

“Plain Work to Do”:  
Elizabeth Gaskell’s Intervening Re-productions of Seamstress Labour

by

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## Abstract

This thesis explores Elizabeth Gaskell's engagement with and intervention in issues surrounding seamstress labourers, particularly as manifest in her three texts with eponymous seamstresses: "Libbie Marsh's Three Eras" (1847), *Mary Barton* (1848), and *Ruth* (1853). Many scholars have emphasized that representations of seamstresses, including symbolic, proliferated in Victorian culture during the rise of industrialization. Most notably, Lynn M. Alexander argues that authors adopted the seamstress as a metonym for the working class and later as a stand-in for other groups. My study juxtaposes Gaskell's seamstress fictions with Victorian nonfictional, poetic, and visual representations that helped establish the figure of the Victorian seamstress. However, my readings of Gaskell's needlewomen are in tension with both recent critical understandings of the seamstress figure in Victorian literature as symbolic or metonymic and popular Victorian constructions of the seamstress; such interpretations do not do justice to the complexity of Gaskell's seamstress fictions and ultimately dissociate Gaskell's seamstresses from her depictions of labour conditions as they distinctly affect individual needlewomen. Libbie is a labouring slopworker whose individual physical toil and financial limitations reveal the complex fabric of a gradated working class; Mary is one of three distinct seamstress labourers (along with Margaret and Sally) that lay bare the contradictions inherent in collapsing the nuance of seamstress experience into a single representative figure, while Ruth is a fallen woman whose consistent attempts to find paid labour recognize women's labour as an economic necessity rather than as simply moral or domestic work. Combined, these chapters reveal that Gaskell challenges the dominant representations of seamstresses; she re-places her seamstresses in the conditions of their labour, mounting an implied critique of a gendered social system that limits the productive capacity of women's labour.

## **Preface**

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Alayna Becker. An early version of the conclusion to Chapter 2, “Conclusion: Representation and Caricature,” formed part of a paper delivered at the 2014 VSAWC Conference under the title “Communities of Exclusion in *Mary Barton*.” An early and abbreviated version of Chapter 3 was delivered at the 2015 UBC Endnotes conference under the title “Laborious Desire: Resituating Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth*.”

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## Introduction

In January of 1850, Elizabeth Gaskell wrote to her friend and fellow author Charles Dickens seeking help for an imprisoned seamstress of sixteen who was fatherless and had an “indifferent” mother. This young woman, Pasley, had been a dressmaker’s apprentice until her second employer “connived at [her] seduction,” after which she considered suicide and fell into a generally unrespectable way of life. Gaskell told Dickens that she was “very much interested” in Pasley’s lot (Gaskell, “61” 98). In her next response to Dickens, she called Pasley “my girl” (Gaskell, “62” 100) and in both November of 1849 and late January of 1850, she wrote of Pasley to her dear friend “Tottie” Fox (Gaskell, “55”; Gaskell “63”). Gaskell’s letters indicate that she visited Pasley often and solicited assistance through many channels and contacts. Thus, Gaskell’s letters reveal more than an “interest” but instead a sustained investment in Pasley’s case.

Gaskell’s engagement with and intervention in issues surrounding seamstress labourers is not limited to her letters, but is also evident in her fiction. Three of Gaskell’s texts feature eponymous seamstress protagonists: “Libbie Marsh’s Three Eras” (1847), *Mary Barton* (1848), and *Ruth* (1853). Many scholars interpret the needlewoman primarily as a “symbol of the poor, oppressed British worker” (Gallagher 130).<sup>1</sup> As I will show, Lynn M. Alexander’s extension of this scholarship attributes metonymic status to the Victorian seamstress. She argues that authors adopted the seamstress as a metonym for the collective working class by the 1847-48 publication of “Libbie Marsh” and *Mary Barton* and as a stand-in for other social groups such as the Victorian prostitute by the 1853 publication of *Ruth*. A metonymic relationship indicates that the seamstress can be a figure linked to the working class, but can be conceptually excluded from

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<sup>1</sup> See Ian Haywood’s “Graphic Narratives and Discoveries of Horror” in *British Industrial Fictions* (2000) for a discussion of the development of the seamstress into an “icon of debased and brutalized capitalist labour” (7).

that class herself; this differs from a broader symbol, which can take a variety of representational relationships. Alexander's work is crucial to understanding the Victorian cultural consciousness surrounding the figure of the seamstress as representations of needlewomen changed over time, and attention to these specifics are temporally and thematically relevant to Gaskell's seamstress fictions. But I argue that Gaskell's representations of needlewomen subtly challenge popular Victorian representations of seamstresses—representations that slowly came to prioritize similar conventions and point towards a symbolic and metonymic function, as is also interpreted by many recent scholars. The question becomes: How might our interpretation of the relationship between the figure of the seamstress and the working class in "Libbie Marsh" and *Mary Barton* shift if we do not take for granted her metonymic function? How too might we differently interpret the relationship between Ruth and the working class if we do not assume a prioritization of the symbol of the fallen woman?

My study reads Gaskell's three seamstress fictions alongside Victorian nonfictional, poetic, and visual representations that were foundational in establishing Victorian perceptions of needlewomen during the period of mass industrialization in the mid-nineteenth century. I also examine Gaskell's intradiegetic representations of her seamstress characters, with a particular focus on their labour. In so doing, I demonstrate that Gaskell's representations subtly challenge both recent critical understandings of the seamstress figure in Victorian literature as symbolic or metonymic and popular Victorian constructions of the seamstress; such interpretations do not do justice to the complexity of Gaskell's engagement with the seamstress figure. Regardless of whether or not it was planned, Gaskell's intervention in understandings of the seamstress can be seen in her letters on behalf of Pasley and in the plot and descriptions of needlewomen in her seamstress fictions. As with the case of Pasley, Gaskell intervenes in the dominant

representations of seamstresses; she re-places her seamstresses in the conditions of their labour, mounting an implied critique of a gendered social system that limits women's labour.

### **Symbolic and Metonymic Seamstresses**

As many scholars have emphasized, representations of seamstresses proliferated in Victorian culture during the rise of industrialization: in fiction and nonfiction, in articles and reports, in poetry and prose, and in paintings and political cartoons.<sup>2</sup> In *Women, Work, and Representation* (2003), Alexander explains that in the years 1842-44 nonfiction reports advocated reform to ameliorate the poverty and dire labour conditions specific to needlewomen, who were nearly always depicted as dressmakers or milliners. These early texts, which helped establish conceptions of the seamstress in Victorian popular consciousness, prompted and greatly influenced fictional representations. As Christina Walkley and Jaap Harskamp point out, all girls, regardless of class, were taught to sew (1; 60-61), or as Christine Bayles Kortsch more specifically articulates “were expected to know how” to do so (6). Thus female readers of higher classes could sympathize more easily with a working-class seamstress than with working-class women in other occupations such as factory labour. Alexander's chronological study notes that authors' depictions of seamstresses shifted from dressmakers and milliners to slopworkers (or pieceworkers) by the middle of the 1840s because slopwork was unquestionably working-class labour (*Women* 58).<sup>3</sup> It is this isolated slopworker, left at the mercy of the capitalist system in the

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<sup>2</sup> An article discussing the economic instability in the seamstress trade was published as early as 1747 (Pinchbeck 289). See Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's 1842 *The Perils of the Nation* and John Galt's 1833 “The Seamstress” as two of the earliest seamstress texts in the nineteenth century. The best-known examples of political cartoons were published in *Punch* magazine: “A Shroud as well as a Shirt” (1848), “Pin Money” (1849), “Needle Money” (1849), and “The Haunted Lady, or, the Ghost in the Looking-Glass” (1863).

<sup>3</sup> Dressmaking and millinery were separate occupations, “but so many businesses dealt in both that the terms were used interchangeably” (Walkley 18 fn.1), and consequently served a similar representative class function.



midst of industrialization, who becomes, for Alexander and for others, the recognizable “symbol” of the collective working class.

It is in this context that Alexander identifies Gaskell’s “Libbie Marsh” and *Mary Barton* as two texts in which “the seamstress was adopted as a symbol for the working class as a whole” (57). Yet Alexander’s analysis also indicates that the seamstress’s own “condition” had become displaced in the process of becoming a cultural symbol. She is not included in the suffering of the working class which she represents: “the seamstress, although usually appearing as the title character, is shown as an illustration of or a spokesperson for the suffering *of those around her, rather than* in terms of her own suffering” (my emphasis, 57). In arguing that the seamstress represents something “*rather than*” her own suffering, Alexander implies that the seamstress’s plight is not included in the suffering of the class that she represents. Hence, though Alexander never defines the representational relationship between the slopworker and the working class in terms of metonymy, such a definition haunts her description.<sup>4</sup> Alexander identifies another shift in seamstress narratives, in which the focus returned to the needlewoman herself rather than to a collective working class from which her suffering is displaced. This concentration was short-lived, however; after 1850, the literary seamstress was still a symbol, but for “larger groups, often only tangentially associated with working-class issues” (139). Once again, the seamstress represents collectives “*rather than*” her own suffering. In the case of Gaskell’s *Ruth*, Alexander identifies this larger, tangential group as fallen women. My readings of Gaskell’s needlewomen are in tension with Alexander’s symbolic and metonymic interpretations, which ultimately dissociate Gaskell’s seamstresses from her depictions of women’s labour.

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<sup>4</sup> Elaine Freedgood comes to a similar conclusion in her review of Alexander’s work.

## Specificity of Labour: Disrupting the Metonym

Since Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* in 1958, many critical approaches to Gaskell's fiction have foregrounded her status as an industrial novelist. By the late 1980s, interventions by scholars such as Nancy Armstrong and Patsy Stoneman set a precedent for a second scholarly concentration in Gaskell's texts: feminist re-examinations which prioritize gender.<sup>5</sup> This thesis takes its impetus from the increased breadth in Gaskellian scholarship that has followed, which includes more diverse and more inclusive approaches to Gaskell's overall oeuvre beyond her "industrial novels," and seeks to expand the connection between the discourses of labour and gender politics in Gaskell's fiction. Diverging from traditional scholarship that prioritizes form and/or genre in Gaskell's works, my project includes short story and novel, industrial and domestic; I examine one short story ("Libbie Marsh"), one "industrial novel" (*Mary Barton*), and one novel typically classified as domestic fiction (*Ruth*).

Deborah Denenholz Morse claims that "[n]o Victorian novelist focuses more centrally on the figure of the seamstress—and on the fallen woman—than Elizabeth Gaskell" (28). Morse's "Stitching Repentance, Sewing Rebellion" (1995) offers the most comprehensive analysis of Gaskell's seamstress fiction to date, but its dual investment in both fallen women and seamstress characters leads to the inclusion of one short story, "Lizzie Leigh" (1850), that does not include a needlewoman. The stakes of my project originate in a politics of gender and labour. What becomes visible when we look at her seamstress narratives together is that Gaskell concentrates on the implications of seamstress labour conditions as they distinctly affect individual needlewomen; in so doing, Gaskell's seamstresses defy symbolic or metonymic interpretation. My use of the term "labour" rather than "work" denotes what I see to be Gaskell's literary

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<sup>5</sup> See N. Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987) and Stoneman's *Elizabeth Gaskell* (1987).

representation of the physical toil involved in manual labour such as needlework, the economic exchange and financial valuation (or lack thereof) of this physical toil, and the pragmatic earthly implications of such economic situations for lower classes—her attention to which forms the basis of her interventions of the seamstress’s metonymic function. This is in contrast to many approaches to Gaskell’s texts that emphasize a middle-class notion of unpaid domestic “women’s work.”<sup>6</sup> It also distinguishes the corporeal, intrinsic aspects of labour from notions of moral work in service of vague, extrinsic rewards.<sup>7</sup>

The focus shifts, then, from the collective working class or fallen woman towards Gaskell’s women labourers as labourers, subject to the conditions of their labour in a patriarchal economic system that hinders their ability to produce. Though bound by this system, Gaskell’s seamstress characters attempt to subtly re-fashion their positions as women labourers. The specificity and nuance with which Gaskell describes seamstress labour challenges our characterization of the seamstress as a cultural metonym, but also challenges the contradictory Victorian social system that does not adequately represent or acknowledge women’s labour while simultaneously leaving labouring women economically precarious.

## **Chapter Descriptions**

“Libbie Marsh’s Three Eras” is Gaskell’s first published short story and first seamstress narrative. By placing Gaskell’s descriptions of Franky—Libbie’s young bedridden neighbour—alongside depictions of needlewomen such as Thomas Hood’s “The Song of the Shirt” (1843) and Richard Redgrave’s *The Sempstress* (1844), I expose the story’s indirect representations of the ghastly physical pain and toil inherent in her seamstress labour. Further, Gaskell’s

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<sup>6</sup> In *Some Appointed Work To Do* (1995), Robin B. Colby argues that Gaskell “recognized” both “women’s potential for labor” and “need for it” (12). While my project aligns with this statement, Colby’s project invokes work and labour synonymously and focuses on the vocational middle-class ideologies of Victorian women’s work.

<sup>7</sup> According to Walter E. Houghton, “work” was the second-most “popular word in the Victorian vocabulary” (242).

characterization of Libbie as a slopworker emphasizes the economic limitations she experiences relative to other members of the working class. Gaskell's specific depictions reveal economic gradations within that class and consequently challenge interpretations of Libbie as a metonymic seamstress who can stand in for the experience of the collective working class. Instead, Gaskell establishes Libbie as a labouring woman within the complex fabric of the working class who attempts to use her labour to alter her conditions.

In my second chapter, I prioritize *Mary Barton*'s three seamstress characters and their occupations: the titular Mary and Sally Leadbitter as dressmaker's apprentices and Margaret Legh as a slopworker. The specificity with which Gaskell invokes details from seamstress urtexts, such as the *Children's Employment Commission* (1843), to describe the nuanced labour conditions of each of these three needlewomen complicates the potential for any of these individual seamstresses to metonymically represent the entire working class. I place the seamstress at the centre of my discussion to highlight Gaskell's representations of the complexity of women's labour. Through this complexity, Gaskell also challenges common misconceptions about and associated restrictions on labouring women in Victorian industrial society.

