

# THE THEMES OF ELIZABETH GASKELL

Enid L. Duthie,



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## List of abbreviations

The edition used for the works of Mrs Gaskell, with the exception of her biography of Charlotte Brontë, is the Knutsford edition, with introductions by A. W. Ward, published by Smith, Elder & Co., 1906, and reprinted by John Murray, 1919–20. Reference to individual works is given under the title of the volume in which they appear. This title has been abbreviated to that of the main work contained in that volume; for example, a reference to 'Half a Lifetime Ago' would be given to My Lady Ludlow, the title story of the volume concerned. The abbreviations used, and the full titles, with the list of the complete contents of each volume, are as follows:

Mary Barton and Other Tales (Libbie Marsh's

Three Eras, The Sexton's Hero, Clopton

House).

Cranford Cranford and Other Tales (Christmas Storms and

Sunshine, Lizzie Leigh, The Well of Pen-Morfa, The Moorland Cottage, The Heart of John Middleton, Disappearances, The Old Nurse's Story, Morton Hall, Traits and Stories of the Huguenots, My French Master, The Squire's

Story).

Ruth and Other Tales (Cumberland Sheep-

Shearers, Modern Greek Songs, Company Manners, Bessy's Troubles at Home, Hand and

Heart).

North and South North and South.

My Lady Ludlow My Lady Ludlow and Other Tales (Round the Sofa,

An Accursed Race, The Doom of the Griffiths, Half a Lifetime Ago, The Poor Clare, The Half-Brothers, Mr Harrison's Confessions, The

Manchester Marriage).

Sylvia's Lovers Sylvia's Lovers, etc. (An Italian Institution).

Cousin Phillis

Cousin Phillis and Other Tales (Lois the Witch, The Crooked Branch, Curious if True, Right at Last, The Grey Woman, Six Weeks at Heppenheim, A Dark Night's Work, The Shah's English Gardener, French Life, Crowley Castle, Two Fragments of Ghost Stories).

Wives and

Daughters Wives and Daughters, an Every-Day Story.

References to Life of Charlotte Brontë are to the Haworth edition, edited by C. K. Shorter (reprinted by John Murray, 1920–2). The title has been abbreviated to Life.

In references to *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, edited by J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard and published by the Manchester University Press, the title has been abbreviated to L, followed by the letter number.

### Introduction

Some writers have to wait longer than others to receive their due from posterity, even when they have been widely acclaimed in their own generation. The lack of adequate appreciation from which Elizabeth Gaskell has suffered has been due largely to the scope and variety of her work. Each of her short stories has its own distinctive qualities, still more each of her novels. And she wrote a large number of tales, of varying length, as well as essays of diverse character, in addition to the five full-length novels and the biography of Charlotte Brontë.

It is true that she has never lacked enthusiastic readers ever since the publication of Mary Barton. Each generation has found something to admire in her, but no generation has done justice to her total achievement. It has even been claimed that Cranford was harmful to its author's reputation by its very success, throwing into shadow works of deeper import. In recent years the social realism of the novels set in Victorian Manchester has received the renewed attention natural in an era of industrial unrest. In a more general context, Wives and Daughters has at length come to be recognised for what it is, one of the great novels of any age. And The Life of Charlotte Brontë continues to be one of the most widely read of all biographies. Yet the approach to Elizabeth Gaskell remains to some extent incomplete, because the very individuality of the separate works tends to obscure the essential qualities that unite them in a harmonious totality.

Like Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, she orchestrated themes which belonged both to her age and to her personal experience, themes which recur, with variations, in the tales and essays as well as in the full-length novels. In his valuable Mrs Gaskell: The Basis for Reassess ment, published in 1965, Edgar Wright adopted an approach which was partly thematic and partly chronological. In the present study, though the chronological factor cannot, of course, be ignored, a thematic approach is used throughout in an attempt to show the basic unity of Elizabeth Gaskell's total achievement. The

main stress must always fall on the major creative work, the novels and the biography—which has close links with the novelist's art—but it frequently happens that the lesser known works provide interesting illustrations of the way in which the main themes are understood and handled. She was naturally attracted by variety of form, as well as by variety of subject. Her style indeed took its shape from her themes, and increasingly achieved a similar harmony underlying its diversity.

Any consideration of those themes today must be indebted to the publication of *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, under the editorship of Professor J. A. V. Chapple and Professor Arthur Pollard, which revealed the richness of the experience on which she was able to draw, as well as to the wide-ranging *Mrs Gaskell's Observation and Invention* of Mr J. G. Sharps.

