

**‘I THINK I MUST BE AN IMPROPER WOMAN WITHOUT
KNOWING IT’: FALLENNESS AND UNITARIANISM IN ELIZABETH
GASKELL’S *RUTH***

Rachel Webster
(University of Leeds)

Abstract

This article draws on the public dialogue surrounding mid-nineteenth-century prostitution, and is particularly concerned with how fallenness was classified, and how it was thought that it should be ameliorated. Elizabeth Gaskell’s novel *Ruth* (1853) engages with the myth of fallenness – how female sexuality was religiously and socially conceived – which contributed towards the dichotomy of two classes of women: the fallen and the virtuous. Gaskell, as a Unitarian, rejected Original Sin, believing that the human mind and soul were not innately sinful but had immense potential for growth. Consequently, Unitarians considered the environment as fundamentally responsible for shaping and determining an individual’s character and fate. This religious viewpoint permeates Gaskell’s response to the “problem” of the fallen woman, perceiving female sexuality not to be inherently corruptible or dangerous. She challenges the institutionalised, separatist response of penitentiary restoration by locating Ruth’s redemptive process within the family home of the Bensons. She offers female solidarity and the role of motherhood as the ideal ameliorative solutions and yet the novel ends with Ruth’s sacrificial death. The article takes this problematic conclusion and suggests that Gaskell, frustrated with the reality of the fallen woman’s fate, hands Ruth over to the Unitarian hope of redemption in death.

‘I think I must be an improper woman without knowing it’ is how Elizabeth Gaskell attempted to assess her character after the publication of her novel, *Ruth* (1853), which so shocked and offended certain readers that it led to the dramatic if confined action of copies being ‘burnt’.¹ Gaskell’s anxiety surrounding the formation and final production of *Ruth* can be observed in her correspondence, as she anticipates the ‘talk’ people will ‘make’ (p. 209) of choosing to depict a fallen woman as heroine, an ‘unfit subject for fiction’ (p. 220), especially for ‘family reading’ (p. 223). She acknowledges the necessity of courage and endurance against such criticism, by believing in her intentions as a writer to speak out a ‘very plain and earnest truth’ (p. 225). However, what troubles Gaskell’s resolve is the unforeseen experience of feeling ‘improper’ under the gaze of friends and worshippers, particularly of those attending the Unitarian Chapel, where her husband William was Minister. In a letter, addressed to her close correspondent Eliza Fox (Feb. 1853), Gaskell diagnoses herself as having a “‘Ruth’ fever”, in which she is physically indisposed from the ‘hard things’ (p. 222) that have been said about the novel, unsettling both her mind and dreams. In the novel, Ruth succumbs to fever several times, with the last bout

¹ Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. by J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Mandolin, 1997), p. 223. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

proving fatal. The first time she suffers is after being abandoned by her lover, Bellingham, when the full force of her public shame and inconsolable position is revealed. Gaskell's choice to align herself with Ruth's fever interestingly associates her experience as publishing novelist with the exposure and tainted character of the fallen woman. To 'shrink' (p. 220) and 'hide one's head like an ostrich' (p. 227) in the sand, because of shame, is to understand the fallen woman's condition, both as a genuine experience of fallenness and as a forced punishment dictated by public disapprobation. Gaskell reconciles her own misrepresentation with the conviction that *Ruth* has brought a 'subject which is so painful' (p. 227) out into the discussion of the public domain, and, by doing so, she secured her place in a growing dialogue surrounding mid-century prostitution.

During the 1840s and into the 1850s, prostitution began to attract the attention of social investigators, largely due to conflicting evidence that it was expanding at an exponential rate, with unsustainable estimates figuring one in six unmarried women or an equivalent of 83,000 were working as prostitutes.² It was labelled the Great Social Evil, not only as an affront to morality, but as recognition of the profession acting upon economic principles of supply and demand. The writings of prominent Congregational minister Ralph Wardlaw and moral reformer J.B. Talbot were characteristic of the 1840s approach to the 'intolerable evil', emphasising prostitution as a threat to the sanctity of family life and to the wider social order.³ Wardlaw's *Lectures on Female Prostitution* (1843), first delivered to an exclusively male audience in Glasgow, looked to 'unite all truly patriotic and Christian men [...] to active and strenuous co-operation for the prevention and cure of the prevailing immorality'.⁴ There was a significant branch of social science at this time, which Wardlaw, Talbot and William Bevon represented, whose practices were synonymous with 'applied Christianity': it was a desire to promote monogamy, self-discipline and cleanliness; three things that the prostitute's life seemed to refute.⁵ Christian morality, in fact, informed the societal identification of prostitution as the illicit intercourse of the sexes, with the sin of fornication intensified by the act being 'committed for hire'.⁶ Judith Walkowitz explains that these empirical surveys were intended as preliminaries to action, in which accumulated data could be used as

² See E.M. Sigsworth and T.J. Wyke, 'A Study of Victorian Prostitution and Venereal Disease', in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed. by Martha Vicinus (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973), pp. 77-99 (p. 78).

³ See Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 31-33.

⁴ Ralph Wardlaw, *Lectures on Female Prostitution: Its Nature, Extent, Effects, Guilt, Causes and Remedy* (Glasgow: Maclehose, 1843), p. vi.

⁵ See Mary Poovey, 'Speaking of the Body: Mid-Victorian Constructions of Female Desire', in *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*, ed. by Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller and Sally Shuttleworth (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 29-46 (p. 31).