Like Mary, *Ruth*'s eponymous character begins the novel as a dressmaker's apprentice. In my third chapter, I examine how Gaskell's descriptions of Ruth's occupation draw on texts by Victorian commentators, such as Anna Jameson. This juxtaposition demonstrates that critical approaches thus far have downplayed the subtext of labour associated with Ruth as a labouring woman—a subtext with which contemporary reviewers were aware. Gaskell's extended commentary on the limits of women's labour in the novel becomes amplified when juxtaposed with middle-class notions of domestic and moral women's work. A representation of a fallen woman who attempts to atone, but who continues to seek paid labour, Ruth demonstrates the

earthly, material necessity and economic need for women's labour. Combined these chapters reveal Gaskell's sustained engagement with the complexity of seamstress labour. Further, they demonstrate that Gaskell's representations of seamstresses, which emphasize their status as women labourers and the economic limitations that define their (in)capacity to productively labour, challenge patriarchal Victorian conceptions of labour.

[Gaskell is] preoccupied with social texture, with life as it is lived, and not with theory.  
(Elizabeth Sabiston, *Private Sphere to World Stage*)

## Chapter 1 | Graded Labour in “Libbie Marsh’s Three Eras”

“Libbie Marsh’s Three Eras” remains rarely examined by critics, largely cited as a marginal text that serves as a stepping-stone to Gaskell’s later works or as evidence of early thematic concerns developed in her longer texts.<sup>8</sup> These concerns that critics identify in the story include a “Wordsworthian power of nature” and its apparent restorative potential, which Jenny Uglow examines in her 1993 *Elizabeth Gaskell* (175); a critique of conventional motherhood and fatherhood, as explored, respectively, by Shirley Foster in *Victorian Women’s Fiction* (1985) and more recently by Melissa Shields Jenkins in *Fatherhood, Authority, and British Reading Culture* (2014); and a commentary on both class relations and working women, as considered by Patsy Stoneman in *Elizabeth Gaskell* (1987) and by Christine L. Krueger in *The Reader’s Repentance* (1992). Critics generally understate the story’s engagement with Victorian conceptions of women’s labour, despite the narrator’s explicit statements about Libbie’s needlework and more implicit references to the implications of seamstress labour conditions generally.

Though not all scholars emphasize Libbie in their analyses, I argue that prioritizing Libbie’s character and her occupation as a seamstress reveals Gaskell’s sustained engagement with women’s labour throughout the story. The eponymous heroine is a slopworker whose narrative begins when she travels to her new accommodations with the Dixons, another family of the same (working) class. She is an orphan, without surviving siblings, and friendless. Though she feels no connection to the family with which she lodges, she slowly befriends the town

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<sup>8</sup> Gaskell co-authored *Sketches of the Poor* (1837) with her husband, William Gaskell in *Blackwood’s*. William Howitt published her “Clopton Hall” (1838) and “Cheshire Customs” (1838), but he made substantial changes to her version and included them as part of his own longer works, without direct attribution. “Libbie Marsh” thus marks Gaskell’s first independently authored text and her first publication of fiction.

“termagant” (52), Margaret Hall the washerwoman, and her ill son, Franky, who live across the court. The trio eventually ventures to Dunham Park on holiday, where their working-class peers shift their sentiments towards both Halls. After Franky’s death, Libbie relates to Anne Dixon a story of her father’s abuse, admits that she does not anticipate she will ever wed, and proposes to Margaret that the two live together as aging widow and maid. Margaret accepts and the story concludes with a summary of the mutual benefit that this arrangement poses for both women.

I propose that Gaskell builds on the mid-century cultural consciousness surrounding the figure of the seamstress to connect these plot threads while also exposing a more subtle thread of commentary on working-class women’s labour as distinct from the working class as a collective. For Alexander, Libbie is a symbol for the entire working class—or, as I argue in my introduction, a representation that Alexander indirectly identifies as a metonym—who represents the “suffering of those around her” but not her own suffering (*Women* 57). If we follow Alexander’s logic, Libbie’s occupation as a slopworking seamstress who experiences no hint of class mobility would serve this metonymic function; she would represent the suffering and toil of the entire working class, but not her own suffering. My analysis resists Alexander’s interpretation by examining Libbie’s character as an individual labourer within the working class rather than a displaced metonym. Ian Campbell notes Gaskell’s awareness of “gradations” within the working class, through her personal interactions with “her husband’s poorer parishioners” (25).<sup>9</sup> He denies that this awareness is apparent in her short stories, however, arguing that they “explore a very different world” distant from the “ghastly poverty of the slums”; for Campbell, Gaskell’s short stories lack representation of “gradation” within the working class (26). Contrary

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<sup>9</sup> As succinctly summarized by Elizabeth Sabiston, who is also the author of the epigraph to this chapter, “of all Victorian novelists, [Gaskell] lived closest to the world she described,” even Dickens (136). Also, as Shirley Foster explains in *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Literary Life* (2002), “Gaskell’s ... philanthropic work ... is verified by various sources” (22). Jenny Bourne Taylor also includes the term “gradations” in her “Short Fiction and the Novel” (250).

to Campbell's assertion, I argue that Gaskell's working class in "Libbie Marsh" is one of subtle gradation—gradation that disrupts the potential for the complex fabric of the working class to be represented by Libbie's individual character. Instead, Gaskell's characterization of Libbie underscores the physical toil and financial limitations—the suffering—in seamstress labour.

### **Ghastly Depictions and the Physical Toil of Slopwork**

My first section examines the indirect methods through which Gaskell's narrative depicts the physical toil of Libbie's seamstress labour, through moments in which she gazes out her bedroom window and observes Franky's pain-induced arm movements. I argue that the specific ways in which his motions and battle to survive mirror popular representations of slopworkers emphasize Libbie's own suffering rather than that of a collective working class.

The narrator rarely explicitly portrays Libbie labouring. Yet an examination of the descriptions of Franky's arm movements and Libbie's occupation as a slopworker through the lens of popular Victorian representations of seamstresses from the mid-1840s makes evident the story's depiction of seamstress suffering and harsh labour conditions throughout the story. On the first evening after Libbie moves into her lodgings with the Dixons, she sits at her new bedroom window and "gaz[es]" across the court at the window opposite, where she sees "the constant *wear*y motion of a little spectral shadow, a child's hand and arm—no more" (my emphasis, Gaskell, "Libbie" 51). In the story's third paragraph, before Libbie even enters her new home, the narrator describes the layout of the court of which the Dixons' house is a part: "one side of the court looked at its exact opposite, as if it were seeing itself in a looking-glass" (49). Thus when Libbie gazes out her own bedroom window and spies Franky through his window, it is as though she encounters her own reflection. Jacqueline Banerjee describes Franky's action agentially: he "waves a feeble hand ... *to catch* the attention ... of Libbie ...



[and] all compassionate readers” (my emphasis, 164). Franky’s waving hand may invoke feelings of compassion in a sympathetic reader; however, Franky has no knowledge of an observer and the story implies no conscious effort on his part to solicit Libbie’s assistance or pity. In fact, the blinds are drawn to prevent such voyeurism; Franky does catch Libbie’s attention, but not intentionally. In positioning Libbie as the gazer, this moment subverts the typical gendered power dynamics in Victorian representations of seamstresses, in which the needlewoman is the object of desirous gaze who must not reciprocate nor meet the male gazer’s eye.

The reflection imagery in this moment also strengthens connections between Franky’s pain and Libbie’s seamstress labour. Though Libbie does not ply her needle in this first instance of window-gazing, Franky’s methodically “plying” arm echoes mid-nineteenth-century imagery and language associated with seamstress labour, typified in cultural texts such as Thomas Hood’s 1843 “The Song of the Shirt.” In fact, Hood also uses the word “weary” when he describes his seamstress’s fingers (1; 81). The “incessant, feeble motion” that Franky makes with just his “hand and arm” (Gaskell, “Libbie” 51) reflects the rhythmic stitching of Hood’s seamstress, who “[plies] her needle and thread” (Hood 4), an action that requires motion only from the hand and arm. Hood emphasizes the dauntingly repetitive nature of needlework by repeating the phrase “stitch, stitch, stitch” three times and the line “work, work, work” nine times. These recurring lines, that consist solely of words which clearly point to the seamstress’s labour, occupy more than 13 percent of the entire poem and set the meter in the poem in much the same way that

Franky's arm and "long, thin fingers ... [keep] time to the heavy pulses of dull pain" (Gaskell, "Libbie" 51).<sup>10</sup>

Libbie's employment as a pieceworker, rather than a dressmaker, provides her character's most direct connection to contemporaneous seamstress images. When Libbie looks across the court and notices Franky's spectral limb, she "sit[s] by the window" (51). The image of a woman at a window is so common that it is "almost cliché" in Victorian literature (I. Armstrong 124); given the prominence of women sitting by windows in Victorian fiction, it might seem a bit of an assumption to draw a connection between Libbie's proximity to the window and needlework. However, immediately before the narrator describes Libbie's view across the courtyard, he also mentions her seamstress occupation for the second time: "she had to go out sewing for several succeeding days" (Gaskell, "Libbie" 51).<sup>11</sup> Libbie's seamstress status, her nearness to the window, the candle in her room, and the nighttime setting combine to recall romanticized images, such as Richard Redgrave's 1844 *The Sempstress*, in which an isolated needlewoman sews by a window at night by candlelight. It is also this painting by Redgrave that "first marks the turn from millinery shops to individuals doing piecework" (Alexander, *Women* 59) in the iconology of the Victorian seamstress. While Redgrave's needlewoman is "displaced middle class" (59) and Libbie is strictly working class, Gaskell's characterization of Libbie as a pieceworker follows the general shift by the middle of the nineteenth century, in which literature

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<sup>10</sup> While the punctuation in these repeated lines is inconsistent throughout, ranging from commas to em-dashes to exclamation marks, in each case the triplicate stands as a line in and of itself. Other lines in the poem also repeat, further emphasizing the repetitive nature of the seamstress's labour and her incessant movement towards death.

<sup>11</sup> Ascribing a gender to a narrator when it is not explicitly identified can be particularly difficult, problematic, and tenuous. In this case, the author is a woman and the pseudonym is the name of a man. I use "he" here, following Alexis Easley's reasoning that the narrator's gender matches that of the pseudonym because of the perceived moral taint of urban investigation for women given the setting and content of the story, particularly in opening with narration of an urban street scene (87). However, I also ascribe a gender tenuously, for Easley herself endorses viewing "pseudonymous publication as a strategy designed to complicate authorial position, rather than a defensive means of obscuring an essential 'self'" (7), which is assumedly applicable to gender. As Jenny Uglow writes, "[t]he name is male, yet the style and concentration on domestic life must have seemed transparently female" (172).

portrayed working-class seamstresses. Even so, the majority of literary representations of seamstresses in the second half of the hungry forties depict working-class slopworkers that build on selective “details from art, especially from *The Sempstress*” (68), as Gaskell does here in Libbie’s position by the window alone at night while observing Franky’s painful stitching movements.

Gaskell’s emphasis on the physical afflictions attendant upon women’s labour coalesces in invocations of spectres and shadows that also saturate descriptions of seamstress labour. Sir John Tenniel’s 1863 political cartoon “The Haunted Lady, Or ‘The Ghost’ in the Looking Glass,” printed in *Punch*, depicts a dressmaker who stands with a client in front of a mirror while, in the reflection, the dressmaker is dead. In her description of this image, Isobel Armstrong argues that the client is “confronted . . . with the ghost of the seamstress (sic) who stitched her clothes” (239). The title of the cartoon certainly invites a connection between the depicted seamstress labour and phantoms. Yet an association between the health implications of seamstress labour and ghosts is also present in the more temporally relevant “The Song of the Shirt,” which Gaskell further invokes in “Libbie Marsh” through a language of spectres and shadows. It is through this language that Gaskell associates Franky’s fragmented arm with the “Phantom” of death (Hood 33-4) and the seamstress’s own “shadow” that serve as her sole company as she labours (Hood 47-8; Gaskell, “Libbie” 51-2). Libbie also observes Franky’s arm “cease, as if the little creature had dropped into a slumber from very weariness” (Gaskell, “Libbie” 51), like Hood’s seamstress who falls asleep in the midst of sewing (Hood 23); yet both arms suddenly jolt up and recommence, unable to find “respite however brief” (Hood 74).

In this first visual encounter at the window with Franky’s arm, Libbie does not perform labour herself; regardless, Gaskell’s descriptions of Libbie’s observations of Franky’s motions

invoke the extradiegetic discourses of seamstress labour and emphasize the truly horrendous working conditions of real and fictional seamstress predecessors, without direct narrative description of those deplorable conditions. In so doing, the story offers a critique of the conditions of seamstress labour specifically, rather than redirecting this critique to a broader working class at the expense of the labouring seamstress or woman.

The shadows of this scene recur later in the story when Libbie does have “plain sewing to do at her lodgings” (Gaskell, “Libbie” 52). This location further associates Franky’s motions and physical anguish with Libbie’s slopwork. According to literary convention by the late 1840s, slopworkers laboured in their “homes,” as this location provided readers with “an ideal entry into the working-class neighbourhood and home” (Alexander, *Women* 71). Though Libbie does not sew in her first instance of window-gazing, after some “time pass[es] away” in an appropriately morbid turn of phrase, Libbie sits at the window sewing while watching Franky’s “little arm ... waving up and down” because she is “sleepless from pain” (52). In fact, Libbie is the only character in the story that the reader “sees” performing paid physical labour; the story does not enter the factory workplace of the Dixons or the places where Margaret washes clothes. Thus, even for readers unfamiliar with the seamstress image—of whom there would arguably be few by 1847 because of its consistent appearance over the previous five years in a variety of media, as discussed in my introduction—Libbie’s sewing in these moments makes a direct connection between Libbie and the toil of manual labour. As the only labour in the story that Gaskell explicitly depicts, Libbie’s slopwork becomes the resonating image of physical labour within the story.

