Liminal Femininity in Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and *Wives and Daughters*

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In her fiction Elizabeth Gaskell reveals a fascination with marginal figures and the abject and canvases a moral matrix deviation from which constitutes the risk of potential social and moral fall and stigma. Not only is she determined to break down barriers of decorum that protect middle-class readers from disease-ridden, under-nourished, and dying factory workers, as well as the social contagion represented by prostitutes and fallen women, but she also promotes a Christian narrative of inclusion according to which those occupying liminal positions in society should be offered sympathy. In doing so, she contributes to an ongoing debate regarding the need for tolerance towards social outcasts and aims to demolish some widely held prejudices that have traditionally been reinforced by a strict middle-class moral code. Gaskell does not generally assess a character's social fitness through a utiliarian consideration of his or her function within society; rather, she concerns herself with the conditions affecting individuals and the reasons preventing liminal figures from being recognised as fit members of Victorian society. And in her treatment of non-normative and transgressive femininity, she does not focus on censuring physical, social, or moral difference, in the terms of the radical, Evangelical rhetoric of the time, as repulsive or depraved. In Gaskell's industrial novel, *Mary Barton* (1848), John Barton, the murderer of Harry Carson, is not categorically rejected as the evil threatening the economic superiority of the capitalist middle classes over the workforce and the balance of the class system; rather, she offers a sympathetic portrayal of his tragedy, reading his suffering in terms of the condition of his class and transforming the grieving mill-owner, Carson senior, into a Christian figure capable of forgiveness. Above all, as a "sympathetic criminal,"[1] Barton is represented through the eyes of his daughter, the eponymous protagonist, whose own experience of social stigma has opened

up and refined her understanding, compassion, and tolerance, eventually replacing her shock and horror at her father's crime with her realisation of her enduring love for him and his memory. By learning to interrogate the mechanisms of society, specifically the law, the difference between right and wrong, and realising her own responsibility as a meaningful individual with social and moral duties, she is able to see beyond the verdict of social penalties and, while not trying to diminish his guilt, offer an emotional response that is motivated by her sense of her father's love for her and their past happiness together.

Gaskell's *Mary Barton* is a novel that sketches in a range of characters the difficulty of moral choices and the concomitant consequences that can rarely be calculated. Knowing that Barton must have murdered Carson, Jem Wilson is prepared to be hanged and take Barton's secret to his grave so that Mary will not be tainted by her father's crime; equally, Mary secretly meets the mill-owner's son, Harry, and has to endure the burden of this legacy, even after she realises she loves Jem. Up until her public confession in the Liverpool courtroom, she has to confront secretly the uncanny presence of this clandestine affair and the possible threat of discovery.

While scholars writing on liminal female figures in Gaskell's fiction largely concentrate on the fallen woman, little work has been offered that investigates the practice of coquetry, the deliberate display of female attractiveness, and the moral implications of a careless or calculating publicising of desire in Gaskell's first novel and in *Wives and Daughters* (1865). Ellen Bayuk Roseman argues that the Victorians "demonized" the coquette "because she represents forms of agency and desire that deeply threaten social norms."[2] Morally ambiguous, the coquette is associated with the seduction and controlling of male desire in order to reach "ultimate self-sufficiency."[3] Intent on reversing gender and power relations, she deploys her fetishised beauty and fashion to construct an irresistible femininity for male observers. Roseman observes that: "The coquette raises fears because of her expertise as well as her seductiveness, and for her investment in clothing for its own sake as well as her desire to captivate men."[4] Gaskell puts coquettes to diametrically opposed uses in her fiction. In *Mary Barton*, she relates the "unschooled" (and transient) coquette, Mary, to the moral dangers of the fallen woman, whilst *Wives and Daughters* offers a striking portrait of a "professional" coquette, Cynthia Kirkpatrick. In her persistent use of coquetry and its associated emotional vacuity, Cynthia represents a negative role model of Victorian femininity that will not fulfil its social function of marriage, childrearing, and the proper instruction of housewifely femininity. My discussion of the two types of coquettes as liminal representations of acceptable Victorian femininity will not primarily focus on Hilary Schor's contention that "Mary's romance is a form of class warfare."[5] Rather, this essay explores Schor's argument that female otherness

in Gaskell's fiction is represented by means of a woman's deviation from the Christian ideals of virtue and containment but also through a resulting perversion of the Romantic goodness of nature within woman.[6] The coquette, in that respect, treads a fine line between liminality and acceptability; one step out of line can signify the loss of character and reputation, as well as the ruin of her marriage prospects. Her reliance on the public display of her attractiveness and the arousal of men's interest and desire removes her from the traditional domestic context of the unmarried Victorian female to the public sphere in which the male gaze objectifies and commodifies her in sexual terms. The Victorian coquette's principal "crime" is her moral vacuity and superficiality and not her questioning of social strictures, as was the function of the late eighteenth-century, Jacobin coquette.[7] Similarly, she does not use her coquetry to benefit reform and effect change, nor is she defined by a curiosity that characterises the heroines in the novels of Gaskell's biographical subject, Charlotte Brontë.[8] Gaskell recommends the domestic sphere as the appropriate realm for a woman, and cautions against the dangers of leaving the security of the patriarchal home. A female's abandonment of (or, more complicatedly in the case of *Ruth*, the expulsion from) her native community and its protective mechanisms catapults her into a context of desire and violence the language of which she cannot understand and the effects of which are illustrated in Esther, Mary Barton's aunt, who is barred from ever returning to the sanctified hub of the family, the working-class home.