⁶ Wardlaw, *Lectures*, pp. 10-17.

recommendations for ameliorative policies.⁷

Consequently, in the 1850s, there was an attempt to review the accounts put forward in the previous decade, building upon the evidence collected by Wardlaw and Talbot, generating an ‘intellectual climate sympathetic to regulation’.⁸ William R. Greg, leading essayist, reviewer and social commentator, published an article entitled ‘Prostitution’ (1850) in the *Westminster Review*, whilst William Acton, a practicing surgeon as well as a prolific writer of articles on a variety of medical problems, published *Prostitution: Its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects* (1857).⁹ Acton also published a second edition in 1869 which contained a useful Preface expanding upon his initial conclusions, demonstrating a far greater confidence in his assertions which were nevertheless born out of the 1850s climate. Acton and Greg were advocates of ‘recognition’ and ‘regulation’, terms which were defined in Acton’s introductory remarks:

I propose, in the following pages, to inquire whether, in the interest of society and civilization, on what are commonly called sanitary and social grounds, some compromise, which I should term ‘RECOGNITION’, may not be effected between sanction and pretended ignorance of vice, and whether some useful mean may not exist between unbridled licence and despotism, which for want of a better name might be called ‘REGULATION’.¹⁰

Acton believed that because of ‘men’s nervous reluctance to admit acquaintance with it [prostitution], only half-formed opinions prevail among the most enlightened official men, and extremely erroneous ones among the general public’.¹¹ It became the duty, therefore, of the essayist to dispel such ignorance, to promote prevention, amelioration and regulation as state responsibilities. They attempted to achieve sympathetic regulation by insisting that fallenness should ‘no longer be held to necessitate, depravity’, for the woman was the victim of male desire.¹²

Amanda Anderson argues that the depictions of prostitutes and fallen women in Victorian culture (both through medical and literary forms) dramatised the predicament of agency, with uncertainties raised concerning the nature of selfhood,

⁷ Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p. 37.

⁸ See Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p. 42.

⁹ This article will quote substantially from the 1857 edition of William Acton’s *Prostitution Considered in Its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects in London and other Large Cities and Garrison Towns with Proposals for the Control and Prevention of Its Attendant Evils* (London: John Churchill, 1857). I will also quote from the 1869 revised edition, where appropriate, because the revisions do provide a clarity of thinking and expression which offers an interesting insight into the work’s development.

¹⁰ Acton, *Prostitution* (1857), pp. 3-4.

¹¹ Acton, *Prostitution* (1857), p. 14.

¹² W.R. Greg, ‘Prostitution’, *Westminster Review*, 53 (July 1850), 448-506 (p. 503).

character and society.¹³ There was an underlying fear that fallenness proved the unpredictability of identity, with women susceptible to an irrevocable loss of character. As Sally Mitchell explains, sexual desire was considered to be either weak or nonexistent in women and therefore to fall was a conscious, deliberate or forced choice.¹⁴ As a consequence, a mythology of fallenness was conceived: a myth, according to Nina Auerbach, that enabled cultural fears of female sexuality to hide behind it. By creating an enigmatic icon, the fallen woman could embody, depending on the observer, either a monstrous, autonomous aggressor or a pitiful victim, and yet neither viewpoint sought to understand female sexuality.¹⁵ This myth was also reaffirmed by domestic ideology in which the virtuous woman protected the morality of the home, and through the husband, influenced the nation too. Therefore, as Lynda Nead notes, the prostitute was a deviation from this respectable norm, and ‘threatened not only stable class relations but also national and imperial security’.¹⁶ Consequently, such diverging representations of female sexuality helped to affirm the dichotomy of two classes of women, the fallen and the virtuous.¹⁷ This article is interested in how Gaskell’s *Ruth* critiques, although hesitantly and with much concern, the myth of fallenness, as conceived primarily in the texts which sought to recognise and regulate prostitution. The literary form challenges the causes and effects of fallenness, complicating the assumptions of individual weakness and victimisation, and offering redemption other than through legislative solutions. The article will be structured into two parts: firstly looking at the causes of prostitution, drawing on the Unitarian disavowal of Original Sin; and secondly on the possible restoration of the fallen woman, based upon a unique combination of divine and self-redemption.

Individual weakness, with certain women susceptible to fall, fuelled the Victorian myth of two types of women, and this was often conceived in religious terms. It is this area of thought that is most interesting for the study of *Ruth*, because Original Sin was often blamed for the downfall of the unfortunate woman.¹⁸ The concept of Original Sin, or as the Calvinist defined it, Total Depravity, was the linchpin in the Evangelical creed.¹⁹ Man was under the curse of the ‘fall’, the

¹³ Amanda Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1993), p. 1.

¹⁴ Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women’s Reading 1835-1880* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1981), p. xi.

¹⁵ Nina Auerbach, ‘The Rise of the Fallen Woman’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 35 (June 1980), 29-52 (pp. 29-31).

¹⁶ Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 91.

¹⁷ See George Watt, *The Fallen Woman in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), p. 3.

¹⁸ See Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p. 37.