The ghastliness of Franky’s limb points towards his illness and inevitable death, like the seamstress whose incessant labour simply leads her to sew “at once, with a double thread, a

Shroud as well as a Shirt”; the dire health ramifications of her labour far outweigh the insufficient income made from sewing shirts, which leaves her unable to bring herself out of poverty (Hood 32).<sup>12</sup> Yet Gaskell’s ghastly language in this scene is also significant in the context of her ghost stories and Gothic fiction, which are slowly garnering more scholarly attention.<sup>13</sup> Stoneman notes that Gaskell’s “minor works, many of which have subjects—ghosts, bandits, witches, murders, madmen, imprisonment, torture, mutilation—which ‘fit’ neither her earnest social image nor her cosy feminine one” frequently cause “embarrassment” for critics (6). While “Libbie Marsh” would be described neither as a ghost nor as a Gothic story, Gaskell’s phantom invocations are examples of what Michael Ashley describes as “a focal point” that Gaskell “was able to disseminate through her work” (11). Another convention of Gothic fiction is a distressed heroine. The macabre and oppressive physical toil of Libbie’s labour, including the haunting effects of her inevitable death, do characterize her as distressed.

Gaskell rewrites this element of the Gothic in Libbie, a repressed protagonist who speaks out against the oppression of working-class women. Jenny Uglow comes to a similar conclusion about a connection between Gaskell’s Gothic tendencies with a feminist critique of social structure, arguing that her inclusion of “oppressed yet defiant heroines” shows that “Gaskell’s stance was both radical and feminist” because her “Gothic conventions ... link the cruel repression of wives and daughters to the pressure of history and the patriarchal power of the

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<sup>12</sup> Alexander directly connects Franky’s illness to labour conditions by attributing the cause of his illness to a workplace accident. She mentions this in passing, as though common knowledge; however, the story never states the cause of Franky’s illness, aside from Anne Dixon’s explanation that “[s]ummat’s amiss wi’ his backbone” (51). Nonfictional texts, such as Friedrich Engels’ *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1844) and fictional works such as the Elizabeth Stone’s *The Young Milliner* (1843), established a connection between the seamstress and poor health due to poor labour conditions.

<sup>13</sup> An early article addressing supernatural elements in Gaskell’s fiction is Carol A. Martin’s “Gaskell’s Ghosts: Truths in Disguise” (1989). In fact, Martin asserts that Gaskell’s ghost stories are “much more representative than anything by the Brontës or Eliot of the Victorian ghost story” (104). See also “Woman Witched: The Supernatural Tales of Elizabeth Gaskell,” in Vanessa D. Dickerson’s *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide* (1996).

aristocracy” (120). Libbie demonstrates such oppression and defiance in reaction to Anne Dixon. Near the end of the story, Anne “lightly” and ignorantly comments that she would “rather have [her fiancé Bob] tipsy than anyone else sober” (18). In response, Libbie defiantly tells Anne to “hush” and then secretly reveals to Anne (and thus to the reader) that her father had killed her younger sibling “in one of his [drunken] bouts” years earlier (66). The revelation of her father’s abuse amplifies the story’s critique of seamstress labour conditions in the face of systemic patriarchal oppression. While Libbie here gives voice to the abuse and oppression suffered by many women, she is also a victim of the abuse of her father and consequently suffers a lack of family and poor labour conditions; as such, she defies a metonymic relationship which would have her depict the suffering of others at the expense of representing her own.<sup>14</sup>

### **Working-Class Gradations and Economic Limitations**

The narrative’s descriptions of Libbie emphasize the fact that she is an individual within the working class, while the details of her economic limitations demonstrate that not all members of the working class experience the same degree of poverty. This section illustrates that the details of these varying experiences reveal the economic gradations within the working class—gradations that a single seamstress figure cannot embody. From the first sentence of the story, the narrator’s descriptions of Libbie’s relationships with people and settings are self-

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<sup>14</sup> The publication context of “Libbie Marsh” also points to the story’s undertones of desolate conditions for labouring women. Gaskell wrote “Libbie Marsh” specifically for *Howitt’s Journal*, which “often included exposés of the *harsh* living conditions *endured* by laborers in industrial cities” (my emphasis, *Easley* 84). While the goal of the journal was to “prevent the corrupting influence of revolutionary feeling among the laboring classes” (84), Christine Kreuger asserts that Gaskell “manage[s] to introduce her own disruptive social criticism into this [*Howitt’s* apolitical] middle-class construction of reality” (161). Gaskell’s chosen pseudonym, Cotton Mather Mills, also invokes a cultural awareness of dire labour circumstances. As Jenny Uglow and Joanne Shattock both note, “Mills” is a pun on Gaskell’s contemporary setting (172; 47), but it also marks that setting with the Chartist political unrest associated with factory and mill labour. Her pseudonym points to the consequences for women in imbalanced labour conditions; it recalls Cotton Mather’s rhetoric surrounding the economics of industrialization and women’s labour, as the Salem trials were connected to class and labour disputes, and the victims were most notoriously women.

equivocating—he disputes the finality of his own words. “There was a flitting in our neighbourhood” he authoritatively begins, but then immediately revises and claims it is “hardly a flitting, after all” (49). The event becomes disqualified as a “flitting” because it is “*only* a single person” who is moving house (my emphasis, 49). The story thus begins by setting up a dramatic expectation for its *dramatis personae* in the community at large, but disrupts this expectation by narrating the specific experience of one member of the community—Libbie Marsh. Yet Libbie’s move is represented as inconsequential not only because she is an individual person, but also because of her meagre possessions; instead of a procession of “a cartload of drawers and baskets, dressers and beds, with old king clock at the top of all,” Libbie has “*only* one large wooden chest” (my emphasis, 49).

The repetition of “only” in the descriptions of both Libbie and of her belongings is significant for two reasons. First, its irony calls into question the opening subversion of importance. While the narrator initially counters his own assertion that Libbie’s relocation is a significant event, the narrator’s ironic repetition of “only” makes it clear that this move *is* significant to the narrative, especially because it is the story’s heroine who here flits. Second, it grounds Libbie’s situation in comparative economic conditions; the comparison between the commotion of a typical move involving carts of possessions and a single chest implies at least a partial financial basis for perceived insignificance. This happening is far from insignificant for someone like Libbie, who is both alone and economically vulnerable, who walks “slowly,” “heavily,” “listless and depressed” through the streets in anticipation of her move (49). In the opening sentences of the story, Gaskell thus establishes a world of degrees rather than finalities—gradations of expectation, significance, and class that emphasize personal rather than communal experience. In so doing, Gaskell builds a protagonist that is too individual to represent

the entirety of the working class and that simultaneously emphasizes the complexity within that class.

One could argue that the comparison in this opening scene, particularly the juxtaposed belongings of Libbie and an unidentified generality, implies comparisons between classes, rather than degrees within the working class. As Alexis Easley argues, although “the reference to ‘our neighbourhood’ and the colloquial ‘a flitting’ [seem] to suggest a working-class narrator,” Gaskell’s chosen pseudonym includes the title of Esquire, which indicates a “higher social class” (Easley 87), and the reader is encouraged to identify the narrator with the pseudonymous author. However, even if the narrator is of a different class than Libbie, the narrative still emphasizes the gradations within the working class with a particular focus on Libbie and her fellow unmarried women labourers occupying the lowest financial level. Libbie moves to the home of the Dixons, a family of factory workers, where she can board and continue labouring as a seamstress for her current employers. Though both Libbie and the Dixon family are of the same class, the narrative implies economic disparities. The Dixons are “fine spinners, in the receipt of good wages” (51) who have sufficient financial security to be lenient about Libbie’s rental payments and generous with her portions of “their extravagant meals” (53). While Tamara Ketabgian cites descriptions of the Dixons’ meals as indicative of “industrial work [that] so intensifies the habits of consumption that they resemble mechanical processes themselves” (73), these provisions also



demonstrate Libbie's comparative poverty and hence reveal economic variations within the working class.<sup>15</sup>

Libbie's position as a slopworker also intimates her economic vulnerability compared with her working-class peers. As discussed in my introduction, representations of seamstresses shifted from dressmakers and milliners to slopworkers because the slopworker is indisputably working-class. By identifying Libbie as a slopworker, Gaskell invokes the familiar descriptions of working-class seamstresses that identified her as a pitiable victim of capitalist society. Rather than stand in for a distanced working class of which she is not a part, or symbolize a broader working class, the emphasis is on Libbie as a woman slopworker. Though both the Dixons and Libbie, as fine spinners and a seamstress respectively, participate in the cloth industry, "in the case of clothes production, it was the seamstress who suffered most" (Walkley 9). Or, at least, public consciousness of the plight of the seamstress perpetuated an image of the seamstress as the epitome of financial insecurity and economic vulnerability, as the ultimate victim of patriarchal capitalism in the process of industrialization.

The dominant image of the seamstress in Victorian culture by the 1847 publication of "Libbie Marsh" was that of the slopworker—a convention that Libbie follows. However, Gaskell undermines the cultural expectation that Libbie represent the entire working class by detailing Libbie's financial position relative to her fellow labourers. Even within the seamstress

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<sup>15</sup> Ketabgian indicates that Libbie herself "wonders" about and "reflects" on the Dixons' meals (73); however, while the narrator does state that it is Libbie who "wonder[s] at their [the Dixons'] extravagance," it is important to note that this description is in the words of the narrator rather than Libbie herself. The next sentence, which Ketabgian interprets as a continuation of Libbie's thoughts, includes a rhetorical shift in which the voice seems to revert to narrative commentary, rather than Libbie's own reflections. I make this distinction partly because it is crucial in discussions of social class in the story. If the narrator is of a higher class, the descriptions of meal consumption become tainted by external commentary on working-class extravagance. Further, Libbie speaks but few words for herself in the story, most notably in the concluding moments of the narrative during her treatises on women's social positions. By conflating the narrator's voice with Libbie's, as Ketabgian does here, the sparse moments of direct quotation of Libbie's speech lose much of their resonance.

occupation, gradations existed, and the slopworker embodied the lowest position, making the smallest income. She “had a more difficult time procuring work” than other types of needlewomen, “worked longer hours and was paid even less” (Alexander, “Loss” 296; *Women* 17). It is specifically pieceworkers who sew shirts—the clothing item most notorious for leaving needlewomen impoverished and victimized. An apprentice had to pay a “premium” in order to be apprenticed to a dressmaker or milliner (Harris, Introduction 4), and thus entry to this position was in part restricted to those with some previous financial means. Slopwork, on the other hand, required minimal initial financial commitment. Many historic accounts, such as those by Henry Mayhew in 1849, include details in which slopworkers were required to purchase their own “trimmings, ... candles, ... [and] the firing ... to press the work” to complete their sewing tasks (*Voices* 43). Yet the cost of these start-up materials, although proportionally high for the menial income of a slopworker, was more attainable for many than a large upfront sum for an apprenticeship. It was the pieceworker who fell most victim to the historic shift in clothing production from dressmakers and tailors to what Gallagher identifies as “[t]he ‘sweating system’” with pay “below subsistence levels” (130). Depictions of this economic desolation expanded from “common knowledge in the 1840s” (130) into fictional representations, in which slopworkers “were paid starvation wages by employers and middlemen who were anxious to exploit their labour and make a large profit” (Harris, Introduction 4).

While Gaskell does not explicitly describe the numerical details of Libbie’s economic interactions with her employer or her lodgers, the narrative engages with the Victorian image of the slopworking seamstress to attribute its extradiegetic iconology of economic precariousness to Libbie’s character. Following the conventions of the figure of the seamstress as it developed post-1844, Libbie has “no father, husband, family or friends,” leaving her “truly alone and

defenseless” (Alexander, *Women* 59). The narrator emphasizes this isolation: the first paragraph ends in foreboding that Libbie “was now about to be thrown again entirely among strangers” (Gaskell, “Libbie” 49); the man carrying her sole wooden chest of belongings is an “acquaintance” only because he is less a stranger than “every one else” (49); and when she first arrives at her new lodging she finds herself “standing alone . . . with no one to say a word to” (49). She reflects on her isolation, recalling that her father, mother, and brother are all “long since dead” (50). Libbie *must* labour to provide for herself financially in the face of economic vulnerability.

The relationship that develops between Libbie and the Halls, which Libbie instigates through the purchase of a gift for Franky, exposes the story’s critique of the lack of financial security available to women labourers within a graded working class. When Libbie first discerns the “agony” portrayed by Franky’s silhouetted arm movements from across the courtyard, she does not yet know to whom the arm belongs. She “directly” solicits information from Anne and learns of “Margaret Hall’s lad” (51). A few short paragraphs later, “time . . . unveil[s] the hidden things” (51), and Libbie and the reader slowly become aware of the Halls’ situation, including Franky’s illness and the community’s (or at least the Dixons’) aversion to Margaret. Libbie also gathers visual and verbal information about the Halls—from Anne in this moment and by her own devices later in the story. She learns, by surreptitiously watching the fractured parts of Franky and his life through his window, of his fondness for taking care of other living creatures. She buys him a canary, Jupiter, as a secret Valentine.

The financial logistics involved in Libbie’s purchase of Jupiter are significant in the story’s commentary on women’s labour, and the economic precariousness of the slopworker in

particular.<sup>16</sup> Libbie's idea to purchase Franky a secret Valentine gift is rooted in her own experience and pleasure in receiving gifts. She recalls her own fond memories of the day (which also happens to be her birthday) before her mother's death. But the narrator emphasizes that such a purchase is no simple feat for someone of Libbie's income; she must "save" and "screw" to buy the canary. It is in the context of this purchase that the narrative first mentions an actual monetary value, compounding the economic resonances in her exchange with the barbershop owner, Emanuel, who also sells canaries. Armed with the half-guinea that is the result of many "self-sacrifices" (53), Libbie learns that the "prize birds" she initially encounters cost two to four times more than her budget. She adjusts her expectations accordingly, stating she is "not over-particular as to shape and colour" but would like one that can sing well. She therefore shifts to prioritize function over pomp, aligning with her economic means and position as a functional labourer. Yet even the "good singers [are] ... above Libbie's means." Once again Libbie adjusts her expectations. Once Libbie states that the canary is for someone who is "poorly," meaning ill but also calling to mind her poverty, Emanuel offers Jupiter—the least beautiful and capable of only "warbl[ing]" in lieu of singing. The narrator sarcastically explains that this "please[s] Libbie more; for she was always one to find out she liked the gooseberries that were accessible, better than the grapes that were beyond her reach." He then ironically adds, as if an afterthought, that "the price too [i]s just right" (54).