In *Mary Barton* Gaskell outlines the fatal consequences of flirtation for a woman. Meeting Harry Carson clandestinely but with the help of a girl of doubtful morality and reputation, Sally Leadbitter, Mary indulges the fantasy of becoming the wife of the wealthy young man whose fortune would not only enable her to feed her vanity but to secure her father's financial well-being. She relies on the capital qualities of her physical attractiveness, believing Carson's protestations of love sincere and considering herself "as good as engaged to be married" (*MB*, 120) to him; she does not question his motivation, nor does she interrogate whether her lover would willingly draw his equals' censure upon him by allying himself in marriage to the family of one of his father's "hands." Various fantasies converge in Mary's naïve trust in Carson which cloud her little-developed judgment and blind her against the social stigma she is risking were her meetings with Harry Carson known to her class community. While true love represents a motivating force that would (and does in the end) morally redeem her, it is her calculating, financially motivated "ambition" (*MB*, 121) to be a lady that informs her actions and her passive acquiescence to be objectified by Carson so as to represent the absolute symbol of his desire.[9] She regards herself implicitly as taking part in an exchange of commodities, and volunteers her person and its desirable, external

qualities in return for the hoped-for elevation to Carson's social status and a fancied life of ease:

> The old leaven, infused years ago by her aunt Esther, fermented in her little bosom, and perhaps all the more, for her father's aversion of the rich and the gentle. … So Mary dwelt upon and enjoyed the idea of someday becoming a lady, and doing all the elegant nothings appertaining to ladyhood. It was a comfort to her, when scolded by Miss Simmonds, to think of the day when she would drive up to the door in her carriage to order her gowns from the hasty tempered, yet kind dressmaker. But the best of her plans, the holiest, that which in some measure redeemed the vanity of the rest, were those relating to her father; her dear father, now oppressed with care, and always a disheartened, gloomy person. (*MB*, 121)

Some of Mary's wishes, especially "doing all the elegant nothings appertaining to ladyhood," anticipate Mrs. Gibson's desire in *Wives and Daughters* to give up earning her own livelihood, to effect a change of situation, to transform herself from dependent widow into independent wife, to direct others, rather than be directed, and to instruct servants rather than students, thereby exercising authority rather than serving it. The role that Mrs. Gibson fashions for herself is one that runs counter to her social (and natural) role as mother, step-mother, and wife, as she establishes a regime of arbitrarily exerted power from which her pliant husband shrinks and finally detaches himself, once he discovers her unscrupulousness and hard-heartedness. In Mrs. Gibson and Mary, Gaskell delineates two types of women: the one utilising art to achieve her ends and the other the natural, instinct-driven female whose morality is not uncontroversial or steady but is strengthened through engaging with, and overcoming, obstacles; ultimately, the latter type of femininity can be tempted but not corrupted by the lures of art. While Mary's use of dress underscores her natural beauty, she does not seek to use fashion as an emancipatory tool or to conceal blemishes or misrepresent her true surface and the substance of her identity. Her construction and identification as coquette (by Harry Carson) take place externally and are not motivated by the "professional" coquette's "intention" of not "responding to the feelings awakened" ("coquetry," meaning 1, *OED*). Her "ambition" is contained within the boundaries of her inexperience of social mechanisms, strategies of courtship, and the dangers of unlegitimised desire, love, and correspondence with a member of the opposite sex. Having been raised in an environment of benevolent patriarchal authority, she has not imbibed, through explication and example, the model and tenets of obedient, working-class housewifely femininity. Mary's understanding of the boundaries of the public and private spheres is vague; her desire to perform a part in a realm where she can be admired for her beauty is a temptation that she will not resist at this early stage of the novel. Only once she has undergone a severe

act of cartharsis, making a very public declaration of her love for Jem at court, does she realise the full extent of her love and the social significance of a female's revealing it to an audience other than her lover. Whereas Mrs. Gibson effectively performed the well-rehearsed role of demure and dependent governess before her second marriage, once the doctor's wife she reveals her true colours, acts out her morally irredeemable character, and demonstrates her failure both as a mother and wife. However, at that point she can fall back upon the contractual security of institutionalised marriage that she coveted from her husband, relying on his means to continue in her new social status.