¹⁹ See Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-*

consequences of the first, unlawful disobedient act towards God by Adam and Eve, releasing evil into the world. The only solution to man's moral condition was through faith in the atoning death and resurrection of God's son Jesus.²⁰ This placed salvation securely in the hands of God, with man unable to redeem himself. Another dimension to redemption, affirmed by Calvinists, was predestination: the belief that only a select number of mankind, already known to God, will experience his salvation. What is of interest here is the 'flaw in Evangelical logic', the contradictory behaviour that resulted from those who subscribed to Original Sin.²¹ Transgression had become a distinctly gendered experience, as Nina Auerbach argues, with the doom of Milton's Satan 'grafted' onto the character of Eve, a creature predisposed to fall.²² Despite recognising that all men were weak and susceptible to sin, and in need of moral salvation, there was a tendency towards exclusiveness and separation. As Mark Knight and Emma Mason explain:

The individualistic tendency of Evangelicalism meant that total depravity was seen primarily in terms of personal human sinfulness, yet it extended to the belief that all society was fallen. As a result, many Evangelicals sought to separate themselves from the evil of their society and its corrupt 'worldly' influences.²³

This helps to understand why the myth of the fallen and the virtuous existed, even though, according to orthodox Christianity, all were sinners. The prostitute had become Original Sin incarnate, the corruptible, dangerous figure, who, it can be assumed, was not predestined, and thus beyond societal and redemptive help.²⁴ Therefore, to prevent contamination, she must be isolated from her virtuous counterpart. This is the Calvinist position taken to its extreme, and not all social investigators held to this view, but it does highlight the root of such thinking.

Although Gaskell was no different to her contemporaries in designating prostitution as an illicit act, with women vulnerable to male desire, she refuses to view salvation as selective, insisting on a Unitarian dismissal of Original Sin. This stance challenged the Calvinistic, pre-determined nature of man's moral condition, allowing instead a moral "level playing field" in which individual choices and

Century Novel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 54.

²⁰ See Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 8.

²¹ See Jay, *Religion of the Heart*, p. 58.

²² Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 155.

²³ Mark Knight, and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 128.

²⁴ See Patsy Stoneman, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 67.

environmental circumstances formed character.²⁵ Despite referring to herself as ‘Unitarianly’ unorthodox, Gaskell did follow the essential Unitarian doctrines, such as the belief in a benevolent God as judge, Jesus as *the* model but not divine human, universal salvation, a dismissal of both pre-destination and, as already noted, Original Sin.²⁶ The human mind and soul were not innately sinful, but instead were born with an immense potential for growth. Unitarians considered the environment as fundamentally responsible for shaping the individual, therefore, it is not surprising to find Gaskell interested in the role that environment plays in a fallen woman’s plight.

Gaskell commences *Ruth* with her familiar trope of describing the novel’s locality, drawing attention to people’s traditions and mode of work. Her justification for such an opening is to:

enable one to understand more clearly the circumstances which contributed to the formation of character. The daily life into which people are born, and into which they are absorbed before they are well aware, forms chains.²⁷

Gaskell uses Ruth’s environment to suggest possible reasons for her susceptibility to seduction, whilst maintaining the innocence of Ruth’s character and behaviour. Ruth is described as a caged bird in Mrs Mason’s dress-making establishment after being ‘wrenched’ (p. 38) away from her past life of familial affection in the countryside. She is now orphaned and friendless in a ‘large populous desolate town’, and the narrator asks of the reader ‘what became of such as Ruth?’ (p. 34). Her life is confined to the ‘incessant labour of the work-days’ and the isolating, ‘monotonous idleness’ of Sundays (p. 35). Gaskell’s use of juxtaposition highlights Ruth’s problematic position, where, although she is surrounded by people and activity, she is removed from the protection of intimates and fruitful labour. The lack of parental supervision is regretted, particularly for the vulnerable situation it leaves Ruth in, as she is pursued by her potential lover, Bellingham, without any protector or advice respecting ‘*the* subject of a woman’s life’ (p. 44). Ruth is described as ‘innocent and snow-pure’, who had heard of falling in love but did not know the ‘signs and symptoms’ (p. 44). Yoko Hatano argues that Gaskell’s intention here is to represent Ruth as an example of seduced innocence, the type of fallen woman Evangelical penitentiaries preferred to rescue. Such a differentiation conforms to the belief that Evangelical, particularly Calvinistic, redemption was unheeded and consequently unavailable to the hardened and innately corrupted prostitute. This assessment by

²⁵ See Anderson, *Tainted Souls*, p. 3.

²⁶ See Angus Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 10; R.K. Webb, ‘The Gaskells as Unitarians’, in *Dickens and Other Victorians: Essays in Honour of Philip Collins*, ed. by Joanne Shattock (Hampshire: The Macmillan Press, 1988), pp. 144-71 (p. 144).

²⁷ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth*, ed. by Alan Shelston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 2. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

Hatano, however, not only misunderstands Gaskell's Unitarian disavowal of Original Sin, which rejects such classification of a woman's moral condition, but it is also a misreading of Gaskell's intentions in highlighting Ruth's innocence.²⁸ Gaskell distances Ruth from an innately sinful character but also reveals the vulnerabilities of female ignorance, for at the crucial point of seduction the narrator appeals to the reader to 'remember how young, and innocent, and motherless she was!' (p. 56).

