The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel

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CHAPTER TWO

Elizabeth Gaskell’s Resistance to Pre-Raphaelite Gendered Silence

Elizabeth Gaskell has charmed yet puzzled Victorian and modern critics, for her complex and multifarious literary art can be neither contained nor easily classified within distinct literary categories. At the very beginning of her impressive biography, Jennifer Uglow encapsulates the bewilderment critics have experienced when dealing with this versatile writer: “I had always admired Gaskell’s fiction and the vigour and humour of her letters. I liked the way she stood at odds with orthodoxies and eluded pigeon-holes. Conservatives and radicals, Christians and skeptics, Marxists and feminists, all acclaimed different aspects of her work, but all in the end seemed to tap their pens in frustration: she somehow did not ‘fit.’” It is precisely in the fluidity and elusiveness of Gaskell’s literary art that, Deidre d’Albertis suggests, we may discover a better understanding and deeper appreciation of her work: “Gaskell’s life and writing become legible once we accept the failure of fixed or stable identity categories to describe them accurately.” Throughout most of her works, D’Albertis points out, we encounter “multiple subject positions and overlapping ideological discourses,” some of which include “textual practices as a non-conformist Unitarian (theological), reformer (liberal/political), philanthropist (social), bourgeoisie (economic), and writer of novels (professional/literary).” Uglow and D’Albertis bring attention to the multiplicity and complexity of Gaskell’s literary discourse and her appeal to diverse audiences. I wish to discuss here yet another unexplored facet of Gaskell’s literary art, her reconfigurations of famous and popular Pre-Raphaelite paintings in her controversial novel Ruth (1853). By redrawing Pre-Raphaelite paintings in her narrative, Elizabeth Gaskell seeks to further participate in contemporary debates on gender inequities; simultaneously, she explores the role of Pre-Raphaelite visual art in the endorsement or subversion of gender stereotypes.
Elizabeth Gaskell and the Pre-Raphaelites

In 1851, when the memory of the hostile reception of Mary Barton was still painful, Elizabeth Gaskell undertook the task of composing Ruth, an "immensely courageous book," in which she chose as her heroine a social outcast, a subject suppressed in Victorian society and art: a teenage woman with an illegitimate child. Like the Pre-Raphaelites, who challenged preestablished notions about worthy subjects of representation, Gaskell takes up an unlikely candidate for a subject of representation, contrary to stereotypical heroines. And like the Pre-Raphaelites, who in their early paintings often represented individuals rather than types in order to depict unique experiences, Gaskell chose for this novel a unique person she herself encountered, as we shall see, in an actual incident.

As we have already seen in chapter 1, the Pre-Raphaelites experimented with portrayals of women in unconventional roles. David Masson, in his extensive and laudatory "Pre-Raphaelitism in Art and Literature" in 1852, found the Pre-Raphaelites' subversion of traditional gender constructs consistent with their goal to accurately represent reality (200). Most of the famous, or notorious, paintings of these early years were unorthodox representations of traditional subjects drawn from the Bible, such as Hunt's A Converted British Family Sheltering a Christian Missionary from the Persecution of the Druids (1849–1850), The Hireling Shepherd (1851), Rossetti's Girlhood of Mary Virgin (1848–1849) and Ecce Ancilla Domini! (1849–1850), Millais's Christ in the House of His Parents, or from literature, primarily Tennyson, Shakespeare, and Keats, such as Millais's Mariana (1850–1851) and Ophelia (1851–1852) and Hunt's Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus (1850–1851) and Claudio and Isabella (1850–1853). Whether biblical or literary, these paintings blended the unconventional with the conventional, quite often redefining gender constructs within conventional situations.

It is precisely this convergence of the unconventional with the conventional that Gaskell explores in her redrawings of popular Pre-Raphaelite paintings in her contentious novel Ruth, thus raising questions not only about established gender constructs but also about Pre-Raphaelite gendered boundaries. Like the Pre-Raphaelites, who called into question normative and stereotypical understandings of women in these early paintings, Gaskell also questioned normative distinctions by portraying an outcast and a virtuous person in one, blending and challenging the contemporary conventional binaries of the fallen woman and the Virgin Mary. The uniqueness of Gaskell's blending of attributes, however, lies in their interdependence, for, as she demonstrates, Ruth's virtuous qualities are partly the cause of her fall; she is a victim precisely because she displays stereotypical, feminine qualities.
Through reconfigurations of Pre-Raphaelite paintings Gaskell launches a critique not merely of the prevalent norms (unfair stereotypes) but also of a society that extols the very feminine qualities and attributes that make women candidates for exploitation and victimization. Gaskell endows Ruth with stereotypical beauty, typical fragility, and meekness most likely in order to show the inevitably disastrous consequences women quite often face when conforming to paradigms of idealized femininity. For this purpose she borrows from Pre-Raphaelite paintings some idealized versions of feminine beauty, but in her reconfigurations of these paintings she demonstrates that idealized versions of women quite often sustain and nourish conditions of victimization.

Gaskell’s concern with the social conditions of victimization may also explain her reconfiguration of a notable Pre-Raphaelite painting such as Ophelia (1851–1852) (plate 7), which displays the tragedy of an innocent victim, blending youthful features and vibrant female beauty with the finality of a tragically premature death. Gaskell seeks a similar effect, as we shall see, but for a different purpose. Her own portrayal of the relationship between innocence and victimization focuses not on some inevitable tragic fate but on social conditions that are concrete and situational and, as such, ought to be changed if further victimization is to be avoided. Gaskell’s vision of the social realm is that of a sphere lacking permanence, a sphere subject to change. For this reason her representation of Ruth involves a fallen woman who, unlike the stereotypical representations of the period, is able to overcome the stigma of her condition and to suspend her grief and become an agent of social change, rejecting gestures of respectability and acceptance (through marriage). Gaskell enables Ruth to emerge out of the social norms that have victimized her.

Subtly embedded within the subtext of the novel, Gaskell’s narrative reconfigurations of Pre-Raphaelite paintings in Ruth are not merely echoes of these paintings but rather attempts to further extend Pre-Raphaelite gendered boundaries and reveal the constraints imposed on women even in seemingly liberal or untraditional Pre-Raphaelite representations. Gaskell’s transformations of Pre-Raphaelite images into narrative scenes simultaneously reveal her engagement with contemporary debates on gender issues and disclose her efforts to empower women by redrawing Pre-Raphaelite representations that, even those seemingly unconventional, often perpetuated traditional gender roles.