Elizabeth Gaskell died before she could complete the final pages of her last novel, and as certainly before she realised her full potential, for *Wives and Daughters* shows her at the height of her powers, yet hers was no unfinished symphony. Few writers leave us with such a sense of fulfilment; few have sought it less for themselves, or better succeeded in leaving to their readers a lasting legacy of beauty and truth.

My thanks are due to Professor J. A. V. Chapple and Professor Arthur Pollard, and to the Manchester University Press, for kindly permitting quotation from *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*. My acknowledgements are also due to John Murray for quotations from the Knutsford edition of Elizabeth Gaskell's works, and from the Haworth edition of her *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. The Brontë Society kindly permitted me to use material from my article in *Transactions* in 1977 on 'Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw" and Mrs Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story". Finally I should like to express my sincere gratitude to the staff of the University Library, Exeter.

## To the memory of my parents, Arthur and Gertrude Duthie

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# 1 Biographical background

Elizabeth Gaskell once expressed her belief that to live an active and sympathetic life was the indispensable prelude to producing fiction which had strength and vitality in it. This was certainly true in her own case. By the time *Mary Barton* appeared in 1848, she had a wide experience of the areas of life which were to provide her major themes. Nor did literary fame prevent her from continuing to take part in the spheres of activity to which she was already committed. Neither her temperament nor her circumstances inclined her to the self-absorption which is the pleasure and the peril of a different order of genius. She was receptive to the atmosphere of her age as well as to the varied happenings which filled her busy days. Before considering the themes of her work, it is desirable to look briefly at the sources, personal and social, from which they evolved.

Her father William Stevenson, born at Berwick-on-Tweed in 1772, belonged to a naval family. By temperament, however, he was a scholar, not a sailor, though he had a hereditary love of the sea. As the family were Dissenters, Oxford and Cambridge were closed to him, but he became a divinity student at Manchester Academy and subsequently minister at the Unitarian chapel at Failsworth, near Manchester. It was while there that he met Elizabeth Holland, who belonged to a long-established Cheshire yeoman family, whom he married in 1797. He had resigned from the ministry before his marriage and was soon to begin the erratic career in which his many talents were never to find full scope. He became an experimental farmer at Laughton Mills, near Edinburgh, but the venture failed. The Stevensons moved to Edinburgh where he was private tutor, journalist and editor of the Scots Magazine. In 1806 the family moved to London in the hope of a brighter future, Lord Lauderdale having invited Stevenson to accompany him to India, on his appointment as Governor-General, as his private secretary. The project never materialised, as Lord Lauderdale's appointment was not confirmed by the East India Company, but he secured a post for Stevenson as Keeper of the Treasury Records, an occupation which allowed him

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time to contribute to many of the leading periodicals. His daughter Elizabeth was born in Chelsea in 1810, the last of eight children and, with her eldest brother, the only one to survive infancy. Her mother died thirteen months later, and an elder sister of her mother, Mrs Lumb, who lived in Knutsford in Cheshire, took the motherless infant into her care. The child was therefore brought up in a small country town, and under the aegis of the Hollands, and both facts were important for her future development.

Her deep love of the country had its roots in her early familiarity with rural Cheshire. Sandlebridge, the family home of the Hollands, four miles from Knutsford, both farm and country house, came to represent for her the epitome of pastoral peace. In Knutsford itself her aunt's house faced the open common, and Mrs Lumb kept a couple of cows, poultry, geese and ducks on the pasture behind. The child also became familiar from an early age with the pattern of life in a traditional society. In Knutsford, her 'dear adopted native town', the social hierarchy was firmly established and ensured a stable community, in which the Hollands, as a family of substantial yeoman stock, which had been fixed in the county for generations, had a recognised status.

That they were Dissenters, of Unitarian belief, no longer represented a barrier to social recognition, and their position was made more secure by the fact that they were related by marriage to some of the most important and influential Unitarian families. The Brook Street Unitarian Chapel at Knutsford, to which the young Elizabeth Stevenson was taken regularly, had been built, as we are reminded in Ruth (where it features as Thurstan Benson's chapel at Eccleston) 'about the time of Matthew and Philip Henry, when the Dissenters were afraid of attracting attention or observation, and hid their places of worship in obscure and out-of-the-way parts of the towns in which they were built'. But the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century saw the growth and consolidation of the Unitarian movement in England. Religion, as it was presented in Brook Street, was the strongest of all the influences that moulded Elizabeth's youth. It involved a close personal knowledge of the Bible—particularly the New Testament—practical help to one's neighbour, tolerance and open-mindedness and the belief that there is in all men the spark of divinity.

