

## Revisiting Gender and Socio-Political Awareness in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers*

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**Abstract:** Victorian literature is important today because it is a battlefield in which new concepts of text and social order are forgeable. An important combination of feminism, ideology, textualism and historicism, woven together from traditions of Victorian study has become central to the study of Victorian literature today. Standing formidably for the Victorian literature is the Victorian novel. The Victorian thought that invented their fictions contributed to the understanding of history. And indeed the novel seems the prime example of the way Victorian women started to create themselves as social subjects, as a category: women. Studying Victorian fiction produced by female writers helps us to get know these women and why they have to write the novel, the story of their own domesticity. This paper aims to examine Elizabeth Gaskell as part of the mainstream of the literary tradition bringing the aspects of her work that diverge from and converge with the Victorian canon. Throughout her writing career Gaskell extends and expands the scope of her knowledge about history and gender. This historical consciousness and gender awareness is taken as a basis for a more detailed consideration of one of her novels *Sylvia's Lovers*. *Sylvia's Lovers* (1864) is Gaskell's least-known novel which examines the effects of a defunct state policy, imprisonments or the enforced enlistment of men in the Royal Navy during the period 1796-1800. A second plot revolving around marriage consequently proceeds from assumptions stated in the impressment plot. The dialectic of this double plot yields an increasingly internalized subjection, moving from physical discipline (imprisonments) to half-willed consent (concocted marriage) to an oath of self-denial. What will be examined in this paper is the relative weight these conflicting impulses are accorded in Gaskell's narrative, reassessing in turn the text's representation through its fractured organization of larger cultural tensions associated with the progress of suffrage in the nineteenth century.

**Keywords:** Victorian novel, Elizabeth Gaskell, Gender awareness, Socio-political consciousness

### 1. Introduction

*Sylvia's Lovers* (1864) is Elizabeth Gaskell's least-known novel, and its obscurity is usually accounted for by its having moved away from the "social-problem" material on which her reputation mainly depends. Lansbury sees *Sylvia's Lovers* as "a necessary preface to *Marry Barton* and *North and South*," since the "penal laws" of the Napoleonic period, which "made revolt seem an Englishman's natural right and duty" (160), set the tone for industrial conflict forty years on. Gaskell's historical fiction examines the effects of a defunct state policy, impressment or the enforced enlistment of men in the Royal Navy, during the period 1796-1800.

The first half of the novel chronicles the infliction of this brutal policy on the inhabitants of the whaling port of Monkshaven and, in particular, on one local family. Daniel Robson, a farmer, smuggler, and former sailor, lives with his wife, Bell, and daughter, Sylvia, on the outskirts of the town at Haytersbank Farm. Sylvia Robson, having come into young womanhood, must choose between two suitors: the handsome, fearless, and mercurial harpooner or "specksioneer" Charley Kinraid, or her awkwardly doting, the industrious, pious, and somewhat smug shopkeeper, Philip Hepburn. Kinraid's exploits and caprices dominate the beginning of the novel; it is only when the sailor is secretly captured by a press-gang lurking in the neighbourhood that the plot seemingly abandons the

political implications of the impressment issue to focus on the unhappy marriage of Sylvia to Philip, who capitalizes on his rival's removal and secures his cousin's half-hearted consent to wed. Thus the book sustains two separate narrative movements linked only by the figure of Hepburn, who conceals the fate of Kinraid and attempts to take his place with the disconsolate heroine.

A second plot revolving around marriage consequently proceeds from assumptions stated in the impressment plot. Sylvia's domestic unhappiness reflects dissatisfaction with family law in Gaskell's society, a concern that found expression in the movement of early feminists to win the rhetoric of liberalism and make its language their own property, even as they struggled to gain legal recognition for themselves as property holders. In this story the impressment and fraudulent marriage both function to deny the contractual rights and self-determining status of individuals taken against their will into custody by the state or an unscrupulous spouse. *Sylvia's Lovers* vividly depicts the insurgency of the individual only to re-contain his or her rebellion within the fictional structures of the text. The dialectic of this double-plot yields an increasingly internalized subjection, moving from physical discipline (impressment) to half-willing consent (coercive marriage) to an oath of self-denial (enlistment); this movement toward more intensive subjectivity can be constituted only through negation of the self, an act that was seemingly understood by Gaskell as an explicit renunciation of proprietary interest.

