

THE ANGEL, THE MARTYR AND THE WHORE: ELIZABETH GASKELL'S FEMALE TRINITY

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Elizabeth Gaskell's two most polemic novels, *Mary Barton* (1848) and *Ruth* (1853), focus on homonym female characters, according to the tradition of 19th century fiction. Their controversy derives from subjects which, until then, were avoided by “serious” Victorian literature — especially when written by the wife of a Unitarian minister — or illustrated through recurring clichés and deeply moralizing judgements.

Mary Barton chocked mentalities because of the dramatic realism in her accurate descriptions of life in Manchester, during the industrial crisis of the 1840's. In her preface to the first edition, Elizabeth Gaskell wrote: “I know nothing of Political Economy, or the theories of trade. I have tried to write truthfully...” (Tillotson 202). Indeed, the first chapters of the novel convey a straightforward picture of the overwhelming misery generated by low salaries, unemployment, strikes, and the mill owners' lack of concern for their workforce. In her romantic and immediate view of reality, Elizabeth Gaskell offers the Christian values of solidarity, forgiveness and mutual respect as a mediating force between the fighting classes, and as an antidote for the cruel 19th century economic liberalism, although she never suggests a radical change in society and mores. The writer had nevertheless to face the fury of Manchester mill owners, who accused her of calumny and of rousing, without a purpose, the workers' anger against their ‘rightful’ masters. This is the epitome of how to misread Elizabeth Gaskell's work, and her true desire for reconciliation and charity towards the underprivileged.

The refusal of any polemic or chocking intention against the ruling mores is clearly expressed in the way *Mary Barton* pictures female

characters. The protagonist embodies the Victorian ideal woman: blonde, pale, blue-eyed, a soft voice, selfless, always caring for someone else's happiness. Mary, the caring and merciful figure of the mother of Christ, with her double function of protection and self-sacrifice, is the highest example of female virtues. Mary Barton is the perfect housewife, born to marry and to mother, almost illiterate, the object of her father's love (but also of her father's violent anger), facing all situations with resignation and tears and expiating her final fit of initiative with a long nearly deadly sickness. Although Mary works at a dressmaker's, manages her house, enjoys a certain freedom of movements and spends long periods on her own, this incipient emancipation is immediately and carefully depicted in the dangers it entails. In this particular case, such dangers leave the heroine on the brink of dishonour at the hands of the wealthy Harry Carson.

This impending fall is supported by the progressive loss of a family: Mary's mother died when she was only thirteen and her father, John Barton, is permanently absent, due to his involvement in trade unionism, the Chartists' Petition and Communism. To these aspects we can also add his depressed distance, his addiction to opium and the starvation and misery both father and daughter live in. The unprotected young woman is thus exposed to the seduction of the high society gentleman and his permissive moral standards, thus introducing discretely the central topic of *Ruth*. A discrete topic not only in its causes but also in its consequences, as Ruth is an orphan, motherless and fatherless — the cause — and she will commit the sin — the consequence — which Mary manages to escape from.

In spite of these mitigating circumstances, Mary is subjected to general and self-criticism as she did correspond to the *flirt* of Harry Carson, “one above her in station” (Gaskell 155). The too democratic marriage between a daughter of the working class and an upper class mill owner would violate the laws of social intercourse amongst classes, whose mutual love, preached by Elizabeth Gaskell, should always be of a Christian spiritual nature and never profane.

Scolded even by her virtuous blind friend Margaret (who had advised Mary that her actions should be “maidenly” wrapped up in modesty and timidity), Mary suffers and blames herself repeatedly for having been “easy”, a fatal flaw which, she believes, is the cause for Jem Wilson's supposed crime and punishment: “with bitter remorse, [she] clung more closely to his image with passionate self-upbraiding. Was it not she who