Evangelical, sociological writers of the 1840s rarely questioned the belief that a woman's sinful nature contributed to her fallen state. Although receptive to the vulnerability of the prostitute's position, the tone and rhetoric of lectures presented by Ralph Wardlaw insisted upon her guilt. Wardlaw sincerely felt his responsibility to verbally strip the prostitute of her 'allurements', revealing her 'true character of moral loathsomeness' with 'wretched and damning tendencies'.²⁹ He quotes extensively from Dr. William Tait's *Magdalenism: Inquiry into the Extent, Causes and Consequences of Prostitution in Edinburgh* (1842), in which Tait outlines natural and accidental causes of prostitution, with 'licentiousness of inclination' taking prominent place at the top of the list. Wardlaw also suggests that the ready compliance of the seduced (as an example of an accidental cause) almost deprives the term 'seduction' of its appropriateness.³⁰ Gaskell places the rhetoric, as voiced by Ralph Wardlaw, into the mouth of Esther, her first example of a fallen woman, in *Mary Barton* (1848), whose seduction and later abandonment by a soldier leads her into the life of a 'street-walker'.³¹ She condemns her own position, describing herself as a 'wretched loathsome creature' (p. 145) with the 'black curse of Heaven' (p. 277) resting upon all her actions. She is haunted by 'some spiritual creature' (p. 192), which she equates with the condemning eyes of family and friends. John Barton's violent reaction, to fling her 'trembling, sinking, fainting' (p. 144) from himself is to reinforce Esther's guilt, that she is 'past hope' (p. 192). Despite the suggestiveness of Esther's untimely demise Gaskell consistently avoided the use of rhetoric which insisted a lapse into sin was inherent and not circumstantial. Esther goes out into the streets to feed her starving child and asks her listener Jem Wilson: "'Do you think God will punish me for that?'" The 'wild vehemence' (p. 189) of her tone, along with the directedness of her question, also seeks a response from the reader.

Jemima, daughter of Mr Bradshaw, in whose household Ruth finds employment as a governess, is a character consistently used by Gaskell to critique the association of the fallen with the sinful nature. She rebels against the 'hard doctrines' of her father, the perfect embodiment of Calvinistic values, in which he drew a 'clear

²⁸ Yoko Hatano, 'Evangelicalism in *Ruth*', *The Modern Language Review*, 95 (July 2000), 634-41 (p. 637).

²⁹ Wardlaw, *Lectures*, p. 3.

³⁰ Wardlaw, *Lectures*, pp. 113-16.

³¹ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, ed. by Edgar Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 6. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

line of partition' between two groups of mankind, the one to which he belonged, and the other, composed of individuals in need of 'lectures, admonitions and exhortations' (pp. 323-24). However, an acquaintance with Ruth's past life shows the extent to which Jemima's indoctrination from her father has, nonetheless, instilled itself within her; she recoils from the knowledge of Ruth's sin, this 'evil most repugnant to her womanly modesty' (p. 324). She compares this contact with 'open sin' to the diver's terrifying encounter with a 'strange, ghastly, lidless-eyed monster' (p. 323). Jemima's imagination has conjured up a frightening metaphor of fallenness, largely due to her inexperience and ill-preparation for facing what appears on first encounter a new 'terror' (p. 323); she has only pre-learned condemnation to guide her response. Gaskell is critical of the unreasonable classification of 'wantonness' (p. 337) as the one sin hated and loathed above all others, which fuels such judgment, and is perpetuated by writers such as Wardlaw.

The 1850s, however, did see some writers attempt to inculcate a more 'humane and reasonable response' to prostitution, by shifting responsibility onto the male and his unrestrained sexual desire.³² Gaskell notes this shift by using Bellingham, Ruth's seducer, to characterise the male persona that Greg and Acton put forward as the main cause of prostitution; they transfer blame from a woman's inherent sinful nature to that of the man. Bellingham demonstrates an unbridled sexuality, which Jemima unconsciously alludes to when comparing him to a race horse:

She watched her father's visitor attentively, with something like the curious observation which a naturalist bestows on a new species of animal. [...]

'Brutes are sometimes very beautiful, mamma. I am sure I should think it a compliment to be likened to a race-horse, such as the one we saw. But the thing in which they are alike, is the sort of repressed eagerness in both [...]. Though he seems so gentle, I almost think he is very headstrong in following out his own will'. (pp. 263-64)

Jemima has never been acquainted with such a man before; hence her observation is likened to a 'naturalist' bestowing interest upon a 'new species of animal'. However, Jemima does not possess the vocabulary or knowledge to successfully identify 'repressed eagerness' as a coherent sexual desire; consequently, she finds some expression through using the metaphor of a racehorse. She is able to hint, although not fully, at his dangerous attractiveness, surmising that 'brutes' can also be 'beautiful'. Similarly, Old Thomas, previously a servant in Ruth's family home, tries to warn Ruth of the danger Bellingham presents through the scriptural reference of

³² See Anne Humphreys, 'Biographical Note' in Acton's *Prostitution Considered in Its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects in London and other Large Cities and Garrison Towns with Proposals for the Control and Prevention of Its Attendant Evils* (London: Frank Cass, 1972), p. vi.

the ‘devil’ prowling around as a ‘roaring lion’ (p. 51). She cannot translate this biblical warning into the appropriate social terms: the words fail to form a ‘definite idea’ in Ruth’s mind as she is ignorant of male passion, especially desire disguised in the form of a ‘handsome young man’ (p. 51).³³ The narrator, however, makes it clear that Bellingham is motivated by the possession of Ruth’s beauty, her only commodity he ‘cared for, and it was supreme. It was all he recognized of her, and he was proud of it’ (p. 74).