## 2. Discussion

Gaskell's novels of contemporary or near contemporary life are committed to an optimistic assessment of how an individual's action can affect social developments. Gaskell's assessment of her own daughters, as expressed by Irene Wiltshire, "proved to ... what extent their lives matched the high ideals of Gaskell herself, often expressed through her fictional female characters - women who tend to be strong minded and capable of spiritual and emotional growth". *North and South* especially, assigns a crucial importance to the heroine's role as mediator in the class war. In *Sylvia's Lovers* she adopts the more pessimistic view of human agency typical of the nineteenth-century historical novel pioneered by Scott, whose heroes are typically caught up in large historical

events on which they can have little or no impact. Gaskell was not alone in attempting to measure her own achievement against Scott's - nearly every major Victorian novelist felt duty-bound to try his or her strength against the monolithic example of his invention. Ian Duncan analyzed the tremendous impact of Scott's historical narrative on the Victorian imagination. The modern individual undergoes a chastening development, as does the nation-state in the Waverly novels remarks, this process of formation inevitably creates a conflict or dialectical contest between the protagonist's private interests and the good of the nation. Victorians dwelled upon the rift created by narrative privileging of the individual subject in opposition to the nation-state; Scott's work resonated with their own anxieties about the rights and duties of middle-class as opposed to working-class Britons, or men as opposed to women. "If Scott powerfully reinvented romance, as the narrative of individual lives in a collective experience of history," as Duncan has proposed [1], then Scott's inheritors - and Gaskell more than any other - identified gender as a means of sorting, classifying, and evaluating the significance of individual lives within that collective and increasingly nationalistic experience [2].

Gaskell had always been fascinated by history, and during the 1850s had written stories based on historical events, including "Lois the Witch" (1858) about the Salem witch trials, and "My Lady Ludlow" with its inset narrative about victims of the guillotine during the French Revolution. With *Sylvia's Lovers* she returned to the full-length historical novel, she turned to the events of the 1790s. Gaskell is concerned not with the events that make up official history, the actions of Kings and generals - but the everyday life of ordinary era: the story of the powerless. She emphasizes throughout how fundamentally the obscure lives of her characters are determined by political decisions they know practically nothing about. The novel's dramatic embodiment of government tyranny is the press-gang.

The press-gang's activities dominate *Sylvia's Lovers*. The Admiralty's impressment during the war with France is described in the novel, and the crucial determining action of the narrative turns on its operations. According to A.W.Ward, the press-gang's attack on a returning whaler, which leads to

Darley's death and Kinraid's wounding; Kinraid's own impressment; the freeing of the impressed prisoners, and the burning of the Randyvowse, which leads to Daniel Robson's execution - these events are all based on historical records of similar incidents on the north-eastern coast of England in the 1790s. They are tied together in the narrative by their significance in Sylvia Robson's life. The early description of the attack on the whaling-ship establishes her closeness in feeling to the outraged Monkshaven community. The wounded Kinraid first attracts her as a local hero; with his impressment she loses her lover, with Daniel's execution she loses her father. Affected to an unusual degree by measures that affect all in her community, and exceptionally noticeable because of her beauty and liveliness, her importance as a heroine is that she is a particularly vivid representative of Monkshaven life. Being "of that impressible nature that takes the tone of feeling from those surrounding her" (18), she can be made to typify the Monkshaven community feeling: mutually supportive, passionate and violent in defense of its own. Her fate is a particularly intense version of all Monkshaven people's: helpless against government power and unable to gain more than a glimpse of understanding of the historical and political forces shaping their lives.