This scenario emphasizes both Libbie's meagre income as a slopworker and the limitations that such dire economic conditions place on her. Since giving Jupiter to Franky also

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<sup>16</sup> Libbie's gift and subsequent friendship with the Halls are rooted in women's labour beyond the financial details; it is because Margaret's labour as a washerwoman demands she be absent from home during the day that Libbie determines a canary would make an appropriate companion for Franky. The two become friends, and Margaret also slowly allows Libbie into her life and friendship. Margaret demonstrates her "gratitude" for Libbie's generosity by literally helping Libbie with the "burden" of carrying her "bundle of work half as large as herself" home through the streets" (56-7), further associating their friendship with a politics of women's labour. Margaret may not be able to financially recompense or reciprocate, but she can offer her physical labour.

leads her to make a friend, it demonstrates the difficulty of such economically vulnerable characters to alter their living conditions through personal agency alone. It also draws attention to the financial gradations within the working class, as discussed earlier in this chapter. The narrative implies that, were Libbie not living with the Dixons, she would not be able to afford the purchase. Further, Libbie conceives of her plan to help Franky “as she stitche[s] away” (Gaskell, “Libbie” 53). However, like the disruptions in narrative expectation in the first few paragraphs of the story, the narrator interjects his own commentary to clarify that the Dixons “never pressed [Libbie] for payment if she had but little work to do” and continue to provide her with the same share in meals, “which are far more luxurious than she could have met with anywhere else” (53). The story then returns to relating Libbie’s plan, also revealing her need to save for the purchase. Once again, economic gradations within the working class unsettle the possibility for an all-encompassing perspective of the class in its entirety. With such diversified experience within the working class, Libbie cannot metonymically represent the whole. Instead, Gaskell’s emphasis on the limitations imposed on Libbie, on the Halls, and on her relationship with the Halls exposes how dependent these characters and relationships are on the pragmatics of labour and wages.

### **Conclusion: A Trip to Dunham Park**

The majority of my argument thus far has featured details from the first of the story’s three sections. In lieu of a conclusion, I turn briefly to the latter two parts to demonstrate how they, too, emphasize the gradation and pragmatics of economic conditions for labouring women within the working class and thus resist metonymic representation. The second section of “Libbie Marsh” begins amidst the community commotion over deciding where to go on holiday for Whitsuntide. The working-class members playfully debate the merits of their two options: Dunham or Alderley. It quickly becomes clear, however, that the basis of decision is not whether

or not one is what Slater deems “old-fashioned,” but is instead economic. The rebuttal from his unnamed and more colloquial (and therefore presumably of lower economic status) debater is that he must be “old-fashioned” and go to Dunham Park because it costs only “fourpence a-piece” (Gaskell, “Libbie” 56), undercutting the playful exchange with the subtext of real economic considerations. As with Libbie’s purchase of Jupiter, the price is just right for those whose economic vulnerability requires them to think in financial terms. Both of these men and their families are from the working class, but one family must consider the comparative cost of the two locations while the other has the luxury of jovial banter. The gradation of experience within the working class here, like the gradation evident between Libbie and the Dixons, precludes the possibility that Libbie represents the working class in its entirety. Again, as with Libbie’s purchase of Jupiter, notions of pleasure are rooted in economics: there is a cost for pleasure. In this case, however, Libbie and Margaret share the financial burden of saving for the trip, as a result of their friendship after Franky receives Jupiter.

Rather than a complete contrast to city life, as one might expect, Gaskell exposes the group’s experience of “country” as simply another degree removed from the city. The trip to the park is only eight miles from Manchester, and when they arrive Franky even conflates Dunham with London (58). The park is deemed “country” only when considered relative to the city. In fact, some members of the working class insist on taking Franky to a viewpoint to see Manchester, which they perceive to be the essential experience of all visitors to Dunham. The city is both “ugly, smoky Manchester” and “earnest, noble-working Manchester,” rather than simply a negative contrast to the country (61). It is also while in Dunham that Bob, a working-class character who appears only in this moment of the text, passes around a hat to “see what the company will give” when the group hears of another member’s hunger and lack of food (60).

“It’s tiptop,” exclaims another, “to live on the public” (60), in a statement that invokes the language of unionization and social welfare and brings a discourse of labour unrest into the space apparently removed from urbanity.

While Libbie must return to her labour in Manchester under the same physical and economic precariousness as before the vacation, the time in Dunham provides insight for her into another social arrangement. Gaskell encourages such an interpretation by the opening scene of the third part of the story, which shifts the setting back from Dunham to Manchester. Like the story’s opening scene, in which Libbie moves “slowly and heavily,” followed by a man carrying her symbolic single chest of belongings, the third section begins with a slow procession, consisting of humans and a chest, that edges its way “slowly, slowly” through the streets (Gaskell, “Libbie” 63). In the chest is Franky, who has succumbed to his illness, which recalls the toil in seamstress labour. As Libbie walks in the procession, she reflects on the “shadow of the feebly-waving arm [that] first caught her attention” (63), which further invokes scenes of Libbie’s labour from earlier in the story. Libbie recognizes that Margaret is now a solitary figure, like Libbie at the outset of the narrative. Their situations, as developed throughout the story, are too distinct for Margaret’s case to be represented by Libbie; this procession is so distant from the Dunham scenes that Libbie cannot here represent the entire working class; and the scene is so emotive that Libbie cannot be metonymically removed from the suffering of the working class. Rather, Libbie’s experiences as a labouring seamstress in the narrative, and her brief exposure to the social arrangements modeled by the working-class men who share food at Dunham, lead to her proposal to Margaret for communal living as physically and economically precarious labouring women.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See Pauline Nestor’s *Female Friendships* for a discussion of female friendships in Gaskell’s fiction and life.

## Chapter 2 | *Mary Barton*: Distinct and Nuanced Seamstress Labour

Published in 1848, *Mary Barton* marks Gaskell's foray into the novel. Unlike her earlier works, it was published anonymously.<sup>18</sup> Due in large part to Williams' inclusion of *Mary Barton* in *Culture and Society* in a list of six mid-century Victorian "industrial novels," it remains one of her best-known texts. The novel's explicit focus on relations between the working-class and manufacturing-class male characters has been central to discussions of the novel since its publication. Studies such as Patsy Stoneman's *Elizabeth Gaskell* (1987), however, prompted scholarly focus on the novel's gender dynamics. Many scholars also look to the possible connection between the political and domestic aspects of the novel. These elements become complicated when combined with the novel's subtitle (*A Tale of Manchester Life*) and Gaskell's original title for the work (*John Barton*—named after Mary's father). Such publication decisions have spawned debates over whether the "true" sympathies of the novel lie with the "Manchester Life" of Mary or of John (Williams, *Culture* 95), of domesticity or politics, of gender or class. Catherine Gallagher's *Industrial Reformation* (1985) and Hilary Schor's *Scheherezade in the Marketplace* (1990) connect the political and domestic portions of the novel through the parallels of the limitations placed on Mary's and John's public voices: Mary's as a woman and John's as the chosen spokesperson (read representative of) the Chartists.<sup>19</sup>

Some recent approaches further examine the relationship between politics and gender in the novel. In her chapter dedicated to *Mary Barton* in *Walking the Victorian Streets* (1995), Deborah Epstein Nord examines the novel's discourse of female sexual desire and of anxiety

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<sup>18</sup> Gaskell considered publishing *Mary Barton* under the pseudonym Stephen Berwick. However, as John Mullan explains, Gaskell made this decision too late, and the book was published anonymously instead. Reviews of the novel speculated as to the author's gender. Perhaps the most famous is John Forster's statement in 1848 that "[u]nquestionably the book is a woman's" (68), because of the novel's details of domestic life.

<sup>19</sup> For a more recent discussion of an allegorical relationship between the two plots, see Chris R. Vanden Bossche's *Reform Acts: Chartism, Social Agency, and the Victorian Novel, 1832-1867*.



concerning economic independence for women entering the labour force. In *Unstable Bodies* (1995), Jill L. Matus examines the Victorian-constructed naturalization of “class differences [as] written into the body’s [unstable] sexuality” (58) manifest in the novel. However, scholars have not adequately considered how Gaskell’s inclusion of three seamstress characters in the novel relates to Victorian representations of labour in the late 1840s. Beth Harris has established that Victorian women’s relationships with sewing labour were complex and varied. In the 1843 *Children’s Employment Commission*, “nearly half of the statements from witnesses [attesting to conditions of seamstress labour] were favourable” (Harris, Introduction 3). Over time, however, fiction and nonfiction authors emphasized only the negative portions of the reports, and the complexities of earlier reports were no longer portrayed to the general public. Many representations of needlewomen at the time did draw on what became iconic elements of the needlewoman figure. Yet each of Gaskell’s three seamstresses in *Mary Barton* builds on these elements in distinct ways to lay bare the intricacies within the seamstress figure itself; Gaskell challenges the issues created by collapsing the experience of individual seamstress labourers into the popular metonymic representation.

Gaskell’s inclusion of three developed seamstress characters—Mary, Margaret, and Sally—challenges the possibility for dominant Victorian representations of seamstresses to be indicative of all extradiagetic needlewomen. Were the seamstress a metonym for the entire working class in *Mary Barton*, the symbolism of the figure of the seamstress would be contained in a single needleworker. That character, in this case Mary, would demonstrate the deplorable conditions, not of her own labour, but of the factory workers and Chartists, such as her father, in the novel. According to Alexander, Mary takes on this status and thus represents the “suffering” (*Women* 57) of working-class labour without directly suffering as a labourer herself. As such, she

would also be excluded from the suffering she represents. My reading deviates from Alexander's; I argue that Gaskell's juxtaposition of three distinct, individual seamstress characters disrupts the potential for a single character not only to stand in for members of the working class but also to stand in for all needlewomen. In her depictions of these three characters, Gaskell prioritizes details of the physical demands of their labour and more extensively focuses on the limitations generated by their menial incomes as labouring women. I argue that these labour conditions—most notably physical toil and associated economic limitations—do, in fact, include the needlewoman; that Gaskell's complications of the metonymic seamstresses emphasize that they, too, are labouring members of the working class.

### **Origins and Occupations: Three Seamstresses**

The following section examines the ways in which the origins and specific occupations of each of the novel's three seamstresses draw on conventional seamstress depictions that were prominent in Victorian public consciousness by the novel's 1848 publication. I show that, though these three characters draw on similar conventions, their cases are distinct and therefore cannot be collapsed into metonymy: "*the seamstress.*"

The narrative begins in "some fields near Manchester," which establishes Mary's roots in a pastoral setting and contributes to the text's commentary on industrial and women's labour, but also points to a convention of seamstress fiction.<sup>20</sup> These fields are "popular places of resort at every holiday time," and are just "two miles" from a "little village" (Gaskell, *Mary* 11).<sup>21</sup> Critics have made much of Gaskell's invocations of the pastoral in this opening and throughout the

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<sup>20</sup> In noticeable contrast to Dickens, Gaskell sets a large proportion of texts in Manchester. Raymond Williams explains that Manchester also offers a more simplified urban setting than London in which to stage class conflicts (*Country* 219-20). See Deborah Epstein Nord's *Walking the Victorian Streets* for how this decision affects fictional representation (138).

<sup>21</sup> This moment engages in a discourse of labour and economic limitations like the Park scenes in "Libbie Marsh."

novel.<sup>22</sup> However, most crucial to a discussion of the conventions of seamstress fiction here is the narrative shift and physical movement of the characters, including Mary, from the countryside to the city. Harris, Walkley, and Alexander all note that the seamstress figure in literature throughout the 1840s to 1860s typically originates in the “country.” In her 1843 nonfiction piece “The Milliners,” Anna Jameson also emphasizes that most young milliner girls “often come from the country healthy and strong” (2).<sup>23</sup> Though the Bartons begin the narrative in the countryside and shift to the city, they are on a trip in the country and return to their home in Manchester; rather than reproduce this convention of seamstress literature, Gaskell writes a unique seamstress origin story.

Mary’s character also reflects other conventions specific to the seamstress figure which were culturally prominent at the time of the novel’s 1848 publication, and of which the reading audience would have been aware. In the 1843 *Children’s Employment Commission*, R. D. Grainger stresses that many dressmakers are “young persons of the age of 14 and upwards” (F29); in her commentary on Grainger’s report that she wrote in the same year, Jameson emphasizes that the “usual” starting age of milliners is between fourteen and sixteen (2); Mary is 13 when the novel begins.<sup>24</sup> Further, in early seamstress texts which “establish[ed] the image” of the seamstress, the needlewoman has “no feminine role model (her mother is either dead or ineffective)” (Alexander, *Women* 34). Mary’s mother is alive and well in the novel’s opening pastoral scene; in fact, she embodies fertility, being “far advanced in pregnancy” in contrast to

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<sup>22</sup> See Susan Zlotnick’s *Women, Writing, and the Industrial Revolution* (1998) for an analysis of how the country and the city relate to pre-industrial and industrial society in *Mary Barton* that is similar to my interpretation of Gaskell’s representation of the relationship between country and city in “Libbie Marsh”: “the industrial past may be far from ideal, but the rural past is decidedly worse” (79).

<sup>23</sup> The movement of a girl or young woman from the country to the city is a plot element not exclusive to seamstress tales; it is also, among others, a common feature of cautionary narratives that warn against the negative moral influences on women in urban settings, particularly when those women enter the workforce.

<sup>24</sup> In May of 1849, Gaskell wrote to Jameson and mentioned a previous meeting (78).

her “frail” companion Jane Wilson (Gaskell, *Mary* 13). Yet, by the third chapter, Mrs. Barton has died in childbirth, leaving Mary motherless.<sup>25</sup> Her only remaining potential mother figure is her Aunt Esther, whose possible positive influence over Mary is denied even before Mrs. Barton’s death. As John Barton tells his friend George Wilson, though he assumes Esther has not committed suicide (the typical fate of a fallen woman in fiction at the time), she left their lives under morally suspicious circumstances and had a penchant for putting “nonsense i’ th’ girl’s [Mary’s] head” (15). Mary does not begin the novel in employment; it is only after Jane has died in Manchester that Mary seeks occupation as a dressmaker’s apprentice.