had led him to the pit into which he had fallen?" (217). There is also a certain egotism here, as Mary is so sure of her own charms that she considers herself to be a good reason for a crime, allegedly committed under the influence of passion. However, well above her beauty, there might be other reasons for a murder, reasons that belong to the scene of social justice. Mary's fault is made worse if we bear in mind that she acted not for the love of Harry Carson (although she will redeem herself by saving Jem Wilson for love), but out of ambition for social status and wealth, together with a good deal of self-satisfaction for the fair tribute to her beauty: "Oh, why did she ever listen to the tempter? Why did she ever give ear to her own suggestion, and cravings after wealth and grandeur? Why had she thought it a fine thing to have a rich lover?" (217). It is possible to argue that she did it due to filial devotion, wishing to offer John Barton a quiet wealthy old age, but the materialistic motive prevails as an aggravating circumstance. The image of the unspotted angel slowly vanishes, though it can never be mistaken for the literary stereotype of the whore. This stereotype appears at the opposite extreme of Marian virtue, with the character of Esther, Mary's lost aunt, in both senses of the word.

An alcoholic and a prostitute, Esther's self-portrait is cruel: "I could not lead a virtuous life if I would (...) I must have drink (...) If we did not drink, we could not stand the memory of what we have been, and the thought of what we are, for a day. (...) I am past hope. (...) And do you think one sunk so low as I am has a home? Decent, good people have homes. We have none" (154-155). "We", the lost women. Unlike Mary (and Ruth), Esther's split with her family is voluntary, a fact that deeply hurt her sister Mary Barton, mother of the protagonist, whose death John Barton thinks Esther is to blame for.

"Besides all this, the sayings of her absent, her mysterious aunt, Esther, had an unacknowledged influence over Mary (...) she had early determined that her beauty should make her a lady; the rank she coveted the more for her father's abuse; the rank to which she firmly believed her lost Aunt Esther had arrived" (23), as she had once promised little Mary. But Esther does not suggest prostitution; she simply refers to a vague ladylike status, an allusion-illusion still echoing in Mary's mind, which ultimately leads her towards someone like Harry Carson. This delusion carried Esther to disgrace with the officer, again *above me far*, to the broken promise of marriage and to the outrageous status of single mother. Her fall is the consequence of a wild nature, against every single principle of Victorian femininity, "riotous and noisy", according to John Barton's

opinion¹. There had already been a clear prophecy: “I see what you’ll end at with your artificials, and your fly-away veils, and stopping out when honest women are in their beds; you’ll be a street-walker, Esther...” (7).

Mary’s near-fall is conversely the result of a carefully drawn plan, dictated by ambition, which nevertheless spares her from the ultimate sin. Esther’s dishonour is only the beginning of a never ending story of unlimited suffering, until the death of the sinner, after the death of her daughter, the offspring of sin. By dying in the same house where, as the narrator repeats, she had once been an innocent girl, Esther shares the anonymous grave and the epitaph of the murderer John Barton, “For He will not always chide, neither will He keep his anger forever” (371), in a communion of crimes that God will possibly forgive. According to this point of view, the sin motivated by the loose sexual impulse — with the sequent degradation and death — is much worse than the one inspired by vanity and calculation — without disgrace and with a canonical happy-end of marriage and procreation. Because the sole possible destiny for an honest woman is to fit in the social structures through matrimonial submission, and never through active desire or independence, which might turn her into her own and only master². That is why we are constantly faced with the list of temptations which threaten female workers in their incipient process of emancipation: “That’s the worst of factory work, for girls. They can earn so much when work is plenty, that they can maintain themselves anyhow. (...) You see Esther spent her money in dress, thinking to set off her pretty face; and got to come home so late at night...” (7).

To the typically male fear of losing its dominating role in society, Esther opposes reasons of moral nature: “I found out Mary went to learn dressmaking, and I began to be frightened for her; for it’s a bad life for a girl to be out late at night in the streets, and, after many an hour of weary work, they’re ready to follow after any novelty that makes a little change.

