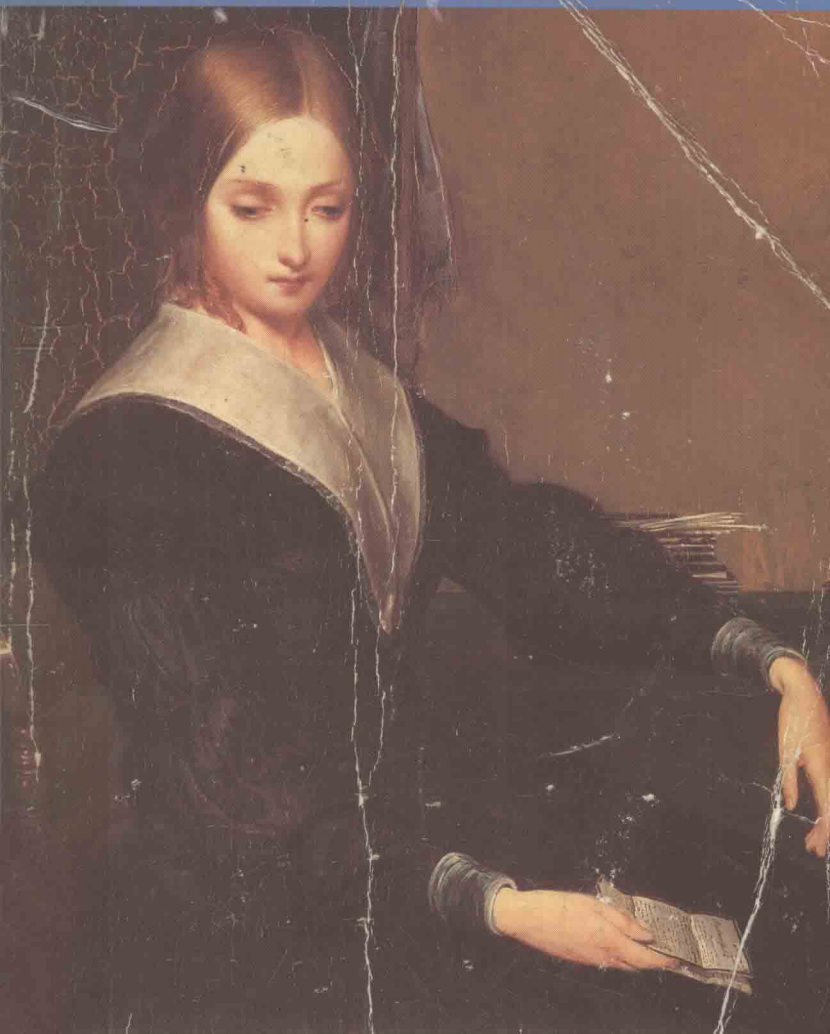


WORLD'S CLASSICS



ELIZABETH GASKELL

RUTH

THE WORLD'S CLASSICS



ELIZABETH GASKELL

*Ruth*



*Edited with an Introduction by*

ALAN SHELSTON



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## INTRODUCTION

### I

*Ruth*, published in three volumes in 1853, was Elizabeth Gaskell's second full-length novel. *Mary Barton* (1848), her 'tale of Manchester Life', had brought her both criticism and success: it had given her also the confidence and the freedom to experiment. The immediate result was a series of stories and occasional pieces, mostly with a provincial setting, that culminated in the episodes she collected together as *Cranford*. By its choice of setting, and by its general tenor, *Ruth* would seem to confirm this movement on the part of its author away from the Manchester setting of the novel that had made her famous. *Ruth*, however, like *Mary Barton*, was explicitly conceived as a social-problem novel; furthermore, and again like its predecessor, it drew upon its author's direct experience of the issues it sought to bring to public attention.

