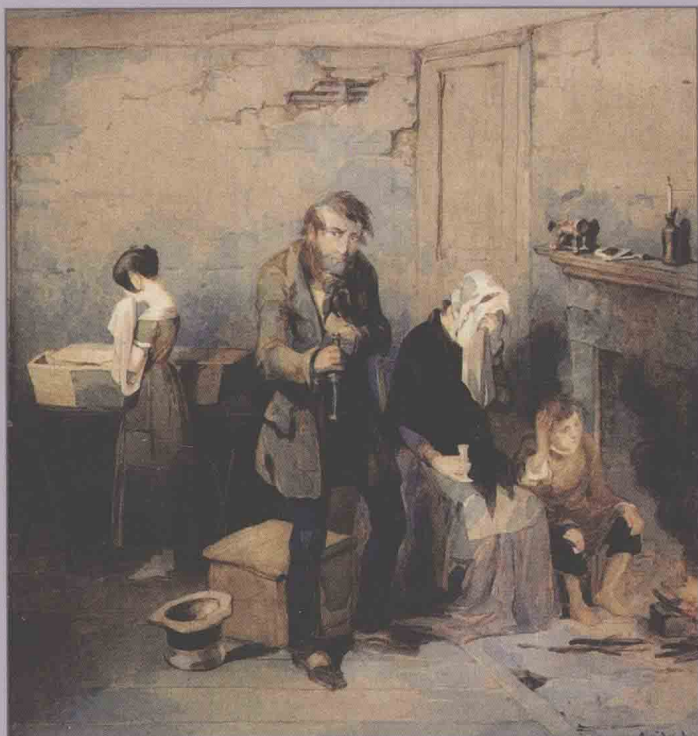


MARY BARTON

ELIZABETH GASKELL



EDITED BY THOMAS RECCHIO

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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Elizabeth Gaskell
MARY BARTON



AUTHORITATIVE TEXT
CONTEXTS
CRITICISM

Edited by
THOMAS RECCHIO
UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

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Preface

I

The Royal Exchange Theatre located in St. Ann's Square, Manchester opened its thirtieth anniversary season in 2006 with the world premiere of Rona Munro's two-act dramatic adaptation of Elizabeth Gaskell's first novel *Mary Barton*. The play, which ran from September 6 through October 14, was subsequently published in book form (Nick Hern Books, London 2006) with a foreword by Munro, in which she writes:

Elizabeth Gaskell's passion to write came from a need to hold up the world she saw every day in front of an audience who might choose never to see it [at] all. At the birth of the Industrial Revolution she showed the human cost of a world in which economic forces were treated as forces of nature which could not be controlled, inevitable disasters bringing starvation and death to thousands. She wrote not a piece of polemic, but a complicated human story which has compassion for all its characters but poses the most difficult moral questions—still relevant today. (v–vi)

Munro's claims evoke three key emphases that have surfaced in much of the critical work on *Mary Barton*: Gaskell's intention to show her educated, affluent, middle-class readership the horrific actualities for many working-class people during periods of low employment and slack trade in the first industrial city in the world, Manchester during "the hungry forties"; her desire to demonstrate the destructive power of economic practices, which are based on the assumption that the laws of economics invented by laissez-faire economic theorists have the same validity as the laws of physics; and her resistance to proposing specific legal and economic reforms, which would transform the novel from a medium for reflection into a tract for debate. In other words, Gaskell concerns herself in *Mary Barton* with our tendency to turn away from human suffering in order to preserve our own sense of well-being, with the ease with which we rationalize our willful blindness by attributing the causes of suffering to forces beyond our control or our influence; and she confronts us with

morally complex and unsettling social realities through the texture of the narrative world she presents.