Though recent critics have focused on Gaskell’s unorthodox treatment of the subject of the fallen woman, few have pursued what could have led them to recognize the Pre-Raphaelite presence in the novel. Some, however, have touched upon a few Pre-Raphaelite elements; referring to Ruth, Jennifer Uglow, for instance, remarks, “Gaskell’s novel is erotic in the
Plate 7, John Everett Millais, Ophelia, 1851–1852. Oil on canvas, 30 x 44 in (76.2 x 111.8 cm), Tate Gallery. Reproduced by permission.
manner of Pre-Raphaelite paintings whose women gaze out with pale enigmatic faces, while their bodies, drapery and surroundings flow with life” (329). Furthermore, Hilary Schor contends that the Pre-Raphaelites’ representation of female beauty transforms woman into an aesthetic object of the male gaze. By presenting Ruth’s beauty as the cause of her exploitation, Gaskell, according to Schor, exposes a woman’s precarious existence in a culture that worships feminine beauty: “[F]or Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites, a woman’s only story is her beauty made into narrative, that is, when she is seen by a man. . . . Gaskell, on the other hand, refuses to ignore the possibility that a woman’s beauty is a fact not in an abstract moral or aesthetic situation, but in a very real context in a socially determined world.”

Ruth can be further understood as the site of the intersection of narrative and painting, a woman writer’s attempt to revise stereotypical representations of women, engrained in contemporary culture not only by literary works but also by paintings widely circulated in engravings, prints, and illustrations of poems or novels. By reconfiguring Pre-Raphaelite pictorial, static representations of women into narrative, dynamic images in Ruth, Elizabeth Gaskell breaks the silence of stereotypical, passive female figures, giving them, and by extension her readers, the voice to resist the dominant tradition. In Ruth, then, the intersection between painting and narrative is primarily ideological, governed not so much by the laws of genre as by the laws of gender.

Gaskell’s familiarity with the three founders of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, and John Everett Millais, is attested in her numerous references to these artists and their paintings in her letters. In a letter to Charles Norton about her experiences in London in the autumn of 1859, for instance, she describes, as we have already seen, her emotionally charged response to Rossetti’s and Hunt’s paintings: “And then we saw Holman Hunt’s picture, and Holman Hunt’s self. I am not going to define & shape my feelings & thoughts at seeing either Rossetti’s or Hunt’s pictures into words; because I did feel them deeply, and after all words are coarse things.” She goes on to recount in a humorous tone her encounter with Rossetti:

Let me think what we did worthy of record—I think we got to know Rossetti pretty well. I went three times to his studio, and met him at two evening parties—where I had a good deal of talk with him, always excepting the times when ladies with beautiful hair came in when he was like the cat turned into a lady, who jumped out of bed and ran after a mouse. It did not signify what we were talking about or how agreeable I was; if a particular kind of reddish brown, crepe wavy hair came in, he
was away in a moment struggling for an introduction to the owner of said head of hair. He is not as mad as a March hare, but hair-mad. (Letters 580)

Rossetti in turn regarded Elizabeth Gaskell as a friend. In a letter to William Michael Rossetti, for instance, he remarks, “I have some idea (with Christina’s approval) of sending the Goblins to Mrs. Gaskell, who is good natured and appreciative, and might get it into the Cornhill or elsewhere.”

Though we have no direct evidence that Gaskell met the three leaders of the Pre-Raphaelite movement before the publication of Ruth, it is entirely possible that she had seen their early paintings during her frequent travels to London. Even before meeting Millais, for instance, in April 1853, she had seen The Order of Release and The Proscribed Royalist (Letters 231). In 1849 she visited the Royal Academy; she also spent considerable time in London in 1850 and 1851, when she could have seen Rossetti’s early paintings (Uglow 225, 254, 273). From 1850 on Dickens became her chief publisher. More than two-thirds of her stories and articles between 1850 and her death were published in Household Words and All the Year Around (ibid., 254–55). In fact she had published “Lizzie Leigh” (whose theme she expanded in Ruth) in Household Words on April 30, 1850 (Chapple, Further Letters 72). It would have been impossible then for her not to have read Dickens’s notorious article on the Pre-Raphaelites, published in Household Words on June 15, 1850. Like other Victorian novelists, Gaskell had direct access to The Times, which published reviews of Pre-Raphaelite paintings and Ruskin’s letters defending Pre-Raphaelite art, as well as to journals embroiled in the Pre-Raphaelite controversy, some of which, like London Illustrated News, reproduced Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Her earliest reference in her letters to The Times occurs in a letter to Catherine Winkworth on November 21, 1848 (Letters 60–61).

Gaskell was also an avid reader of Athenaeum; her earliest reference occurs on October 29, 1848, in a letter to Barbara Fergusson, in which she informs her of a positive review of Mary Barton in that journal (Chapple, Further Letters 40). Gaskell published two reviews in the Athenaeum issue for December 13, 1851, the first the lead review, of Longfellow’s Golden Legend, and the second a review of Spiritual Alchemy. The second review is especially noteworthy for Gaskell’s views on the art of the novel, which reveal her knowledge of visual arts and her interest in adopting Pre-Raphaelite techniques in her novels. In this review she objects to the handling of the perspective in Spiritual Alchemy, noting that it “reminds us of the old willow-pattern plates, where the man in the boat away at sea is just as large and prominent as the three men on the bridge close at
A good novelist, like Jane Austen, for instance, Gaskell asserts, describes scenes accurately and truthfully so that we can “unconsciously picture” them. Although she does not mention the Pre-Raphaelites, she refers to some of their early principles, such as the importance of “simplification and truth,” which can be acquired by “much conscientious observation of life,—and of a severe training in the art of describing correctly what is correctly observed.” Furthermore, like Ruskin, who in his defense of the Pre-Raphaelites in his letters to The Times on May 13 and 25 of that year, underscored the connection between the Pre-Raphaelite truth to nature and morality, Gaskell points out, “the cause of religion and morality will be better served by faithfully depicting, to their homeliest details, the sorrowful consequences inevitably resulting from wrongdoing than by personifying “Death,” “Foul Injustice,” “Spirits sacred and beloved” (832). Indeed her letters, containing references to contemporary newspapers and journals that reviewed Pre-Raphaelite art, are too numerous to mention here. Undoubtedly, by 1853, when Ruth was published, Gaskell had read reviews of Pre-Raphaelite art, was familiar with their aesthetic principles, and must have eagerly sought their paintings in art exhibits, prints, or engravings. Her interest in the Pre-Raphaelites, as her letters attest, continued to the end of her career.

The Genesis of Ruth

Gaskell’s emotional investment in Ruth is revealed in her various comments in several letters. In a letter to R. Monckton Milnes, for instance, she says, “I am so glad you liked ‘Ruth.’ I was so anxious about her, and took so much pains over writing it, that I lost my own power of judging, and could not tell whether I had done it well or ill” (Letters 225). The hostile reviews the novel received, conjoined with her friends’ alienation, made Elizabeth Gaskell physically ill, at one point suffering from “Ruth fever” as she playfully states in a letter to Eliza Fox: “I think I must be an improper woman without knowing it, I do so manage to shock people,” she remarks. “Now should you have burnt the 1st vol of Ruth as so very bad? even if you had been a very anxious father of a family? Yet two men have; and a third has forbidden his wife to read it; they sit next to us in Chapel and you can’t think how ‘improper’ I feel under their eyes” (Letters 222–23).