Mary's initial emphasis on surfaces (the trusting of appearances, but also her marketing herself to Carson in terms of her beauty) and materialistic considerations are transmuted once she internalises Jem's love for her and realises that a life with Jem is what she truly desires. Her coquetry does not represent looseness of morals, abandoned flightiness, and irresponsibility of her social and familial duties, but an ignorance of the rigidity of social conventions and carelessness that are not ingrained and endemic; rather, they are the result of growing up without a mother's guidance. Gaskell's educational approach illustrates the harmful effects that Mary's ignorance of, and unfamiliarity with, class-specific conventions entails. Self-assured that her beauty will secure her a working-class lover such as Jem Wilson, she applies the same expectations to her meetings with Carson, not realising however that she is not an equal in this planned exchange of financial assets and her commodities of physical beauty, reputation, and character. She is unable to comprehend clear demarcation points in social conventions, ceremonies, and the structures regulating female working-class identity in the Victorian period. Unlike a true, "professional" coquette, however, it is this uncertainty – the inability, through ignorance, to decode class- and gender-specific expectations – that endow her character with tragic potential. While coquettes are self-centred and only concerned about their own gratification, Mary never loses sight of her father's future prospects and the wish to return the love with which he sustained her after her mother's death.

The narrator's insistent statement that Mary does not love Harry Carson implies censure nevertheless, as it stresses the potential moral transgression that her actions *could* precipitate. Carson was "a lover, not beloved, but favoured by fancy. A gallant, handsome young man; but not beloved" (*MB*, 80). The transient nature of the protagonist's "fancy" is in clear contrast with Victorian propriety which allowed no such fleeting, unregulated interest in a person who could potentially destroy one's reputation. It reveals her trusting to romance and fantasy and a detachment from the social and moral codes that dominate human relationships at the time Gaskell was writing her novel. Mary's desire to "mak[e] … an impression" is not only aroused by Carson but also when she meets Job Legh's niece,

Margaret, for the first time. "Margaret could hardly take her eyes off her, and Mary put down her long black lashes with a sort of dislike of the very observation she had taken such pains to secure" (*MB*, 67). Emotionally insecure, Mary seeks to define herself through her brilliant appearance, even in a homosocial context; yet, this brilliancy is merely external and contrasts strikingly with the pseudo-angelic and spirituality-inspiring singing voice of Margaret. At the same time, it is the onset of Mary's illness at the end of the court case that initiates a cataclysmic prostrating of her powers: she is infantilised while ill, helpless, and no longer wilfully assertive; in fact, through an instance of *anagnorisis*, she is transformed into the kind of woman who will find fulfilment once she emigrates to Canada with Jem and Mrs. Wilson senior and turns wife and mother.

Mary's naturally open disposition is constrained by her secrecy about her meetings with Carson and, later in the novel, her knowledge of her father's murder of his employer's son. Initially at least, she relies on womanly intuition and only then develops a more sophisticated perception of her role as a female individual and men's constructions of her as a coquette. Her beauty, in that regard, is an asset but also exposes her to temptations to which the steadfast Margaret is not subjected.[10] A public exposure of Mary's ambiguous intercourse with Carson would tarnish her "character" and, ironically, make her *unattractive* as a future wife to men of her class. The danger that a loss of character entails is exemplified in Mr. Thornton's negative reaction to Margaret Hale's walking with her (then-not-acknowledged) fugitive brother at dusk in *North and South* (1855). Barbara Leah Harman observes aptly: "By protecting Frederick, Margaret traffics with what is dangerous, illicit, even violent, and this fact is reemphasized when she herself commits a 'crime'" by lying in order to shield him.[11] Margaret's clandestine walk with her brother "leads … to the public assumption that Margaret is tainted with desire." She is unable to erase this assumption's "general effect of producing her as a sexual body available to men and of making her ashamed of her beauty."[12] The secret between Mary and Harry Carson, as is shown later in the novel, will haunt Mary, make her both suffer the reproaches of others and feel the sense of abandonment and liminality associated with a transgression of propriety. Then, Esther, an uncanny vision from a happy past, will disrupt Mary's romance by reminding her of her mother. At the same time, Barton's encountering Esther inspires him with anxiety concerning Mary's future. To him, Esther is a haunting phantom, pursuing him and threatening his last link with his past humanity. He blames his sister-in-law for his wife's death and implicitly and unconsciously links this blame with Mary, a conflation of identities that is re-evoked and re-enacted when Mary mistakenly identifies Esther as her dead mother.

In leaving her class (and working-class community) without the sanctioned protection of a husband, Esther made impossible a return as a meaningful mem-

ber of her family and class. She survives as the relict of her own poor knowledge of patriarchal society and is left to fend for herself in the only profession open to her; on the brink of society, she is no longer an object of desire but fulfils a function only – it is this function that men have assigned to her while at the same time exploiting this function in their own, largely uncensored overstepping of social boundaries and propriety. Esther's life, previously defined by her emotional relationship with the father of her child, is transformed into an existence contributing to an economic process. John Barton's explanation of her physical appearance is couched in economic terms, and he sees this focus on commodity as the root evil of females working in factories. The mechanised work process engrosses the female's attention while in the factory, rewarding her with spendable capital, but this kind of employment also deprives young and inexperienced women of the traditional education – transmitted from one woman to another, from mother to daughter – that instils the values of the family, rather than those of publicised individuality. Barton recalls in chapter 1 that "Esther spent her money in dress, thinking to set off her pretty face" (*MB*, 43);[13] holding her responsible for his wife's death, he notes that her "giddiness, her lightness of conduct, had wrought this woe" (*MB*, 58). Esther's fall not only represents the result of her own wrong choices or anticipates the risk that Mary is running by meeting Carson, but the story of Esther has larger social significance in that, as Elizabeth Gaskell noted in a letter to Mrs. Greg, it "throw[s] light upon their groping search after the causes of suffering."[14]