Written intermittently over the years from 1844 to 1847 but not published until October 1848, *Mary Barton* appeared at a moment that augured well for its success. There had been a flurry of publications dating roughly from 1832 through 1845 that began to constitute what came to be called the "industrial" (and sometimes "social problem") novel. Such works as Harriet Martineau's "A Manchester Strike" in her *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832), Frances Trollope's *Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* (1840), Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's *Helen Fleetwood* (1840), Elizabeth Stone's *William Langshawe, the Cotton Lord* (1842), and Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845) are the most noteworthy examples, and all suffer from similar limitations: the subordination of characterization to the work's explicit argument and the tendency for the narrative to degenerate into anti-industrial polemic. In the context of such an emergent genre, *Mary Barton* was welcomed for its complexity of characterization, its linguistic richness, and the verisimilitude of its detail. In addition, 1848 was the year of a resurgence of revolutionary activity in Europe, most notably in France with the overthrow of King Louis Philippe and the establishment of the second republic. One of the issues fueling that revolution was a drive for universal suffrage. One of the six points of the English "People's Charter" (carried as petitions to Parliament in 1839 and 1842) was a call for universal male suffrage. Consequently, *Mary Barton* was read in the context of renewed English anxieties that conflated the terror of the French Revolution from 1789 with the emergence of working class organization, a conflation that accounted in part for the suppression of working-class organization that resulted in the Peterloo Massacre in Manchester in 1819. Gaskell was, in fact, concerned about her novel being read as simply opportunistic because of an unexplained delay in its publication that pushed the date of its appearance to a time when the political unrest in Europe had been widely reported and discussed. In a letter to her publisher John Chapman dated July 10, 1848, in response to his request for an "explanatory preface" to the novel, Gaskell wrote: "The only thing I should like to make clear is that it is no catch-penny run up since the events on the Continent have directed public attention to the consideration of the state of affairs between the Employers [*sic*], & their work-people" (*Letters* 26, p. 58). Having written that to Chapman, however, did not prevent her from evoking the revolutionary climate in her "Preface," which concludes with this sentence: "To myself that idea which I formed of the state of feeling among too many of the factory-people in Manchester, and which I endeavoured to represent in this tale (completed above a year ago), has received some confirmation from

the events which have so recently occurred among a similar class on the Continent."

Note how deftly Gaskell registers her idea "of the state of feeling" within the working classes having come to her before "the events which have so recently occurred," those events confirming her insights rather than her insights being a response to events. Thus she announces her novel as a warning to address a "state of feeling." How much that "state of feeling" results from policy or from attitude is not clear. What is clear through a reading of the novel, though, is that it results from the unambiguous quality of experience in working-class life. Suffering was clear; what to do about it was not. A necessary preliminary to action, however, is understanding, and that is what the novel enables: by presenting working-class experience as fully as she does (with an emphasis on mortality and family stability), and by working metaphorically to evoke comparable experience in the middle-class, Gaskell offers her novel as a stimulus to reflection. The focus of such reflection Gaskell suggests in a letter she wrote to a Miss Lamont dated January 5, 1849: "John Barton" was the original name [for the novel *Mary Barton*], as being the central figure to my mind; indeed I had so long felt that the bewildered life of an ignorant thoughtful man of strong power of sympathy, dwelling in a town so full of striking contrasts as this is, was a tragic poem, that in the writing he was my 'hero'; and it was a London thought coming through the publisher that it must be called *Mary B*" (*Letters*, 39, p. 70). Gaskell addresses the wavering focus of the novel as a whole in that passage, noting her central conception of "an ignorant thoughtful man of strong power of sympathy" as the heart of her novel while acknowledging the shift in emphasis required by her publisher for, we can assume, marketing considerations.¹

Gaskell's "hero" was John Barton; the publishers wanted Mary Barton as heroine. As the history of critical discussion on this issue shows, Gaskell's writing problem was a formal one, a question of genre. Was she writing a realistic narrative of industrial suffering or a romantic narrative about the obstacles placed between two lovers? Gaskell was doing both, turning the life of her working-class hero into a "tragic poem." In other words, as she notes elsewhere in her "Preface," Gaskell wondered about "the romance in the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets of the town in which I resided." We might say, then, that for Gaskell, the possibilities of romance broadly construed—romance as love (Jem and Mary), romance as memory (Alice Wilson), romance as adventure (Will Wilson as sailor and Mary's quest to find him), romance as science (Job

1. Love stories are always marketable. In a BBC interview with Sarah Frankcom, the director of Rona Munro's adaptation, Frankcom replied to the question, "Why should the people of Manchester go and see [*Mary Barton*]?" with: "Because it is a good old-fashioned love story!"