The sufferings of the unmarried mother, like the hardships of the industrially oppressed that formed the subject of *Mary Barton*, were familiar to Mrs Gaskell from her charitable work in Manchester. In 1850 she took up the cause of a girl called Pasley whom she had come across in the New Bayley prison. In a long letter to Dickens, at that time involved in his emigration project for fallen women, she gives details of the case. Pasley's career exemplifies the dangers facing even a girl of respectable parentage who was neglected. The daughter of an Irish clergyman who had died when she was two, she had been neglected by an indifferent mother, and then placed in an orphanage, before becoming a dressmaker's apprentice. Following a series of misfortunes for which she had not herself been responsible she had been seduced by her own doctor. The consequence had been first the Penitentiary and then a career of petty crime; finally, by an appalling stroke of coincidence, the poor girl had been

confronted when in prison by her very seducer, now acting as prison surgeon.<sup>1</sup>

The Pasley case obviously anticipates *Ruth* in many of its details—in the social class of Pasley herself (Ruth Hilton is the daughter of 'a respectable farmer' and the granddaughter of a clergyman), in the choice of dressmaking as a trade whose apprentices were easily exposed to moral temptation, and in the dramatic detail of the reappearance of the seducer, a man whose superior social position served to reinforce both his own irresponsibility and the double standard generally associated with his behaviour. Having secured her objective of salvation by emigration for Pasley, Mrs Gaskell made no further reference to the case, and the fact that she was to wait another two years before apparently reproducing its details in *Ruth* suggests that the relationship between them and her novel is as much as anything coincidental. In fact several of the fictional situations to be found in Mrs Gaskell's early work refer to the issue of the sexual vulnerability of young girls. In *Mary Barton* the heroine, herself for a time a dressmaker's apprentice, is exposed to the attentions of a rich mill-owner's son; even more to the point she has an aunt who has taken to the streets as a result of her own sexual lapse. In *Lizzie Leigh* (1850), a short story of Manchester life, Mrs Gaskell approached the topic again, this time making it the centre of her narrative. Others amongst these early stories deal with the wider theme of betrayed love and its concomitant unhappiness. *Ruth*, then, by its consideration of what Mrs Gaskell herself conceded would be regarded as 'a subject unfit for fiction' (*Letters*, p. 220), is not so much a special case as the logical outcome of her interest in its theme.

Although Mrs Gaskell's earlier approaches to the sexual theme had passed without remark she came to it again in *Ruth* with considerable foreboding. Even while working on the novel she feared its publication, recording that she had lost 'my own power of judging', and that she could not tell 'whether I had done it well or ill'. On its appearance it

<sup>1</sup> See *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester, 1966), pp. 98–100.

immediately became 'a prohibited book' (by her husband, presumably) in her own household, and 'not a book for young people, unless read with somebody older'. The reactions of acquaintances served to confirm her worst fears: "Deep regret" is what my friends here feel and express'; two men, she knew, had 'burnt the 1st vol. of *Ruth* as so very bad' (*Letters*, pp. 203-26, *passim*). As the wife of the minister to the Manchester Unitarian community, a group which included powerful middle-class interests, and which she may well have drawn on for her portrait of the Bradshaw family in the novel itself, Mrs Gaskell was exposed to articulate personal criticism. As had been the case with *Mary Barton*, frankness on an issue of public morality was met by the pointed objections of those amongst her direct acquaintance who took a different point of view.

Experienced reviewers, however, were markedly more sympathetic. Mrs Gaskell may refer in her correspondence to instances of reviews whose comments had distressed her, but in fact on its publication *Ruth* was reviewed both extensively and for the most part generously. Seduction and illegitimacy were prominent topics in the fiction of the early 1850s: the examples of *David Copperfield*, with the story of Little Emily at its heart, and *Bleak House*, with its heroine whose birth out of wedlock is the trigger of its mystery plot, show that whatever may have obtained in the Gaskell household such subjects were in themselves generally acceptable as family reading. On the whole *Ruth* was received as a proper and valuable commentary on a subject of public concern. If few reviewers were prepared to go as far as the anonymous contributor to *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* who, in the course of an attack on the double standard involved in conventional attitudes to sexual morality, concluded that condemnation of the heroine could only be based upon 'a superstitious and exaggerated estimate of physical virginity', only a minority were directly hostile.