Esther takes responsibility for her fall by accepting the socially constructed shame that giving birth to an illegitimate child entails. The narrator states that Esther truly loved the father of her child; there is no indication that she calculated – like Mary does – on improving her social position. Her motives are, therefore, pure, which makes her fall all the more terrible. Mary's coquettish acceptance of Carson's attentions, however, is calculated to flatter her own vanity, ensuring that she sees herself in the position of agent to decide whether *she* wants to accept him in marriage and not vice versa. He is seen as a handsome means to an end, but she has no sense of what it means to be a "professional" coquette.

Like Mary, Esther had not adequately been prepared for the duties and the role of a housewife. Identifying parallels in the lives and appearances of his daughter and her aunt, John Barton decides that Mary will not work in a factory; unwilling to "go to service" (*MB*, 62), she is keen to retain the sense of independence that she gained through the absence of a female authority figure in her home. Living in her employer's household, with an implicit control of both her public and private lives as a member of his "family," would run counter to her desire to be admired publicly, at the same time curbing her individuality and integrating her within a clearly organised social and gender framework. The narrator notes:

"Three years of independence of action … had little inclined her to submit to rules as to hours and associates, to regulate her dress by a mistress's ideas of propriety" (*MB*, 62). More importantly, "her mysterious aunt, Esther, had an unacknowledged influence over Mary. She knew she was pretty … [and] had early determined that her beauty should make her a lady" (*MB*, 62). Drawing on the fiction of Esther's success, Mary wants to reach an end (marriage and wealth) by means of her beauty; she thereby functionalises her beauty in the way the coquette does, but her "plan" is not well-thought-through and relies on Carson's undissembling acceptance of her as a valid partner in marriage. The choice of dressmaking as a profession contributes to the realisation of her vision in that she is soon promoted to show-woman, offering a performative display of the clothes and her person (and, of course, but secondarily, her skill). Roseman observes that "'Window-dressers' – young women who modelled the wares of clothing stores – and the shopgirls who sold the merchandise displayed themselves, earned money, and developed a notoriously flirtatious boldness through their work."[15]

Mary contemplates that a "dressmaker's apprentice must (or so Mary thought) be always dressed with a certain regard to appearance; must never soil her hands, and need never redden or dirty her face with hard labour" (*MB*, 62), as servants and factory workers do. The parenthetical tag, "or so Mary thought," introduces the narrator's better knowledge of the ways of the world. Mary's naivety, coupled with her simple desire to improve her lot in life, informs her flirtation and is not fundamentally linked, as in the "professional" coquette, with persistent dishonesty and falsehood. While middle-class women can use coquetry for short periods of their lives, specifically at the time of courtship, and are not reproached for it, the case of a working-class female is decidedly different, as the woman neither has the leisure nor the independence to play the coquette. Working-class coquetry, therefore, is seen as an anomaly in behaviour that indicates moral corruption. Significantly, Harry Carson misunderstands Mary's behaviour in that he judges her in the sense of a "professional" coquette, little imagining that she in fact does not have any idea of his true intentions and that she has been guided by their intermediary, Sally, who appears well-versed in intrigues.

Mary's naivety and intuition are related to what Schor has explored in terms of the Romantic, innate goodness of the female; however, in the secular, industrial world of the Victorian period, a role-specific education for a woman is required. Trusting to her belief in the fiction that Esther made her fortune by marrying outside her sphere and class, Mary shows herself to be ignorant of the differences between the classes that are the basis of John Barton's moroseness, anger, and depression. Barton trusts his daughter and cannot imagine that she would look for a partner outside her own class. Mary's longing for a better life of affluence and security echoes Esther's earlier longing for companionship and a

family of her own, independent of John Barton's conservative authority. As an unmarried female member of the working class, Mary relies on the protection of both her father and her community. Her employment at the shop of Miss Simmonds functions as a contact zone between the working and the middle classes. It facilitates an intercourse (if desired by the middle classes) that would otherwise not be possible publicly, but by actively engaging in clandestine intercourse with Carson, Mary becomes subject to the censures of both the middle *and* the working classes; through this act of transgression, she no longer exclusively belongs to either. She is thereby caught up in "the profound moral alienation of [the] classes."[16]