¹ About the dangers of sexual and social female immoderation, against the Victorian rule of passivity as the most valuable asset for women, see Rebecca Stott, *The fabrication of the late victorian femme fatale* (London: MacMillan Press, 1994) and Alain Corbin, *Le temps, le désir et l’horreur* (Paris: Aubier, 1991). Here, notice the following passage: “La femme qui se livre aux excès se doit d’être guidée par le besoin, jetée sur le pavé par la misère profonde, guettée par la mort. Des femmes “folles de leurs corps” constitueraient une dangereuse menace pour le sexe des hommes et un terrible exemple pour les épouses vertueuses...” (95).

² “Pouvoir vivre sans l’homme signifiait, pour la femme, pouvoir disposer librement de son sexe” (Corbin 94).

But I made up my mind, that bad as I was, I could watch over Mary, and perhaps keep her from harm" (153). Determined to act as a kind of guardian-angel for her niece, Esther initiates a curious fusion of extremes where the lost woman becomes the silent omnipresent ghost behind the virgin. They are the two faces of the same coin, the two possible figures of female identity for Victorian mentality, deprived of middle-terms, the angel and the devil³. But good and evil are close relatives, because what one of these two women is/was (Esther, a once honest prostitute), the other will soon be/cease to be (Mary, on the brink of ruin but still honest). Esther's utmost maternal love and, latter, her dedication to Mary, seem to deceive the pre-established social and literary models. A lost woman may have a heart (remember Nancy's providential access of generosity in *Oliver Twist*), standard and deviation may coexist into one single female character, who thus becomes a real human being, instead of a mere didactic device.

Elizabeth Gaskell's soft revolution reaches its peak in 1853, with the scandal of *Ruth*, a novel at its time considered as unsuitable for young people when read without adult supervision. The reasons for the controversy are now of moral nature, after *Mary Barton*'s social dilemmas. Being a lower class single mother, Ruth's destiny would have been similar to Esther's if Elizabeth Gaskell hadn't had the generous courage of subverting the established rules. Ruth commits the sin — although there is not one single allusion to the sexual act along the book — but her existence, until her redemptive death, is not one of vice and degeneration, but one of penance and virtue.

"She is an orphan, without brother or sister, and with a guardian, whom, I think she said, she never saw but once. He apprenticed her (after her father's death) to a dressmaker" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 123): Ruth's youth (sixteen years old) and total abandonment turn her into an easy prey for Henry Bellingham, another Mr. Carson, rich, irresponsible and fully aware that the ruling mores will forgive him in every circumstance. These circumstances actually happened in reality over and over again, but literary fiction was supposed to ignore them⁴. Ruth embodies "the union of

³ About female stereotypes, their importance for the maintenance of social order and their role in literature, see Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (New York: OUP, 1989).

⁴ "The presence of large numbers of single women (particularly servants) away from the families and communities which customarily supervised marriage and courtship meant a greater incidence of seduction and abandonment (unstable unions) and hence illegitimacy.

the grace and loveliness of womanhood with the naiveté, simplicity, and innocence of an intelligent child" (33). Beauty is still an essential characteristic for any female protagonist, but this particular protagonist is now a single mother lost in the Victorian society. Instead of receiving the usual lenient characterization as a high society seducer, Bellingham deserves a very severe speech by the narrator, who describes the causes for his amoral attitude. However, the narrator astutely forgets to condemn Ruth's "immoral" behaviour. For Elizabeth Gaskell, Bellingham is the outcome of a permissive upbringing, which tacitly induced the young gentleman to hide every attitude divergent from social conventions, as dissimulation would always be prodigally rewarded.

Still, both Mary's and Ruth's stories seem to result from the lack of a family or of a solid education; ostensibly, their stories never appear as the result of a male dominated society that reduces women to domestic(ated) passivity. The audacious beliefs of Elizabeth Gaskell, still a good Victorian wife, never cross the borders of home and family. A good family orientation would avoid stories such as Ruth and Bellingham's (or Mary and Carson's); the author never suggests a collective changing of minds and of deeply rooted social habits.

