



Elizabeth Gaskell
Sylvia's Lovers

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ELIZABETH GASKELL

Sylvia's Lovers



Edited with an Introduction and Notes by

FRANCIS O'GORMAN



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SYLVIA'S LOVERS

ELIZABETH GASKELL was born in 1810, the daughter of Elizabeth Holland and William Stevenson, who trained as a Unitarian minister and was subsequently a farmer, journalist, and civil servant. After her mother's death, she was brought up by her aunt in Knutsford, Cheshire. In 1832 she married William Gaskell, junior minister at Cross Street Unitarian Chapel in Manchester; the couple had seven children, of whom four survived to adulthood. Gaskell's first novel, *Mary Barton*, published in 1848, was very successful and brought her to the notice of Charles Dickens, who subsequently asked her to write for his new periodical, *Household Words*. Her second novel, *Cranford* (1853), began as a series of papers in this journal. Her other novels are *Ruth* (1853), *North and South* (1855), *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), *Cousin Phillis* (1864), and *Wives and Daughters*, published posthumously in 1866. She also wrote many stories and non-fictional pieces, and the first biography of Charlotte Brontë (1857). She died in Hampshire in 1865.

FRANCIS O'GORMAN has written widely on English literature, and recent books include *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Culture* (2010) and editions of Margaret Oliphant's *The Makers of Venice* (2012), John Ruskin's *Praeterita* (Oxford World's Classics, 2012), and, with Katherine Mullin, Anthony Trollope's *The Duke's Children* (Oxford World's Classics, 2011). He is Professor of Victorian Literature at the University of Leeds.

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INTRODUCTION

Readers who do not wish to learn details of the plot will prefer to treat the Introduction as an Afterword.

But for sorrow there is no remedy provided by nature; it is often occasioned by accidents irreparable, and dwells upon objects that have lost or changed their existence; it requires what it cannot hope, that the laws of the universe should be repealed; that the dead should return, or the past should be recalled.

(Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, 28 August 1750)

WHEN Elizabeth Gaskell began her penultimate novel, *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), her most recent major publication had been a biography. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) was a commemoration, and celebration, of another woman writer. It is easy to forget that the whole art of the biographer, let alone of the novelist, let alone of a woman novelist, was not in the 1850s well established. Charlotte, like Gaskell, had found time for fiction only in the middle of a busy life with many responsibilities at home and beyond. In the *Life*, Gaskell declared Charlotte to be incomprehensible without an appreciation of her physical and social environment. 'For a right understanding of the life of my dear friend,' she said, '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.' And peculiar in Gaskell's eyes they were. 'Even an inhabitant of the neighbouring county of Lancaster is struck by the peculiar force of character which the Yorkshiremen display,' she continued, using that same word 'peculiar', and elaborating on the famous rivalry between the two counties of the red and the white rose. She thought Yorkshiremen strikingly independent. She thought them suspicious of strangers and 'untried modes of action'; curt in address and harsh in speaking. She thought they had affections that were 'strong and their foundations lie deep: but they are not—such affections seldom are—wide-spreading'; Yorkshiremen, she added, were fond of pithy observations, and had feelings that were 'not easily roused, but their duration is lasting'.¹

¹ Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Angus Easson, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 17–18.

Charlotte Brontë's life made sense in this context. And so, in fiction, did the life of Sylvia Robson, the beautiful, blighted heroine of *Sylvia's Lovers*.

Set in an imagined version of the north Yorkshire whaling town of Whitby ('Monkshaven'), *Sylvia's Lovers* develops Gaskell's accounts of Yorkshire life. The moors around Whitby and the temperament of those who live there are the topics of her first chapter. The novel portrays a community in which suspicion, particularly Philip Hepburn's of Charley Kinraid, is part of the emotional drama. Who is Charley, and does he mean what he says? Gaskell's novel studies another man, Daniel Robson, who makes his mind up independently, who pursues his own line of action against others—and with disastrous consequences. It is a novel of taciturn individuals (Kester and Alice, for instance), and of feelings that are hidden. It concerns affections that are strong and deep but not 'wide-spreading': *Sylvia's Lovers* explores relationships within the small Robson family; friendships in a tiny community; the love of one cousin for another; the happenings in a single draper's shop. And it is about feelings that are far from easily roused, but which endure. Indeed, the endurance of a love, wise or otherwise, is central to the plot of this magnificent nineteenth-century novel of waiting (Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) is another and so, a little later, is Anthony Trollope's *The Last Chronicle of Barset* (1867)). Gaskell may have been heavy-handed in her description of Yorkshire when she was looking for the key to Charlotte Brontë's genius. But *Sylvia's Lovers* turned what seem to us stereotypes into imaginary flesh and blood, into figures with whom readers, wherever they were, could sympathize—across classes, across places, across time.