Spencer notes that the writer who, in *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, seemed only hesitantly in favour of the rights of workers to form unions and to strike, and who unequivocally condemned any violence on their part, comes in *Sylvia's Lovers* to support resistance to the government and to accept the rebels' violence as regrettable but inevitable. The novelist whose writing became tangled as she acknowledged the existence of female sexual desire in *Ruth*, here casually allows Sylvia, married to Philip, to betray how much she longs for another man: this is no source of shame for Sylvia or embarrassment for her creator (101). The much more radical questioning of conventions and institutions in *Sylvia's Lovers* belies the claim that Gaskell had turned to "non-political" writing (McVeagh 45). What she had done, though, seemingly was to turn away from the topical issues of capitalist industrial relations and unmarried motherhood, which drew attention to the political project of her earlier novels, to less obviously immediate social questions and a historical narrative

form that would not be interpreted as political. Adopting the historian's perspective freed her to criticise the values of her class and time by moving the contest onto safer ground. She ensured both that she could express more rebellion and that she would not be read as rebellious.

*Sylvia's Lovers* is not framed as a purely private story but deals explicitly with the interaction of public and private events. In particular, like *North and South*, it investigates the relation between aggression on a public scale and ideologies of masculinity as manifested in courtship and the family. Where *Sylvia's Lovers* differs from the earlier novels is in giving a historical dimension to these questions; it is charged with a sense of the historical relativity of values, manners, even psychological processes (68,98,240,283,502), and this too applies at both public and private levels. Just as the Napoleonic Wars lie behind and structure the industrial world of the 1840s, so an earlier version of masculinity underlies Victorian gender relations. *Sylvia's Lovers* deals with "a primitive set of country-folk, who recognize the wild passion in life, as it exists untamed by the trammels of reason and self-restraint" (386). *Mary Barton* and *North and South* assume the basic goodness of human nature, which allowed Gaskell to see aggression as a perversion, a "fall", and to distinguish the "human" qualities of nurturance and reason from "bestial" violence. In *Sylvia's Lovers*, however, aggression is seen as characteristic of a "primitive" stage of humanity, where the "passion" of love easily passes into the "passion" for revenge.

*Sylvia's Lovers*, unlike all Gaskell's previous novels, begins with an exposition of setting, here "Monkshaven" life in 1797 - history, geography, class structure, whaling industry and Napoleonic Wars - the point of which seems to be to explain the characteristic aggression of its people. *Sylvia's Lovers* hinges round the ethic of revenge, which in Monkshaven was "considered...wild justice" (283).

Sylvia Robson, seems a child of nature, she resists formal education, is at home in the cowshed, walks barefoot and is linked with landscape and the sea (342). The development of Sylvia's character depends on the gender polarisation of her parents. Daniel Robson's masculinity derives from a decided separation of gender roles. As a harpooner in the dangerous whaling trade, he lives a life never entered by women. Bell Robson, on the other hand,

though skilful and energetic, is engaged in the exclusively feminine activities of spinning and dairy work. As a farmer, Robson maintains this separation, “a kind of domestic Jupiter” (51), “to whom...none but masculine company would be acceptable” (88). Although Daniel is childish and impulsive, his wife allows him to think “that he ruled with a wise and absolute sway” (247,281), and in chapter 5, when Daniel derogates woman’s company (49) and welcomes even the tailor, because “t’ninth part [of man]’s summit to be thankful for, after nought but women” (50), it is Sylvia who has contrived the tailor’s visit. Sylvia has learnt the trick of “managing her father” (49) because she “hated the discomfort of having her father displeased” (39), but Bell genuinely believes that “the masculine gender” confers “superior intellect” (125), and that virtue, in a woman, consists in going “through life in the shadow of obscurity, - never named except in connection with good housewifery, husband, or children” (122). With Daniel’s death, her own intellect collapses, “deprived of its *raison d’être*” (321). Extreme gender polarization creates an atmosphere in which each sex admires in the other the qualities from which it is excluded, and, like the knights and heroes of old, Daniel uses tales of courageous exploits “t’way of winnin t’women”(105).

Philip Hapburn’s occupation does not distinguish him from women. He serves alongside Hester in the shop and, in contrast to Kinraid, he is pale and stony, but although Philip shows the beginning of a change which J.S.Mill notes, “the association of men with women in daily life [becoming] much closer...than it ever was before” (310), he is not therefore less masculine than Kinraid. Philip is distinguished from Hester because it is to him, as a man, that the Foster brothers bequeath their capital and the management of the shop, a process ritualized by lengthy stock taking and accounting (Chs.14,16). The link between written texts, property and patriarchal ideology is emphasized as Jeremiah Foster “unconsciously employed for the present enumeration of pounds, shillings, and pence” the “peculiar tone” normally reserved for reading the Bible (172). Philip as an older male relative assumes the right to control Sylvia’s indignation against the press-gang. He also control her education. Although he offers to teach Sylvia, he is satisfied when she resists (Chs.8,10).