Feminist writers such as Margaret Homans, Mary Jacobus, and Mary Poovey, to mention but a few, discuss nineteenth-century women writers’ attempts to revise “the cultural myth of language’s process and structure that situates them as the silent and absent objects of representation.” I wish to extend this argument by taking into consideration women’s
silencing in Pre-Raphaelite paintings, in this case Rossetti’s and Millais’s. By redrawing such paintings in her narrative, Gaskell simultaneously attempts to revise literary history. Her narrative breaks the silence of stereotypical passive, submissive women and engages her readers in questions regarding those women’s individual experiences. In this respect her quest to represent individuals rather than types parallels the Pre-Raphaelite commitment to idiosyncratic representation (Prettejohn 256).

Even at its inception, Ruth was connected to the story of a woman’s silence, representative of numerous other victimized women who had no legal recourse to sexual exploitation. In a letter to Charles Dickens in 1850, in which Gaskell asks for his advice to assist a young woman named Pasley to emigrate to Australia, she describes an incident that served as the genesis of Ruth: “I am just now very much interested in a young girl, who is in our New Bayley prison. She is the daughter of an Irish clergyman who died when she was two years old; but even before that her mother had shown most complete indifference to her; and soon after the husband’s death, she married again, keeping her child out at nurse. The girl’s uncle had her placed at 6 years old in the Dublin school for orphan daughters of the clergy; and when she was about 14, she was apprenticed to an Irish dress-maker, here, of great reputation for fashion” (Letters 98). She goes on to describe how the dressmaker eventually lost her business and the girl was placed with an acquaintance who “connived at the girl’s seduction by a surgeon in the neighbourhood who was called in when the poor creature was ill.” She recounts the girl’s desperate situation as she attempts to reach her mother:

Then she was in despair, & wrote to her mother, (who had never corresponded with her all the time she was at school and an apprentice;) and while awaiting the answer went into the penitentiary; she wrote 3 times but no answer came, and in desperation she listened to a woman, who had obtained admittance . . . solely as it turned out to decoy girls into her mode of life, and left with her; & for four months she has led the most miserable life! in the hopes, as she tells me, of killing herself, for “no one had ever cared for her in this world,”—she drank, “wishing it might be poison,” pawned every article of clothing—and at last stole. (ibid., 98)

She continues with her first meeting of the girl: “I have been to see her in prison at Mr Wright’s request, and she looks quite a young child (she is but 16,) with a wild wistful look in her eyes, as if searching for the kindness she has never known,—and she pines to redeem herself” (ibid., 99). In her description of Pasley, Gaskell focuses on her inarticulate “wild wist-
ful look.” The inarticulate anguish that look conveyed must have left an indelible mark on Gaskell’s memory and imagination, for she relates it to Ruth on numerous occasions. When Benson, for instance, discovers Ruth contemplating suicide by the pond where Bellingham had adorned her hair with water lilies, we see her “crouched up like some hunted creature, with a wild, scared look of despair, which almost made her lovely face fierce.” On another occasion, when Bellingham suddenly reappears on the beach at Abermouth, we are told that Ruth’s young pupils notice her face in the “low, watery twilight,” when she encounters her erstwhile lover: “So pale, so haggard, so wild and wandering a look, the girls had never seen on human countenance before” (chapter XXIII). Wild inarticulate looks, silence stifling overwhelming emotions, and dreams offering a liberating space for utterances otherwise forbidden are all expressions of what Julia Kristeva describes as the nonverbal essence of the semiotic. In Speaking the Unspeakable Anne-Marie Smith interprets Kristeva’s semiotic as “an articulation of unconscious processes which fracture the common idealization of those images and signs which secure the status quo, and guarantee the establishment. It is a constant subversive threat to the symbolic order of things, which itself, Kristeva stresses, is no monolithic structure, but an illusion of stability”(16). In the impalpable and intangible transformation of the Pre-Raphaelite paintings into narrative images, reframing the visual in the textual and inviting the readers’ imagination to once again reframe their own interpretations of Pre-Raphaelite art, Gaskell must have sought the means by which she could transgress ideological boundaries in order to redefine female subjectivity. By these means in Ruth Gaskell undertakes the great challenge of offering the unauthorized an opportunity to speak and to become social agents of change.

Reconfigurations of Pre-Raphaelite Paintings in Ruth

At the onset of the story Ruth underscores women’s difficulty of breaking silence or articulating resistance to the dominant tradition. We first encounter Ruth at two o’clock in the morning, her silent face framed by “a window (through which the moonlight fell on her with a glory of many colours)” (chapter I). Like the Lady of Shalott, Mariana, and countless other silenced literary and painterly figures, Ruth longs for the liberating escape the public sphere seductively offers as she presses “her hot forehead against the cold glass” and strains “her aching eyes in gazing out on the lovely sky of a winter’s night” (chapter I). Soon after this description, we follow Ruth to a corner of the house where she is busy sewing a beautiful evening gown destined for the wealthy class from which she is excluded:
Ruth’s place was the coldest and the darkest in the room, although she liked it the best; she had instinctively chosen it for the sake of the wall opposite to her, on which was a remnant of the beauty of the old drawing-room. . . . It was divided into panels of pale sea-green, picked out with white and gold; and on these panels were painted . . . the most lovely wreaths of flowers, profuse and luxuriant beyond description . . . the branches of purple and white lilac—the floating golden-tressed laburnum boughs. Besides these, there were stately white lilies, sacred to the Virgin. . . . At the bottom of the panel lay a holly-branch, whose stiff straightness was ornamented by a twining drapery of English ivy . . . and, crowning all, came gorgeous summer and the sweet musk-roses. (ibid.)

Drawn in the manner of the Pre-Raphaelite “egalitarian methodology” (Prettejohn 172), including as much attention to the surrounding objects as to the central figure, Ruth’s first full-figure portrait evokes Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Girlhood of Mary Virgin (1849) (plate 8), a painting representing the Virgin Mary as a docile, diligent maiden whose face, like that of Ruth’s, is absorbed by her embroidery. Printed in the catalog of the Free Exhibition, where the painting was first exhibited, was Rossetti’s sonnet that extols the Virgin’s virtues, thus guiding the reader’s interpretation of the painting:

This is that blessed Mary, pre-elect
God’s Virgin, . . .
Her kin she cherished with devout respect:
Her gifts were simpleness of intellect
And supreme patience. From her mother’s knee
Faithful and hopeful; wise in charity
Strong in grave peace; in duty circumspect.
So held she through her girlhood; as it were
An angel-watered lily, that near God
Grows and is quiet.13

Explicating Rossetti’s sonnet, Alicia Faxon underscores the symbolism of the colors chosen even for the books stacked on the side, bound, as she explains, in colors “traditionally associated with certain virtues: white for Temperance, red for Fortitude, blue for Faith, green for Hope, and gold for Charity. . . . The dove represents the presence of the Holy Spirit, the red robe beneath the cruciform trellis foretells Christ’s passion, the rose and the lily are symbols of the Madonna, and the palms and thorny branch in the foreground refer to Christ’s martyrdom” (53–54). Barringer further notes the ivy on the trellis and points out that the lily represents the puri-
Plate 8. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, 1848–1849. Oil on canvas, 32 1/4 x 25 1/4 in (83.2 x 65.4 cm), Tate Gallery. Reproduced by permission.
ty of the Virgin Mary (8). A careful observation of the panels Ruth sees, as she, like the Virgin Mary, diligently sews, reveals that Gaskell in her redrawing of Rossetti's painting has included all the colors and the flowers of that painting, and, throughout the novel she ascribes to young Ruth Mary's aforementioned virtues.