Both Greg and Acton refer to prostitution as a profession, insisting that it exists and flourishes because it relies on the economic principles of supply and demand, with male desire fuelling the need for prostitutes. Such a shift in responsibility could only be effected if woman’s sexuality was denied altogether.³⁴ Greg trod on dangerous ground as he knew that if women were seen to have no sexual inclination, then those who did sell themselves must be perverse, beyond societal help, and open to the severest condemnation. Jill Matus makes the comment that the vision of a world in which sexually driven women exercised their urges was a hellish apocalypse to Greg.³⁵ Hence, Greg’s priority had to be a dismissal of autonomous desire. He writes:

Women’s desires scarcely ever lead to their fall, the desire scarcely exists in a definite and conscious form, till they have fallen [...] men’s sexual desire is inherent and spontaneous.³⁶

Acton also refutes the possibility of a woman’s enjoyment motivating her fall by stressing ‘uncontrollable sexual desires of her own play but a little part in inducing profligacy of the female’.³⁷ One physician, giving advice on the developments of puberty for adolescents, remarked that ‘puberty, which gives man the knowledge of greater power, gives to woman the conviction of her dependence’.³⁸ Greg believed that a woman’s sexuality only became active once sexual intercourse had taken place, hence she was dependent on the man’s ‘greater power’, unable to control or assert her own sexuality. Consequently, maintaining a female unconsciousness of sexuality was a sure way of keeping women protected until marriage could provide a secure awakening. Prostitution only confirmed to the essayist the degradation, demonstrated in both the diseased body and mind, of the woman subjected to unsanctioned sexual

³³ See Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 158.

³⁴ Greg, ‘Prostitution’, p. 490.

³⁵ Jill L. Matus, *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 123.

³⁶ Greg, ‘Prostitution’, pp. 456-57.

³⁷ Acton, *Prostitution* (1857), p. 20.

³⁸ See Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), p. 86.

relations. Ignorance construed as innocence was perpetuated and encouraged by advice pamphlets, stipulating that if any information of a sexual nature was to be imparted, it must come from the mother; for as historian Deborah Gorham quotes from advice literature, Lydia Child's *The Mother's Book* (1832), a girl 'who receives her first ideas from shameless stories [...] has in fact prostituted her mind by familiarity with vice'.³⁹

Gaskell's characterisation of Ruth as ignorant and sexually unaware could be seen on face value as an affirmation of Greg's denial of female sexuality. The narrator acknowledges that Ruth never received her mother's advice respecting 'the subject of a woman's life' (p. 44), and it takes a child's rebuke, after living with Bellingham for several weeks, to spark a 'new idea' (p. 72) of her compromised position. Ruth cannot deny Bellingham's justification for committing herself to him when it is presented to her as 'natural', in the sense of throwing 'yourself upon the care of the one who loves you dearly' (p. 57). Greg confidently asserts that nine out of ten women fell from 'pure unknowingness [...] from motives or feelings in which sensuality and self have no share'.⁴⁰ As Ruth begins to realise the 'estimation in which she was henceforward to be held', she accepts 'I must not think of myself so much. If I can but make him happy, what need I care for chance speeches?' (p. 73). Ruth upholds what Greg terms as 'weak generosity'.⁴¹ However, it is a more credible assessment, as suggested by Jill Matus, to view Ruth's 'unknowingness' as a topical representation of passionlessness, in which Gaskell critiques the dangers of sexual ignorance.⁴² Bellingham primes Ruth for seduction by slowly extending their unchaperoned walks after the Sunday church service. Ruth at first refuses but then:

suddenly wondering and questioning herself why she refused a thing which was, as far as reason and knowledge (*her* knowledge) went, so innocent, and which was certainly so tempting and pleasant, she agreed to go the round [...] she forgot all doubt and awkwardness – nay, almost forgot the presence of Mr. Bellingham. (p. 40)

This quotation draws attention to the various dangers of feminine ignorance of sexual desire. Firstly, the parenthetical inclusion of '*her* knowledge' is deliberately used by the narrator to identify Ruth as ill-equipped to make an accurate assessment of the impropriety of Bellingham's suggestion; she does not possess the right knowledge to uncover Bellingham's subterfuge as seduction. Secondly, when she is caught up in the 'beauty of an early spring day' (p. 40), she forgets Bellingham's presence completely. Ruth is unable to perceive Bellingham as a sexual being; hence, she

³⁹ Gorham, *The Victorian Girl*, p. 92.

⁴⁰ Greg, 'Prostitution', pp. 459-60.

⁴¹ Greg, 'Prostitution', p. 458, and see Poovey, 'Speaking of the Body', p. 33.

⁴² Matus, *Unstable Bodies*, p. 126.

cannot comprehend herself being viewed in similar terms. This is also seen in her ability to disassociate physical beauty from herself. She acknowledges that ‘yes! I know I am pretty [...] I could not help knowing [...] for many people have told me so’ (p. 12), yet this speech is void of all conceit or any understanding that beauty can be exercised as a power.⁴³ Ruth’s forgetfulness of Bellingham’s presence indicates her naïve misunderstanding of the situation, and, consequently, leaves her vulnerable to his advances.