In one respect, *Sylvia's Lovers* marked a significant shift in Gaskell's career. As the author of *Mary Barton* (1848), *Ruth* (1853), and *North and South* (1854–5), she was known for her modern themes: the city, the urban poor, industrial relations, the new industries, the fallen woman.² *Sylvia's Lovers* is not about such topics, though the issue of a woman's self-determination and the nature of her education mattered as much in the 1860s as at the end of the

² For a recent argument about a modern context for *North and South*, see Stefanie Markovits, 'North and South, East and West: Elizabeth Gaskell, the Crimean War, and the Condition of England', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 59 (2005), 463–93, which argues for the place of the Crimean War in the novel.

eighteenth century when the novel is set. Yet *Sylvia's Lovers* is no sharp break from Gaskell's past, for all that. It belongs, in mood and setting, with the Gaskell of the shorter fiction. It belongs with *Cranford* (1851–3) and its melancholy exploration of lost loves and ordinary lives on the margins; with the broken happiness of 'My French Master' (1853); with 'Half a Lifetime Ago' (1855) and its tale of perished romance and silent suffering; with the small community and the hidden inner life of a young woman in *Cousin Phillis* (1864); even with the drama of a ruined family in 'The Doom of the Griffiths' (1858). *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell is believed to have said, was the 'saddest story I ever wrote'.³ But she wrote many sad stories. Indeed, she published a tale of peculiar unhappiness, 'A Dark Night's Work' (1863), in the same year as *Sylvia's Lovers* appeared. There too 'sorrow came marching down [. . .] like an armed man' on a father and daughter.⁴ 'A Dark Night's Work' resonates with many of the themes and images of *Sylvia's Lovers*. It is a story of waiting as well—and for a more literal return from the grave. *Sylvia's Lovers* has not the modern topicality of Gaskell's earlier work. Yet it is no departure from her life-long concern with the sorrow of ordinary lives and the inevitability of suffering, the tragic potential of obscure communities, and the pain endured by seemingly unremarkable men and women. She was the Victorian novelist closest in spirit to Wordsworth's *The Excursion*⁵ (1814) and, perhaps, to the darkest pessimism of J. M. W. Turner.

The sea was part of Gaskell's family history. Her grandfather, from Berwick-upon-Tweed, had been a naval captain; two of her uncles were navy men; and her brother, John Stevenson (1798–1828), had been a sailor too, but had disappeared in the winter of 1828. Perhaps he died at sea, or on his ship's arrival in India: no one ever knew. In *Sylvia's Lovers* is a displaced recollection of that family calamity that had helped to kill Elizabeth's father. More immediately, Gaskell had

³ *The Works of Mrs Gaskell*, with introductions by A. W. Ward (London: Smith, Elder, 1906), vi, p. xii. But no authority is given for this much quoted line.

⁴ Elizabeth Gaskell, *A Dark Night's Work and Other Stories*, World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 28. 'A Dark Night's Work' was published serially in *All the Year Round*, 24 January–21 March 1863.

⁵ For some consideration of Gaskell and Wordsworth (though without reference to *Sylvia's Lovers*), see Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), esp. Ch. 4: 'The Poetry of Humble Life'.

some local knowledge of Whitby, which she visited for a short holiday in the early winter of 1859 (see Note on the Text, p. xxvii). There she learned about Whitby's past as a whaling port, and may have heard of a riot in 1793, following which a man called William Atkinson had been condemned to death at York.⁶ She later read more in local histories. But it would be wrong to say that she 'researched' *Sylvia's Lovers* in any modern, or certainly in any thorough, sense. She took some ideas, some events, and a small number of actual people from history as the basis for a story that was her own. (And she may have picked up the idea of a girl abandoned when her lover is seized by the press-gang from any number of poems and ballads.)⁷ Only in the last few chapters did she rely more extensively on real occurrences. If not always consistently, Gaskell wanted her facts to be right as far as she could (sometimes hurriedly) make them. But real events and places were only imaginative spurs.