Legh)—are what provide a core of meaning and a drive for fulfillment in the most ordinary of lives. What turns romance into tragedy are the social conditions that distort the drive for fulfillment into violence, indirect and social in the case of the mill owners, direct and personal on the part of Barton. The net effect of the tragedy is to blur the distinction between the personal and the social. And that may be what Gaskell's novel encourages readers to reflect upon.

Consider the following passage presented as a direct address to the reader. On an errand of mercy John Barton had just left the Davenports' cellar where Ben Davenport, lying on the feces-strewn damp stones of his family's dwelling, is raving in the last throes of a typhus fever before his death. Barton is forcibly struck by "the contrast between the well-filled, well-lighted shops and the dim gloomy cellar," the same contrast that struck him even more powerfully on the death of his son when he observed the wife of a mill owner buying provisions for a party as his son was dying of starvation:

[. . .] But he could not, you cannot, read the lot of those who daily pass you by in the street. How do you know the wild romances of their lives: the trials, temptations they are now enduring, resisting, sinking under? You may be elbowed one instant by a girl desperate in her abandonment, laughing in sad merriment with her outward gesture, while her soul is longing for the rest of the dead, and bringing itself to think of the cold-flowing river as the only mercy of God remaining to her here. You may pass the criminal, meditating crimes at which you will tomorrow shudder with horror as you read them. You may push against one, humble and unnoticed, the last upon earth, who in heaven will be in the immediate light of God's countenance. (Chapter 6)

The "romances" of the girl and the criminal alluded to in the passage find extended and painful echoes in the story of Barton's sister-in-law Esther, who becomes a streetwalker out of economic necessity and contemplates suicide, and in Barton's own story, with Barton himself turning to crime. (The "humble and unnoticed" is played out in the life of Alice Wilson.) The effort to read the lot of others becomes a path toward reading our own social and personal circumstance. In this context, we can read the novel as an extended reflection on the particular social conditions that distort a normative drive for fulfillment into simultaneously self-destructive actions. Esther's turn to prostitution and the death of Harry Carson, rather than being exceptional actions that distort the internal social logic of the novel (as some critics have maintained), become weirdly normative in a world where what Friedrich Engels called "social murder" is the shadow

reality. Davenport's death, the starvation of Barton's son Tom, and the death of Harry Carson are all morally equivalent events in the novel. The death of Carson's son becomes a mirror that reflects back to Carson an image of himself. That too may be what Gaskell's novel encourages readers, especially her mill-owning readers, to reflect on. As the Manchester working-class poet Samuel Bamford wrote to Gaskell in a letter included in this volume: "You have drawn a fearfully true picture: a mournfully beautiful one also have you placed on the tables of the drawing rooms of the great, and good it must there effect; good for themselves, and good also I hope for the poor of every occupation."

II

The genesis of *Mary Barton* has often been told. The first sentence in the "Preface" alludes to one of the circumstances that encouraged Gaskell to write: "Three years ago I became anxious (from circumstances that need not be more fully alluded to) to employ myself in writing a work of fiction." Those circumstances center on a specific event: the death of her son Willie from scarlet fever in 1845. As a retreat from her grief, the story goes, William Gaskell encouraged his wife to write a novel. Another circumstance is recounted in Jenny Uglow's 1993 biography: "Elizabeth allegedly told Travers Madge of the moment that inspired *Mary Barton*. One day, visiting a poor family, she was trying . . . to argue against their suspicion of the rich, 'when the head of the family took hold of her arm, and grasping it tightly said, "Ay, ma'am, have ye ever seen a child clemmed [starved] to death?"'" (193). And such a sight, having seen his child starve to death, haunts John Barton throughout the novel.

But although *Mary Barton* was Gaskell's first novel, it was not her first attempt to write. She and her husband William broke into print in 1831 with their co-authored poem "Sketches among the Poor," which they modeled on the poetry of working-class poets such as George Crabb and Samuel Bamford. In 1839 she contributed a short description of Clopton Hall (a place she had visited as schoolgirl in Stratford-upon-Avon) to William Howitt's volume *Visits to Remarkable Places*. Subsequently, Howitt published three of her short stories in his *Howitt's Journal*: "Libbie March's Three Eras" (a story about single women coping with hardship in Manchester, included in this volume) and "The Sexton's Hero" in 1847 and "Christmas Storms and Sunshine" on New Year's Day 1848. All three stories were published under the general title "Life in Manchester" and with the pseudonym Cotton Mather Mills. Howitt sent the manuscript of *Mary Barton* to John Forster (Charles Dickens's great friend and later his

first biographer) who advised the publishers Chapman and Hall to publish it. After some confusion as to whether or how to identify the author (Gaskell suggested the pen-name Stephen Berwick in a letter to Chapman dated October 19, the day after the book was released), the novel was published anonymously.