In her analysis of the relations between domestic servants and factory workers, Dorice Williams Elliott argues that, despite the common origin of the two groups, a division existed between them that was inspired by servants' adopting the paternalist view of loyalty to the middle class, that is the Masters, thereby considering themselves superior to their brethren working in factories. Elliott's argument can be applied to the dressmaker, Miss Simmonds, who employs Mary, for Barton's daughter, through her work, is introduced to a new class and its values, and develops aspirations that are in clear contrast with the working-class ethos. According to Elliott, "Mary's language asserts that her class has its own ideas of 'propriety' and its own network of social relations and privileges and that she and her peers do not need to be regulated by middle class employers."[17] Her desire for social mobility indicates that she aspires to the financial security of the middle classes but that she is not aware of the differences in conduct and role of the working and middle-class unmarried female, a contrast that is strikingly borne out in Mary and Cynthia Kirkpatrick. Although *Mary Barton* aims to generate a better reciprocal understanding of the classes, it does not offer alternatives to the system or its social and complex moral codes as such. The pride of the community that John Barton represents is reflected in its members' pronounced identities, whereas the loyalty of domestic servants to their employers commonly results in their "giv[ing] … up their own identities."[18] In that regard, Mary's exploration of the contact zone where working and middle-class individuals meet stimulates her implicit refashioning herself, appropriating her working-class identity to the needs of a new identity as the middle-class wife of Harry Carson.

Mary's assignations with Carson are as much for mutual pleasure and the self-conscious gratification of her vanity as they are escapes from the increasingly depressing environment at home. Keeping her meetings secret, she instinctively feels that they are wrong, as they have not been authorised by her father, a feeling also experienced by the young Ruth when she joins Mr. Bellingham for a walk in the woods. Sally, the low, resourceful female also working at the dressmaker's and employed by Carson to further his cause with Mary, intends to exert her corrupt-

ing influence but ultimately shows Mary how morally wrong her secret meetings were. Leadbitter "was vulgar-minded to the last degree," and "in her eyes it was an honour to have had a long list of wooers" (*MB*, 132). She advocates a type of femininity that encourages numerous "wooers," suitors soliciting the female in marriage, but the very encouragement of being approached by numerous suitors runs counter to the working-class female's aspirations to modesty. Judging vulnerable and inexperienced females like Mary by her own intrusive personality, Sally assumes that young women should use an equally intrusive flirtatious persona to attract numerous men. She is oblivious to "[c]onsiderations of modesty or propriety" and is characterised by the narrator as possessing the "talent … to corrupt others" (*MB*, 132). She represents a disruptive force among the females of *Mary Barton*, and her physical unattractiveness is equalled by her moral callousness.

Lacking the beauty that recommended Esther and Mary to middle-class male figures, Sally, despite her moral perversity, is protected within her community. She has found an occupation for herself by trafficking information between middle-class men and ignorant women from her own class and thereby serves the function of the procuress. Her movement between the classes has given her a degree of mobility and a reputation that make her unattractive to men from her own class community. Unlike Mary's aunt, however, she contains her (sexual) desire.

When Esther and Mary meet, the one represents the potential double of the other. The aunt's non-containment of desire and the impulse to explore the public sphere without John Barton's sanction has resulted in her inability to frame linguistically the experience of her liminality. She "longed to open her wretched, wretched heart, so hopeless, so abandoned by all living things, to one who had loved her once; and yet she refrained, from dread of the averted eye, the alerted voice, the internal loathing, which she feared such disclosure might create" (*MB*, 294-95). Her suffering on the occasion is immense, she craves for love and yet she is an outcast, an alien, doomed by her decision to leave her family and class, to be avoided and shunned by those who once loved her. Inventing a "tale of married respectability" (*MB*, 297), she temporarily fashions a position for herself that she would rightfully have occupied, had the father of her child married her. Yet, this fake return to an innocent, working-class existence only depresses her more deeply, as she knows that she is performing an act of masquerade, wearing a dress that "had a sort of sanctity to the street-walker" (*MB*, 292). Once admired for her "fresh dazzling beauty" (*MB*, 293) and "loving and unselfish disposition" (*MB*, 294), Esther, as a result of her moral fall, has undergone a transformation: she has become a monster whose touch repels John Barton. Gaskell, usually reluctant to

visualise physicality, describes in detail Esther's dress, an emblem of her profession:

> It [her profession] was told by her faded finery, all unfit to meet the pelting of that pitiless storm; the gauze bonnet, once pink, now dirty white, the muslin gown, all draggled, and soaking wet up to the very knees; the gay-coloured barège shawl, closely wrapped round the form. … Much was like the gay creature of former years; but the glaring paint, the sharp features, the changed expression of the whole! But most of all, he [John Barton] loathed the dress; and yet the poor thing, out of her little choice of attire had put on the plainest she had, to come on that night's errand. (*MB*, 168-69)

Gaskell's description of Esther's dirty and soaking-wet dress offers a metonymic capturing of the change that she has undergone from a beautiful and innocent girl to a consumed and exhausted prostitute. The very article of dress, previously underscoring her beauty, now serves as a denominator of her functionalised, fallen existence; she has become a grotesque spectacle, rather than the image of the immaculately clean and modest working-class women, Alice Wilson or Mary Barton, senior. The uses of fashion to set off beauty to advantage or the consumption of fashion for its own sake are seen as dangerous. Roseman has noted that in *North and South*, Margaret reveals "self-contained, narcissistic pleasure" in admiring herself wearing a shawl, an action "at once innocent and sensual."[19] Gaskell cautions against vanity and displayed beauty in protagonists such as Ruth, Margaret, Mary, or Cynthia as dangerous in that it can invite temptation, raise male desire, and all too often culminates in a woman's undoing. The transformed Esther no longer possesses "dazzling beauty," but serves as a monument of her personal woe and her profession's condition, being characterised by "sharp features" and "glaring paint." She uses art to attempt a temporary restoration of nature and her former charms, but this art stresses her grotesqueness as much as it highlights her suffering.