Mrs Gaskell's anxieties about *Ruth*, therefore, would seem to have been exaggerated if we consider them in the light of contemporary reactions. Nevertheless it is fair to

say that by devoting her novel explicitly and exclusively to the issue of the fallen woman she was challenging her readership in a distinctly provocative way. When mid-Victorian fiction draws attention to sexual frailty it invariably does so in ways that confirm the existing stereotypes of feminine behaviour: this is as true of George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859), for example, as it is of Dickens's more theatrical considerations of the topic. What was new about *Ruth* was not only that it confronted the issue head-on, but that in doing so—however awkwardly—it presented the reader with a woman whose psychology as well as whose situation demanded more than conventional sympathy and understanding. The only real equivalent in its own time is the somewhat special case of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), a novel which Mrs Gaskell is likely to have read, and which we may legitimately expect to have influenced her thinking. Not until Hardy's *Tess*—like Ruth Hilton, 'a pure woman, faithfully presented'—do we have a heroine who challenges the reader in the same way as does the heroine of *Ruth*.

## II

In the Preface to *Mary Barton* Mrs Gaskell had described how, 'living in Manchester but with a deep relish and fond admiration for the country', her first thought had been 'to find a frame-work for my story in some rural scene'. This, she says, she abandoned for an account of 'the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets of the town in which I resided'. In *Ruth*, again dealing with an issue arising out of her Manchester experience, her chosen 'frame-work' was one that would allow her to express her affection for country life.

The change of scene is an important one. In the first place, provincialism in the Victorian novel invariably implies the backward glance. The rhythms and pace of rural society always carried for Victorian authors the implications of rest and release. In a story which was to be devoted to the redemption of its heroine from a disaster which marks her for life the tranquillity of country life is the most potent

of restoratives. In such a context the symbolism of nature can play its part to the full: the flowers of field and garden suggest natural freshness and growth, while the vaster landscapes of nature evoke a permanence that provides fit setting for the moments of individual crisis. In a novel in which the healing power of time redeems the errors of a moment the passage of the seasons and of the years carries its own therapeutic force. But the choice of setting is significant in other ways. It allows Mrs Gaskell, for example, to indulge her enthusiasm for country manners and country ways, for the curiosities of dialect and of behavioural detail, in a way which somehow invests them with a moral weight of their own. The minor characters, like the Welsh inn-keeper, and notably the servant Sally, are somehow worthy *because* of the limiting nature of their provincialism: just as country recipes and country air are invested not only with physical but with moral quality. Mrs Gaskell deliberately chose for her action settings which had explicit personal significance for her and throughout *Ruth* we have a sense of the author's own presence in the novel that is generated as much by her attachment to her chosen scene as by her direct—and frequent—authorial interpolations. Authorial intrusiveness is one of the dominant characteristics of Mrs Gaskell's fiction, based as it invariably is upon personal commitment and remembered experience. *Ruth*, however, is a novel about which, as we have seen, she had serious misgivings, and the effect of her personal involvement in this case can be ambivalent. If at one level we sense her very real affection for the personalities and the places she describes, at another the effect is one of uncertainty and reserve.