Therefore, how should one consider the socially misplaced character of the single mother? How can it be that "From that day forward Leonard walked erect in the streets of Eccleston, where many arose and called her [Ruth] blessed" (430)? Because Ruth bore with Christian resignation a life — *via cruxis* of self-sacrifice, until her (un)necessary death, that ultimately saves her from the condition of Esther⁵. Ruth washed away her sin with tears, "The errors of my youth may be washed away by my tears - it was so once when the gentle, blessed Christ was upon earth" (301), but she was actually awarded more helping characters (the Bensons, Sally, Jemima) and less strokes of fortune than Esther was (Leonard survives, Annie dies; Bellingham tries to make amends, Esther's lover vanishes). Thus Ruth, unlike Esther, can afford the luxury of looking after her own spiritual salvation, surpassing the mere physical survival of herself and her son, at any price.

(...) Fully 70 percent of these women came from families broken by the death of at least one parent" (Tilly, Scott 97, 122).

⁵ About *Ruth's* epilogue, Charlotte Brontë asked "Why should she die?". This and other reactions to the inevitable (?) death of Ruth can be found in Miriam Allott, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, collection *Writers & Their Work* (London: Longman, 1971).

After experiencing countless vexations and rejections, Ruth recovers the public respect through the sacred mission of helping the victims of typhus. "I have felt that I must go (...) I am in God's hands!" (425): just like the Biblical Ruth, she becomes devoted to her peers after having received her son as a divine gift ("Oh, my God, I thank Thee! Oh! I will be so good!"; 118). When she gives birth to a new life, Ruth redeems herself in God's eyes. When she gives away her own life, she is redeemed under the society's eyes. Ruth dies in the same bed where Leonard had been born, in the same room where she had told him he was an illegitimate child. Birth — social stigma — death, this is *Ruth's* trinity.

Ruth is thorn between the love for her son, of whom she is so proud, and the social stain, her greatest sorrow: "all the days of my years since I have gone about with a stain in my hidden soul — a stain which made me loathe myself, and envy those who stood spotless and undefiled" (299). When the moment comes, she chooses to immolate herself to society, recovering the respectable status. The duty of sacrifice is stronger than maternal instinct and, once again, conventions defeat nature. Just like Esther had been defeated by Mary, so Ruth is defeated by herself. Elizabeth Gaskell is not audacious enough to allow Ruth to be happy.

The Bensons are the epitome of a tolerant dissenting family — surely like the Gaskells — even though they are not able to assume Ruth's condition openly, thus illustrating the Victorian antagonism between public and private life (public virtues *versus* private vices). On the one hand, the Bensons show a truly Christian generosity when they shelter Ruth, despite their monetary difficulties and against social canons, which Thurstan Benson boldly judges during a long dialogue with his sister (118 to 122). "She must strengthen her child to look to God, rather than to man's opinion" (121), says Thurstan, immediately before yielding to the lure of public lie, when he agrees to introduce Ruth as a widow. Neither Elizabeth Gaskell nor her spokesman resists social pressures, because both fear them. And the consequences are inevitable when truth comes out, too late, causing general scandal in Ecclestone.

Society knows how to handle martyrs of virtue and lost sinners but not a respectable alternative behaviour. "Everything might have been done to lead her right (...) without this child, this miserable offspring of sin. (...) this meddlesome child; that spoils everything" (120 and 124): if it weren't for the visible consequence of 'sin', everything would be comfortably disguised. Thus, only death will soothe the outraged community, restoring the black sheep into its structures.

As far as Bellingham is concerned, Ruth is equally complex. Ruth followed Bellingham for love but, some years later, she questions his desertion rationally, although she does so among romantic memories of her “darling love”. When Ruth meets Bellingham again, she is strong enough to chastise him with the words “I do not love you. I did once. Don’t say I did not love you then; but I don’t now. I could never love you again” (302). Determined, nevertheless, to carry her burden until the end, she couldn’t have found a better expiation. Ruth dies nursing the father of her son, closing the circle of life and death and leaving Leonard as a legacy to the world, God’s gift to this 19th century Ruth.