Because Gaskell lived among and socialized with many mill owners in Manchester—some of whom attended her husband's Unitarian Chapel each Sunday—she welcomed the anonymity, knowing that some of her friends and neighbors might be offended by her depiction of Mr. Carson and the other mill owners in the novel. And, indeed, when her identity as the author became common knowledge early in 1849, her neighbors were offended, some refusing to speak with her in church, and her family friend W.R. Greg writing a long, detailed, negative review (excerpted in this volume). But Gaskell did want to be read and to be known. She asked Chapman to send copies of *Mary Barton* to Dickens and to Thomas Carlyle (whose letter in response is included in this volume). When the reviews of the novel began to appear, the Manchester press tended to be unkind, but the London reviews were enthusiastic, notably John Forster's and Charles Kingsley's (also included in this volume). Gaskell decided to travel to London, where her publisher arranged tickets to cultural events, and where she was wined and dined by the London literati. She became, in effect, a celebrity, a circumstance that did not take her completely by surprise. In a letter to an unknown correspondent dated March 8, 1849, she expressed concern that in traveling to London "it would ill become me to say that I might not be materially altered for the worse by this mysterious process of 'lionizing'" (*Letters* 40, p. 71), that is, the process of one newly famous being publicly acknowledged and celebrated in at times surprising and unsettling ways. She already had had a taste of that in Manchester, for in the same letter she asserts, "Oh dear! I wish poor Mary Barton could be annihilated this next month; and I then might go where I liked, & do & see what I liked naturally & simply." But the genie, in effect, was out of the bottle. The "authoress of *Mary Barton*" became an important figure in mid-Victorian literary life, publishing between 1848 and her death in 1865 six substantial and wide-ranging novels, the finest literary biography of the century in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, and numerous short stories and occasional pieces in the periodical press.

III

Although her novels were widely reviewed and admired in her life time, Gaskell's work received much less critical scrutiny after her death. As Robert Selig notes in his *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Reference*

Guide, "Too much criticism on Elizabeth Gaskell from 1867 to 1946 tends to freeze selected earlier opinions into dogma and, at the same time, to respond to less and less of her work" (ix). There are a number of reasons for this. First, the venues for publication for literary criticism were limited; the explosion of academic publication venues such as university presses and specialized journals of criticism (one notable exception being the *Publication of the Modern Language Association*) did not occur until after the second world war. Second, one publishing venue that kept nineteenth-century British novels in circulation, other than the commercial press that marketed pocket editions of many Victorian novels, was the schoolbook industry, which started producing school editions of Victorian novels both English and American in the 1880s. The introductions to those school editions defined the authors and their work in highly restrictive ways appropriate in the publishers' minds for the benefit of schoolchildren. While there were no school editions of *Mary Barton*, there were nine school editions of *Cranford*, all published in America, and almost all discussing that novel as representative of Gaskell's "charming" and "sane" sensibility. Third, for complex reasons related to the role literature played in the construction of national identities in England and America, Gaskell's *Cranford*, by the 1890s, became the novel most identified with her name.

Soon after her death, however, Gaskell was probably most remembered for *Mary Barton*. In the ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* published in 1879, for example, Flora Masson ends her entry on Gaskell with this: Gaskell "was far more an artist than a reformer. Had it not been so, *Mary Barton* would not rank so high in the literature of fiction as it does. It is no work of occasion, the chief interest of which departs when the occasion itself is over. It is a thoroughly artistic production, and for power of treatment and intense interest of plot has seldom been surpassed. It is as the authoress of *Mary Barton* that Mrs. Gaskell will be remembered." And even during the years of critical neglect, *Mary Barton* was valued in some surprising ways. In 1907 the novel was banned in Manchester area schools for girls because it was considered to be too emotionally stimulating (*Manchester Evening Chronicle* of May 9 and June 19 and the *Manchester Guardian* of June 22, 1907). That same year the London County Council banned *Mary Barton* from London schools for similar reasons (*The Academy*, June 22, 1907). Both actions are a testament to the power of the novel, a power that was felt as far away as Russia in 1860 when Fyodor Dostoevsky chose to publish a Russian translation of *Mary Barton* in his magazine *Vremya* (Time) to inaugurate a series of translations of foreign literature. The centenary year of Gaskell's death, 1910, also produced a wave of appreciation as evidenced by the more than three-score publications