An examination of Mrs Gaskell's choice of settings in closer detail will indicate the kind of uncertainty to which I refer. As I suggest in detail in my notes to this edition, each of the four locational settings of the novel—Fordham, where Ruth is an apprentice; North Wales, where she is taken by Bellingham; Ecclestone, where she lives out her life of repentance; and Abermouth, where she undergoes the traumatic experience of Bellingham's reappearance—can be associated fairly readily with places that Mrs Gaskell knew



well and which, in three of those four cases, had powerful emotional associations for her. In each case, however, she superimposes a kind of fictional disguise, as if reluctant to allow the direct association to be made. Embarrassment like this is perhaps not unusual in a novelist still learning her trade. (*Jane Eyre* might offer a somewhat similar example: any reader of that novel will find its geography awkwardly contrived.) In *Ruth*, though, Mrs Gaskell seems both positively to want her story to embody the emotional associations these locations had for her while insisting all the time that it is all only a fiction. All too conscious of the boundaries between fiction and reality, in a work that deals fictionally with a real-life issue she lacks the sophistication as a novelist to conceal them.

Similar uncertainty can be seen to arise over the period in which the novel is set. After the birth of Ruth's baby concludes the first part of the novel, leaving her established with the Bensons, we are given a chapter (Chapter 19) in which, as Mrs Gaskell says, 'the quiet days grew into weeks and months, and even years, without any event to startle the little circle into the consciousness of the lapse of time'. Later in the same chapter we are told that the child, Leonard, is now 'a noble boy of six'. It is at this point that we are introduced to the Bradshaw family, with Ruth's appointment as a governess, and there is then the rapid movement to the events of the election that will reintroduce Ruth's lover Bellingham, now the Parliamentary candidate, Mr Donne. It is quite clear, from the references to railway travel alone, that these events, even if the geography is entirely fictional, cannot take place earlier than the late 1830s. But at the outset of the novel we are told that Ruth's apprenticeship was served in a 'country town many years ago', and while 'many years ago' in a novel written in 1852 might legitimately be said to allow for the passage of less than a quarter of a century—the longest period consistent with the later events—the sense of the phrase in context certainly seems to imply a date rather further in the past. The point may seem a small one, but what I think it suggests is that *Ruth*, not unlike *Cranford*, is at one and the same time a contemporary novel and a retrospective novel.

In the same way, by the deliberate choice for her principal setting of a manufacturing town that is also a country town, Mrs Gaskell provides for the presentation of what came to her primarily as an urban issue within a provincial context. This is not to imply, of course, that there was no illegitimacy in provincial towns, or that unmarried mothers who lived in them were not at a social disadvantage. From the outset, however, critics have detected a problem at the heart of Mrs Gaskell's treatment of her theme, and while the root of that problem lies in her conception of her heroine, a contributory factor is that she brings to it what often seems to be an exaggerated sense of the shame attaching to Ruth's situation. Every reader of *Ruth* is likely to feel that the heroine's own sense of shame is painfully over-intense, even more so the reaction of her child to the discovery of his bastardy. Partly, at least, this must be because attitudes that have been formed by a Mancunian middle-class sensibility, and which apply within the context of urban domesticity, are brought to bear upon an issue that is formulated in terms of an earlier and different tradition.

Undoubtedly the uncertainties that reveal themselves in this way reflect Mrs Gaskell's deeper misgivings about *Ruth*; moreover, they are symptomatic of confusions that lie at the heart of the novel. If, as I have indicated, contemporary reviewers reacted on the whole favourably to *Ruth* they invariably pointed out that, far from over-stating her case, Mrs Gaskell had compromised it by the way in which she had presented her heroine. In particular they drew attention to Ruth Hilton's faultlessness, represented as it is by her unworldly innocence in matters of sexual relationships before her fall and by her acquiescence in the life of self-denial she is required to lead after it. Thus the reviewer in *Sharpe's London Magazine* (15 January 1853), while acknowledging the novel's 'tenderness' and 'delicious scenic descriptions', objected to Ruth herself as 'childlike': his counterpart in *The Gentleman's Magazine* (July 1853) felt that she should have been portrayed as 'more alive and less simple', and shown as 'less passive, more enthralled'—more subject, that is, to the pressure of her own sexual feeling. Fuller expression of these, and similar objections, was

given in George Henry Lewes's expressly generous assessment in *The Westminster Review* (April 1853), where he argued that Ruth's fall was so qualified by 'extenuating circumstances' that 'the question of "guilt" is reduced to a point of casuistry'. Such criticism was taken to its logical conclusion by W. R. Greg, a Unitarian intellectual and businessman known personally to Mrs Gaskell, who had previously taken issue with her over the social philosophy of *Mary Barton*. In a long article entitled 'The False Morality of Lady Novelists', published in *The National Review* in January 1859, Greg wrote retrospectively of Mrs Gaskell's treatment of her heroine:

She has first imagined a character as pure, pious, and unselfish as poet ever fancied; and described a lapse from chastity as faultless as such a fault can be; and then, with damaging and unfaithful inconsistency, has given in to the world's estimate in such matters, by affirming that the sin committed was of so deep a dye that only a life of atoning and enduring persistence could wipe it out.

Greg goes on to point out that such a conception inevitably invalidates Ruth's representative status: she simply cannot be considered as one of 'the ordinary class of betrayed and deserted Magdalens'.

Criticism of this kind, from predominantly sympathetic commentators, is an interesting endorsement of the suggestion that Mrs Gaskell's anxieties about the propriety of her subject were exaggerated: what these critics are calling for is a more open examination of the realities of the case. And in terms of the novel itself their objections, as more recent assessments of *Ruth* have confirmed, are unanswerable. From the outset it is clear that Ruth Hilton is no ordinary sinner, nor even an ordinary dressmaker's apprentice. In a way that anticipates Hardy's account of Tess in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Ruth is given qualities that distinguish her from her workmates, and which they themselves instinctively recognize; again, like Tess, her sexual ignorance—'she was too young', we are told, 'when her mother died to have received any cautions or words of advice respecting the subject of a woman's life', though it is difficult to believe that her workmates would not have

enlightened her—becomes not simply the instrument of her downfall but a feature that contributes to the sense of her fragile distinction. 'Remember', Mrs Gaskell insists, 'how young and innocent, and motherless she was'—as if in some way there could be degrees of motherlessness. Crucially Mrs Gaskell turns her back on the period when Ruth must have become Bellingham's physical lover, intimating only that they had lived together for a while in London: when we first see Ruth after she has run away with Bellingham it is in the North Wales setting that is to be the scene of love betrayed. The effect of all this—and of the manipulation of a pattern of imagery that presents Ruth as a child of nature—must be to deflect criticism from her, and it leaves the reader with two problems. If we ask too many questions we will find Ruth incredible; and if we accept her on Mrs Gaskell's terms we will find it difficult to concede that she must spend a lifetime in redemption of her guilt. For while the history of Ruth's life with her benefactors, the Bensons, is clearly meant to show us the way in which the world should respond to cases like hers, as distinct from the way in which it all too often does, her guilt is never questioned in radical terms. Indeed, no one accepts it more completely than she does herself: her sense of shame contributes as much to her 'specialness' after her rescue as does her sexual ignorance before her fall.

Clearly Mrs Gaskell's first critics were right: over-conscious of the hostility that might be aroused by her theme, she compromises the issue by giving us a heroine to whom no one could conceivably object. The fact that Hardy should have felt the need to devise similar strategies in the case of Tess is in itself interesting: determined that no one should doubt the impeccable credentials of their heroines, both authors undermine their representative credibility. But comparison with Hardy reminds us of a simple and central fact that we need to keep in mind where *Ruth* is concerned. If Mrs Gaskell burdens her heroine with guilt it is because she, unlike Hardy, has absolutely no doubt that what she did, whatever the circumstances, was wrong. Ruth Hilton is not, in her final analysis, innocent, and it would have been inconceivable for Mrs Gaskell to have

regarded sexual relationships outside marriage as other than explicitly forbidden. Her novel is not a plea for sexual permissiveness, but for sympathy on society's part for those who have sinned: its criticisms are against the double standard that would absolve Bellingham and the inflexible moralism that would reject the sinner as does the obdurate Mr Bradshaw. Seen in this light the projection of Ruth as perfect beyond criticism has a logic of its own. If society can reject a sinner such as she, how will it react to the many less unexceptionable cases that are part of its daily experience?