Ruth’s greatest challenge to this period lies in the heroic statement of Thurstan Benson, summing up the novel’s general idea: “Is it not time to change some of our ways of thinking and acting? I declare before God, that if I believe in any human truth, it is this —that to every woman, who, like Ruth, has sinned, should be given a chance of self-redemption — and that such a chance should be given in no supercilious or contemptuous manner, but in the spirit of the holy Christ” (351). But Ruth’s self-redemption follows the example of Christ too closely and the protagonist does not survive.

Elizabeth Gaskell’s work is still subjected to very conventional notions of retribution. And, once again, self-denial and sacrifice are the most valuable qualities of a woman: Mary nearly dies for Jem’s sake, Esther walks the streets for her daughter, and Ruth gives her life for the victims of typhus. There is always some kind of guilt, some original sin that the daughters of Eve must expiate with suffering. More than being a preceptor, a dressmaker, a factory worker or a housewife, being a martyr seems to be the main role played by the women of Elizabeth Gaskell’s first novels.

Elizabeth Gaskell knows that the practice of charity is the sole form of political action open to women of her time. Trying to justify her literary activity, Elizabeth Gaskell claims she writes “to give utterance to the agony (...) of suffering without the sympathy of the happy” (Tillotson 205). In her written exercise of sympathy towards women, Elizabeth Gaskell voices the everlasting conflict between human nature and social rules, which are still the victors. She exposes but does not solve. Conformity to what is feminine by tradition must be observed by every means. Thus, the stories of Esther and Ruth, so different in terms of canonical respectability, are equal in their abandonment and early death. Thus, the inevitable model of Mary. However, in the seeming distance

between Mary and Esther, an empty space between the angel and the devil, an unwelcome obstacle has arisen: Ruth and the incipient essay at creating an actual human character, instead of a moral-didactic paradigm.

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Resumo: Os dois romances mais polêmicos de Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* e *Ruth*, giram em torno de personagens femininas que representam, respectivamente, a plena aceitação e a recusa incipiente do senso comum vitoriano. Em *Mary Barton*, dois estereótipos coexistem: a mulher-anjo (Mary) e a prostituta (Ester). O romance retrata os perigos trazidos pela independência econômica e laboral para as jovens trabalhadoras fabris, bem como a degeneração até à morte a que todas as mulheres 'caídas' estão condenadas. Mas, por vezes, ambos os estereótipos parecem coincidir num só personagem, criando um ser humano real, em vez de um simples dispositivo didático. A discreta revolução de Gaskell surgirá em *Ruth*, com o seu incômodo exercício de solidariedade para com as mulheres abandonadas e as mães solteiras. O destino de Ruth teria sido em tudo semelhante ao de Ester, se Elizabeth Gaskell não tivesse tido a coragem generosa de subverter as regras. Ruth 'peca', mas o seu percurso até à morte redentora não é de vício e degeneração, mas sim de penitência e virtude. Mostrando sem questionar, a autora expressa o conflito entre a natureza humana e as regras sociais, que no entanto ainda saem vencedoras.

Abstract: Elizabeth Gaskell's two most controversial novels, *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*, focus on female characters who represent, respectively, the full acceptance and the incipient refusal of Victorian common sense. In *Mary Barton*, two stereotypes coexist: the woman-angel (Mary) and the whore (Esther). The novel depicts the dangers brought by economic independence

and factory labour to young female workers, as well as the degeneration until death to which all “fallen women” are doomed. But, sometimes, both kinds of women seem to coincide in a sole character, creating a real human being instead of a mere didactic device. Gaskell’s soft revolution will rise in *Ruth*, with her unwelcome sympathy for the abandoned women and single-mothers. Ruth’s destiny would have been similar to Esther’s if Elizabeth Gaskell hadn’t had the generous courage of subverting the rules. Ruth ‘sins’, but her route until the redeeming death is not one of vice and degeneration, but one of penance and virtue. Showing without solving, the author voices the conflict between human nature and social rules...which nevertheless are still the winners.