Greg believed that if women were placed in the right environment, protected from and ignorant of the knowledge of sexuality and associated vice, ‘from exciting causes’, then all would be pure and virtuous.⁴⁴ This appears to affirm a Unitarian dismissal of Original Sin, considering all women to be virtuous, and, with Greg’s wavering Christianity grounded in such Unitarianism, it is quite possible he is advocating innate goodness. However, Gaskell cannot perpetuate this myth of female sexuality, believing instead that it was an essential and not shameful part of a woman’s nature. Patsy Stoneman is right to identify the tension Gaskell faced of advocating ‘self regulating’ adult women, whilst retaining the desire to control and protect female purity, which was often only achieved through the denial of sexual knowledge.⁴⁵ There is evidence within *Ruth*, demonstrated through the characterisation of Jemima, of female passion, desire and yearning which contradicted both the dangers of sexuality and the consequent need to promote passionlessness in women.⁴⁶ Gaskell is able to explore sexual desire, without expressing it explicitly, by defining it as ‘impulse’. Jemima is aware of the growing attachment between herself and Mr Farquhar, the suitor chosen by her father because of the ‘fitness’ (p. 216) of the alliance to suit his purposes. However, the ‘silent rebellion’ (p. 215) existing in Jemima’s heart against the ‘manoeuvring’ of her future course like ‘pieces at chess’ (p. 240) causes her to withdraw and maintain a ‘sullen reserve’ (p. 224) in Farquhar’s presence. Farquhar recognises ‘impulse’ as the guiding force of Jemima’s behaviour, and is troubled by its existence in such a girl, being ‘taught to dread impulses as promptings of the devil’ (p. 215). Jemima disagrees with this alignment of impulse with evil, lamenting: ‘Poor impulse! how you do get abused’ (p. 217). She will not allow herself to ‘change her very nature’ to ‘gain the love of any human creature’ (p. 219), and although Jemima’s impulsive, ‘headstrong’ and ‘passionate’ (p. 365) nature causes her uneasiness, both physically and mentally, as she wrestles the ‘demon’ (p. 245) of jealousy when Farquhar’s affections are transferred to Ruth, it is important that Gaskell allows her to experience the full range

⁴³ See Hilary M. Schor, *Scheherezade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 61.

⁴⁴ Greg, ‘Prostitution’, p. 457, and see Matus, *Unstable Bodies*, p. 123.

⁴⁵ Patsy Stoneman, ‘Gaskell, Gender and the Family’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. by Jill L. Matus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 131-47 (p. 140).

⁴⁶ See Matus, *Unstable Bodies*, p. 130.

of desire.

Jemima's understanding of her own sexuality and desires is greatly increased when she is made fully acquainted with Ruth's past. Her first encounter with 'open sin', as already noted, was a tumultuous experience, precisely because the 'family and religious circumstances' had tried to 'hedge' and 'guard' (p. 323) her from ever encountering vice. Yet knowledge of sexuality enables Jemima, for the first time, to fully understand her own desires for Farquhar, as well as to recognise the unjust jealousy she has been harbouring against Ruth. It is a 'sudden impulse' which makes her aware of the offence she has given to Farquhar, and causes her to ask "I have not vexed you, have I, Walter?" (p. 374). The use of his first name settles the doubt of whether mutual affection exists between them, and they are finally identified as lovers. During Bradshaw's angry and violent admonition of Ruth's past sin, Jemima confidently and for the first time openly rebels against her father's wishes, bearing 'witness' to the goodness of Ruth's behaviour. There is a display of female solidarity as Jemima stands 'side by side' with Ruth, taking her 'cold, dead hand' in her 'warm convulsive grasp' (p. 338). Jemima's passionate nature, demonstrated through her association with impulse and manifested in bodily action, is only strengthened and confirmed in the revelation of possessing such a sexual nature.

Jemima's confession that "I might just have been like Ruth" (p. 365), susceptible to temptation, but for the difference in family circumstances, draws Ruth's history closer to the bourgeois social sphere, refusing to affirm the myth of two types of women, who should never interact.⁴⁷ It also engages head on with the social investigator's contradictory viewpoint of what has happened to the fallen woman's character during the period of her prostitution. Despite Acton's insistence in the 1857 edition of *Prostitution* that 'it must not be imagined that, though disordered and for a time lost to our sight, the other strata of the woman's nature have ceased to exist' he wrote in the revised 1869 edition that a woman's progression into fallenness, starting with a single act of unchastity, is a losing of her better self.⁴⁸ He explains that:

By unchastity a woman becomes liable to lose character [...] reduced to prostitution for support. She is a woman with half the woman gone, and that half containing all that elevates her nature, leaving her a mere instrument of impurity.⁴⁹

Acton's reading of a woman's fallenness suggests that her character becomes defective, with a significant breach taking place between her once virtuous state and her current position. Although Acton and Greg promoted rescue, believing that the

⁴⁷ See Bodenheimer, *Politics of Story*, p. 163.

⁴⁸ Acton, *Prostitution* (1857), p. 53.

⁴⁹ Acton, *Prostitution* (1972), p. 166.

‘first false step [...] should no longer be considered irretrievable’, they did present the fallen condition as unstable and changeable.⁵⁰ It is this categorisation which Gaskell challenges, unconvinced that a transgression into sin changes the essential nature of a woman’s character.

This belief of Gaskell’s is reflected in her approach to amelioration, wanting to reintegrate women back into a ‘conventional and recognisable’ bourgeois society.⁵¹ She was sceptical that ‘deception’ (giving a woman a new identity), as carried out by penitentiaries and institutes of reclamation, was the correct solution for dealing with fallenness. Charles Dickens helped to set up Urania Cottage, a ‘Home for Homeless Women’, whose activities were described in detail in his weekly *Household Words*. After an average term of probation, usually lasting one year, a ‘refining and humanising alteration’ was ‘wrought in the expression of the [woman’s] features [...] which scarcely can be imagined’.⁵² With irreproachable character matching their transformed appearance, such women were ready to emigrate to Australia, to take up their new positions as domestic servants, governesses and eventually wives. Such schemes implied that reintegration could only occur in an environment where past lives were unknowable. The uncomfortable knowledge of a woman’s sexuality had to be erased in a scheme of forgetfulness. Gaskell objected to this type of ‘humanising alteration’ in her fictional portrayal, by stripping Ruth of her widowed disguise and allowing her sexual past to be known in the heart of domesticity, in the Bensons’s home.