A girl from the city who begins her narrative in the country, is motherless but begins the novel with a healthy mother, Mary both adheres to and disrupts narrative convention specific to the mid-century Victorian seamstress. This characterization of Mary allows Gaskell to invoke the cultural consciousness surrounding needlewomen and complicates the seamstress’s origin narrative and, through association, symbolic significance. Gaskell’s consistent play on the conventions of the seamstress figure, even before Mary becomes a needleworker, demonstrates the novel’s focus on the specificity of each needlewoman’s case. By emphasizing the distinctiveness of Mary’s character and origins as a labourer among other seamstresses and other working-class labourers, Gaskell establishes Mary as an individual labourer rather than a metonymic representation.

By the late 1840s publication of *Mary Barton*, literary seamstresses were largely depicted as slopworkers, as this specific type of needlework was perceived to be unambiguously working-

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<sup>25</sup> Though I name most characters by their first and last names upon first introduction, then simply their first names in subsequent occurrences, I use “Mrs. Barton” consistently throughout in order to distinguish Mrs. Mary Barton—married to John and mother to William and Mary junior—from her daughter, who is the titular character of the novel. In an examination of gender politics in the novel, this naming may seem to counter a progressive emphasis on women’s labour through defining a woman in patriarchal terms; however, this decision is made solely for the sake of clarity so that a qualifier does not need to be attached to Mary “Junior” throughout.

class labour, as opposed to the blurred class distinctions in millinery and dressmaking. Mary digresses from this pattern, however; she is not a slopworker but rather an “apprentice ... to a certain Miss Simmonds, milliner and dressmaker” (Gaskell, *Mary* 29). The return to a dressmaking protagonist demonstrates Gaskell’s continued engagement with the effects of metonymic representation, here specific to the seamstress figure. Early seamstress texts, such as Elizabeth Stone’s *The Young Milliner* (1843), focused on dressmakers to bring attention to, and call for reform of, the labour conditions and treatment of real-life seamstresses. In my first chapter, I demonstrated how Gaskell’s characterization of Libbie as a distinctly working-class slopworker, rather than an ambiguously classed dressmaker’s apprentice, challenges metonymic representation. In *Mary*, Gaskell’s re-writing of the dressmaker’s apprentice as distinctly working-class further intervenes in the effects of metonymy that would leave Mary solely a vessel for the suffering of others; instead, Gaskell emphasizes the distinctiveness of seamstress women’s labour, and the volatile conditions of that labour, within the working class.

While the titular character is not a slopworker, as is the case in other Victorian seamstress fiction published by middle-class authors after the mid-1840s, Gaskell does include a different pieceworking character: Margaret Legh. Like Mary, Margaret is motherless; unlike Mary, her father is deceased and she is therefore “orphaned,” which Harris notes is a common element of seamstress narratives (Introduction 2). Though without biological father, Margaret has a paternal figure in her grandfather Job Legh, who nursed her back to health with a piece of bread and some milk when she was first orphaned; he thus also metaphorically takes on a maternal role in her life.<sup>26</sup> The amount of narrative space allotted to Margaret’s origin story combines with her slopwork labour to distinguish her character from Mary’s; the two seamstress characters are too

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<sup>26</sup> Critical attention has been given to notions of motherhood and fatherhood in the novel, particularly in master-worker relationships and as factors contributing to Mary’s moral misstep in her relationship with Harry Carson.

individual to be collapsed into one figure representative of a collective working class. Once again, Gaskell emphasizes the nuance of the seamstress figure through the specificity of individual characters, complicating any narrative expectation that would assume that Mary is *the* seamstress who can metonymically depict the experience of *the* working class in its entirety.

Even putting their individual job titles aside, Mary's and Margaret's cases are too developed and too specific to represent a generalized collective. Nor can their characters supplement each other to provide a unified symbolic needlewoman who can perform the seamstress's typical metonymic function. Were this the case, Margaret's character would adhere to the conventions of seamstress fiction where Mary's character does not, and vice versa.

Although Mary is a dressmaker's apprentice and Margaret a slopworker, the two women adhere to and diverge from culturally prominent representations in slightly different ways. Unlike both Libbie (from my first chapter) and the conventions of the fictional metonymic slopworker, Margaret is not isolated; she is an orphan but has her grandfather. As in the case of Mary's opening characterization (as rural/not rural, motherless/not motherless), Margaret both does and does not follow the conventions of the seamstress figure (as orphaned/not orphaned). This narrative insight into the particular factors that lead to these women's needlework ultimately emphasizes the specificity of the conditions of each seamstress's labour; as such, the focus becomes these women labourers rather than a broader working class.

Gaskell includes a third needlewoman: one of Mary's fellow dressmaking apprentices, Sally Leadbitter.<sup>27</sup> Though her character is much less developed than either Mary's or

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<sup>27</sup> Sally is the least developed of the three seamstress characters. As Sandro Jung articulates, "[i]n her fiction Elizabeth Gaskell reveals a fascination with marginal figures" (53)—a fascination congruent with what Irene Wiltshire identifies to be a strong Wordsworthian influence (13-14). As Anna Fenton-Hathaway has recently emphasized, in *Mary Barton*, Gaskell "highlights how conventional versions of proper plotting tend to minimize interest in such [marginal] characters" by foregrounding them (239).

Margaret's, the narrator does reveal some of Sally's background and familial situation. Even though she has "vulgar" tendencies, she has a morally redeeming "love for her mother, an aged bedridden woman"; but her mother is as "lightly principled [as] Sally herself" (Gaskell, *Mary* 80), which the novel indicates is unfortunate for her moral development. Though she is neither orphaned nor motherless, like Margaret and Mary respectively, she is fatherless and her mother's presence is moot. Whether or not Sally adheres to Victorian middle-class notions of morality is less significant to this discussion than the narrative effects of the background information provided about Sally. As a third seamstress character with an individual story of seamstress labour (the conditions that result in that labour and the conditions that result from that labour), Sally's character even further emphasizes the distinctness of each woman's labour.

Sally is "vulgar-minded to the last degree" and has "just enough talent to corrupt others." Gaskell hints at a connection between Sally and melodramatic romance fiction, indicating that Sally's desire for a "long list of wooers" is a "pity" because Sally is rather "plain," not "likely, one would have thought, to become a heroine on her own account" (80). According to Sandro Jung, Sally "intends to exert her corrupting influence" because she assumes that "vulnerable and inexperienced" women like Mary "should use an ... intrusive flirtatious persona to attract numerous men" (61-2). Sally's plainness leaves her undesirable romantically, but she enthusiastically plays a key role in Mary's liaison with Harry Carson, who is coincidentally the son of her father's employer. Sally adds an element of convention, in that many seamstress fictions contain a "wom[a]n who ha[s] been worn down morally by the [needleworking] job ... and the reading of 'immoral' books" (Alexander, *Women* 34). Sally acts as a foil to Margaret's moral influence over Mary, but ultimately loses out to Mary's eventual decision to distance

herself from Harry and silently devote herself to Jem Wilson—a working-class man who had previously expressed his love for her.

But, just as Sally's relationship with her mother complicates a clear-cut understanding of her morality, her motives for encouraging a relationship between Mary and Harry are not simply due to a moral deficiency or ignorance. Even after Mary states that she would like to end her relationship with Harry, Sally persistently appeals to Mary to continue. Although the narrator explains that "the mere excitement of the thing" influences Sally's position as Harry's "advocate," she also receives financial compensation for her role in Harry and Mary's romance. Harry pays Sally to deliver letters from him to Mary: Sally's "willingness was strengthened by sundry half-sovereigns" (Gaskell, *Mary* 79). In her re-writing of a morally questionable needlewoman, Gaskell includes economic factors. Rather than indicate that Sally is immoral solely because of economic greed, however, the financial details emphasize Sally's precarious moral *and* economic positions. Sally has no surviving male relatives and limited employment options, which since she is a woman, would provide menial pay and entail poor working conditions anyway. Hence, Harry's half-sovereigns pull Sally towards immoral actions while poor wages push her towards accepting alternative income when the opportunity presents itself regardless of its moral implications. Though Mary, Margaret, and Sally are all needleworkers, Gaskell emphasizes the distinctiveness of origins—familial and financial—that lead to particular seamstress labours.

### **Economic Specificity in Seamstress Labour**

The next section of this chapter extends the discussion of distinctive seamstress representations, beginning with that of Sally, to examine the specificity of each seamstress character's economic restraints. By emphasizing the specific financial situations of the three



needlewomen, Gaskell individualizes their cases, establishing each as a distinct member of the labouring class.

In the context of her low moral standards, encouraging a secret romance by acting as a messenger between the two amours is a logical action for Sally's character. When John briefly leaves town, Mary opts to put her meetings with Harry on hiatus. It is in this context that Gaskell develops Sally's character, but also mentions that "Mr. Carson [gives] her so much money" to perform her task that she "hope[s] the wooing would be long a-doing" (Gaskell, *Mary* 80). As Jung observes, then, Gaskell connects Sally's position between the two lovers to "employment" and "occupation" (Jung 61-2). The description is further steeped in a language of paid labour, as Sally has an "appointment" during which she is "charged" to deliver a message to Mary (Gaskell, *Mary* 80). As mentioned in the previous section, Harry pays Sally to deliver these messages. Thus, it is the specifics of Sally's economic situation—her need to enter the labourforce as a dressmaker's apprentice and her awareness of the financial precariousness of her labour—that lead her to encourage the relationship between Mary and Harry.

While Gaskell gives no specific numerical details regarding Sally's salary as dressmaker's apprentice, authors and artists consistently emphasized the poverty of the working-class Victorian seamstress in their representations. As a dressmaker's apprentice, Sally's occupation would be perceived to be "the higher end of female employment with the needle" and historically "promised, at least after the apprenticeship was served, a decent living" (Harris, Introduction 4); "it was, at least in theory, a structured career with definite prospects, and always [had] the possibility, however remote, of one day running one's own business" (Walkley 2). Despite these broader real-life seamstress experiences, early seamstress texts of 1842-44, including reports such as the *Children's Employment Commission*, emphasized the popular

cultural perception of dressmaking as “mistreatment” and “neglect,” “forced ... work [of] extremely long hours” (Harris, Introduction 4) and economic dependence on an abusive capitalist system. Mayhew’s 1849 letters emphasize that employers still drastically underpaid dressmakers and that apprentices to the position were financially vulnerable (179-84). Without a father, Sally must provide for herself and her bedridden mother through what was popularly perceived to be a notoriously and piteously low-paying occupation.

Gaskell’s characterizations of Mary and Margaret, which precede the development of Sally’s character, also provide insight into the economic instability of intradiegetic seamstresses. Thus, regardless of whether or not readers connect Sally to popular representations of seamstress poverty, such an association exists within the novel and compounds Sally’s economic incentives in her position as romantic messenger as a supplement to her menial income. Her persistence in approaching Mary and encouraging her to receive Harry’s entreaties is thus not simply the result of a poor moral disposition, but is a combination of her need to labour because of an ill mother, the coworkers and clients she encounters because of her labour, and her scant wages. Gaskell’s elaboration of these conditions establishes Sally as an individual woman labourer. Sally is not a metonym for the suffering of the working class, of all labouring women, or of all seamstresses; Sally’s seamstress status does not erase her character’s individual sufferings and limitations caused by the conditions of her labour.

The process through which Mary becomes a dressmaker’s apprentice derives from a combination of the necessity of her labour due to financial insecurity and contemporary anxieties surrounding women entering the public sphere in order to labour. Faced with the awareness that Mary must engage in paid labour, John insists that she find work through either “going out to service, [or] the dressmaking business.” The narrator recalls that John “dislike[s] factory life for

a girl, on more accounts than one” (Gaskell, *Mary* 27), reminding the reader of John’s earlier determination that “Mary will never work in a factory” (14). One of the “accounts” on which John bases his aversion to factory work is his sister-in-law Esther, who also worked in a factory and, he rightly assumes, has subsequently become a fallen woman. John associates Esther’s factory work with “street-walk[ing]” (14), which builds on “contemporary medical opinion [that] the overheated atmosphere of the factory, which accelerated puberty, also caused sexual precocity” (Honeyman 84). However, “John Barton’s explanation of [Esther’s] physical appearance is couched in economic terms” (Jung 59). As Carolyn Lesjak notes, he denounces factory work for women not “because factory work is morally injurious but rather because women with independent incomes” are morally injurious (37): “They can earn so much when work is plenty, that they can maintain themselves any how” (Gaskell, *Mary* 14).

Through John’s logic, Gaskell invokes common perceptions of the conditions of seamstress labour in nuanced ways. First, John’s reasoning reflects a perceived hierarchy within seamstress labour: he does not consider slopwork as an option, but considers only dressmaking. However, it simultaneously reinforces a perception that dressmaking labour is not lucrative, otherwise he would be anxious about Mary’s financial independence; he sees it as a way she can be occupied and earn a wage, but not become self-sufficient and “maintain [herself] any how.” Third, it reveals that he perceives the conditions of labour as more morally appropriate than factory or slopworking labour. All three of these assumptions draw on different popular perceptions of the figure of the seamstress; by juxtaposing differing perspectives through one voice, Gaskell lays bare the contradictions in the seamstress symbol.

For Lesjak, John’s perspective on Esther’s moral fall “inverts cause and effect” because prostitution becomes the result of “economic freedom” instead of “economic hardship, as was

the case with most women who turned to prostitution” (38). However, John’s perspective is proven wrong later in the novel, when the reader learns that Esther resorts to prostitution only after she is left husbandless, with a child, and without any employment options. Though Esther’s early paid labour is that of a factory worker and not a needlewoman, Gaskell makes strong connections between Mary and Esther throughout the novel. Gaskell’s most overt connection between the two is that Esther consistently fears that Mary will follow the trajectory of her own fall. The extent to which connections can be drawn between Mary and her Aunt Esther further grounds the former in a context of women’s labour, rather than as a representation of the collective working class. Though there are some narrative parallels between Mary and Esther, Esther and Sally, and Sally and Mary, these similarities do not erase the distinctiveness of each character’s case. For example, Mary and Esther perform very different labour and Mary does not fall into prostitution as her aunt fears. Sally’s morally dubious decisions based both on economic necessity and on circumstance also further complicate perspectives on women’s labour such as John’s. In juxtaposing different perceptions of Mary’s entrance into the labour force, Gaskell emphasizes the distinctiveness of economic factors and labour conditions that can influence individual women’s decisions to labour.