What may have been more on Gaskell's mind in shaping *Sylvia's Lovers* were three other women novelists: Charlotte and Emily Brontë and George Eliot. Gaskell had been reading the Brontës' fiction and poetry in preparation for the *Life*. And it lingered in her thoughts. In one way, though, it was not their *writing* that mattered. The whole feel of *Sylvia's Lovers*, about lives and loves in inaccessible parts of Yorkshire, was influenced by Gaskell's conception not of the Brontës' novels but of the Brontës themselves, living emotionally troubled existences apparently far removed, in Haworth, from the mainstream of nineteenth-century life, from the currents of ordinary feelings and wide society.⁸ But at the same time, *Sylvia's Lovers* is a *literary* dispute with Charlotte and Emily about what fiction itself should represent. Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) was Anne's morally robust response to her sister's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). *Wuthering Heights*—the 'W. H.' initials are not accidentally repeated in the name of Wildfell Hall—told a rough, violent story of a woman pursued by two men, isolated from any large community, where revenge becomes the dominant passion. Anne,

⁶ See George Young, *A History of Whitby, and Streoneshalh Abbey*, 2 vols. (Whitby: Clark and Medd, 1817), i. 285.

⁷ See Appendix II.

⁸ Gaskell's conception of the Brontës as essentially isolated has been extensively challenged. See, for instance, Heather Glen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), and Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

wishing to 'tell the truth',⁹ took another story of sexual triangles in an isolated house, and offered a morally decisive, almost educational text about what she saw as the reality of living with the destructive forces of depravity. Symptomatically, she turned the dark and sexy glamour of Heathcliff into the careless, callous, heartless, drunken Huntingdon (and there was something of her brother Branwell in him too). Moral coordinates were murky in Emily's novel. But not in Anne's.

Like Anne, Gaskell had *Wuthering Heights* in mind. She knew it dismayed its first audience: Emily's novel 'revolted many readers by the power with which wicked and exceptional characters are depicted', Gaskell admitted.¹⁰ And she told a correspondent more personally in 1857 that: 'I cannot say I agree with you in preferring "Wuthering Heights" to [the sisters'] other works—notwithstanding its wonderfully fine opening.'¹¹ Gaskell was cautious in public about a book that Charlotte defended.¹² And *Sylvia's Lovers* was, in turn, another response. The novel was Gaskell's narrative of a woman desired by two men in a remote northern community, where sorrows in love were made far more sympathetic and violence was driven from households onto streets and battlefields. Extreme emotions in Emily's *Wuthering Heights* are transformed into the often unspoken love of Sylvia for Kinraid. The sexual charisma of the outsider who disappears on a long absence is made ambiguous in Kinraid, and he is given nothing of Heathcliff's volcanic malevolence. The dull, conventional, proprietorial Hepburn is the metamorphosed Linton, just as the unpalatable Joseph becomes the enduringly loyal Kester. Brontë's fascination with revenge is changed, too, and the novel is a subtler, more uncertain meditation on the 'justice' of Philip Hepburn's action in trying to protect Sylvia from Kinraid and on Sylvia's 'revenge' on Philip. 'I'll never forgive yon man, nor live with

⁹ Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, ed. Herbert Rosengarten, introduction by Josephine McDonagh, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

¹⁰ Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 270.

¹¹ Letter to ?Mr Anderson, 9 December 1857, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), 494.

¹² See Charlotte's 'Editor's Preface' to the 2nd edn (1850), reproduced in Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. Ian Jack, introduction by Helen Small, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 307–10.

him as his wife again' (p. 332), Sylvia says after the revelation of Philip's untruthfulness. That is Gaskell's feminized, psychologically concentrated, and tragic version of Heathcliff's later life as he pursues a Jacobean vendetta against Linton's family.

