertains to Nash’s inquiry, but the scholar perhaps neglects mentioning this novel due to its seeming unimportance in Gaskell criticism.

⁴ A December 1851 issue of Dickens’ weekly journal *Household Words* for example, advertises its forthcoming holiday number as “showing what Christmas is to everybody” (Extra 312).

⁵ Although “A Gossip” was printed anonymously, Gaskell speculated to Edward Chapman that the author was “Dr. Whewell . . . I believe; and I have received a very complimentary note from him as well” (*Letters* 142). Presumably, Gaskell refers to William Whewell, master of Trinity College, the prominent Victorian theologian, historian, and scientist.

⁶ In August of 1850, Gaskell explained to her friend Eliza Fox, “I have been writing a story for Xmas; a *very foolish* engagement of mine—which I am angry with myself for doing” (*Letters* 130), while a month later she complained in similar terms to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth: “Mr. Chapman asked me to write a Xmas Story ‘recommending benevolence, charity, etc’, to which I agreed, why I cannot think now, for it was very foolish indeed. However, I could not write about virtues to order” (*Letters* 132). Likewise, Gaskell’s exchange with publisher Edward Chapman reveals tension over first the title, and later the profits of the book. Sometime in December—apparently before the title was finalized as *The Moorland Cottage*—

Gaskell vehemently concludes a letter to Chapman: “I will disown that book if you call it *The Fagot*;—the name of *my* book is *December Days*,” and over a decade later in 1861, she was still writing to the publishing company, inquiring about “my account with Messrs Chapman with regard to ‘*The Moorland Cottage*’” (*Letters* 407, 651).

⁷ For example, in January 1851, a few weeks after the publication of *The Moorland Cottage*, Gaskell’s tone toward her publisher Edward Chapman had changed from the frustration she expressed during the writing process. Rather, in a somewhat self-congratulatory letter she wrote that the press had “been very busy praising” the book, and she apparently sent her publisher “some very sweet-scented flowers” in thanks (*Letters* 142). Likewise, in light of her complaints from 1850, what did Gaskell mean seven years later in a letter to George Smith when she referred to *The Moorland Cottage* as “(a poor little, pretty—I thought) Christmas tale” (*Letters* 484)?

⁸ Gash reports that curates earned a lower salary than other clergymen, “the average being £80 per annum” (61), while Gaskell’s character Edward later complains of the pitiful “seventy pounds a-year” that a curate can expect (31). These figures place the Brownes at the low end of the middle-class financial spectrum, in contrast to the Buxtons, whom Mrs. Browne estimates are easily worth “four thousand a-year!” (45).

⁹ With later characters, including the wayward son and forger Richard Bradshaw in *Ruth*, the modern estate managers Mr. Horner and Captain James in *My Lady Ludlow*, the rising engineer Paul Manning in *Cousin Phillis*, and the predatory agent Mr. Preston in *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell variously reimagines the professional man and complicates her one-dimensional portrayal with Edward Browne.

¹⁰ Davidoff and Hall’s research leads them to emphasize “the central importance of . . . the family and the dynamics of sexual difference” in the formation of the English middle class (16).

¹¹ Irene Wiltshire sees *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* and the tragedy of Branwell Brontë, along with Edward Browne from *The Moorland Cottage*, as relevant to Gaskell’s 1859 story “*The Crooked Branch*.” In the gothic tale, Benjamin Huntroyd, an ungrateful son of a farmer, aspires to be an attorney and returns from London to commit robbery and violence on his parents. Wiltshire reports that Gaskell developed her 1859 story from facts she learned about a real court case in 1849 and goes on to suggest that the characterization of Edward Browne “may well have been fostered by Gaskell’s conversation with

members of the legal profession in 1849, but it was not until 1859,” after researching and writing the biography of Brontë, “that she could return to the theme of unworthiness and develop it fully” (101). In this essay, Wiltshire makes a compelling argument about Gaskell’s darker vision after *The Life*, but in emphasizing “the optimism that informed [Gaskell’s] earlier tales” (93), she also downplays the criminal Edward Browne as merely an example of “youthful moral slackness” (101).

Chapter Three

¹ In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Elizabeth Gaskell presents this quotation as extracted from an 1850 letter she wrote after meeting Charlotte Brontë (334). In the original letter to Catherine Winkworth this passage reads: “Such a life as Miss B’s I never heard of before Lady K S described her home to me as in a village of a few grey stone houses perched up on the north side of a bleak moor—looking over sweeps of bleak moors” (*Letters* 124). In her transcription of this passage in *The Life*, along with spelling out Brontë’s name and trying to obscure Lady Kay-Shuttleworth’s identity with a dash, Gaskell adds a full stop after “before,” suggesting that she never heard of such a life before meeting Brontë in person, rather than before listening to her friend’s gossip. In any case, Brontë was clearly an enigma to the sociable and urban Gaskell.

² The first edition of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* was published in March 1857, but a second edition followed after the first sold out, and then a third edition became necessary after threats of libel forced Gaskell to revise certain sections. In particular, the story of Branwell Brontë’s adulterous relationship with his employer’s wife caused scandal, as did the account of William Carus Wilson, benefactor of Cowan Bridge where the Brontë girls attended school. The Penguin edition of *The Life* cited here reprints the first edition but includes the third-edition alterations in appendixes.