Mary’s own perceptions of seamstress labour contradict those of her father, which further exposes the conflicting perceptions of needlewomen’s labour. While many representations of seamstresses at the time drew on contradictory conventions, *Mary Barton* lays them bare. By juxtaposing the dialectical perspectives of different characters, Gaskell emphasizes the complexity inherent in the seamstress symbol itself; in so doing, she acts against the needlewoman’s metonymic function by presenting fictional women labourers who can be collapsed neither into each other nor into a symbol for the entire working class. Gaskell directly

connects Mary's dressmaking position to class ideologies; while her father focuses on the occupations that he would prefer she avoid on moral premises, Mary's decision is based largely on relative class position. Mary takes what she perceives to be the most "respectable" position she can in which, as the narrator emphasizes, Miss Simmonds pays her "young *ladies* ... quarterly because so much more *genteel* than by week" (my emphasis, Gaskell, *Mary* 29).<sup>28</sup> Authors of the urtexts of seamstress fiction from the early 1840s depict a dressmaker or milliner in order to create a character with which readers of higher classes can sympathize, partly based on the respectability of her labour in comparison to both slopwork and factory work.<sup>29</sup> Just as John forbids his daughter from labouring in a factory because of its immoral implications, a middle-class reader forbids him or herself to sympathize with an unclean factory-working woman.

Mary comes in contact with Sally while she labours at Miss Simmonds' establishment, since she is a fellow dressmaker's apprentice. This contact is historically and fictionally typical for a dressmaker, but not for a slopworker, as the conventional representation of a slopworker in fiction by the late 1840s is that of an isolated needlewoman in her home, void of human connection and the camaraderie of fellow labourers. It is also through her position as a labourer that Mary meets Harry Carson, the son of the Mr. Carson who employs her father and with whom Mary has begun consorting.<sup>30</sup> This streetwalking context draws on existing popular conventions of the female needleworking labourer who is forced out of doors to travel to and from her place of employment, including the rare dressmakers (such as Mary) who do not board

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<sup>28</sup> In *Ruth*, the dressmaker Mrs. Mason also addresses or describes her employees as "ladies."

<sup>29</sup> See the anonymously published *A London Dressmaker's Diary* (1842) and Elizabeth Stone's *The Young Milliner* (1843) as examples. As Joseph Kestner observes, Stone's work "is distinct from most literature dealing with seamstresses because it did not use the *Second Report* [of the *Children's Employment Commission*]" (83).

<sup>30</sup> I describe this plot detail in present perfect tense to emphasize that the novel reveals this relationship once it is already underway, not as it occurs.

at the dressmaking establishment. As Walkley explains, “day-workers were subject to constant temptation. They were encouraged to look smart and attractive, and their walk home usually took place at night” (85). Mary’s case reflects these historical factors, as her beauty attracts Harry’s attention, and her travel to and from work allows frequent meetings. Hence a combination of the conditions that require Mary to labour and the conditions created because of her labour leave her susceptible to the affections of young gentlemen: a desire for gentility in comparison with her working-class childhood and the requirement to be in the public streets when travelling to and from the dressmaking establishment where she must labour due to financial need. Though both Mary and John prefer she labour in dressmaking over factory and slopwork, their differing yet overlapping motives for needlework reveal the complex web of factors that can lead to a specific type of seamstress occupation. But Esther’s own narration of her fall as a love story, the fact that neither Mary nor Margaret falls, and the economic influences on Sally’s morally questionable actions, prove John’s assumptions wrong; through exposing how constructed such assumptions are, Gaskell calls into question cultural perceptions of seamstresses and women’s labour.

Mary also reveals an aversion to the toil of manual labour: “a dressmaker’s apprentice must (*or so Mary thought*) be always dressed with a certain regard to appearances; she must never soil her hands, and need never redden her face with hard labour” (my emphasis, Gaskell, *Mary* 28). The narrator’s parenthetical tongue-in-cheek qualification emphasizes Mary’s delusion; the reader would recognize the irony in this statement, as earlier seamstress fiction that featured dressmakers emphasized the dire conditions inherent even in dressmaking. Thus, while Gaskell never overtly shows Mary labouring while at Miss Simmonds’, an awareness of the violence of seamstress labour in which Mary would engage is implied through this irony. Further, Gaskell does include Mary in scenes of seamstress labour, when sewing with her

slopworking friend, Margaret. As Mary “hurrie[s] home one evening ... from Miss Simmonds’,” as the conditions of her labour necessitate she travel the streets late in the day, she encounters Margaret who is on her way “to nowhere but [Mary’s] own house” for company while completing some slopwork. Mary offers to help, even though she is “tired enough of sewing to-night at Miss Simmonds” (43), alluding to the labour she has just completed, the details of which readers familiar with the image of the seamstress would be able to imagine.

It is in this scene that Gaskell most overtly depicts seamstress labour and its health ramifications. Margaret has saved certain tasks to be done by candlelight and she has been home working alone, which follows the iconology of the slopworking seamstress as represented in fiction and art, such as Redgrave’s *The Sempstress* that I describe in my first chapter. Yet the fact that Mary and Margaret work together in the evening disrupts the image of the isolated seamstress by focusing on the friendship between the women. The two work on mourning, which is the most arduous type of sewing to complete, particularly for eye health, because of the necessity of sewing black-on-black (Jameson 4) and because it must be done quickly. Margaret’s case reminds readers of these horrendous health consequences as Margaret mentions how much it “hurt[s] the eyes” and just a few paragraphs later reveals that she is “growing a little blind” (Gaskell, *Mary* 45). She then explains that she carries on sewing mourning, despite its effects on her health, because “[p]lain work pays so bad” but now she is “suffering for it” (46). Thus, while Lesjak asserts that “work is never represented concretely” (46), Gordon Bigelow’s assertion is more apt: “the work depicted most frequently in the novel is in fact sewing, which we see as both unpaid labor in the household ... and as paid manufacturing employment” (145). These moments are not prominent, but my project’s focus on the seamstress characters reveals Gaskell’s inclusion of scenes in which women explicitly perform labour in the text. By placing this

moment in the context of sewing mourning, Gaskell intertwines this violence of seamstress labour with descriptions of working-class mortality. “[M]ourning has been so plentiful this winter” that it affects Margaret’s eyesight (Gaskell, *Mary* 46), but this also indicates a high level of mortality which the novel implies is largely from within the working class; Mary and Margaret sew mourning for the newly widowed Mrs. Ogden and her three daughters (43-4). Implied in these interwoven narratives is that these women, left without a husband or father, will also join the labour force, very likely in an occupation such as sewing. Those most directly affected by these deaths, then, are the working-class women who must labour.

### **Conclusion: Representation and Caricature**

This chapter has established that Gaskell’s representations of needlewomen in *Mary Barton* emphasize the specificity of each seamstress character’s suffering, economic situations, and labour conditions. In so doing, she challenges iconic representations of seamstresses, which had developed in cultural consciousness and literature by the 1848 publication of the novel, that collapse the nuance of distinctive experience of labouring seamstresses. Yet, while this chapter has focused on how complicating the metonymic function of the seamstress amplifies commentary on working-class women’s labour, this is not to argue that there are not similarities between Gaskell’s representations of working-class women and working-class men. Rather, the working class in the novel includes individual women and men who perform a variety of types of labour. Gaskell’s commentary on the effects of metonymy extends to the working-class men.

Following Jem’s physical confrontation with Harry over the love of Mary in the novel, the Chartists politically confront their masters in search of higher wages and increased representation. They achieve neither, but do get more than they bargain for in a representative caricature that exaggerates in order to ridicule: “While the [Chartist] men had stood grouped near



the door ... Harry Carson had taken out his silver pencil, and had drawn an admirable caricature of them—lank, ragged, dispirited, and famine-stricken” (Gaskell, *Mary* 156). In the words of David Ellison, this caricature “exaggerates the bodies of the deputation, adding and subtracting flesh ... by which their very emaciation becomes, perversely, fuel” (486). The distortions of Harry’s satirical drawing incite the Chartists to overt violent action against the masters. Upon seeing the caricature, one Chartist recognizes himself: “that’s me ... it’s the very way I’m obligated to pin my waistcoat up to hide that I’ve gotten no shirt” (Gaskell, *Mary* 158). Harry’s image attempts to transform the group into a laughable collective, exaggerating individual characteristics to ironically efface individuality and the specifics of each man’s character.

In Harry’s drawing, John Slater’s big nose is just as indicative as another’s lack of shirt. Slater is upset not by another’s perception of his proportionally large nose, which is a synecdoche, but by the exclusionary politics of metonymic representation; in Slater’s words, “it seems ... sad as there is any as can game on what they’ve never knowed” (158). Those who are not attuned to the distinctiveness of their characters—of the economic and labour conditions that leave them shirtless and without recourse—erroneously dissociate them from the suffering incurred from their labour. The fact that the metonymic article—the shirt—is actually missing further emphasizes the process of erasure in metonymic representation. It is this erasure that the seamstress characters, too, resist in *Mary Barton* through their labour.

*But what if we ... recognize that labor is always hard to see in the novel—even in the industrial novel ...? What if ... we were ... to make visible its continued and often vexed presence, its unwillingness, as it were, to go away?*  
(Carolyn Lesjak, *Working Fictions*)

### Chapter 3 | Generative Potential of Corporeal Labour in *Ruth*

Despite the decided focus in Gaskellian scholarship on industrial fiction, *Ruth* remains underexamined as a commentary on industrial labour, including women's labour. Instead, many of Gaskell's contemporaries and modern-day critics understand *Ruth* mainly as a fallen heroine of domestic fiction who experiences a moral restoration controversial to many readers at the time of publication.<sup>31</sup> The overall lack of scholarship concerning labour in the novel is surprising, given the recurrence of labour politics in the plot. The novel tells the story of *Ruth*, a young woman who begins the narrative as an orphaned dressmaker's apprentice to Mrs. Mason. Her employer prizes her beauty, but so does a local gentleman, Mr. Bellingham, whom she meets while repairing dresses at a ball. The two begin to meet regularly, initially by happenstance and then by contrivance. Eventually Mason happens upon the pair together and dismisses *Ruth* from her employment, and *Ruth* accompanies Bellingham to London. He falls ill and abandons her under his mother's influence during his recovery, and *Ruth* discovers she is pregnant. While lamenting her lot, she meets Thurstan Benson, a minister. He and his sister Faith create a respectable identity for her as a widow, and she travels with them to their hometown, where she

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<sup>31</sup> See Suzann Bick's "Take Her Up Tenderly" and Hilary Schor's chapter "The Plot of the Beautiful Ignoramus" in *Scheherezade in the Marketplace*. For a discussion of how sympathy interacts with *Ruth*'s ambivalent fallenness to reflect middle-class social anxieties, see Audrey Jaffe's "Under Cover" in *Scenes of Sympathy*. Gaskell is notorious for her deep internalization of commentary on her writing, which is evident in her letters and diaries. As Gaskell mentions in a letter to Eliza Fox in February 1853, "two men" by had burnt their copies of *Ruth*, and "a third ha[d] forbidden his wife to read it" (222-23) because of the subject matter of a morally redeemed fallen woman. Reactions ranged from this extreme vehemence, to the moderate reviews of its "dull" plot that Gaskell relates in her next letter to Tottie in the same month (223), to the approval for which she thanks Anna Jameson in a letter from March of the same year (226). Some approved so much of her restoration that they protested *Ruth*'s death, which was the typical plot trajectory for a fallen woman in the literature of the time. Charlotte Brontë, in an oft-cited letter to Gaskell in April of 1852, exclaims: "Yet—hear my protest! Why should she die?" (200).

gives birth to her son Leonard. She becomes a governess for the middle-class Bradshaw family, until Mr. Bradshaw discovers her secret. After a time of unemployment, Ruth becomes a sick nurse, then nurses Mr. Bellingham (who has coincidentally re-entered her life under a pseudonym) when he falls violently ill. He recovers, but Ruth does not.

Contemporary readers were aware of a discourse of labour in the story, especially through the seamstress figure even if recent critics are not. In February of 1853, *New Monthly Magazine* published an unsigned review of *Ruth* in which the reviewer likens the novel to Hood's "The Song of the Shirt," "reproduced in prose but with amplifications" (233). These amplifications, according to the reviewer, are Ruth's seduction, fall, and attempts to atone. John Malcom Ludlow's 1853 review focuses on these amplifications in stating that the majority of the novel "lies far from all class feelings" (282). Following suit, recent discussions of Ruth's expiation tend to prioritize genre over labour politics; for example, Tim Dolin emphasizes that the novel is *neither* pastoral *nor* industrial (vii), while Audrey Jaffe describes *Ruth* as an "oddit[y] within the Victorian literature canon" ("*Ruth*" 47).<sup>32</sup> However, as I have already shown, "The Song of the Shirt" reflected and greatly influenced cultural perceptions of the figure of the seamstress—a figure that became central in discussions of industrial labour. By dissociating the labouring seamstress of Hood's poem from its "amplifications" in Gaskell's novel, critical approaches thus far have downplayed the complex associations between needlewomen as victims of the industrial revolution and class-based ideologies of work in mid-Victorian public consciousness. In *Ruth*, Gaskell continues to engage with the popularly recognizable figure of the Victorian seamstress in her third and final eponymous needlewoman.

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<sup>32</sup> Jaffe also includes *Cranford* as the second of Gaskell's "oddities."