Rousseau saw the reluctance of girls to read and write as a sign of their inherent incapacity, but Sylvia rightly sees learning as irrelevant to the sort of role defined by her mother’s life.

Sylvia’s sexuality, however, is not dead but repressed, and Philip’s unconscious desire evokes the figure of Kinraid, who is its visible sign: “all this time Philip was troubled by a dream... a convention of Kinraid’s living presence some where near him in the darkness” (343). When Sylvia speaks of her own dream of Kinraid, however, he finds it intolerable, “what kind of a woman are yo’ to go dreaming of another man...when yo’re a wedded wife?” (345). Before long Philip is jealous of anyone who receives her love-Hester (349), the baby (356) and even “the inanimate ocean” (360). Sylvia, meanwhile, “was glad occasionally to escape from the comfortable imprisonment of her “parlour” into “solitude and open air, and the sight and sound of the mother-like sea”(350). Both ‘sea’ and “mother” are ambiguous terms in *Sylvia’s Lovers*, her mother’s surveillance, perpetuated by Philip, denies to Sylvia both Kinraid and sexual maturity, but her mother’s impulse to succor the needy (484), manifested in Sylvia’s effort to save the sinking ship, brings back Kinraid and a crisis of adult autonomy. Like the mother, the sea is the site both of love and death, both of Kinraid’s parting pledge and of his disappearance and Philip’s denial, and provokes in Sylvia a complication involving physical and ideological ‘death’: Kinraid” was dead; he must be dead; for was she not Philip’s wife?” recalling what Philip said about her dream, she shuddered “as if cold steel had been plunged into her warm, living body” (360) and when she sees Kinraid again, “her heart leaps up and fell again dead within her, as if she had been shot” (377). Sylvia’s “death” takes the feminine form of silence. After Philip’s “coldsleel” speech “she lay down, motionless and silent” (354-5), “her lips compressed (353). “Nothing stirred her from her fortress of reserve” (356), but though “she said no word”, she “constantly rebelled in thought and deed” (359). Quiet as a Quaker (362), her stillness is the result of “unnatural restraint” (363). Eventually, feeling that she “cannot stay in t’house to be chocked up wi[her] tears”(368), she runs out into a storm and like Ruth, is “quieted by this tempest of the elements” (369). As in Chapter 3, her emotion is shaped by communal feeling, and as part of a crowd

she unwittingly helps save the ship on which Kinraid is returning.

Kinraid's return is the Freudian return of the repressed, initially "unutterable" (heading to Ch.35) and, madness threatens: she speaks "with incessant low incontinence of words" (383), and understands that Philip "kept something from me as would ha'made me a different woman" (409). However, Sylvia never connived at the lie denying her sexuality. She was "no prude, and had been brought up in simple, straightforward country ways" (146). The historical setting releases Elizabeth Gaskell from the disabling Victorian concept of innocence which entangles *Ruth* and *North and South*, and allows her to present Philip's Puritan ethic as an imposed ideology. Sylvia's response to Kinraid's return is not shame but indignation, expressed in the crude terms of her father's "wild justice". She "assume[s] to herself the right of speech" (380), and, "with her cheeks and eyes aflame" (381), makes a vow of implacable enmity to Philip (383).

Nicholas Rance notes that "Gaskell's audience would have been shocked by the sympathy extended to a heroine renouncing her marital vows" (1975:139), but several of the short stories following Caroline Norton's 'English Laws for Women' (1854) and the Matrimonial Causes Act (1857) show her worried preoccupation with the indissolubility of marriage. Elizabeth Gaskell's approved response to injustice was to "speak out", but the historical perspective of *Sylvia's Lovers* allows her to see that what seems to be "the voice of conscience" may be only "sublimated maxims" (Abel, 1982:49). When Sylvia throws off wifely duty and vows eternal enmity to her husband, she is simply adopting her father's attitude, exchanging one masculine code for another. Sylvia shares the "settled and unrelenting indignation" (52) which her father felt for the press-gang, and the vow she makes against the witness who hangs her father - "I'll niver forgive-niver!" (319) - is the same as she makes to Philip: "I'll never forgive you man, nor live with him as his wife again" (383).