Meanwhile in distant London William Stevenson married again, in 1814. There were two children of the second marriage, but his daughter Elizabeth remained in Knutsford. Her only contact with

her own family was through the occasional visits and lively letters of her brother John, twelve years older than she. He entered the Merchant Navy, and it was to say goodbye to him on his departure on his first voyage that she returned to Chelsea on a visit in 1822. This first visit was followed at intervals by others, but they were never enjoyable experiences. '... very, very unhappy I used to be'2 was her recollection of them many years later.

In the August of 1822 she left Knutsford again, this time to spend five years at boarding-school. The school chosen was at Barford in Warwickshire and later moved to Stratford. It was run on liberal lines by the Miss Byerleys, who had Unitarian connections, being related to the Wedgwoods. Her years at this school, in pleasant rural surroundings, were happy ones. She returned to Knutsford in 1827 and soon after enjoyed a holiday in Wales which initiated her into the beauties of a new type of scenery, more awe-inspiring than the pastoral.

The next year brought unexpected calamity. John Stevenson sailed for India in that summer, as he had done several times before, but he never returned from this voyage and his family never knew whether he was actually lost at sea or disappeared after landing. The traumatic effect of the loss of this loved and admired sailor brother was to be reflected in his sister's works. She returned to Chelsea because of this family tragedy and remained with her father, now in failing health, till his death from a stroke in March 1829. Her helpfulness during these difficult months was later praised by her stepmother, in a letter to her aunt Mrs Lumb.<sup>3</sup> But their relationship remained superficial and, after her father's death, she returned to the orbit of the Holland family.

She did not, however, return immediately to Knutsford. Two of her relatives with established positions in London society invited her to visit them, her uncle Swinton Holland, a banker with a house in Park Lane and her cousin Henry Holland, son of the Knutsford surgeon and an eminent London doctor. After a brief contact with a milieu wealthier and more sophisticated than any she had yet known, she went on a long visit to family friends at Newcastle. The impressions received during her stay with the Revd William Turner, Unitarian minister at Newcastle, and his daughter Anne are reflected in her sympathetic portrayal of the Benson household in Ruth. Turner's religion represented the same practical and charitable ideals as those of Brook Street Chapel and he also had the intellectual culture and interests characteristic of Unitarians, and

was active in 'every benevolent and scientific interest in the town'.<sup>4</sup> His daughter Mary had married John Gooch Robberds, minister of Cross Street Unitarian Chapel in Manchester, and Elizabeth Stevenson accompanied Anne Turner on a visit to the Robberds in the autumn of 1831. It was while staying with them that she met William Gaskell, the assistant minister at Cross Street, whom she married at Knutsford in August 1832.

William Gaskell, five years older than she, was the son of a Warrington manufacturer. He had graduated at Glasgow University and trained for the Unitarian ministry at Manchester New College, then at York. He was, like William Turner, intellectual and cultured and, like him, a tireless worker for social causes. The marriage was based on shared ideals and in many ways similar tastes, as well as on physical attraction. In temperament they were very different; her fundamental seriousness was overlaid with a charming gaiety and she was as naturally exuberant as he was naturally grave.

After a honeymoon in Wales, they began their married life in a house in Dover Street, conveniently near to Cross Street Chapel. Here after the loss of a daughter, stillborn, in 1833, two children were born: Marianne in 1834 and Margaret Emily (Meta) in 1837. In 1842 they moved to a larger house close by in Upper Rumford Street, where a third daughter, Florence, was born the same year and William, the only son, in 1844. Their life was already a busy one. William Gaskell's enthusiasm for education and social reforms involved him in many commitments, as well as his ministerial duties. His wife proved a most devoted mother, as well as showing hospitality to their relatives and friends, though Mrs Lumb died in 1837. She was proud of her husband's social work and herself took an active part in the Cross Street Chapel's Sunday and Day Schools in Lower Mosley Street, directed by Travers Madge. Through this, and her visits to the poor families she befriended, she gradually came to know much of the conditions in which the Manchester workers lived.