At present, discussions of corporeal labour remain peripheral or cursory in *Ruth* scholarship. Stoneman's indispensable feminist reexamination of Gaskell's works, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (1987), reflects the views of early commentators such as Ludlow by focusing on the novel's female community without mention of work, labour, or the community of dressmaker's apprentices. At the other end of the spectrum are engagements with Ruth as a representation of a seamstress, but in service of an emphasis other than women's labour; Martin A. Danahay's *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture* (2005), for example, draws explicitly on the iconography of the distressed Victorian seamstress in its brief reading of *Ruth*, but does not distinguish between the terms "work" and "labour." As I assert in my introduction, this distinction is important for Gaskell studies because her oeuvre reveals a similar articulation. Gaskell does not limit her working-class female characters to middle-class notions of domestic work; instead, her texts challenge such cultural constructs through emphasizing the physical and economic effects of "labour." Forming a middle ground are approaches such as Peter Stiles's "To the Threshold" (2004) which briefly mentions a connection between Ruth and the working class but without examining the seamstress figure, or those that briefly mention her role as a seamstress without elaborating its implications for representations of women's labour, such as Deborah Denenholz Morse's focus on Ruth's sexuality in "Stitching Repentance, Sewing Rebellion" (1995).

This chapter gives precedence to Gaskell's representations of Ruth as a labourer to examine a politics of women's labour in the novel, extending beyond initial explicit connections to the figure of the Victorian seamstress as a dressmaker's apprentice. Ruth's fall draws on the popular representations of needlewomen post-1850, which continued to include the labour of the needlewoman's incessant "stitch—stitch—stitch[ing]" (Hood 29) a decade after the publication of Hood's poem. Ruth continually attempts to atone for her sin through socially recognizable

moral codes, in which she performs charitable and self-sacrificial acts in the name of extrinsic, deferred reward. Yet *Ruth* exposes the limitations of this paradigm. As such, Gaskell's novel critiques systemic patriarchal middle-class economic models that exclude women labourers, such as seamstresses, from the productive capacity of labour. Ruth Y. Jenkins identifies Gaskell as one author who "[c]ircumscribed by patriarchal constructs[,] ... transform[ed] canonical patterns—even by simply reproducing them as [a] wom[a]n" (28).<sup>33</sup> In *Ruth* Gaskell offers a literary female-gendered "re-production" of women's work and women's labour, as a representation of a fallen woman who nobly attempts to atone, but whose consistent attempts to find paid labour recognize the earthly material and economic necessity of women's labour.

### **Seamstresses, Economics, and Fallen Women**

This section places Ruth's sexual fall in the context of seamstress iconology, which reveals the financial cause of her trip with Bellingham to London. I assert that Gaskell grounds Ruth's fall in the pragmatic economic implications for seamstresses, rather than the moral context of a sexual fall. In the fourth chapter of the novel, Mason witnesses Ruth arm-in-arm with Bellingham on their evening return to the dressmaker's establishment (Gaskell, *Ruth* 41-2). Adhering to characterizations of dressmakers from historic cases who "enforce strict respectability by strict rules" concerning their apprentices' liaisons with men (Walkley 87), Mason immediately dismisses Ruth from her service with such "intolerance" that Ruth is unable to utter a single word of explanation (Gaskell, *Ruth* 42). This moment acts as a catalyst for Ruth's fall. In line with Gaskell's selective returns to early conventions that "establish[ed] the image" of the seamstress in Victorian popular culture, Ruth has "no feminine role model"

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<sup>33</sup> Ruth Y. Jenkins examines how Gaskell "charged her culture with appropriating God's word to authorize industrial oppression for greater profit and female subjection for men's vicarious salvation" (94). The chapter's focus on religious doctrine, rather than labour, leaves this Jenkins' work tangential to my argument.

(Alexander, *Women* 34): she is an orphan, and her confidante, Jenny, is absent from the dressmaker's shop due to illness (Gaskell, *Ruth* 25-6). Bellingham capitalizes on her abandonment by coercing her into accompanying him to London (43-4). The subsequent chapter opens with a geographic and temporal displacement, during which Ruth and Bellingham have consummated their relationship. Thus begins the part of the narrative that is the basis of most commentary on *Ruth*: the protagonist's status as a Victorian "fallen" woman. If mentioned at all in these critical works, Ruth's initial occupation as needlewoman functions largely as a literary device that logically leads to her fall.

"[B]y means of the detailed representation of an individual case," summarizes Jaffe, Gaskell's "goal in *Ruth* was to elicit sympathy for the figure of the fallen woman" ("Under" 77). Jaffe continues by discussing the sympathy of other characters in the novel and of middle-class readers for Gaskell's most controversial fallen woman.<sup>34</sup> Scholarship that focuses on Ruth as a fallen woman reproduces popular Victorian perceptions of the seamstress that developed by the 1853 publication of the novel. As discussed in my introduction, the figure of the isolated slopworker became recognizable in discourses of working-class industrial labour by the late 1840s, while authors of earlier seamstress texts from 1842-44 focused on dressmakers and milliners to garner sympathy and reform for seamstress labour conditions specifically. In all of these cases, the seamstress's occupation forces her out of doors to some degree, to travel to and from clients' homes or to run other errands. This leaves her susceptible to advances from men of other classes, which it was thought could result in a sexual fall and associate her with "street walkers." By the 1853 publication of *Ruth*, such a potential for seamstress protagonists was familiar to most readership, as were cultural associations between seamstresses and prostitution.

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<sup>34</sup> As critics such as Maria Granic-White note, "*Ruth* is the first [Victorian novel] to include the fallen woman as the protagonist" (147). Angus Easson makes a similar observation in his 1979 *Elizabeth Gaskell* (114).

However, Gaskell does not intervene only in Victorian treatment of the “figure of the fallen woman” (Jaffe, “Under” 77); rather, she intervenes in Victorian cultural perceptions and treatment of women labourers by emphasizing the labour conditions that result in Ruth’s fall.

With the publication of Mayhew’s letters in the *Morning Chronicle* and his full-length *London Labour and the London Poor* from 1849-50, the figure of the seamstress once again garnered attention in nonfiction and fiction supplications for social reform. Depictions such as Mayhew’s countered the perception that needlewomen pursued prostitution because of excess desire; instead, he emphasized the seamstress’s economic *necessity* to “resort ... to prostitution” (*Voices* 91).<sup>35</sup> While equating Ruth’s sexual relationship with prostitution may seem like a stretch from a contemporary perspective, for nineteenth-century social commentators like Mayhew, the discrepancy is minimal.<sup>36</sup> Gaskell’s opening descriptions of Ruth as a needlewoman are more than a narrative device to support the rehabilitation of prostitutes. Influenced largely by the symbolic resonances of the seamstress figure in his culture by the time of publication (Alexander, *Women* 95), Mayhew writes of seamstresses who must resort to prostitution in order to avoid starvation. The women he describes in this context are slopworkers, rather than dressmakers and their apprentices; in popular iconology, the slopworker sews men’s shirts, performing “wifely duties for the marketplace” instead of for her husband, making her work “not unlike prostitution itself” (Harris, Introduction 6).

Though orphaned and cared for by a distant guardian, Ruth begins the novel as a dressmaker’s apprentice. Her occupation is explicitly stated. But in describing Ruth’s labour

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<sup>35</sup> Historian Judith Walkowitz makes a similar argument about prostitution at the time in general, describing a Victorian woman’s decision to prostitute herself as partly “circumstantial rather than premeditated” and a “response” to “vulnerable economic and social conditions” (14).

<sup>36</sup> This is best demonstrated in his *London Labour and the London Poor*; true to the Victorian compulsion for categorization, Mayhew lists “Professional Prostitutes,” “Clandestine Prostitutes,” and “Cohabitant Prostitutes” under “Those who will not work” (26-7). While he mentions the seamstress in his elaboration of clandestine prostitutes (255), Ruth’s unmarried “cohabitation” with Bellingham would draw additional sexual infamy.

conditions Gaskell also draws on conventions of the urtexts which featured dressmakers and milliners rather than slopworkers. Like the young milliners Anna Jameson describes in 1843, Ruth is between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, works in a poorly ventilated room, and sleeps in an overcrowded lodging (Jameson 2; Gaskell, *Ruth* 6-10). She and her fellow labourers are cold, fatigued, and famished; in their brief half-hour repose offered my Mrs. Mason at “[t]wo o’clock in the morning,” she supplies the women with “bread and cheese and beer” (Gaskell, *Ruth* 6-7), which she instructs her employees to eat while “standing” (Gaskell, *Ruth* 5; X.Y., qtd. in Jameson 2).<sup>37</sup> This subsistence is only slightly more substantial than the “tea and bread and butter” described by Jameson (2), but would still fall under the category of what Grainger’s 1843 report on the employment of dressmakers would deem “insufficient” rations (F30). By drawing on early factual descriptions of dressmakers, Gaskell re-situates Ruth in her status as a labourer within the capitalist industrial system; accessible through the lens of the pre-existing cultural awareness of the working conditions of the seamstress, the opening description places the novel in a context of labour relations—of employer and employee, of master and woman. Ruth’s character thus reflects the financial limitations of real-life and fictional seamstress labourers before her, but performs labour that leaves her not quite as economically or morally vulnerable as the figure of the isolated slopworker. In this context, Ruth’s fall becomes less of a given, demonstrating Gaskell’s unsettling of cultural constructions of gendered labour and cultural perceptions of the relative economic security of dressmaking.

Another common narrative explanation for a Victorian woman’s fall is punishment for aspirations beyond her class, but Gaskell also disrupts this convention by featuring a seamstress

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<sup>37</sup> This time also recalls Richard Redgrave’s *The Sempstress*, in which a clock indicates just before two thirty in the morning: Mason’s apprentices will return to work at the same time as the sempstress he depicts. However, Redgrave’s painting is that of the solitary woman sewing piecework, while Gaskell’s scene of multiple dressmakers is more reminiscent of early illustrations, such as “The Milliners and the Duchesses” (1843).



protagonist. Because representations of the seamstress by the 1840s placed her “precisely in the intersection of the rich and the poor” (Harris, “Glitters” 115), anxiety about class mobility saturates the figure of the needlewoman. Surrounded by and creating the luxurious attire of her clients, the seamstress is consistently tempted by the fetishized commodity—that which she desires but cannot attain by her own means. In early seamstress literature, “women who have been worn down morally from the job” can influence poor romantic relationships for their fellows in the dressmaking trade (Alexander, *Women* 34). Further, Mason demands that Ruth work at the county ball—a demand which the narrator insinuates is based on Ruth’s beauty (Gaskell, *Ruth* 10)—and asks that she wear a more genteel dress (13).<sup>38</sup> Mason’s selection is consonant with a Victorian anxiety about clothing’s ability to obscure and unsettle class distinctions that is particularly resonant in the figure of the seamstress. Despite all this, Ruth poses no real threat to the middle class. Ruth’s dress is “shabby” (13) and she insists that she does not deserve to attend the ball (11). The narrator makes a point of describing the emotional support provided to Ruth from her fellow apprentices (18), who are also much “too sleepy to care for any of the poms and vanities” (8) of the higher classes who will attend the dance. It is at the ball that Ruth first encounters Bellingham, but she follows appropriate respectable behaviour in shunning his gaze (Harris, “Glitters” 127), keeping her eyes plied to her sewing labour (Gaskell, *Ruth* 15). In her re-writing of the figure, then, Gaskell creates a seamstress who does not require narrative punishment for unacceptable class aspirations, but who also does not initially experience the complete economic necessity of the slopworker who falls into prostitution to supplement her income. So why does she still fall?

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<sup>38</sup> The narrator emphasizes that Mason “*really* was not *aware* of the falseness” of her prioritization of beauty (my emphasis, Gaskell 8); ostensibly apologetic moments on behalf of her middle-class peers such as this occur throughout Gaskell’s work, which I assert reveal a level of biting sarcastic criticism rather than apologetics.

By re-assembling many of the conventions of the seamstress trope, Gaskell creates a fallen woman who does not fall due to dire financial straits, but does fall because of a *specific* economic situation. Through a series of encounters, Bellingham gains Ruth's trust, leading to their gallivanting through the meadows to visit her childhood home, Milham Grange. It is on their return that Mason observes the two together and dismisses Ruth from her position as labourer. Consequently, Ruth is faced with the prospect of unemployment and loss of the food and shelter provided by her apprenticeship. Bellingham exploits Ruth's vulnerability in this moment by ordering her a cup of tea and leaving to secure them a carriage to London. Heather Levy, though she does not elaborate on the labour implications of the situation, notes that it is "[t]he fact that Ruth cannot pay for the cup of tea" which "precipitates" their relocation to London and her sexual fall (87). For a moment, Ruth conceives of an alternative to joining Bellingham and makes to leave the inn and return to Old Thomas and his wife, who now inhabit Milham Grange. However, she "remember[s] the cup of tea she had drank; it must be paid for, and she had no money with her" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 46).

As an apprentice, Ruth receives only room and board from Mason, no income or dispensable monies, and her guardian allots as little money as possible to her care (31-2). The narration further saturates this moment with Ruth's financial inexperience and insufficiency. Not long after their first interaction at the county ball, Bellingham saves a young boy from drowning in Ruth's presence and leaves his purse with her so that she has the finances to see to the boy's care (21-2). This also secures a third encounter with Ruth to receive the leftover monies. Ruth misinterprets Bellingham's character by assuming he understands the economic pragmatism necessary within the working class; what she interprets as "fine generosity" is no such benevolence for, as the narrator emphasizes, "generosity implies some degree of self-denial"

(23). Ruth's subsequent "fall" is thus rooted in the logic of her material dependency when she is prevented from economically generative labour; she falls because she cannot labour.

### **Thrust into Inaction: Ruth's Recurring Requests for Labour**

As with Ruth's fall, a discourse of pragmatic labour permeates Gaskell's descriptions of Ruth's conduct after Bellingham's departure. While Ruth attempts to atone, she does so more in response to corporeal, intrinsic implications than abstract, moral reasoning.<sup>39</sup> During this process, she repeatedly attempts to secure paid labour, particularly by using the skills from her earlier seamstress employment. However, the limitations of gendered conceptions of women's work, of extrinsic moral code, and of opportunities for pragmatic and economically viable women's labour in her Victorian society prevent the agentive labour she seeks.

When Ruth finds herself abandoned by Bellingham, her seducer, in a foreign setting, she eventually rouses herself to a purpose: a march towards the "suicide" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 73) that would complete the typical narrative for the Victorian fallen woman. However, an interaction with her new acquaintance, Thurstan, changes the trajectory of her actions. It is after this interaction that, under the advisement and with the assistance of Thurstan and his sister Faith, Ruth begins her expiation for her sexual and moral fall. Thurstan's status as a minister and the religious language in his attempts to console Ruth lead many critics to discuss the role of religion in Ruth's reform, particularly in the context of Victorian discourse of morality and fallen women. Yet Thurstan's religious supplications do not instigate Ruth's atonement; in fact, they immediately precede her suicidal march.