Gaskell does not present a traditional marriage plot in *Sylvia's Lovers* but continues the critical investigation of infidelity and marital discord begun in an early story such as "A Manchester Marriage" and continued later in "Cousin Phillis." Truly happy marriages are rare in Gaskell's work: many readers have commented on her attraction to

communities of single women (as in *Cranford*) that rely upon the marginal dividends of a masculine commercial economy for sustenance (Auerbach, 1978). In *Sylvia's Lovers*, however, marriage is presented as the only option available to the heroine at precisely the point where the plot of masculine political identity becomes submerged. Sylvia enters into a contract of marriage with her cousin Philip Hepburn under dubious, even fraudulent conditions, transferring the burden of the debate about social contract in the novel to yet another legal institution, marriage. Unlike the demands made upon the individual by state policy in times of war, marriage required the internalization of arrangements of consent by both parties with the sanction of a religious state authority. Yet marriage, like military enlistment, could encompass a wide range of voluntary and semivoluntary forms of participation. Finally, unlike enlistment or impressment, marriage summoned a powerful rationale for voluntary initiation grounded in culturally shared notions of the self based upon secular or affectionate bonds and religious or spiritual obligations to another. Sylvia's subjugation depends only slightly upon the form of external control that have been already examined in the case of her lover Kinraid's impressment and in the arrest and execution of her father, Daniel. Willingly taking on the guilt associated with her father's rebellion against impressment, Sylvia compulsively reproduces Daniel's muting and imprisonment through the destruction of her own will in marriage to Philip Hepburn. "It is not accident that the exploration of the victimized status of women is examined in legislation of the late fifties," writes Joseph Kestner, "if Sylvia Robson had been able to divorce, or had sufficient education to remain independent after separation, there might have been alternatives to her condition" (194). Rather than openly commenting on the restrictive family law in the 1850s and 1860s, Gaskell turned to a displaced crisis located in a historically remote past in order to dramatize a present-day claim of women for legal subject status.

The claim of different groups of individuals in the nineteenth century to recognition as subjects under the law and the troubles they encountered in doing so have shaped the account of Gaskell's novel and its political/ historical plot. The special case of impressment involved temporary abduction of the

male subject into the category of the nonsubject. What Kinraid experiences when his individual liberties are canceled and he submits to naval discipline is, in certain respects, analogous to what Sylvia suffers after she loses the liberty associated with her unmarried status by entering into matrimony. Both suffer, as do the good men of Monkshaven roused by the fire alarm, through the betrayal and deceit Gaskell associates with calculated trickery. Kinraid and Sylvia do not undergo an identical experience of subjection. Each confronts different “choices” in the process of relinquishing self-determination. Kinraid’s abduction is violent and thus he chooses to cooperate with the Navy rather than become a victim of deadly force. Sylvia’s “seduction,” if we can call it such, occurs during a time of severe emotional distress. Her “choice” appears freer than Kinraid’s and nearly voluntary in nature. Even so, it would be a mistake to equate the violent bondage of impressment with the domestic imprisonment accompanying an unhappy Victorian marriage. So too, the impressment plot and the marriage plot do not fall into clearly equivalent halves of the same question in the novel, nor are they mirror images of one another. Rather the marriage plot proceeds from assumptions put forward in the impressment plot, subtly reworking and gendering its definition of the individual, and extending the investigation of this more particular individual’s powers and limitations.