The city had by then come to be considered representative, more than any other, of the social ferment caused by the industrial revolution. The development of the cotton industry had transformed it, in the latter part of the eighteenth century, into a vast manufacturing centre and by 1831 the population had increased almost six times in sixty years. But the growing distance between the manufacturers and the workers led to increasing social unrest. The

1819 'massacre of Peterloo' was far from forgotten when the Gaskells settled in Manchester in 1832. In the 1830s and 1840s, the decades when Elizabeth Gaskell grew familiar by personal contact with conditions in the dingy courts and slums, there were recurrent economic depressions. The most severe of these followed the financial crisis of 1836 and, coupled with bad harvests, reached its height during the years 1839-42. Elizabeth Gaskell was appalled by the squalor and misery she saw, and Engels's descriptions are hardly grimmer than some of those she was to give in Mary Barton. With virtually no drainage and no pure water supply, epidemics were rife. The fever from which Davenport, one of the mill-workers in Mary Barton, dies, is 'of a low, putrid, typhoid kind; brought on by miserable living, filthy neighbourhood, and great depression of mind and body'. The factories, no less than the slums, took their toll of health and life through excessive working hours, unguarded machinery and ill-ventilated work-rooms. Attempts at industrial legislation were still inadequate, though a series of Factory Acts, from 1833 onwards, tried to improve conditions for children, and later for women, in the mills. In their misery during the depression Manchester workers supported the Chartist movement, which hoped to secure political representation for the working classes. The 'People's Charter', which stated the aims of the movement, was published in 1838 and delegates from all parts of the country joined in presenting it to Parliament in June 1839, but Parliament refused to consider it. The rejection of the Chartist petition was to be used by Elizabeth Gaskell as the turning-point in the life of her hero in Mary Barton.

But Elizabeth Gaskell also knew the other side of industrial Manch ester, the side probably considered most characteristic in the forties. This was the Manchester of the manufacturers and merchants, the new aristocracy of commerce. She recognised, like Engels, the extent of their power, though, unlike him, she considered the lack of communication between them and their operatives, so different from the relationship between rich and poor in the traditionalist society to which she was accustomed, as an unmitigated evil, which called urgently for redress and remedy. Some of Manchester's wealthy businessmen were known to her personally because they and their families formed a considerable part of the congregation of Cross Street Chapel. There were for example the Potters, rich calico-printers, the Schwabes, also calico-printers, who belonged to the German colony in the city and Robert

and Samuel Greg, who were cotton-spinners. This wealthy congregation had their philanthropic interests, but frequently their laissezfaire individualism in industry and economics was in opposition to the 'Christian interventionism' desired by Elizabeth Gaskell. The critic W. R. Greg, brother of Robert and Samuel, was to attack Mary Barton bitterly as unfair to the manufacturers. In some, however, she did find the concern for their workers' welfare which was ultimately to be shown by Thornton in North and South. Samuel Greg sincerely desired to improve their condition, though his efforts on behalf of his Bollington workers were not repaid with success in business and he became bankrupt in 1847. It was to Samuel Greg's wife that Elizabeth Gaskell was to write explaining her motives in Mary Barton.<sup>6</sup>

In this restless but dynamic atmosphere both she and her husband had many demands to meet on their time and attention. but their family life remained a happy one, never so happy, indeed, for Elizabeth Gaskell, as after the birth of her son in 1844. Her happiness was abruptly shattered when the child died of scarlet fever at the age of ten months. It was to divert her thoughts from this overwhelming sorrow that her husband suggested she should attempt to write 'a work of some length'.7 Clearly the suggestion would not have been made if she had not already given evidence of her literary ability. She had kept a private diary of the first years of her two elder children and no doubt written short stories like 'The Doom of the Griffiths', begun, on her own admission, when her first child was a baby though not published till much later.8 But in 1845 only two of her writings had been published, a poem in collaboration with her husband—the first and only example of a projected series 'Sketches among the Poor'-and an account of her visit as a schoolgirl to Clopton House, included by William Howitt in his Visits to Remarkable Places in 1840. She may also have composed by this time the three short stories that appeared in Howitt's Journal in 1847 and 1848 under the pseudonym 'Cotton Mather Mills'— 'Libbie Marsh's Three Eras', 'The Sexton's Hero' and 'Christmas Storms and Sunshine'. But she did not give the full measure of her capacities till she began work, probably in the last months of 1845, on the full-length novel that appeared in 1848 with the title Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life.