Esther understands herself as a monster that would pollute Mary if she allowed herself to be kissed by her niece. The "frantic kind of gesture" (*MB*, 298) with which she pushes Mary from her symbolises the rejection that prostitutes had to endure on a day-to-day basis. It anticipates the rejection that Ruth will be experiencing when she is slapped by a little boy who, having overheard his mother's statements regarding Ruth's sexual impurity, terms her "a bad, naughty girl."[20] Unlike Mary, however, Ruth, at the time of her seduction, was too young and inexperienced to penetrate Bellingham's true motives. Ultimately, one of the main functions of *Ruth* is the recognition of a female's inherent worth, even though she may be fallen. In that regard, Gaskell assures her readers that even the alienating Esther could still love, and that her turning prostitute was not by incli-

nation but out of the necessity to save her child. For Gaskell, her fall was, as Angus Easson has pointed out, "not a psychological perversity but a social responsibility."[21] "Esther is presented as something other than merely a bad girl" and her character bears "more than a facile moral significance in the underlying pattern of the novel."[22] She is an expression of the "disruptive and humanizing energies"[23] of Gaskell's fiction and, through the contrast drawn between her past and present, is re-humanised rather than dehumanised.

Esther's despairing "'Not me. You must never kiss me'" (*MB*, 298) anticipates Mrs. Wilson's rejection of Mary when she learns of her flirtation with Carson. She is then a "dirty hussy" (*MB*, 278) and stands accused of "arts" and "profligacy" (*MB*, 281) with which she is supposed to have ensnared Jem. As Easson notes, Mary is both "the dominant consciousness" of and "the emotional point of growth" in the novel, and as such undergoes a maturing process from a working-class coquette to a loving wife and mother.[24] It is part of this process to *understand* the seriousness of her transgression and to overcome her coquetry, a cultural *habitus* that she possibly copied and emulated from the middle classes. How alienating the charge of flirtation and coquetry was in the Victorian period is reflected in Jem's (painful) reaction to Carson's thoughtless statements about Mary being an "arrant flirt" (*MB*, 227) and "a giddy creature" (*MB*, 227).

Unlike Mary, Cynthia Kirkpatrick in *Wives and Daughters* is an outspoken flirt. Through her mother's neglect, Cynthia taught herself to adopt the appearance of a young lady, without assimilating the values of Victorian middle-class morality and propriety. She negotiates the conflicts between her desires and the legitimacy of these desires by appearing spotless, constructing an image of perfection, which is externally manifested by her striking beauty, her irresistible charm, and the desire to please others. Notwithstanding her engagement with Roger Hamley, the second son of Squire Hamley, in his absence she continues her coquetry, which culminates quickly in an offer of marriage from one of her step-father's former pupils. Mr. Gibson reads her behaviour initially as "thoughtless" (*WD*, 426), rather than as deliberate, but realises that her coquetry is constitutional and that she is unable to be constant.[25] She frequently protests to Molly, her step-sister, that she is not "good," and the secrecy that she adopts to conceal her anxiety at her engagement with Mr. Preston at last brings on depression, a reflection of what Gibson terms the "gloomy things" (*WD*, 326) that occupy her mind.

Cynthia's abject coquetry is made worse by her sophisticated understanding of her own nature and her supposed inability to live a life of truth. Molly, by contrast, is characterised by her "shy modesty" (*WD*, 137), her straightforwardness, and willingness to help Cynthia to free herself from the demands of Mr. Preston. In doing so, she is mistakenly blamed for the transgressions that Cynthia has com-

mitted, and is stigmatised temporarily for what is publicly considered her clandestine affair with Mr. Preston. As Barbara Leah Harman has observed, "Molly is initiated by implication into the mysteries of sexual relations through the fiction of her involvement in unsanctioned intimacy."[26] Cynthia, however, is prepared to jeopardise Molly's reputation to save her own.