listed in Clark Northrup's 1929 bibliography in Sanders's *Elizabeth Gaskell* (1929), the most characteristic title being, perhaps, "The Gentle Radiance of Mrs. Gaskell's Enduring Fame" (*Current Literature*, November 2, 1910). (That title also suggests something of the dogmatic reverence toward Gaskell and her work characteristic of the time.) Mrs. Esther Alice Chadwick's *Mrs. Gaskell: Haunts, Homes, and Stories* was also published in the centenary year as was the special commemorative number of *The Bookman*, which included a beautiful chalk drawing of George Richmond's famous 1851 portrait of Gaskell as an insert suitable, as the expression goes, for framing. And 1948, the centenary year of *Mary Barton*, saw the publication of Annette Hopkins's "Mary Barton: A Victorian Bestseller," an article coming at the end of Selig's "frozen" period of Gaskell criticism. Subsequently Hopkins published the first full-length literary biography of Gaskell in 1954. But it was not until the 1970s, as the bibliography appended to this volume suggests, that Elizabeth Gaskell and *Mary Barton* became subjects of serious, sustained critical and popular interest. The popular interest can be best illustrated by the number of theater, radio, and television adaptations offered of Gaskell's work in recent years. Selig notes that "[i]n late 1975 *Cranford* was made into a musical by Joan Littlewood and John Wells at London's Theatre Workshop, and a dramatized version of *North and South* was shown on BBC television in December of 1975" (x). In 2001 the BBC produced a lavish television adaptation of *Wives and Daughters* and an unabridged dramatic reading of *Mary Barton* that was broadcast again in 2006. Another critically acclaimed *North and South* television adaptation was released by the BBC in 2004, and at the moment of this writing, the BBC is working on an adaptation of *Cranford* (fused with two of Gaskell's short stories) called *The Cranford Chronicles* starring Judi Dench. There are rumors afloat that an adaptation of *Mary Barton* is on the BBC drawing board.

IV

The critical material appended to the main text of *Mary Barton* is organized under two headings: Contexts and Criticism. Under "Contexts" are included letters related to the publication of the novel and Gaskell's reactions to the criticism the novel received. The contemporary reviews offer a sampling of the range of critical responses, which tend to fall into two camps: one appreciates the moral energy of the novel's engagement with the particularity of working-class life while the other argues for the deceptive implications of such particularity. "Libbie Marsh's Three Eras" is included to provide added texture to Gaskell's sensitive rendering of how working-class women

bond together in response to economic and personal hardship. The selections from Engels were chosen to highlight two aspects of Gaskell's novel: its verisimilitude in description and its metaphoric/aesthetic engagement with what Engels defines as social murder and an incipient class warfare. The Faucher material both confirms and revises Engels's descriptions, providing a more nuanced perspective that is closer to the terms of understanding that circulated within Gaskell's social circle. The brief selection from *The Christian Teacher* adds another view of labor-management relations.

Within "Contexts," the "Adaptation" and "Illustration" sections have a mutually reinforcing function, for novels do not circulate in a culture strictly through the critical discourse that contextualizes and responds to them. Novels stimulate responses in other aesthetic forms, and those responses can be read as forms of critical interpretation. For a dramatist like Dion Boucicault to choose to adapt *Mary Barton* for the popular and often melodramatic theater shows that he recognized a quality in certain narrative trajectories of the novel that could serve the purposes of drama. The Richard Altick piece included in the "Criticism" section that compares the novel to Boucicault's drama explores what some of those purposes are. Illustrations provide pictorial representation of what the illustrator finds significant, provocative, and/or essential in the form and content of the novel. The Randolph Caldecott illustration from the frontispiece of the Smith & Elder illustrated edition of *Mary Barton*, for instance, in the way it represents Mary as tall and full-figured, standing over her seated, emaciated, hunched-over father, renders in a single image the central dynamic in the narrative pattern associated with John and Mary: John's deterioration on the one hand (the loss of his moral stature and paternal authority) and Mary's elevation through her loyalty and physical struggle to save both her father and her future husband. The other images in the "Illustration" section—another frontispiece, two series of three and another series of seven—all offer opportunities to explore narrative emphases highlighted by the visual images. In some ways, the empty critical space that Selig identified in the history of Gaskell criticism, is filled by the implicit criticism of adaptation and the material form of editions of the works themselves. Taken as a whole, the "Contexts" section provides examples of a range of discourses and perceptions that animated the social, political, economic, and artistic dialogue about industrial life in Manchester in the 1840s.