A few pages later, Gaskell evokes Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (Behold the Servant of the Lord!) (1849–1850) (plate 9), which, as Tim Barringer observes, “continues the narrative of *The Girlhood of the Virgin Mary*” (42). The scene represented in the painting is described in Rossetti’s early sonnet “Mary’s Girlhood”:

> Till one dawn, at home,
> She woke in her white bed, and had no fear
> At all,—yet wept till sunshine, and felt awed;
> Because the fulness of the time was come. (11–14)

When Ruth first encounters Mr. Bellingham at the ball where she mends his partner's, Miss Duncombe's, dress, he offers her a white camellia in an attempt to attenuate the impact of her sharp impertinence to Ruth. Ruth returns home enraptured by the “exquisite beauty” of the “perfect” and “pure” flower and talks to her friend Jenny about it till she falls asleep (chapter II). In the early morning, Jenny observes Ruth’s happy face as she dreams smiling: “She is dreaming of last night,” thought Jenny. It was true she was; but one figure flitted more than all the rest through her visions. He presented flower after flower to her in that baseless morning dream, which was all too quickly ended” (ibid.). As in the scene of the Annunciation, represented in Rossetti’s painting, Ruth’s dream takes place in the early morning. Like the Archangel Gabriel, who offers the Virgin Mary a white lily announcing her conception of Christ, Bellingham offers Ruth a white flower that initiates her relationship with him and that results in Leonard’s conception.14

Yet another dream earlier in the novel also resembles Rossetti’s *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* in setting and style. After isolating herself from the other seamstresses and gazing at the falling snow through a window, Ruth expresses a desire to run outdoors and enjoy the purity of the landscape. Thus Ruth is identified with the white purity of the outdoors that evokes the whiteness of Rossetti’s painting. That same night she goes to bed exhausted, but soon Jenny decides to waken her since “she was crying in her sleep as if her heart would break” (chapter I). The startled Ruth, “sitting up in bed, and pushing back the masses of hair,” recounts her dream: “I thought I saw mamma by the side of the bed, coming, as she used to do, to see if I were asleep and comfortable; and when I tried to take hold
Plate 9. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Ecce Ancilla Domini! 1849–1850. Oil on canvas, 28 7/8 x 16 1/2 in (72.6 x 41.9 cm), Tate Gallery. Reproduced by permission.
of her she went away and left me alone—I don’t know where; so strange!” (ibid.). Ruth’s startled gaze, as she sits in her bed and recounts her dream, recalls the awkward posture of the Virgin Mary with the astonished glance in Rossetti’s painting. In the sonnet accompanying the painting Rossetti describes her crying “till sunshine” and feeling “awed.” Ruth is represented in a similar situation, bewildered by her mother’s mysterious appearance and disappearance, which in turn resembles the sudden appearance of the Archangel Gabriel standing by the Virgin Mary’s bed.

These are not the only two occasions on which Gaskell redraws Rossetti’s painting. Throughout the novel, her description of Ruth quite often strikingly resembles Rossetti’s representation of the Virgin Mary in his Ecce Ancilla Domini! When, for instance, Ruth keeps vigil during Bellingham’s sickness, hiding behind his closed door all night, she is startled by the splendid light of a sunrise replete with the colors of the religious symbolism in Rossetti’s painting: “Just above the horizon, too, the mist became a silvery grey cloud hanging on the edge of the world; presently it turned shimmering white; and then in an instant, it flushed into rose, and the mountain tops sprang into heaven, and bathed in the presence of the shadow of God. With a bound the sun of a molten fiery red came above the horizon” (chapter VII). Against this splendid background of dazzling whites and reds, the awkwardness of Ruth’s pose is even more prominent: “She sat curled up upon the floor, with her head thrown back against the wall, and her hands clasped round her knees.” To Mrs. Bellingham, who suddenly opens the door of her sick son’s room, Ruth in her white dress against the wall appears like a “white apparition” (ibid.). Here Ruth’s gawky posture seems yet another transformation of the shrinking posture of Rossetti’s Virgin, startled by the archangel at sunrise. Later in the novel, when Sally decides to cut her hair so that Ruth will appear more like the purported widow to the community, Sally walks into Ruth’s room to find “the beautiful, astonished Ruth, where she stood in her long, soft, white dressing gown, with all her luxuriant brown hair hanging disheveled down her figure” (chapter XIII). In these scenes, whether it be Ruth’s awkward poses or her astonished, vulnerable gaze, her “auburn hair with a fair complexion” (chapter I), her disheveled hair hanging down her face, or her white gown, these details all correspond strikingly to Christina Rossetti’s appearance as the Virgin Mary in Ecce Ancilla Domini! By associating Ruth with the Virgin Mary, Gaskell defies, subverts, and elides the conventional distinction between the polarized Victorian gender oppositions: the Virgin and the fallen woman.

Her reconfiguration of Rossetti’s Girlhood of the Virgin Mary also serves as an occasion for implicit and subtle criticism of conventional represen-
tations of femininity. No doubt this painting celebrates the Madonna as the supreme paradigm of the Angel in the House, an angel whose silence is so extensive that she could be compared to an inanimate lily “that near God/Grows and is quiet” (10–11). This sonnet, originally printed in the catalog of the Free Exhibition for this painting, highlights the Victorian paradigm of the domestic woman who suppresses her voice and ornaments her home with her beauty—“an angel-watered lily.” Indeed the sonnet underscores the patriarchal qualifications of femininity, a long list of virtues all defining female passivity, beginning with “respect,” which often involves the suppression of one’s own voice, followed by “simplesness of intellect,” both qualities at the very top of the list. Yet the narrator in Ruth takes pains to demonstrate that it is precisely this “simplesness of intellect,” often associated in contemporary culture with feminine morality, that is the cause of Ruth’s demise. In fact the qualities Bellingham first notices in Ruth and readily decides to exploit echo those that Rossetti’s sonnet on the Virgin Mary exalts and Victorian culture sustains: “There was, perhaps, something bewitching in the union of the grace and loveliness of womanhood with the naïveté, simplicity, and innocence of an intelligent child. There was a spell in the shyness, which made her avoid and shun all admiring approaches to acquaintance” (chapter III). Later on, when Bellingham convinces her to go to London with him, after Mrs. Mason has unjustly and summarily dismissed her from her service, Ruth’s virtues make her a vulnerable victim. When Ruth proposes that she could live with old friends instead, Bellingham promptly rejects the idea and takes her to London. Ruth, however, does not protest or resist, for, we are told, “she was little accustomed to oppose the wishes of any one—obedient and docile by nature, and unsuspicious and innocent of any harmful consequences” (chapter IV). Thus Gaskell demonstrates the contradictory nature of social demands imposed on women in an androcentric culture: selfless devotion and blind obedience are quite frequently tantamount to women’s victimization. In this structure, as Ranita Chatterjee points out, “women are never allowed to grow up; they are permanently infantilized in the service of the Father’s Law both literally, in their exclusion from power, and symbolically, in their relations with men” (132).