³ For example, to illustrate the feminist debate surrounding the biography, Robin B. Colby suggests that *The Life* “might seem, on first glance, to be a conventional treatment of women’s roles within Victorian society . . . Embedded within it, however, is an attack on a social order that hypocritically prefers women to be inactive and decorative, and does not value the work they actually do” (86). Certainly, the image of Brontë as the undervalued, sacrificial daughter and sister offers a similar criticism on Victorian gender norms as does Gaskell’s depiction of Maggie Browne in *The Moorland Cottage*—written soon after she met Brontë.

⁴ Even Gaskell could not abandon the label of “coarse” in the biography: “I do not deny for myself the existence of coarseness here and there in her works” (401).

⁵ Hughes and Lund, along with other scholars including Juliet Barker and Lucasta Miller, note that “the ‘scandalous’ and ‘shocking’ obituary in *Sharpe’s*,” which led Patrick Brontë to request an authorized biography by Elizabeth Gaskell, actually contained material from one of her own letters (Hughes and Lund 130); in effect, Gaskell was “asked to publish a corrective to a story for which she herself was ultimately responsible” (Miller 65).

⁶ In her 1853 novel *Ruth*, Gaskell sets the scene as “a hundred years ago” and describes a provincial town with dark and dangerous streets, in which “no regard was paid to *the wants of the middle class*, who neither drove about in coaches of their own, nor were carried by their own men in their own sedans into the very halls of their friends. *The professional men and their wives, the shopkeepers and their spouses, and all such people*, walked about at considerable peril both night and day” (5; my emphases). This mention and partial definition of the middle class is significant and certainly grounds the novel in a middle-class perspective. Yet *Ruth* is set in a romantic past, such that Gaskell here invokes a different middle class than that familiar to her Victorian readers. Essentially, this passage situates *Ruth* in an era before the middle class (i.e. Gaskell’s readership) became more prominent in English society.

⁷ This contrast between Haworth and Manchester comes from a letter Brontë wrote to Gaskell in 1853, inviting her to “turn your back on Plymouth Grove to come to Haworth . . . in the spirit which might sustain you in case you were setting out on a brief trip to the back woods of America” (456n‘a’); in a following letter on the same subject, Brontë wrote of the “comfort in thinking that but thirty miles intervene” between her home and Gaskell’s (456n‘b’). Gaskell added both of these letters to the third edition of *The Life*.

⁸ Preeminent Brontë scholar Juliet Barker sees Gaskell’s depiction of Yorkshire as highly fictionalized: “it comes as something of a shock to discover that historic Haworth was a dramatically different place from the one of popular legend. Mrs. Gaskell’s description may be a fairly accurate picture of Haworth in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but it completely ignores the Industrial Revolution and the major impact it had on life in the nineteenth-century township” (92). Obviously, Gaskell does not

“completely” disregard the presence of industry, but she certainly tries to minimize its importance in her portrayal of Haworth as lacking a true middle class.

⁹ Gaskell practiced Unitarianism, a liberal and tolerant nonconformist faith. In terms of politics, the author was relatively liberal as well, although her letters betray her characteristic ambivalence and a hesitancy to align herself with a single political party or viewpoint. In contrast, as Gaskell reports in *The Life*, Brontë was an Anglican with strong anti-Catholic feelings and a politically conservative Tory.

¹⁰ Branwell Brontë poses the biggest threat to the family’s middle class status with his dismissals from employment, affair with a married woman, and drug use. Gaskell uses Branwell to highlight the selfless nature of the Brontë girls who “are not the first sisters who have laid their lives as a sacrifice before their brother’s idolized wish” (102), and she also mitigates his responsibility by labeling him a “victim” of the “the profligate woman, who had tempted” him into sin (211).

¹¹ Rachel Worth’s article, “Elizabeth Gaskell, Clothes and Class Identity,” focuses on Gaskell’s two social-problem novels, *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, to investigate the “neglected area” of working-class clothing (52).

¹² Worth cites an 1865 letter Gaskell wrote to her daughter Marianne about “a dress being given as a gift to a servant . . . Elizabeth advises her daughter to buy a print gown . . . but on no account, she writes, should it be made of silk” (54). Thus, for Brontë to wear a silk gown is a clear sign of her class status.

¹³ After *The Life*, Gaskell continued to claim authorship; all of her major works that follow, when not published anonymously due to the conventions of periodicals such as *Household Words*, boast “Mrs. Gaskell” as author.

Conclusion

¹ For example, in her 1863 historical novel *Sylvia’s Lovers*, which opens in a similar manner as *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Gaskell depicts a time of great social change, yet without the kind of class anxiety that she betrays in *Mary Barton*. *Sylvia’s Lovers* centers on a Yorkshire seaside community witnessing the tensions between established landowners and wealthy industrialists, and in which an aspiring young sailor “might rise by daring and saving to be a ship-owner himself . . . and this very fact made the distinction between class and class less apparent” (13). Gaskell’s willingness to write about such

evolutions of class in this novel (as with *Wives and Daughters*) attests to the maturation of her views on the English social spectrum.

² The BBC miniseries adaptations include: *Wives and Daughters* (1999), *North and South* (2004), and most recently, *Cranford* (2008), a production that in fact weaves together elements of *Cranford*, *My Lady Ludlow*, and “Mr. Harrison’s Confessions.” *The Moorland Cottage* and *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* obviously are unlikely to become television adaptations, but perhaps *Mary Barton*, which contains a sensational and romantic plot, will be the next Gaskell text included in the BBC’s “heritage drama line-up . . . a genre understood to fulfill a palliative function for” modern audiences “alarmed by intensified class division and increasing globalization” (Hamilton 188).

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