From her first introduction, Cynthia is a moral alien. When educated in France, she adopts the forms of French coquetry, forms which, to a degree, conceal her inability to love herself or others. When, on her mother's marriage, she is introduced into Mr. Gibson's household, she realises quickly that her coquettish standards are strikingly different from her stepfather's strict notions of propriety. As a role model her mother has failed Cynthia, and it is partly due to this failure that Cynthia cannot enjoy the happiness and fulfilment that Molly will experience in her marriage with Roger Hamley. Easson remarks that Cynthia's

> capacity for self-analysis places … [her] above her mother, yet even this is a source of irritation when she so vexingly will not do what she knows is morally right. Cynthia, it seems, is incapable of being entirely happy, because she can see what is valuable in others and yet always undervalues it until it has passed beyond her grasp. Like her mother she is entangled in mysteries.[27]

In fact, Cynthia, aware of her disposition, anticipates the ensnaring dangers that she will encounter in London, but for pleasure's sake visits her uncle and aunt nevertheless and there meets Mr. Henderson whom she marries at the end of the novel. She acts out her desires spontaneously and does not rationalise them; in that regard, her quick exit from the novel does not allow the reader to develop a sympathetic response to Cynthia. The corrupting influence of coquetry has proven all-pervasive, hardened her into a static figure, unable to change, and will make it impossible for her to be content in marriage.

How alien the flirtatious Cynthia is to Mr. Gibson is evidenced when he learns the truth about her engagement to Mr. Preston. He reprimands his stepdaughter severely, reproaching her for having "been a flirt and a jilt even to the degree of dragging Molly's name down into the same mire" (*WD*, 572). He refers to the "evil constructions [that] are put upon actions ever so slightly beyond the bounds of maidenly propriety" (*WD*, 573) and considers the simultaneous engagement to two lovers as an instance of the duplicity of his stepdaughter's character; rather more drastically, he could have seen it as an act of prefigured adultery. Clearly, the contrast between Molly's high moral standards and Cynthia's imprudence and egotism is echoed in the frictions that exist between Mr. Gibson and his wife.

The striking contrast between Molly and Cynthia is demonstrated when Molly, after one of Cynthia's outbursts of passion, tries to sympathise with her

stepsister. Molly's willingness to console Cynthia is immediate and not subject to the forms of Victorian emotional restraint; she tries to soothe her without considering that she has just completed her work in the garden and is consequently covered with soil. The soiled Molly evokes the idea of dirt associated by Natalka Freeland with working-class goodness and integrity, whereas the suffering Cynthia is described as beautiful (and implicitly false); this contrast confirms Freeland's argument that the beauty of the coquette Cynthia is only external and that it conceals effectively her moral perverseness from the public gaze.[28] Molly in due course realises Cynthia's true character, undergoing with regard to her, as Easson observes, "a progression of liking, love, bewilderment, and disappointment."[29]

Cynthia is a victim of her education in that she was neglected by her mother and imbibed the wrong principles regulating femininity in France. She adopted a behavioural code that is unacceptable to Victorian society but that is mitigated by her striking beauty and her public display of decorum. She protests that her coquetry is innate, an even more damning statement as it implies constitutional (moral) corruption and depravity. The Squire of Hamley Hall identifies her as a French woman, in both her manners and coquettish behaviour, whereas Osborne's French widow, Aimée, does not embody the squire's negative notions of French femininity. At the end of the novel, Cynthia, marrying Mr. Henderson, is not held accountable for her actions. As her simultaneous engagement to Roger Hamley was not publicly known, she is saved from the disgrace that it would have been impossible to negotiate as a young woman seeking a marriage-partner. As it is, Cynthia marries a rich barrister and secures herself the independence that she did not enjoy in her mother's household. The open-ended nature of *Wives and Daughters* leaves equally open the fate of Cynthia Kirkpatrick. As a "professional" coquette who consistently declared that she could not reform, she most likely will continue her habits of coquetry even in marriage, not making happy either herself or her husband. The power of the Victorian home, so central to Gaskell's fiction, may be able to transform Cynthia, but in the light of such figures as Mary Barton's aunt, Esther, or the martyr, Ruth, and the suffering both invited through trust in love, this appears unlikely.

Both Mary and Cynthia are liminal females: while Mary's coquetry is the short-lived result of her self-conscious beauty, vanity, and her wish to transcend the class barriers, Cynthia's is supposedly innate. Mary successfully reforms through her love for Jem and his for her, but Cynthia's selfish disposition is not given the chance to reform. Rather, by trying to appear faultless, she seeks to deny male power over her; her beauty, in this regard, serves as the patina concealing her subversive potential and resistance to the model of the obedient female outlined in the character of Molly, who in many ways can be regarded as the sane double of the "mad" Cynthia. To note, as one critic of *Mary Barton* does, that the "cause"

of Mary's self-consciousness of her beauty "is not so much natural vanity as cultural reinforcement"[30] is to misread the extreme contrast that Gaskell develops between the fickle, coquettish, and irresponsible Mary from the beginning of the narrative and the disillusioned and loving partner of Jem at the end of the book. She is symbolically "cured" of this vanity when she relives a second infancy on her sick bed. It is through Gaskell's sympathetic presentation of Mary that the morally and sexually transgressive implications of coquetry (also associated with prostitution) are brought to the fore.