In a letter to Anne Robson, Elizabeth Gaskell admits that she herself would hesitate to read a book about the seduction of a fifteen-year-old girl, but even the anticipation of hostile criticism would not deter her from articulating a subject often silenced in proper Victorian circles: “An unfit subject for fiction is the thing to say about it; I knew all this before; but I determined notwithstanding to speak my mind out about it; only how I shrink with more pain than I can tell you from what people are saying though I wd [sic] do every jot of it over again to-morrow...” In short the
only comparison I can find for myself is to St. Sebastian tied to a tree to be shot with arrows" (*Letters* 220–21, my emphasis). In the same letter she reiterates her conviction in the importance of protesting inequities silenced by Victorian ideology. “I have spoken out my mind in the best way I can, and I have no doubt that what was meant so earnestly must do some good, though perhaps not all the good, or not the very good I meant” (ibid., 221).

Gaskell’s choice of Pre-Raphaelite paintings suggests her determination to undermine the feminine passivity and silence endorsed by literature and art. Her novel includes notable examples such as *Ophelia* and *Mariana*. On a walk in the woods during their stay in Wales, Bellingham and Ruth come across a “circular pool overshadowed by the trees” (chapter VI). Although flowers bloom by the pond, they are barely seen in the dark shadows the trees cast, but the water lilies catch Ruth’s and Bellingham’s attention, and Bellingham gathers a few and proceeds to create his own painting: “[H]e took off her bonnet, without speaking, and began to place his flowers in her hair. . . . Her beauty was all that Mr. Bellingham cared for, and it was supreme. It was all he recognized of her, and he was proud of it. She stood in her white dress against the trees which grew around; her face was flushed into a brilliancy of colour which resembled that of a rose in June; the great heavy white flowers drooped on either side of her beautiful head, and if her brown hair was a little disorderd, the very disorder only seemed to add a grace” (ibid.).

Bellingham’s “painting” transforming Ruth into a spectacle, the object of his gaze, seems an amalgamation of John Everett Millais’s *Ophelia* (1850–1852) and Arthur Hughes’s painting of the same title. Representative of the iconography of madness, as Showalter points out, Hughes’s painting depicts Ophelia before her suicide: “In the Royal Academy show of 1852, Arthur Hughes’s entry shows a tiny waif-like creature—a sort of Tinker Bell Ophelia—in a filmy white gown, perched on a tree trunk by the stream. The overall effect is softened, sexless, and hazy; although the straw in her hair resembles a crown of thorns. Hughes’s juxtaposition of childlike femininity and Christian martyrdom was overpowered, however, by John Everett Millais’s great painting of Ophelia in the same show.”¹⁵ Gaskell chooses water lilies instead of straw, but the effect is the same. Turning from the earlier evocation of *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, wherein Gaskell associates Ruth with the lily of the Virgin Mary, here in her redrawing of *Ophelia*, she, like Hughes, through her choice of the crown of flowers, foreshadows her martyrdom, underlined by Ruth’s constant sighs to Bellingham’s utter irritation.

Simultaneously, though, the details of the scene in the novel also evoke Millais’s *Ophelia*. Her disordered hair resembles Ophelia’s
disheveled hair in the stream. A contemporary review of the painting by The Athenaeum in 1852 lauded the beauty of the painting, attributing it partly to the depiction of Ophelia’s passivity and silence: “The expression aimed at is that of an incapability of estimating ‘her own distress.’ The open mouth is somewhat gaping and gabyish,—the expression is in no way suggestive of her past tale. There is no pathos, no melancholy, no one brightening up, no last lucid interval. If she dies swan-like with a song, there is no sound or melody, no poetry in this strain.” The reviewer’s description of Ophelia is based primarily on negation: no sound, no melody, no voice—the denial of subjectivity. In spite of the luxuriantly detailed and seductively vibrant landscape, the reviewer focuses on absence and silence. Ophelia’s stifled voice, the swan song that is vanquished by silence, is his primary concern, at once underscoring the stereotype of victimized, passive, silent femininity.

Like Millais’s Ophelia, Ruth is surrounded by flowers; in particular, Gaskell evokes the rose floating by Millais’s Ophelia when she describes Ruth’s face “flushed into a brilliancy of colour which resembled that of a rose in June” (chapter VI). Furthermore, Gaskell’s pond closely resembles that of Millais’s rather than Hughes’s, which, according to Millais, is inaccurately represented: “The speed-well grew in the shallowest water of the pool, and all around its margin, but the flowers were hardly seen at first, so deep was the green shadow cast by the trees. In the very middle of the pond the sky was mirrored clear and dark, a blue which looked as if a black void lay behind” (ibid.). Showalter’s interpretation of Millais’s Ophelia as “a sensuous siren and a victim” (63) would be an apt description of Gaskell’s representation of Ruth as Ophelia.

Yet by evoking Shakespeare’s Ophelia, a literary stereotype engrained in contemporary culture by popular paintings and engravings, Gaskell attempts to rewrite literary history by giving a voice to a hitherto silent figure of passive femininity. Shortly after Bellingham abandons Ruth, she returns to the pond to commit suicide, but when she hears Benson’s cry of pain as he falls over a sharp, projecting rock, she runs to his rescue and abandons her plan. Thus Ruth, unlike Ophelia, does not yield to despair, a typically feminine gesture; instead, she undertakes a traditionally masculine role in becoming someone’s rescuer. In this case the setting and the motif anticipate those in The Proscribed Royalist. Later on when she jeopardizes her own health to rescue Bellingham by nursing him back to health, Bellingham in his delirium sees her as the beautiful, passive spectacle he had once created but no longer possesses since Ruth has already rejected his marriage proposal. Towering over him, Ruth no longer lowers her gaze: “[H]er looks were riveted on his softly-unclosing eyes, which met hers as they opened languidly. . . . She was held fast by that gaze of his, in
which a faint recognition dawning, and grew to strength. He murmured some words—‘Where are the water-lilies? Where are the lilies in her hair?’” (chapter XXXV). Later on her deathbed, Ruth’s image once again evokes Ophelia when her “unconscious eyes” tell of “a sweet, childlike insanity within.” Like Ophelia, Ruth dies singing: “[S]he was happy and at peace. They had never heard her sing; indeed the simple art which her mother had taught her, had died, with her early joyousness, at that dear mother’s death. But now she sang continually, very soft and low. She went from one childish ditty to another without let or pause” (ibid.). Unlike Ophelia though, Ruth does not die as a victim but as a rescuer and a redeemer. Her final moments allude to her initial image as a Madonna figure deified through her magnanimous altruism: “‘I see the Light coming,’” said she. “‘The Light is coming!’” she said.