Wuthering Heights is in the weave of *Sylvia's Lovers*, and so is *Jane Eyre* (1847). Perhaps Sylvia's erotic choice (not that there is much of a choice) between the risky, sexy, charming Kinraid and the moral, earnest, dull Philip is also Gaskell's version of Jane Eyre's choice between Rochester and St John Rivers. Not for Gaskell, certainly, the violence or 'coarseness', as many contemporary readers saw it, of the Brontës' representation of sexual love. And then there is the question of courage, of feistiness. Where Jane Eyre is one of the most emotionally articulate and decisive of all the heroines of nineteenth-century fiction—and, in turn, an important figure for twentieth-century literary feminism—Sylvia's strength is different. She has hardly any words to express her inner life. Like many of Gaskell's women, Sylvia could never be the first-person narrator of her own story. Yet if Sylvia's sorrows remain only partly expressed, and are regularly misunderstood, it is startling lucidity that she finds for a moment in the middle of calamity. Kinraid, returning after he is believed dead, tells a distraught Sylvia in Chapter 33 to set aside her first marriage as fraudulent and marry him. But Sylvia reminds him of her child. "He's spoilt my life," she says of Philip as she refuses Kinraid's proposal, just as Jane Eyre refused to live as Rochester's mistress: "—he's spoilt it for as long as iver I live on this earth; but neither yo' nor him shall spoil my soul" (p. 332).¹³ It is the verbal pinnacle—even as it is the emotional nadir—of Sylvia's history. This is Gaskell's presentation of an ordinary woman—'A creature of ballad',¹⁴ as Jenny Uglow nicely phrases it—with extraordinarily limited powers to describe or to control her destiny who, for a moment, is strong, without being Jane Eyre; able to defend herself, without being Heathcliff; and to love passionately, without being Catherine. Here is the once-in-a-lifetime

¹³ It was an emotional situation on Gaskell's mind: she has Ellinor Wilkins in 'A Dark Night's Work' declare that the evening when her father accidentally kills his business partner "has spoilt my life for me" (Gaskell, *A Dark Night's Work and Other Stories*, 69).

¹⁴ Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (1993) (London: Faber, 1999), 517.

strength of ordinariness without self-possession or education, with neither personal confidence nor, it may be, deep intellectual resource.

Gaskell's response to the Brontës was creative. It was part of a conversation in fiction between influential writers. But where George Eliot was concerned, Gaskell, writing *Sylvia's Lovers*, felt something more like anxiety. With their intense if controlled sympathy for the suffering of ordinary provincial lives, and their commitment to the novel as an exploration of such lives, the two novelists shared aesthetic and moral ground. Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) had defined a distinctive rural realism in representing the lives of working men and women at the end of the eighteenth century: its setting was a sketch of a pre-modern, pre-cities, pre-industrial society. Eliot's narrator proposed to show the reader 'the roomy workshop of Mr Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder, in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799'.¹⁵ *Sylvia's Lovers* occupied similar territory, sharing the same concern with local places, local labour, and specific moments in English history experienced in rural communities. And like *Adam Bede*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Wildfell Hall*, and *Jane Eyre* together, Gaskell's specificity included linguistic verisimilitude. As with the Midlands fiction of Eliot and the northern fiction of the Brontës, *Sylvia's Lovers* explores the expressive capacity of dialect, an apparent marker of human authenticity; of voices that seem rooted in history and place; of language that achieves different nuances and is bounded by different limits from what we would now call Standard English. Gaskell's representation of dialect had been a characteristic of her earlier writing, particularly *Mary Barton*, a novel for which William Gaskell had supplied his 'Two Lectures on the Lancashire Dialect'.¹⁶ But in fact the dialect of *Sylvia's Lovers* caused some trouble on the novel's publication. It proved to some attentive readers that Gaskell was more at home in north-western than north-eastern speech (see Note on the Text). In her revisions in the manuscript and between the first and second editions, she was obliged to

¹⁵ George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Carol A. Martin, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5.

¹⁶ These were published in 1854 as a separate pamphlet, then appended to the 5th edn of *Mary Barton*. They are reproduced in Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, ed. Shirley Foster, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 384–414.

convert much of what she had originally written in Lancastrian into Yorkshire dialect. It mattered that she was right.