Once Gaskell has placed Ruth into a domestic environment, she is able to dramatise the functional benefits domesticity has in restoring a fallen woman’s social reputation. Ruth is given six years peace in the Bensons’s home and the narrator interestingly describes the external change that this had given to her, whilst subtly playing down any internal change:

But, perhaps, in Ruth herself there was the greatest external change; for of the change which had gone on in her heart, and mind, and soul, or *if there had been any*, neither she nor anyone around her was conscious; but sometimes Miss Benson did say to Sally, ‘How very handsome Ruth is grown!’ (p. 208, emphasis mine)

The emphasis upon her external features, in the above quotation, indicates that it is the physical effects of Ruth’s ordeal that have been soothed by domesticity. The strong bond between mother and son is also presented as evidence that the domestic space can restore, with Ruth’s ‘whole heart’ given over to this ‘boy’ (p. 209). Gaskell

⁵⁰ Greg, ‘Prostitution’, p. 503.

⁵¹ See Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel*, p. 33

⁵² Charles Dickens, ‘Home for Homeless Women’, *Household Words*, 7 (April 1853), 161-175 (p. 173).

is concerned with the proper sphere and object of love, concluding that Ruth's motherly and fierce regard for her son should supersede her childish love, naively conceived, for Bellingham.⁵³ This practice of selfless love, which is distinguished from 'weak generosity', therefore, has implications for Ruth's redemption. Thurstan Benson, when he first hears that Ruth is pregnant, dismisses Faith's concern that this will be Ruth's 'badge' of 'shame' but instead rejoices, believing that reverence for her child will 'shut out sin, – will be purification' (p. 119). Contradictorily, this physical reminder, the product, of Ruth's fall will not debase her but instead be revered as the means of blotting out the past wrong, and will initiate her spiritual renewal. Ruth, at first, fears that she 'loved him too much – more than God himself – yet she could not bear to pray to have her love for her child lessened', and, in consequence of this honest dialogue with God, the narrator comments that 'her love for her child led her up to love to God' (p. 209). Ruth and her son, Leonard, 'grew and strengthened into the riper beauty of their respective ages', with 'no touch of decay' (p. 214) transferred to their respective household members. This bond, nurtured in the domestic home, not only leads to Ruth's spiritual awakening, but protects her from the worst excesses of outside disapprobation.

Despite Gaskell's support of the fallen woman's character, her Unitarian belief could not throw aside the problem that a sexual sin had been committed. And so consequently, Ruth is led through an extended period of suffering, culminating in her untimely death. This is often the most troubling part for the modern reader to accept. The narrator explicitly identifies suffering as having a spiritual benefit, with Gaskell enforcing it upon Ruth not to satisfy social expectations of punishment, but of God's law; 'His law once broken, His justice and the very nature of those laws bring the immutable retribution' (p. 286). The critic R.K. Webb explains that, within a Necessarian scheme, which Gaskell subscribes to, the inescapable effect of wrong formation of character or a deliberate or careless choice would result in suffering.⁵⁴ Through such an experience, the person would learn the dictates of duty and to put others before themselves.⁵⁵ William Gaskell's sermon reveals a positive and embracing attitude towards suffering, stating that 'he who has never suffered, has not attained to anything like true moral elevation and maturity of character. We must be purified in the fires of affliction'.⁵⁶ Ruth, after the trial of turning down Bellingham's proposal, suffers an acute sense of doubt and mental uncertainty, but, within the turmoil, 'suddenly a fresh thought came, and she prayed that, through whatever

⁵³ See Schor, *Scheherezade in the Marketplace*, p. 66.

⁵⁴ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the Necessarian scheme as a 'believer in necessity; a person who holds that human conduct is dictated by force of circumstance (as opposed to free will)', <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 23.01.13].

⁵⁵ Webb, 'The Gaskells as Unitarians', pp. 164-66.

⁵⁶ William Gaskell, *Christian Views of Life and Death: A Sermon Preached in Cross-Street Chapel, Manchester, September 25th, 1859, On the Occasion of the Death of John Ashton Nicholls, Esq., F. R. A. S., with a Sketch of his Life* (London: E.T. Whitfield, 1859), p. 12.

suffering, she might be purified [...], God might see fit to chastise her' (p. 285). Ruth correctly responds to her situation by relying on her 'tears' to wash away the 'errors' (p. 301) of her youth, which is juxtaposed against Bellingham's complete lack of guilt or awareness of his waywardness. His actions have 'left no sense of sin' or shame upon his 'conscience' (p. 303) and he lives out his life dismissive of eternal consequences. Gaskell uses Ruth's acceptance of her suffering as a positive indicator of her path towards self-redemption and salvation.

The transitory nature of suffering is an important consideration explored by Gaskell in this novel, to insist on its reformatory purpose and to not allow it to be judged as punishment.⁵⁷ A Unitarian Minister, Lant Carpenter, believed that retributive punishment could have no place in God's intentions but that when 'suffering has done its work, and the deep stains of guilt have been removed as by fire, suffering will be no longer continued'.⁵⁸ There is an uneasy tension between Gaskell's insistence on Ruth's innocent nature and her need for spiritual reform, but through a controlled suffering process, Gaskell finds an opportunity to address humanity's spiritual condition which will eventually culminate in universal salvation. Ruth takes spiritual strength from a carved gargoye her eyes rest upon whilst in church. The narrator describes in detail the unknown carver's ability to capture an 'intense expression of suffering' (p. 282) without retracting from its beautiful features. Ruth views the carving as a memorial to an 'imager, carver, sufferer' (p. 283) who has long passed away but left evidence of a hope that, in time, all human suffering would be at an end. This identification with another human sufferer directly engages with the Unitarian understanding of Christ's role in the world. He is the perfect embodiment of humanity and leaves an exemplified life of self-redemption for all men to follow. As James Drummond preached at the sermon of Gaskell's own death, 'we must suffer with him, if we would be also glorified together [...] sorrow belongs to us as immortal beings'.⁵⁹ Ruth's suffering, therefore, satisfies a social fall but more significantly attempts to represent Gaskell's Unitarian understanding of universal spiritual failings that are inevitable in a Necessarian worldview. At Ruth's funeral, Thurstan reads out chapter seven from *Revelation*, a reference to a time after death when those who have come out of a 'great tribulation' are now cleansed and are before the 'throne of God' (p. 457). This is a pointed dismissal of predestination and Calvinistic assumptions that not all will be saved.