As in Ophelia’s case, Gaskell reconstructs the literary Mariana and reframes the pictorial one. When we first meet Ruth, she bemoans her fate as Mrs. Mason’s apprentice: “Oh! how shall I get through five years of these terrible nights! in that close room! and in that oppressive stillness! which lets every sound of the thread be heard as it goes eternally backwards and forwards” (chapter I). The intertextual connections here multiply, for Tennyson, through his epigraph to “Mariana,” “Mariana in the moated grange,” a quotation from Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure, alludes to the eponymous heroine who for five years has been living a lonely life in a moated grange after being rejected by her fiancé, Angelo, after her marriage dowry is lost in a shipwreck. Unlike Tennyson’s other poems, which are replete with vibrant visual images, “Mariana” concentrates on auditory images that underscore and intensify her inconsolable loneliness. She can hear “the flitting of the bats” (17), “the nightfowl crow” (26), “the shrill winds” (50), “the slow clock ticking” (73), and even the mouse “behind the moldering wainscot” shrieking (64). Ruth, like Mariana, is intensely aware of the oppressive silence to the extent that she can hear even the sound of the thread. Moreover, like Mariana, Ruth, throughout the novel, longingly looks through a window, most often feeling incarcerated within the domestic sphere. John Everett Millais’s Mariana (1850–1851), inspired by Tennyson’s poem, portrays Tennyson’s character standing in front of a window wearily stretching over her embroidery. When this painting was first exhibited in 1851, the following lines from Tennyson’s poem were printed in the catalog:

She only said, “My life is dreary,
He cometh not,” she said:
She said, “I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!” (9–12)
Millais's painting encapsulates a traditionally feminine predicament, the forlorn woman who pines for her lover and would rather die than experience life on her own. Simultaneously, though, Millais adds his own unconventional touches by displaying Mariana's sexuality in her tightly fitting, vibrant blue dress and her unorthodox pose. Several critics have commented on the erotic quality of the painting. Pearce, for instance, observes, “Mariana is presenting her body for inspection, while she gazes desirously into the eyes of the Archangel Gabriel represented in the stained glass” (66).

Elizabeth Prettejohn notes not only the unconventionally sensuous quality of Mariana but also the modernity of the painting: “Thus the stretching pose seems to express sexual tension as well as the woman's weariness with the embroidery... This is not the awakening of adolescent sexuality but the longing or fantasy of mature woman... Female sexuality seems important to this picture, but not in a predictable way. The spectator is neither enticed by a femme fatale nor titillated by a virginal girl. Indeed the picture acknowledges the sexuality of a mature woman in a way that is difficult to reconcile with our conventional preconceptions about the Victorians” (12). As we contemplate the picture, Prettejohn notes, we may interpret it in several ways. It is precisely the indeterminacy of the meaning of the painting, even with the contextualization of Tennyson's poem or Shakespeare's play, that reveals the avant-garde nature of Pre-Raphaelite art—its modernity: “The picture's interpretative implications cannot be simply decoded, any more than its visual intricacy can be mastered without prolonged close looking. Mariana thus has the complexity that we expect to find in significant works of modern art” (13). It is interesting to note that Millais, in his interpretation of Tennyson's "Mariana," adds his own touches. Instead of Tennyson’s dreary landscape, Millais opts for the vibrant colors of a stained-glass window depicting the Annunciation. According to Malcolm Warner, “the fulfillment the archangel brings the Virgin Mary emphasizes by contrast Mariana's deep frustration” (Parris, The Pre-Raphaelites 89). To the right of that window we perceive the motto “in coelo quies,” “in Heaven there is rest,” with a snowdrop, signifying consolation in the language of flowers, painted underneath it. Death, then, the painting implies, is Mariana's only viable alternative.

It is very likely that Ruth's death wish, shortly after she rejects Bellingham's marriage proposal on the beach at Abermouth, is an explicit allusion to Tennyson's and Millais's Mariana: “ ‘I am so weary! I am so weary!’ she moans aloud at last. ‘I wonder if I might stop here, and just die away’ ” (chapter XXIV). But here the similarities between the literary and
the pictorial Mariana end, for, unlike them, instead of subordinating her subjectivity to male authority, Ruth asserts it when Bellingham finally returns and offers to marry her. Unlike Tennyson’s Mariana, who, we are led to assume, would have rejoiced at the reunion, Ruth rejects Bellingham in an articulate, eloquent voice hitherto stifled and repressed to silence: “I do not love you. I did once. Don’t say I did not love you then; but I do not now... We are very far apart. The time that has pressed down my life like brands of hot iron, and scarred me for ever, has been nothing to you. You talked of it with no sound of moaning in your voice—no shadow over the brightness of your face; it has left no sense of sin on your conscience, while me it haunts and haunts... You shall have nothing to do with my boy, by my consent, much less by my agency. I would rather see him working on the roadside than leading such a life—being such a one as you are’” (ibid.).

Ruth’s fiery eloquence is indeed a surprising repudiation of the meek self-effacement of Tennyson’s and Millais’s Marianas. As Shirley Foster remarks, Gaskell defies convention “in her overt admiration for sturdy female reliance”; her rejection of Bellingham is “a denial of conventional morality.” By alluding to both the literary and the pictorial Mariana, Gaskell vividly underscores their differences and articulates the alternatives that even fallen women may have in a culture that suppresses their voice.

Unlike Tennyson’s Mariana, who, engulfed in sorrow, is insensible to nature’s beauty, Ruth is perfectly attuned to natural rhythms, often seeking comfort and peace in them. Such intense affinity with nature reaches its culmination when her Mariana-like wailing, following her rejection of Bellingham, is suddenly disrupted by the piercing beauty of the sunset framed by her window: “Ruth forgot herself in looking at the gorgeous sight. She sat up gazing and, as she gazed, the tears dried on her cheeks; and, somehow, all human care and sorrow were swallowed up in the unconscious sense of God’s infinity. The sunset calmed her more than any words, however wise and tender, could have done. It even seemed to give her strength and courage” (chapter XXIV).

Reminiscent of the Romantic poets’ solitary meditations over natural phenomena that often lead to revelations or epiphanies, captured in notable poems such as Wordsworth’s Tintern Abbey or Coleridge’s This Lime Tree-Bower My Prison, Ruth’s meditative seclusion also fuels spiritual regeneration and empowerment. Through a fusion of the external with the internal, Gaskell’s portrayal of Ruth in this particular scene surmounts the divisive boundaries of the public and private spheres that both Tennyson’s poem and Millais’s painting uphold. Unlike Millais’s and Tennyson’s self-preoccupied heroine, Ruth here, as on various occasions
in the novel, extricates herself from the restrictive boundaries of dependence and self-pity and identifies with nature. In this respect, Gaskell’s representation of Ruth as Mariana in a way anticipates Marie Spartali Stillman’s Mariana (1867–1869), whose open window offers the liberation and spiritual expansion that Millais’s and Rossetti’s Marianas, both enclosed within the domestic sphere, are denied. Like Gaskell’s version of Mariana, Stillman’s is depicted in a moment of meditative reverie, her gaze averted from both the indoors and the outdoors, thus signaling self-containment rather than expectation.