Only when we have accepted Ruth Hilton on Mrs Gaskell's own terms is it possible to see what insight she offers into her situation. For Ruth's distinctiveness is not simply a matter of innocence and resignation; it embraces a sensitivity and depth of feeling that intensify the suffering involved in her tragedy. She has a receptivity to experience that is always at odds with the experiences that are forced upon her: our sense throughout is of what is lost to her in her enforced withdrawal from life. In the first chapter we are shown her at work in the apprentices' attic: 'Ruth pressed her hot forehead against the cold glass, and strained her aching eyes in gazing out on the lovely sky of a winter's night.' The scene is prophetic: throughout the novel we are to see the constraints imposed upon a heroine whose natural instincts are those of impulse and freedom. In Wales her response to the beauty around her defines both her inherent goodness and the unnaturalness of the relationship into which she has been coerced by Bellingham, and when he returns to her life at Abermouth the trauma of the situation is conveyed through an evocation of the power of a landscape to which we feel she, above all, responds. If Ruth, more than anyone, feels her own shame, so it is implicit in her suffering that she most of all should feel its intensity. And part of that suffering is that she *has* loved Bellingham, so much so that, when he returns, she fears the effect of the memories that he brings:

She dared not look round to see the figure of him who spoke, dark as it was. She knew he was there—she heard him speak in the manner in which he used to address strangers years ago; perhaps she answered him, perhaps she did not—God knew. It seemed as if

weights were tied to her feet—as if time stood still,—it was so long, so terrible, that path across the reeling sand. [Chapter 23]

Inevitably in such a situation Mrs Gaskell overwrites, but the melodrama does not invalidate the feeling. Regardless of the reservations that can logically be held about Mrs Gaskell's presentation of her heroine in the context of her public theme, our reading experience, at central moments of the novel, is that she is determined to do justice to the expression of her inner life.

### III

Inevitably discussion of *Ruth* must focus upon its heroine. But in this second novel Mrs Gaskell also reveals very real accomplishment in her account of the situations in which Ruth's drama is played out. Her presentation of the Benson household is an example of the tactful domestic quietism that had expressed itself in *Cranford* and was to be seen at its finest in her later story, *Cousin Phillis*, and it is underpinned in this case by her very firm grasp of the morality on which such a habit of life is based. The example of George Eliot was to show how provincial religious practice—particularly that of Dissent, with its emphasis on the claims of the individual conscience—could provide fertile soil for the novelist committed to the working out of a humane social morality: that is indeed what the Bensons themselves have to do, confronted by Ruth's plight. 'We are not to do evil that good may come,' Benson says, in response to the prospect of bribery in the Eccleston election: as he says it he recognizes immediately how the words reflect on the lie he has told to protect Ruth from public blame. Later Mrs Gaskell reverts to this issue, in an unresolved discussion between Benson and his sister in which his claim that 'God's omnipotence did not need our sin' is followed by an enigmatic silence. Criticism has made much of Benson's lie and Mrs Gaskell has been censured for failing to resolve the issue: the point surely is that it cannot be satisfactorily resolved. Benson's code is one of what might be called sympathetic morality, as opposed to the absolutism

embodied in Mr Bradshaw, and sympathetic morality is of its essence a complex and uncertain affair.