Gaskell's conclusion has continued to receive various degrees of criticism

⁵⁷ See Geoffrey Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians: A Study of the Nineteenth-Century Theological Controversies Concerning Eternal Punishment and the Future Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 43.

⁵⁸ *An Examination of the Charges Made against Unitarians and Unitarianism by the Rt. Rev. Dr. Magee, Bishop of Raphae* (Bristol, 1820), quoted in Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians*, p. 43.

⁵⁹ James Drummond, *The Holiness of Sorrow: A Sermon, Preached in Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, on Sunday, Nov. 19th, 1865: On Occasion of the Sudden Death of Mrs Gaskell* (Manchester: Guardian Steam Printing Offices, 1865), pp. 15-16.

towards the validity of killing her heroine, beginning with Charlotte Brontë's objections: 'Why should she die? Why are we to shut up the book weeping?'⁶⁰ Gaskell had bravely set out to challenge the Victorian myth of fallenness, choosing to depict a heroine free of Original Sin, restoring her into the domestic setting where female friendships were prioritised and sexuality was affirmed. And yet there is a sense that Gaskell continued to be frustrated with the limitations of Victorian culture, as witnessed in her unease of how *Ruth* would be received. Unable to comprehend the full restoration of a fallen woman in her own reality, in a fit of disappointment, she handed Ruth over to the Unitarian security of redemption in death.

⁶⁰ *The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence*, ed. by T.J. Wise and J.A. Symington, 4 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1932), III, p. 332.

Bibliography

- Acton, William, *Prostitution Considered in Its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects in London and other Large Cities and Garrison Towns with Proposals for the Control and Prevention of Its Attendant Evils* (London: John Churchill, 1857)
- , *Prostitution Considered in Its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects in London and other Large Cities and Garrison Towns with Proposals for the Control and Prevention of Its Attendant Evils* (London: Frank Cass, 1972)
- Anderson, Amanda, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993)
- Auerbach, Nina, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982)
- , 'The Rise of the Fallen Woman', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 35 (June 1980), 29-52
- Bodenheimer, Rosemarie, *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988)
- Dickens, Charles, 'Home for Homeless Women', *Household Words*, 7 (April 1853), 161-75
- Drummond, James, *The Holiness of Sorrow: A Sermon, Preached in Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, on Sunday, Nov. 19th, 1865: On Occasion of the Sudden Death of Mrs Gaskell* (Manchester: Guardian Steam Printing Offices, 1865)
- Easson, Angus, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979)
- Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Mary Barton*, ed. by Edgar Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)
- , *Ruth*, ed. by Alan Shelston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)
- , *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. by J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Mandolin, 1997)
- Gaskell, William, *Christian Views of Life and Death: A Sermon Preached in Cross-Street Chapel, Manchester, September 25th, 1859, On the Occasion of the Death of John Ashton Nicholls, Esq., F. R. A. S., with a Sketch of his Life* (London: E.T. Whitfield, 1859)

- Gorham, Deborah, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (London: Croom Helm, 1982)
- Greg, W.R., 'Prostitution', *Westminster Review*, 53 (July 1850), 448-506
- Hatano, Yoko, 'Evangelicalism in *Ruth*', *The Modern Language Review*, 95 (July 2000), 634-41
- Hilton, Boyd, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988)
- Jacobus, Mary, Evelyn Fox Keller and Sally Shuttleworth, ed., *Body/ Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science* (New York: Routledge, 1990)
- Jay, Elisabeth, *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979)
- Knight, Mark, and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)
- Matus, Jill L., ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)
- , *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995)
- Mitchell, Sally, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women's Reading 1835-1880* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1981)
- Nead, Lynda, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988)
- Poovey, Mary, 'Speaking of the Body: Mid-Victorian Constructions of Female Desire', in *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*, ed. by Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller and Sally Shuttleworth (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 29-46
- , *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (London: Virago Press, 1989)
- Rowell, Geoffrey, *Hell and the Victorians: A Study of the Nineteenth-Century*

Theological Controversies Concerning Eternal Punishment and the Future Life (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974)

Schor, Hilary M., *Scheherezade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992)

Shattock, Joanne, ed., *Dickens and Other Victorians: Essays in Honour of Philip Collins* (Hampshire: The Macmillan Press, 1988)

Stoneman, Patsy, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006)

Vicinus, Martha, ed., *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973)

Walkowitz, Judith R., *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980)

Wardlaw, Ralph, *Lectures on Female Prostitution: Its Nature, Extent, Effects, Guilt, Causes and Remedy* (Glasgow: Maclehose, 1843)

Watt, George, *The Fallen Woman in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (London: Croom Helm, 1984)

Wise T.J., and J.A. Symington, ed., *The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1932)