A close observation of the words Gaskell chooses in her textual reconstructions of Millais’s painting further reveals her attempt to align her narrative with the famous painting while simultaneously undermining its motif. Ruth’s room in Benson’s home, for instance, reflects some of the qualities of the stained glass in Millais’s painting: “[T]he white dimity bed, and the walls, stained green, had something of the colouring and purity of effect of a snowdrop, while the floor . . . suggested the idea of the garden-mould out of which the snowdrop grows” (chapter XIII). In this context, by no means is the allusion to the snowdrop accidental. Later in the novel, when Leonard is born, Miss Benson gives her a bouquet of snowdrops: “‘Look Ruth! . . . my brother sends these. They are the first snowdrops in the garden.’ And she put them on the pillow by Ruth; the baby lay on the opposite side” (chapter XV). Unlike Millais’s Mariana, who contemplates consolation in death, signified by the snowdrop under the motto, “in coelo quies,” Ruth finds consolation in her love for her newborn child.

Even after the disclosure of the secret of her “fall,” when Bradshaw ruthlessly turns her out of his house and she loses her job as governess, Ruth does not wallow in despair or spiritually disintegrate by becoming a prostitute, the stereotypical predicament of a fallen woman, but channels her energy into her work as a nurse in the local hospital. Thus Elizabeth Gaskell enables Ruth to become a social agent of change whose work is finally recognized by the citizens at Eccleston. One evening, walking by the hospital, her son Leonard, hitherto stigmatized and traumatized by his mother’s transgression, overhears an old man’s words celebrating Ruth’s work: “Such a one as her has never been a great sinner; nor does she do her work as a penance, but for the love of God, and of the blessed Jesus. She will be in the light of God’s countenance when you and I will be standing afar off” (chapter XXXIII). Thus Ruth, as this scene and her death scene indicate, becomes the light of the Eccleston world, possibly an implicit allusion to Hunt’s celebrated Light of the World.

In a letter to Gaskell in April 1852, Charlotte Brontë protested the ending of the novel: “Why should she die? Why are we to shut the book
weeping.” Since its publication several critics have also objected to the anticlimactic ending. Deidre D’Albertis’s objection is representative: “Gaskell dispatched her heroine through martyrdom in much the same way that both male and female middle-class reformers expatriated ‘fallen’ working-class recipients of Victorian charitable ‘rescue’ to another, better world beyond the shores of England” (13). After her defiant stance against traditional gender boundaries, Ruth dies, effecting no apparent social change. Literary, gender, and ideological conflicts seem unresolved as the narrative closes. In *Bearing the Word*, Margaret Homans defines the context within which Gaskell seemed bound: “[F]or nineteenth-century women writers, the collision between the urgent need to represent female experience and women’s silencing within language and literary history remained a collision articulated but not resolved” (xiii).

*The Voice of the Silenced*

Throughout her fiction Elizabeth Gaskell records a multiplicity of voices traditionally silenced by dominant ideologies and monolithic histories. In “The Crooked Branch,” “Lizzie Leigh,” and “Clopton Hall,” *Sylvia’s Lovers* and *Wives and Daughters* women are denied their voice and their identity. Her works voice resistance to monological ideology and recognize the importance of sociopolitical change in offering the unauthorized an opportunity to speak and to become social agents. In her preface to *Mary Barton*, Gaskell recounts her reason for writing it as the desire to give voice to the oppressed, whose misery was unheeded by their oppressors: “The more I reflected on this unhappy state of things between those so bound to each other by common interests, as the employers and the employed must ever be, the more anxious I became to give some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people” (lxxx, my emphasis). Prescient of terrorism, Gaskell warns that oppression ultimately affects everyone, even those who are responsible for it and tend to dismiss its threat and danger:

If it be an error that the woes, which come with ever returning tide-like flood to overwhelm the workmen in our manufacturing towns, pass unregarded by all but the sufferers, it is at any rate an error so bitter in its consequences to all parties, that whatever public effort can do in the way of merciful deeds . . . should be done, and that speedily, to disabuse the work-people of so miserable a misapprehension. At present they seem to me to be left in a state, wherein lamentations and tears are thrown aside as useless, but in which the lips are compressed for curses, and the hands
clenched and ready to smite. I know nothing of Political Economy, or the
theories of trade. I have tried to write truthfully; and if my accounts
agree or clash with any system, the agreement or disagreement is unin-
tentional. (Preface to Mary Barton, lxxx)

Carlyle apprehended Gaskell’s message as his letter to her, shortly after
receiving a copy of the novel, attests: “I gratefully accept it as a real con-
tribution (about the first real one) towards developing a huge subject,
which has lain dumb too long, and really ought to speak for itself, and tell us its
meaning a little, if there is a voice in it at all” (my emphasis).21 Following the
belligerent reception of Ruth, Gaskell felt vindicated by the power of her
utterance. In a letter to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth she begins by relating the
adverse and extreme reaction to the novel, but she continues self-assured
about her achievement: “[I]t [Ruth] has made them talk and think a little
on a subject which is so painful that it requires all one’s bravery not to hide
one’s head like an ostrich and try by doing so to forget that the evil exists”
(Letters 227).

Gaskell knew the power of one woman’s dissenting voice to break the
silence of the unauthorized and give them the power of representation and
social activism. Margaret in North and South (1854), overcoming women’s
conventional reticence, does not hesitate to criticize Thornton’s treat-
ment of his employees and protests against the abuse of power. Moreover,
when she and Frederick discuss the possibility of his being exonerated
from his involvement in mutiny, Margaret passionately defends his defi-
ance of authority: “You disobeyed authority—that was bad; but to have
stood by, without word or act, while the authority was brutally used,
would have been infinitely worse” (chapter XXXI). Margaret’s social
activism, which is not limited to philanthropy, the domain within which
the middle-class women’s involvement was restricted, extends to the
sociopolitical sphere of the workers’ rights and the industrialists’ respon-
sibilities for the welfare of their employees. Indeed, Margaret is responsi-
ble for Thornton’s implementation of more humane working conditions
in his mills and later on for his conviction and willingness to interact
with his workers and to respect their opinions. In turn, Thornton con-
vinces Mr. Colhurts, a member of parliament, that legislative measures
protecting workers’ rights may avert future strikes.