The make-up of the Benson household is a simple one, its appeal lying in the deftness with which Mrs Gaskell juxtaposes the contrasting and complementary personalities of the minister himself, his sister, and the servant, Sally. The Bensons represent, as I have suggested, the humanity of the Dissenting conscience: Sally's 'church' background is a detail which places them nicely. The Bradshaw *ménage*, by contrast, involves a much more complicated grouping. In the father is expressed the inflexibility of nonconformist morality, reinforced as it is by a utilitarian business ethic, while in his family we see the consequences of the rigorous application of his principles: the submissive ineffectiveness of the mother and the rebelliousness of both daughter and son. If *Ruth* generally can be said to look forward to the provincial novels of George Eliot, in the specific instance of the Bradshaw family—from the overall conception down to the details of the criminality of the son and heir—we have a clear anticipation of the Gradgrinds of Dickens's *Hard Times*. (Dickens, it should be recorded, was much involved with Mrs Gaskell in the early 1850s; he expressed his admiration of *Ruth* when it first appeared in 1853, and began work on *Hard Times* in January 1854.) Where Dickens for the most part gives us the broad outlines of comic characterization and incident Mrs Gaskell offers a more sober analysis of the situation that has its own strengths. Ruth's assimilation into the Bradshaw family allows for the extension of the issue of her redemption from within the purely private sanctuary offered by the Bensons: at the same time it is the catalyst of a sequence of events that involves the Bradshaws themselves in a reconsideration of their own moral premises. As Mrs Gaskell says of Jemima, when she learns of Ruth's past, 'she had never imagined that she should ever come in contact with anyone who had committed open sin'. The interaction between Ruth and Jemima, with the insight it offers into Victorian conceptions of the role of women both within and without marriage, is only one aspect of the way in which the novel as a whole extends its terms of reference as the

Bradshaw context is developed. If much of the action involving the election, with the reintroduction of Bellingham as the candidate, seems contrived, the understanding Mrs Gaskell reveals of the pressures to be found within a particular kind of Victorian family life is both sympathetic and acute.

'Why should she die? Why are we to shut up the book weeping?' Charlotte Brontë asked of the conclusion Mrs Gaskell contrived for *Ruth*. In his turn, A. W. Ward, editor of the 'Knutsford' edition, observed that 'the last chapters of *Ruth* cannot very easily be treated from a purely literary point of view'. In Charlotte Brontë's novels, of course, it is the men who suffer in the end; it can fairly be said that Mrs Gaskell's sense of realism would have saved her from showing us Ruth triumphant. But even the most generous criticism is bound to feel that the ultimate irony of her death as a consequence of nursing her erstwhile seducer is ill judged. *Ruth* is at best an uneven novel, its positive virtues of honesty and insight going hand in hand with uncertainties of focus and awkwardness of narrative contrivance. Furthermore the whole story is coloured by its author's overt and often embarrassing religiosity, and these limitations are never more in evidence than in the concluding pages, where Mrs Gaskell contrives martyrdom for a heroine who has at least earned the right to be accepted amongst the living rather than glorified with the dead. That Ruth should find her ultimate calling fulfilling a need within the wider community is in itself appropriate, and in this respect it is interesting that Mrs Gaskell should later have found herself attracted to Florence Nightingale, whom she described as 'like a Saint' and of whose hospital work she was to write: 'it makes one feel the livingness of God more than ever to think how straight He is sending his spirit down into her, as into the prophets & saints of old' (*Letters*, p. 307). In this instance, life would seem to have imitated art. But Florence Nightingale was not a fallen woman. It was ultimately impossible for Mrs Gaskell to conceive of Ruth in other than tragic terms: the convention that the social problem she represented was a tragedy in itself ensured that the conventions of literary tragedy were the



only ones appropriate to the case. Hence Bellingham's last, and surely most unnecessary, reappearance; hence the death scene, appropriately solemnized by a Shakespearian text. The range of feeling embodied in *Ruth* as a whole, however, is far greater than that suggested by its conclusion alone. At its best a genuinely poetic novel, it examines its central issue with a deeply felt moral conviction. At the same time it never loses its sense of the way in which human beings behave, of their limitations and frailties, and of the potential that lies within them.

ALAN SHELSTON