The heart of the "Criticism" section is composed of selections from the most important critical work done on *Mary Barton* since Raymond Williams's seminal discussion in *Culture & Society* (1958). John Lucas, Rosemarie Bodenheimer, Catherine Gallagher, Patsy Stoneman, and Hilary Schor are the most important critics of *Mary*

Barton by the standard of the frequency of reference to their work, which is a mark of how their work has stimulated more thought, more exploration of the critical significance of the novel. In other words, their work continually broadens the contexts within which *Mary Barton* may be said to speak. Perhaps the most forceful testament to the notion that *Mary Barton* can be brought into a wider range of contexts to contribute to an understanding of broad historical and cultural processes in ways that only novels of high literary quality can is suggested by the topics addressed by Grossman, King, and Corley: the intersections between the novel and the law; between the novel and natural history and folk knowledge of healing; and between the novel, imperialism, and the international drug trade. As a novelist, Gaskell may not have been intentionally addressing any of those matters in a systematic way, but she was exploring the intersection between individual experience and the material realities of her contemporary world. Consequently, Barton's addiction is not merely a symptom of his personal condition, a mark of his deterioration and physical deformity; his addiction is made possible by international trade practices and domestic distribution networks. Alice Wilson's knowledge of "field simples" is not a mark of her peculiarity but a sign of her historical connection to a way of life associated with folk wisdom and healing. What constitutes evidence in law and novelistic demonstrations of local "truth" may both echo and depend on each other in the wider culture for their functional validity.

A Note on the Text

I have used the fifth edition of 1854, the last one Gaskell saw through the press, as my base text. That edition included "Two Lectures on the Lancashire Dialect" written by her husband William Gaskell. I have decided not to include those lectures in this edition for a couple of reasons. First, the lectures serve as an extended gloss on the footnotes William Gaskell provided on the Lancashire dialect in the main text. For example, when Job Legh recounts his London journey, he says this about his infant granddaughter's crying: "But when the coach stopped for dinner it was awake, and crying for its pobbies" (Chapter 9). "Pobbies" is footnoted thus: "pobbies, or pobs, child's porridge." In Lecture One, William adds this: "The word generally used by Lancashire people for young children's food, bread soaked in milk or water by the fire, is 'pobs' or 'pobbies'; and the most probable derivation of this which I have been able to find, is from the Welsh 'pob,' which means a baking; 'pobi' being to bake or to roast." While the lectures are of interest in their own right, and while Gaskell herself was anxious that the lectures be printed with the novel as a way to honor her husband, they do little more than extend what the footnotes amply demonstrate: the literary and historical roots of the local dialect, giving that dialect cultural authority. In an effort to honor William's role in the writing of the novel, however, I have identified the footnotes he provided with a [WG] throughout this text. There are a couple of short explanatory notes in the original text, however, that seem more likely to be Gaskell's. Those I have identified with [EG]. Second, since this is a critical edition, I needed to save space to capture the increasingly wide-ranging critical history of the novel. And third, the lectures are readily available in the 2005 Pickering & Chatto and the 2006 Oxford World Classics editions.

Following the advice of my students, I have tried to restrict my notes to essential information to enhance reading without too much disruption. Consequently, I have avoided interpretive glosses and geographical identifications. Easson's Ryburn edition provides comprehensive geographical references as, following his lead, does Shirley Foster's. Since mid-twentieth-century criticism has focused so much on the documentary quality of *Mary Barton*, I thought it

important to capture in the notes the range of its textual relations. I identify many (not nearly all) explicit and implicit biblical allusions and highlight the major literary references in an effort to suggest how literary Gaskell's first novel is.

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