At the end of the novel the conventional theme of the wealthy bach-
elor’s rescue of the woman in distress is reversed when Margaret rescues
Thornton from his financial straits, thus becoming his business partner
and his equal. When Thornton dismisses Mr. Lennox’s offer to rescue him
from his financial misfortunes, Margaret takes a traditionally masculine,
assertive role and offers him her business proposal:
“You are unjust,” said Margaret, gently. “Mr. Lennox has only spoken of
the great probability which he believes there to be of your redeeming—
your more than redeeming of what you have lost—don’t speak till I have
ended—pray don’t!” And collecting herself once more, she went on
rapidly turning over some law papers, and statements of accounts in a
trembling hurried manner. “Oh! here it is! and—he drew me out a pro-
posal . . . showing that if you would take some money of mine, eighteen
thousand and fifty-seven pounds lying just at this moment unused in the
bank, and bringing me in only two and a half per cent, you could pay me
much better interest, and might go on working Malborough Mills.”
(chapter LII)

More like a postmodern heroine, keenly aware of her own self-worth, pro-
tecting her own assets in the process of becoming involved with a poten-
tial lover and husband, just about signing a “prenuptial agreement,”
Margaret in no way resembles the Angel in the House confined within the
domestic sphere, condemned, like the Lady of Shalott, to the loss of iden-
tity once she asserts her own will or desire and ventures into the public
sphere. The scene simultaneously evokes Millais’s *Order of Release* and
*The Proscribed Royalist*, both pictures in which women rescue persecuted
men and paintings that Gaskell highly admired. In a letter to John Foster
in late April 1853, a year before the publication of *North and South*, when
Millais was exhibiting these two paintings, she asks, “is not Millais’s pic-
ture this year very beautiful?” (Letters 231).

Earlier in the novel Margaret is also instrumental not only in saving
Thornton’s life but also in averting a violent riot. When his workers go
on strike and furiously demonstrate, threatening him by his own home,
“She only thought how she could save him. She threw her arms around
him; she made her body into a shield from the fierce people beyond”
(chapter XXII). The subject and the configuration of the scene evoke
Millais’s immensely popular painting to critics and the public alike, *A
Huguenot, on St. Bartholomew’s Day, Refusing to Shield Himself from Danger
by Wearing the Roman Catholic Badge* (1851–1852). Like the Huguenot,
who does not allow his lover to bind a white cloth around his arm identi-
fying him as Catholic and thus enabling him to escape the massacre,
Thornton rejects Margaret’s “shield”: “Still, with his arms folded, he
shook her off” (ibid.), but later when she is wounded by a sharp pebble
thrown by one of the demonstrators, he “unfolded his arms, and held her
encircled in one for an instant.” The Huguenot’s arms also encircle his
lover as he tries with one to gently untie the white cloth she is binding
around it. However, whereas Millais’s painting inscribes the convention-
al masculine and feminine roles by having the woman motivated by pas-
sion and the man by duty, Gaskell’s redrawing of the painting reverses tradi-
tional roles by having the woman, Margaret, address the crowd and
appeal to their reason: “For God’s sake! do not damage your cause by this
violence. You do not know what you are doing.” By contrast, the out-
raged Thornton resorts to conventional gender boundaries to sway the
mob’s anger: “You do well,” said he. “You come to oust the innocent
stranger. You fall—you hundreds—on one man; and when a woman
comes before you, to ask you for your sake to be reasonable creatures, your
cowardly wrath falls upon her!” (ibid.) Later on, once again guided by
traditional gender roles (in the chapter titled “Mistakes Cleared Up”),
Thornton proposes to Margaret, assuming that her action was motivated
by feminine passion, a mistake that a shocked Margaret quickly clears up,
to Thornton’s distress and dismay. “Yes! . . . I do feel offended; and I
think, justly. You seem to fancy that my conduct of yesterday . . . was a
personal act between you and me; and that you come and thank me for
it, instead of perceiving, as a gentleman would . . . that any woman . . .
would come forward to shield . . . a man in danger from the violence of num-
bers!” (chapter XXIV, my emphasis). Once again Margaret asserts her sub-
jectivity in defiance of conventional gender boundaries.

If a woman is to play an active role in the public sphere, as Gaskell
through Margaret’s positive contribution to the industrial North indi-
cates, she must be educated in order to have a voice that will make a dif-
ference; furthermore, she must be respected as a man’s equal and be
treated as such. Although not a political figure, Margaret is quick to
teach Thornton that wealthy industrialists are the new leaders of the
Victorian world and as such need to exercise their authority, power, and
wealth for the benefit of the people who work for them and for society
at large. In Gaskell’s view, sociopolitical reform must expand conven-
tional boundaries and grant privileges to those whom hegemonic figures
overlook. Female characters such as Mary, Ruth, Margaret, Sylvia, and
Molly become representative of the multiple voices that traditional his-
toriography has silenced. In their exchanges with male characters, we
witness the disintegration of the boundaries between the public (or mas-
culine) and the domestic (or feminine) spheres in times of sociopolitical
change. Though traditionally relegated to the domestic sphere, women
like Ruth and Margaret have the political vision that male characters like
Bellingham and Thornton lack. The traditional dichotomy between the
public and the domestic, Gaskell shows, collapses in times of change.
Although the women in her novels and stories have no political rights,
they become active social agents. Sociopolitical reform, Gaskell demon-
strates, is too important to be left entirely to the prerogative of the
already franchised; to be meaningful, social activism must begin within
every person’s domain of experience and must be carried out by the force of personal commitment.

Such characters are fictional representations of actual women like Harriet Taylor and Florence Nightingale, who at that time voiced the exigent need for women’s social and legal rights. Through their social activism they broke the long-held silence that patriarchal ideology had imposed on women. Their hitherto suppressed voices were widely uttered through liberal journals like *The Westminster Review* and the novels of the period, like *Ruth* or *North and South*, which reached even larger audiences. Pre-Raphaelite paintings such as *Mariana* and *Ophelia*, however, were most likely seen by women writers like Elizabeth Gaskell as attempts to sabotage and silence emergent feminist voices and to confirm existing stereotypes of feminine passivity and vulnerability, endorsed by canonical writers such as Shakespeare and Tennyson. Yet they could also have been interpreted as visual representations of the patriarchal victimization of women and by extension as appeals for legislative measures that could avert further victimization and protect women from culturally endorsed inequities.

The collision between silence and articulation, poignantly expressed in *Ruth*, remained a problem in Gaskell’s own private life as her letters, particularly those responding to hostile reviewers, attest. Yet Gaskell’s simultaneously reticent and multifarious rhetoric invites us to explore more diligently the nuances and subtleties of her literary discourse. In *Ruth*, as well as in her other novels, that discourse takes on pictorial nuances as scenes in the novel reveal feminist reconfigurations of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, at times paradigmatic of her culture’s representations of women and at other times subversive of conventional gender constructs. If we are to appreciate and recognize Gaskell’s alternative possibilities for gendered subjectivity, we must also take into consideration the pictorial dimension of her narratives, for, as *Ruth* and *North and South* disclose, Gaskell’s challenge to gender ideology is often embedded within subtle Pre-Raphaelite iconography.