In articulating the discontinuity between male and female subject, Barbara Leigh Smith’s question, “why does marriage make so little legal difference to men, and such a mighty legal difference to women?” (15) reveals the stakes for Gaskell in mediating between historical romance and women’s fictions of petition. By the mid-1860s, prominent male political theorists such as J.S.Mill had taken up the cause of property reform for women. Absolute public authority within marriage was beginning to be interrogated in public and political discourse. In the world of Gaskell’s novel, as in Smith’s legal analysis, Sylvia dryly remarks that “men takes a deal more nor women to spoil their lives” (475). Charley Kinraid marries a young heiress shortly after Sylvia rejects his claim to her own hand and goes on to distinguish himself in various military exploits in the Napoleonic Wars. Sylvia by contrast, struggles long and hard to earn what little comfort is to be had as a deserted and

suspect wife with a steady private income. The fate of her husband, Philip, however, is far more extraordinary. The conclusion Gaskell fixed on long before she designed the overarching structure of the novel demanded Philip’s martyrdom and Sylvia’s admission of his innocence. The third and abandoned title of the narrative, *Philip’s Idol*, indicates the importance of this final section of *Sylvia’s Lovers*. Creating a third category of subjection, Gaskell explores Christian self sacrifice, nationalistic sentiment, and feminized masculinity seemingly in an attempt to bridge the formal gap between historical romance and the novel of petition, between the rights of men and the duties of women, and between external force and resistant internalization of subordination.

In the final section of the novel, Philip disguised as an outcast and a shabby “hungry-man,” he saves his own daughter, Bella, from drowning in a final suicidal gesture of expiation. Only then is Philip finally granted a lengthy death bed scene and a kiss from his wife on the charred remains of his lips, the only voluntary matrimonial gesture attributed to Sylvia in the entire novel. It is at this moment of physical extermination that Philip achieves the emotional surrender of his rebellious wife. He triumphs in the end, outdoing her previous renunciation of will. Here the marriage plot and historical novel collide to produce concord between the two with Sylvia’s kiss and her care for his hurt body. Philip at last usurps the position of both father and lover-hitherto occupied by Robson and Kinraid in Sylvia’s consciousness-through complete immersion in the realm of subjugation. Subsuming the symbolic function of the oppressed male subject, the impressed, enlisted, or criminalized man who is banished from civil society, as well as the repressed female subject, the invisible or legally nonexistent married woman, Philip represents an apotheosis – specifically religious in nature – of the female speaker of the Married Woman’s Property Act petition. Philip’s gendering is made unstable, even occluded; he is described alternately as strangely maternal and improbably virile.

The contradictory structure of *Sylvia’s Lovers* may depend on conventions of the historical novel Gaskell borrowed from Scott. In displacing a current debate – the rights of women – onto a historically inflected one – the rights of man – Gaskell availed herself of representational material

that was dramatic and violent, yet entirely separable from the subject of her covert investigation. The marriage plot displaces the historical impressment plot, which could reemerge in domesticated form only through the story of Philip's spectacular self-destruction. Gaskell's narrator insists on the difference of the historical past, wryly celebrating the Age of Reason in which she and her readers presumably live. Yet she also allows that history often functions as a maker not of progress or linear development but of ambiguous change. In Gaskell's fiction, history tends to reflect or project contemporary anxieties, potentially leading nowhere. History plays a duplicitous role in demonstrating one thing while intimating another in *Sylvia's Lovers*.

For Gaskell, impressment and inequitable marriage laws represented the failure of the state to recognize the individual as a subject and to recognize his or her reasonable claim to redress such wrongs. Yet time and time again, individual resistance to injustice is shown merely to compound the problems being addressed in Gaskell's social fiction.

### 3. Conclusion

A close reading of *Sylvia's Lovers* illustrates that, the novel is the gloomiest of all Gaskell's long fictions: she herself called it "the saddest story I ever wrote" (qtd. in Duthie 31). With her customary insight into characters and fascination with domestic details – and taste for rather sensational plots – Gaskell writes in *Sylvia's Lovers* about the impact of the war on simple people and about the evils of the unscrupulous activities of press-gangs, the problem of enlistment and disastrous ends of forced marriages. Sylvia is a heroine loved by two men of completely different types. The novel follows her development from a wilful, imaginative, but not especially clever girl, to an alert woman who has been matured by her suffering. *Sylvia's Lovers* is a dark exploration of the immersion of self in structures of hierarchy and domination, subject to powers of the state and law, which function most effectively by eliciting the consent of the individual in his or her own subjection. As a historically conscious writer, Elizabeth Gaskell puts some of the laws of her contemporary government and society under acute criticism by using a historical theme to avoid any further claims of radicality.

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