Yet George Eliot's presence was more problematic for Gaskell than this account suggests. The two writers shared moral and aesthetic ground—but that, alas, was also the problem. The book that particularly daunted the author of *Sylvia's Lovers* was *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). It had been published just as Gaskell was beginning to think about her story of specksioneers, press-gangs, betrayals, and broken hearts. George Smith, Gaskell's publisher, sent her a copy of *The Mill* the day after its publication in April 1860. Gaskell wrote back to thank him, saying she was 'so greedy to read it'.¹⁷ But a year later, she was still struggling with what she had read. Writing in April 1861, Gaskell told Edward Hale that she was 'going to finish my book, 3 vols, very soon':

though after seeing what Miss Evans (George Eliot) does I feel as if nothing of mine would be worth reading ever-more. And that takes the pith out of me. Then Meta [her daughter] says 'But Mama remember the burying the one talent,'—so I cheer up, & mean to get strong & do the best I *can*.¹⁸

Perhaps that was something of an excuse for the slow progress of the novel.¹⁹ But *Sylvia's Lovers* circles thoughtfully around the issues and plot elements of *The Mill* all the same, as if unable to cast off its presence, inhibiting and productive both at once. And, centrally, the argument with Eliot is about the nature of a heroine, and the nature of choice in a world of cause and effect.

Sylvia is Gaskell's version of, her reply to, Maggie Tulliver—the captivating young woman living a seemingly 'simple' life, who is caught up in the erotic cross-currents of her two suitors in *The Mill*. Like Eliot, Gaskell's interests are in the shaping force of a rural environment on a young woman, the limiting of her mind and sexual choices, the confining of her imagination and her actions. Both novelists probe the challenge of a promising woman who has little power to decide. When Philip in Chapter 21 wonders 'if the lives of one generation were but a repetition of the lives of those who had gone before, with no variation but from the internal cause that some

¹⁷ Letter of 5 April 1860, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, 611.

¹⁸ Letter of 22 April 1861, *Further Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. J. A. V. Chapple and Alan Shelston (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 223.

¹⁹ See Note on the Text, pp. xxvii–xxviii.

had greater capacity for suffering than others' (p. 210), he speaks about the unexceptional and 'unhistoric'²⁰ lives to which Eliot's fiction was, at least theoretically, dedicated. But Gaskell makes her heroine far more 'ordinary', more vulnerable, than Eliot's. She plays out the life of the even more unhistoric, proposing the often silent pain of Sylvia Robson as no less worthy of a novel's attention than the dilemmas of the more characterful and resourceful heroine of *The Mill*. Maggie—like Eliot herself—is eager for education; she has a mischievous self-confidence; and is exceptionally articulate. Gaskell replies, as she did to *Jane Eyre*, with a heroine of greater limits: weary of education, unconfident, often tongue-tied. And there is a difference philosophically too. Gaskell's and Eliot's representations of the forces of history, of the nature of the novel as historiography, are dissimilar. In making an unnaturally great sea wave the final calamity of Philip Hepburn's life, Gaskell nods to the great flood that carries off Maggie and Tom at the close of *The Mill on the Floss*. In Eliot, that flood is the inevitable expression of great forces—fate, history, something beyond individual decisions that is inescapable—which have been anticipated by the 'rush of the water'²¹ on the first page of the novel. For Elizabeth Gaskell, the impossibly huge wave that topples Philip's daughter into the sea at Monkshaven is not the requirement of history's inescapable forces. It is no strenuous symbol of a fateful world of cause and effect, where the past defines the present. That wave is more like an accident and a narrative convenience: another event out of any character's control but within the author's; a terrible happening that is necessary not because of history but because of the exigencies of fiction.

Sylvia's Lovers urges the reader to think about what and who is just. Nowhere is that more true than in the dramatic moment of the impressment of Charley Kinraid. The novel invites reflection on whether Philip is being reasonable in doubting Charley's integrity, and in turn whether there is anything to justify Philip's decision not to pass Charley's message of faithfulness to Sylvia. It is hard to forget that there may be evidence of Kinraid's 'real' character in what we

²⁰ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. David Carroll, introduction by Felicia Bonaparte, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 785.

²¹ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. Gordon Haight, introduction by Dinah Birch, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 8.

are told of his previous, apparently casual, relationships with women. It is hard not to wonder why Charley wrote no letters to Sylvia while he was away, or whether there is an indication of a lack of personal integrity in his decision to wed another so quickly after finding Sylvia married to Philip. Sylvia is shocked by this haste; it helps her reassess Philip's worth. But as Gaskell confronts the reader with puzzles about human personalities and the possibility of acting wisely, so she asks the reader to think of another bond with *The Mill on the Floss* and *Wuthering Heights* as modern meditations on the same ancient theme. All three texts ruminate not only on what is just but also, more specifically, on the ancient question of the relationship between justice and revenge.