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<sup>39</sup> Though beyond the scope of this thesis, Gaskell's engagement with notions of work resonates with those of Thomas Carlyle, particularly as he articulates them in *Past and Present* (1843).

Thurstan first approaches Ruth while she sits, “crouched up like some hunted creature” after a crowd of children thwart her attempt at repose in a field (72). Thurstan’s reaction is to quietly utter, “Oh, my God! for Christ’s sake, pity her!” After silently contemplating his words, Ruth heads towards the stream with conviction of purpose. Thurstan tries to follow, but falls “over some sharp projecting stone” and cries out in “acute pain” (73). The agony in his exclamation calls her back to his aid. She runs to the “little mountain stream” that would have been her means of suicide, instead to gather water in her hands to help revive Thurstan (74). Though Ruth’s physical effort to aid another being is a moral activity and is rife with religious imagery, a language of corporeality permeates her reaction. She responds not to his words that invoke intangible entities but to his bodily suffering, and she physically carries water to Thurstan using her hands. This emphasis on suffering and corporeality recalls Ruth’s opening occupation as a needlewoman—a woman labourer who must use her hands to stitch.<sup>40</sup>

When Thurstan subsequently convinces Ruth not to end her life, she responds to his entreaties for the sake of her deceased mother and her unborn child rather than for the sake of God. Once again, Ruth prioritizes tangible entities over abstract powers. Ruth does recognize Thurstan’s supplications that she atone for what her society views as immoral acts, but only in the name of persons dead and not-yet-living. Her mother and child are the tangible means through which she attempts to redeem herself. Even further, the specific invocations of Ruth’s own mother and her status as a future mother challenge patriarchal social structure. Rather than respond to Thurstan as a patriarchal character and voice of reason, Ruth reacts to his mentioning of matriarchs: her mother and her motherhood. Ruth’s responsiveness to invocations of corporeal mother figures and her resultant hand labour in carrying water to Thurstan run counter to the

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<sup>40</sup> The first patented sewing machines were in 1846 and 1851 in America, only affecting British commercial sewing by the 1870s (Kortsch 31-32).

transcendental qualities expressed and embodied by Thurstan. Gaskell's insistence on the relevance of women's labour and intrinsic reward in this moment extends throughout the novel.

While transiently under the care of Thurstan and Faith, and upon discovery of her pregnancy, Ruth reveals to Faith her plans to labour. As Faith recounts to Thurstan, Ruth "means to work night and day to earn enough for her child," but "her utmost earnings would not be more than seven or eight shillings a week" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 92-3). The Bensons take Ruth under their charge and insist that she abandon ideas of public labour. Instead, consistent with their middle-class roots, they suggest that she focus on her moral restoration and domestic women's work, such as caring for her son and performing duties in the Bensons' home. The Bensons create for Ruth a new identity as a widow named Mrs. Denbigh. This new identity allows her to relocate to their small town of Ecclestone, but once again follows middle-class constructs of Victorian respectability in the novel's 1840s setting, in which married women must "[withdraw] ... from the workplace" to the domestic sphere, while the men occupy the public sphere (Honeyman 126). The Bensons' insistence on a retreat to the domestic reflects an anxiety about the moral contamination of public work for women, to which, in Victorian consciousness, the figure of the seamstress was notoriously susceptible (Walkowitz 14) and which Ruth's pregnancy embodies.

Through Ruth's differing approaches to sewing when contextualized as unpaid women's work and as labour, I assert that Gaskell portrays tension between the dominant imagery of the seamstress as a victimized labourer and the less-reported favourable effects of needlework. As mentioned in my previous chapter, Harris notes that the best-known image of the seamstress as a lone, ailing, toiling slopworker in much fiction, nonfiction, and art in the 1840s does not reflect the variety of experiences of real-life women (Harris, Introduction 3). Many reports from the early 1840s included both positive and negative testimonies about the conditions and effects of

seamstress labour; yet, as noted earlier, authors steadily reproduced mainly the unfavourable details that eventually became a prototypical icon in popular culture. Upon her first day living with the Bensons in Ecclestone, Ruth already performs “work” (Gaskell 113), but it is “work” in the terms explained by Kortsch: simply “to sew” (6). Ruth *passively* sews and eventually the “work [falls] from her hands” (Gaskell, *Ruth* 113). Four days later, a parcel arrives for “Mrs. Denbigh” from the Bradshaws—wealthy members of Thurstan’s congregation: “[v]ery fine muslin” (118). Ruth longs to return the fabric, conscious of her inability to reciprocate with a gift because she cannot labour and therefore cannot generate income.

Forced to consume although she cannot produce, Ruth responds by “set[ting] *busily* to work” (my emphasis, 120) enthusiastically re-producing clothes from the material; she purchases much cheaper cloth through her own financial means from which to make clothing for herself, and re-fashions her own expensive clothing (gifts from Bellingham) and the new muslin into attire for her unborn son. Just two paragraphs later, Ruth sews garments for the poor with “*languor*” (my emphasis, 121), working at moral atonement through unpaid women’s domestic work as constructed by the middle class rather than sewing as income-generating labour. By juxtaposing Ruth’s inertia in both moral work and women’s work with her satisfaction in active laborious re-production as a seamstress, Gaskell reveals the limits of a systemic middle-class model which excludes women from the productive capacity of labour and is grounded in a discourse of domestic and moral work.

These limitations become amplified throughout the novel, as Ruth continues to seek labour, only to be thrust back into moral and gendered work; she sees the latter two as inaction because in them she cannot generate income. This is not to imply that Ruth harbours any class aspirations; the Bensons create an alternate identity that unsettles her class, they insist that she

not engage in paid labour, and her repetitious entreaties for labour are attempts at pragmatic self-sufficiency rather than class ascendancy. Immediately following Leonard's birth, Ruth again approaches her benefactors with the idea of providing for herself and her son through either "making dresses" or "plain work" (128). Thurstan once again emphasizes the low income and poor conditions of such labour and asks Ruth to remain in her current position with the Bensons for at least a year, thrusting Ruth back into inaction. Thurstan placates Ruth's insistence for paid labour: "[n]ever fear leading an *idle* life, Ruth. We'll treat you as a daughter and set you all the household tasks" (my emphasis, 129). While she initially takes on this domestic work "heavily" (130), she eventually adopts a more cheerful attitude when Sally, the house servant, invokes Ruth's status as a mother by citing the domestic chores as means through which she can better her son's future. Her character takes on such a penitent and morally pure demeanour that W. R. Greg claimed, in 1859, that Ruth is perhaps too "pure, pious, and unselfish" to garner "compassion" for "Magdalenes" (328). Ruth's continued moral and domestic work eventually draws the attention of Bradshaw, who employs her as a governess—an occupation befitting her gender and her adopted (through disguise) class.

The intrinsic effects of her expiation are undone, though, when the Bradshaws discover her son's illegitimacy and end her employment, leading Ruth to lament "But I shall earn no money!" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 265). Constrained by the options available to her in Victorian society, Ruth can still only work towards spiritual reward. In attempting to generate a persona that justifies middle-class employment, Ruth participates in an immoral lie; she thus transgresses both the social codes dictated by her fallenness and the class and economic standards for paid women's work. Fallen once more, she can only re-begin the reparation cycle. The narrative of Ruth's efforts to atone repeats. Ruth performs tasks for Faith (the character, but aptly also the

transcendent Faith) and feels “daily sacrifice” in her duties. But she becomes frustrated by “inaction” because others prevent her from engaging in active, remunerative labour (271). Rather than teach the Bradshaws as governess, she now teaches her own son. She attempts the “women’s work” of housework, but there is no longer enough to occupy three women. Finally, Sally does obtain some slopwork for Ruth, which does not pay well, “[b]ut whatever it was, Ruth took it, and was thankful.” Ruth performs any labour open to her.

However, Ruth’s labour is unnecessary—though her income supplements the house’s finances, the Bensons do not risk destitution (272). Eventually, Ruth finds “employment” (289) as a sick nurse, tending to the poor who may or may not be able to pay her for her services.<sup>41</sup> While this physical labour is also a form of morally restorative work, its lack of economic benefit leaves her labour pragmatically pointless for her earthly life. Ruth’s labour as a sick nurse is subsumed in moral and women’s work through lack of pay for her actions and through a discourse of penitence, and Ruth herself becomes subsumed in this work through her death after completing what she sees to be her ultimate penance: caring for the very man who seduced her when she was a dressmaker’s apprentice. Her labour-power remains latent. Unlike the cloth that she re-purposes from consumable gifts of flattery to practical clothing, Ruth’s labour has no economic production power—she cannot generate income from this work. Unable to produce, Ruth is consumed. Gaskell depicts a seamstress who cannot escape the systemic patriarchal constructed models of society. Ruth’s work and labour are repeatedly redundant.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> As Pauline Nestor shows, Gaskell’s depiction of Ruth is “a challenge to [poor] public opinion” about nurses (38).

<sup>42</sup> In her article “Gaskell’s Detours: How *Mary Barton*, *Ruth*, and *Cranford* Redefined Redundancy,” Anna Fenton-Hathaway examines how Gaskell plays on the idea of literary redundancy as a response to cultural debates surrounding “redundant” women after the 1851 census.



## Conclusion: Still Mills

Near the beginning of *Ruth*, Ruth walks with Bellingham to Milham Grange, her childhood home. Before reaching the grange, they pass “the great mill-wheel, which st[ands] in Sabbath idleness, motionless in a brown mass of shade, and still wet with yesterday’s immersion in the deep transparent water beneath” (36). Critics such as Hilary Schor cite such moments as evidence of Romantic aestheticism and Wordsworthian poeticism in *Ruth*, which associate Ruth with nostalgic reminiscences of the past or with nature. However, the language in this specific description provides access to the subtext of labour that extends throughout the novel. First, it invokes an object used in corporeal, working-class labour: the mill. This is the same mill wheel that Ruth recalls earlier in the novel as she sits during a brief repose from labour in the dressmaker’s establishment: “at home I have many a time run up the lane all the way to the mill, just to see the icicles hang on the great wheel” (Gaskell, *Ruth* 8). Rather than place the mill in dramatic scenes that depict working-class labour, the mill is “motionless” in both descriptions.

The labour of Ruth and her fellows is a foil to the image of the stagnant mill that she pictures in her mind, as they “[stitch] away as if for very life,” knowing that, regardless of the physical demands of their toil, “the *work* hours of the next day” will not shorten (my emphasis, 6). This contrast emphasizes the corporeal ramifications and poor working conditions that the dressmakers experience. Ruth is the newest apprentice at Mason’s establishment, so has yet to experience the negative health effects of her work conditions, but her closest friend, Jenny, begins the novel with a cough and “pain in her side” (8) that recalls the real-life illnesses of needlewomen described by nonfiction authors such as Jameson. Her affliction worsens, and she disappears from the novel by its second chapter. While the narrator implies that this loss of Jenny’s “warning voice and ... gentle warning wisdom” (26) makes possible Ruth’s seduction by

Bellingham, it also lays bare the long-term effects of poor labour conditions on the economically vulnerable seamstress. The description of Jenny's departure from the dressmaker's shop points to Ruth's probable futures in such an arrangement: physical death, moral death, or both.

At the novel's outset, Ruth longs for the idleness of her youth, in which the demands of her labour do not restrict her aesthetic pleasures such as going for a stroll simply to see the icicles on a mill wheel. However, it is on a day when she and Bellingham go for a stroll simply to see her childhood home that they pass by that very mill as it sits motionless—a day of idleness—and it is as a direct result of that stroll that Mason dismisses Ruth from her employment. As this chapter has demonstrated, the economic implications of this dismissal become compounded in the moment when Ruth does not return to Milham Grange—to the idle mills of her youth—because she cannot pay for a cup of tea. The image of the mill even hints at Ruth's fall, which in typical narratives of pregnant fallen women at the time would lead to her “immersion in the deep transparent water.”

Still a nostalgic return to a pre-industrial or pre-lapsarian society is not a pragmatic or desirable solution. When Ruth returns to her childhood home, prior to her fall, she finds a well-meaning patriarch whose advice is unintelligible. The model upon which he bases his advice is obsolete. Yet the latest model is contradictory: an industrial society in which women must labour for financially pragmatic reasons, but must simultaneously be restricted in that labour so that they cannot viably produce. It is only after her fall that Ruth sees the generative potential in her labour—a potential she cannot actualize. For Gaskell, the culprit in Ruth's situation is the stasis imposed on women through an inability to discover selfhood through labour, because that selfhood is dictated by a patriarchal middle-class construction, and an inability to re-produce the system or within the system despite latent labour-power.

## **Conclusion | “Pull this world to pieces”**

In November of 1849, Gaskell reflected in a letter, stating, “Well, I suppose it won’t do to pull this world to pieces, and make up a better, but sometimes it seems the only way of effectually purifying it” (“55,” 91). Though she does not directly express what precisely needs “purifying” in the world she describes, this statement immediately follows Gaskell’s updates to Tottie about Pasley—the imprisoned needlewoman about whom Gaskell writes to Dickens in the letter that opens my introduction. When examined alongside Gaskell’s seamstress fictions, as this thesis shows, it becomes clear that Gaskell intervenes in “this world” by critiquing the limited options available to seamstress labourers like Pasley. Gaskell’s needlewomen, though distinct and nuanced, are all bound by the conditions of their labour. Attempts to use their labour to alter their positions within the system and self-actualize are met by gender- and class-based restrictions, particularly physical and financial limitations.

Ruth can cut material into pieces and can make more appropriate clothing through her labour in a work of fiction; however, she cannot “pull [her] world to pieces, and make up a better” that will allow her re-entry into paid labour. The seamstress characters in all three of Gaskell’s fictions find themselves in worlds that limit the productive capacity of their labour. Hence, Gaskell’s seamstress texts demonstrate that the dominant structures in Victorian society that restrict the positive effects of women’s labour cannot be dismantled.

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