In Mary Barton she did not so much escape from her own sorrow as identify herself with the sorrows of the working poor of Manchester. The result was a work of compelling power, if uneven construction.

It aroused anger among some of the Manchester mill-owners, but at once reached a wider public and made of her a well-known writer instead of an anonymous one. It also introduced her, on her visit to Londonin 1849, to the literary society of her day. Though too well-balanced to be spoiled by 'lionising', she enjoyed the hospitality lavished on her, including a dinner given by Dickens. The contact with Dickens helped to establish her as a writer, for she became a freque m contributor to his new weekly journal, Household Words, when it began to appear in 1850.

1850 was another landmark in the history of the Gaskells, for it saw their establishment in the house in Plymouth Grove that was to become a centre of hospitality and cultural life in Manchester. There were now four daughters, for another child, Julia, had been born in 1846. In addition to the care of her growing family, Elizabeth Gaskell now had the entertainment of frequent guests to occupy her, as well as her writing. But she had not lost her concern for the victims of the industrial society, and it was this that provided the starting-point for her next novel Ruth.

Among the occupations open to working women, that of seamstress was one of the worst paid and worst organised. The most wretched were those working at home but, in spite of the efforts of Lord Ashley, those who were apprenticed to dressmakers often fared little better. The conditions frequently amounted to sweated labour of the worst kind and, because of the starvation wages, dressmaking was one of the trades often associated with prostitution. The plight of a sixteen-year-old dressmaker's apprentice, seduced, abandoned and imprisoned for theft, whom she visited at the request of her friend Thomas Wright, the prison philanthropist,9 suggested to Elizabeth Gaskell the first chapters of Ruth. The book is, however, chiefly concerned with the moral recovery and social reintegration of the heroine and develops into a powerful plea for a more compassionate attitude to the unmarried mother and her child. Its reception, when published in 1853, was even more hostile than the author had feared but its admirers included Dickens, Kingsley, Mrs Browning and Florence Nightingale.

By now Elizabeth Gaskell was also contributing stories and sketches to *Household Words*. The setting of these was by no means limited to the industrial city, being as often Wales or Cumbria or Silverdale on Morecambe Bay, the Gaskells' favourite country home. Knutsford reappeared as Combehurst of 'The Moorland Cottage', Duncombe of 'Mr Harrison's Confessions' and, above all,

in Cranford, serialised in Household Words before appearing in book form in 1853, when it aroused no such hostile reactions as its controversial predecessors.

In North and South, also serialised in Household Words before publication in 1855, Elizabeth Gaskell returned to the industrial scene, this time allowing both master and workers to state their case. The period of the action was more or less contemporary. By the 1850s Chartism was no longer the same active force, and the Public Health Act of 1848 and the Factory Act of 1850 had done something to improve conditions for the workers. Yet they remained grim enough. Bessy Higgins dies of tuberculosis contracted in the illventilated carding-room, where the air was full of cotton fluff. Relations between masters and workers are still stormy, and strikes sufficiently frequent for Bessy to have seen three in the course of her short life. Elizabeth Gaskell does not gloss over the problems of the industrialist society, even though she now allows more scope to the forces of conciliation. Her second industrial novel met with general approval, even from W. R. Greg, the most severe censor of Mary Barton.

Its completion left its author temporarily exhausted, but writing was now part of the pattern of her life. She did not allow it to interfere with her care of her family or her contacts with an ever widening circle of friends and acquaintances. These included the Nightingales, F. D. Maurice, Kingsley, John Forster, the Arnolds and the Kay-Shuttleworths. It was on a visit to the Kay-Shuttleworths that she met Charlotte Brontë in 1850 and their close friendship began. Charlotte visited her in Manchester in 1851—the year of the Great Exhibition—and in 1853, and Elizabeth Gaskell visited Haworth in September of the same year. Charlotte came again to Manchester shortly before her marriage in 1854. It was their last meeting, for she died in 1855.

The news caused Elizabeth Gaskell deep sorrow and when Mr Brontë asked her to write the official biography of her friend, she at once agreed. Characteristically she thought of it as a portrait of the woman, of which the development of the artist was only a part. Her biography, inspired by true friendship as well as admiration, was universally praised on its appearance in March 1857. Unfortunately she had allowed her indignation on Charlotte's behalf to outrun caution in speaking of the woman—transparently alluded to though not named—whom she held responsible for Branwell's downfall. The consequence soon became apparent with