Whatever the human cost of the press-gangs, they are, in the period of the revolutionary wars in which *Sylvia's Lovers* is set, legal. '[It's] the law, and no one can do aught against it' (p. 28), Sylvia is told, as she watches with horror the gang among the returning whalers. When Daniel helps to rescue impressed sailors and burn down the Randyvowse in Chapter 23, he believes he is acting on a principle of natural justice. But is he acting with some form of *rough* justice that is outside the law, pursuing a kind of revenge? Daniel's own experience with the press-gang early in life had deprived him of a finger and part of his thumb: "'A've a score for t' reckon up wi' t' press-gang!'" (p. 48), he says, ominously. What is the relationship between his actions and justice, not least in relation to the 'just' nature of the press-gangs themselves? And when Daniel is made an example at the York assizes, and hanged, what is the relationship between justice and revenge there? Into this grim moment—which we never see directly—obtrudes the profound questions of whether the operation of law relates to 'real' justice and whether human motives can ever be adequately accommodated within the cold boundaries of the statute book. Although there are many Christian denominations in *Sylvia's Lovers*, church and chapel attenders, and much Bible reading, the novel affirms no unambiguous sense of a providential dispensation. Justice is not divinely tempered with mercy in the management of human affairs. And beside this faint Christianity is Aeschylus' conception in the *Oresteia* (c.458 BCE) that the modern world, that civilized society itself, arises with the assertion of reasoned law over the wild forces of revenge. Like *Wuthering Heights* and *The Mill* (where Maggie's father and

brother are caught up in a conflict between legality and vendetta), *Sylvia's Lovers* examines the persistence of ancient forces, the deep-rooted desires for blood in reparation for harms. "I used to read of Orestes and the Furies at Eton when I was a boy," says the guilty father, Mr Wilkins, in 'A Dark Night's Work', trying to comfort his distraught daughter: 'and I thought it was all a heathen fiction.'²² But the reach of such narratives goes far into *this* fiction. Aptly, with the first appearance of the press-gang under Admiralty warrant in Chapter 3 of *Sylvia's Lovers*, there is a moment's glimpse of the ancient world of Greek theatre, the stage on which Aeschylus had played out the conflict between justice and revenge. 'One of the men was addressing to his townspeople, in a high pitched voice', Gaskell writes of the chaos in Bridge Street as the press-gang pursues the returning sailors: 'an exhortation which few could hear, for, pressing around this nucleus of cruel wrong, were women crying aloud, throwing up their arms in imprecation, showering down abuse as hearty and rapid as if they had been a Greek chorus' (p. 29). In those cursing women is a reminder of the last part of Aeschylus' trilogy: a reminder of the Eumenides, the infernal goddesses, the deities of vengeance.²³

Another great moment in the plot hints at Christian and pre-Christian sources: the return of Kinraid 'from the dead'. The novel draws widely on return-from-the-dead vocabulary, alluding to myths of revival and returning spirits, even while never once using the words 'resurrection' or 'Easter'. Gaskell prohibits any lazy misconception of the novel as some form of Christian allegory. *Sylvia's Lovers* is not the only Gaskell story to turn to such motifs of revival: the narrator returns 'as though I were risen from the dead'²⁴ in the story of another woman's spoilt life, 'The Grey Woman' (1861), for instance. But the density and coherence of revival vocabulary in *Sylvia's Lovers* is exceptional. Ironically, the press-gang that secures Kinraid is from the *Alcestis*, a ship named after the wife of Admetos, whom Hercules in classical myth rescued from the underworld.

²² Gaskell, *A Dark Night's Work and Other Stories*, 94.

²³ It may be relevant that 1853 had seen a major new translation of *The Eumenides* (*The Furies*): *Aeschylus Eumenides: The Greek Text, with English Notes . . . an English Verse Translation and an Introduction . . . by Bernard Drake* (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1853).

²⁴ 'The Grey Woman' in Gaskell, *A Dark Night's Work and Other Stories*, 253.