While Cynthia is not facing any lasting consequences of her fickleness, Mary through the criticism she encounters from Jenny Wilson is made aware that the working-class moral code appears to be more strict than that of the middle classes. Unlike Mary, Cynthia is not redeemed from her coquetry, but withdraws from the novel through her marriage in what is ultimately an unsatisfactory resolution of her moral ambiguity. Potentially, Mary could have been a fallen woman, especially as at crucial moments positive and negative influences such as Margaret and Sally are striving to guide her. It is necessary that Mary be humbled, and this process of impressing on her the gravity of her guilt is effected through both her illness and the societal illness that kills John Barton. The Victorian rejection of "coquetry as a kind of cover story that conceals deeper fears about gender roles … and above all about female agency, autonomy, and eroticism"[31] is strikingly illustrated in Gaskell's fiction. While *Wives and Daughters* offers the most pessimistic view of the figure, Gaskell's first novel demonstrates that coquettes are redeemable. From her liminal position as beautiful coquette, Mary returns to the centre of a family who love her. Also, the romance of *Mary Barton* inspires hope that tolerance towards social outcasts such as Esther could someday come about as well as that coquetry will no longer be necessary in courtship where two partners truly love each other.

Notes

1. Patricia E. Johnson, "Art and Assassination in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*," *Victorians Institute Journal*, 27 (1999): 156.
2. Ellen Bayuk Roseman, "Fear or Fashion; or, how the Coquette got her bad name," *ANQ*, 15.3 (2002): 13.
3. Roseman, "Fear or Fashion," 17.
4. Roseman, "Fear or Fashion," 13.
5. Hilary Schor, *Scheherezade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), 20.
6. See Schor, *Scheherezade in the Marketplace*, 60-66.
7. See Yaël Schlick and Shelley King eds., *Refiguring the Coquette: Essays on Culture and Coquetry* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell Univ. Press, 2008).
8. See Sandro Jung, "Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the Female Detective and the 'Crime' of Selfhood," *Brontë Studies*, 32.1 (2007): 21-30.
9. Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, ed. Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970). All page references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text. On the issues of dissimulation and misrepresentation, see Roland Vegso, "*Mary Barton* and the Dissembled Dialogue," *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 33.2 (2003): 163-83.
10. The importance of beauty and the "demoralized sensuality" and "pure aestheticism" that seduce this beauty are elaborately discussed with regard to *Ruth* by Schor, *Scheherezade in the Marketplace*, 61-62.
11. Barbara Leah Harman, *The Feminine Political Novel in Victorian England* (Charlottesville, VA: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1998), 70. Harman also notes that the loss of "moral purity" is inextricably linked with the loss of "sexual purity" (70-71).
12. Roseman, "Fear or Fashion," 18.
13. See Mariana Valverde, "The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse," *Victorian Studies*, 32.2 (1986): 169-88; Beth Kalikoff, "The Falling Woman in Three Victorian Novels," *Studies in the Novel*, 19.3 (1987): 357-67, and Suzann Bick, "'Take Her Up Tenderly: Elizabeth Gaskell's Treatment of the Fallen Woman," *Essays in Arts and Literature*, 18 (1989): 17-27.
14. Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Letters*, ed. John A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1966), 74.
15. Roseman, "Fear or Fashion," 15.
16. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963, 1980), 376.
17. Dorice Williams Elliott, "Servants and Hands: Representing the Working Classes in Victorian Factory Novels," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 28.2 (2000): 379.
18. Elliott, "Servants and Hands," 281.
19. Roseman, "Fear or Fashion," 19, 18.
20. Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth*, ed. Angus Easson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), 62.
21. Angus Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 114. Also, Melissa Schaub, "Sympathy and Discipline in *Mary Barton*," *Victorian Newsletter*, 106 (2004): 6-21; Kristine Swenson, "Protection or Restriction? Women's Labour in *Mary Barton*," *Gaskell Society Journal*, 7 (1993): 55.

22. Arnold Kettle, "The Early Victorian Social Problem Novel," *From Dickens to Hardy*, The Pelican History of English Literature, ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), 180.
23. Thomas E. Recchio, "A Monstrous Reading of *Mary Barton*: Fiction as Communitas," *College Literature*, 23 (1996): 10.
24. Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, 78, 79. A more traditional view, reading John Barton as the "hero" of *Mary Barton*, is advanced by Arthur Pollard, *Elizabeth Gaskell: Novelist and Biographer* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1965), 65.
25. Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters*, ed. Angus Easson (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987). All page references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.
26. Harman, *The Feminine Political Novel in Victorian England*, 73.
27. Easson, ed., *Wives and Daughters*, xxii.
28. Natalka Freeland, "The Politics of Dirt in *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*," *Studies in English Literature*, 42.4 (2002): 806. Dirt for Gaskell has an important meaning, for as Natalka Freeland argues, the Victorian "misplaced affinity of cleanliness" that was inspired by both religious and sanitary reform discourse was implicitly criticised by Gaskell. According to Freeland, "[r]ather than signifying innate criminality or moral degeneration, dirt is the expected accessory of respectable, working-class domesticity" (806).
29. Easson, ed., *Wives and Daughters*, xxi-xxii.
30. Swenson, "Protection or Restriction?," 60.
31. Roseman, "Fear or Fashion," 19.