MARY BARTON, NORTH AND SOUTH, AND SHIRLEY:

WOMEN AND FAITH IN INDUSTRIAL ENGLAND:

AN EXAMINATION OF THREE NOVELS BY ELIZABETH CLEGHORN GASKELL
AND CHARLOTTE BRONTË

by

HELEN KNAPP WEST

Under the Direction of Roxanne Eberle

ABSTRACT

In Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë’s industrial novels, Mary Barton, North and South and Shirley, the female protagonists display increased agency as they move between the public and private sectors. The authors incorporate a critique of Christian institutions into their industrial texts, insisting that the church must not ignore the plight of women and the industrial poor. Inspired by her belief in Jem’s innocence, Mary Barton moves from the domestic realm and into a public courtroom. North and South focuses on the development of female influence. Shirley points to the possibility of a new, elevated place for women within a spiritual context. Reflecting the crises of the times in which they were written, these novels illustrate that the experience of crises instigates change, and that the crises facing industrial England called for transformation in terms of politics, religion and sexual roles.

INDEX WORDS: Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë, Mary Barton, North and South, Shirley, industrial novel, Margaret Hale, Shirley Keeldar, Caroline Helstone.
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HELEN KNAPP WEST

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HELEN KNAPP WEST

Major Professor: Roxanne Eberle
Committee: Tricia Lootens Richard Menke

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the people who made it possible: Kevin West, Margaret and Herb Knapp, Ruth and Carlton West, Vicki Ankcorn and Stephanie Jones, and to my children, Andrew, Colin, Elizabeth and Allison, who I hope will someday understand the value of seeing an arduous project through to completion.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell’s marriage plots in *Mary Barton, North and South* and *Shirley* move toward egalitarian matches and increased female agency. The authors call for Christian institutions to stay in tune with the needs of a changing Victorian world and are critical of the church’s efforts; however, they view Christianity as an integral part of society. Undoubtedly, the authors’ views on the importance of Christianity to a community’s well-being serve as central underpinnings for their novels. Brontë and Gaskell highlight the role of religion in tandem with women’s movement from the domestic to public arena. In these novels, women, typically part of the private arena, are brought into powerful positions affecting the public realm, just as women of the time were entering the factories and mills. By placing marriage plots at the center of their industrial novels, Brontë and Gaskell move from the public (industrial) sector to the private (domestic) sphere where marriage is the family’s cornerstone. The authors connect women’s transformations in the workplace with a new place for women as marital partners. Brontë and Gaskell propose that in the changing industrial world, neither the female nor the industrial poor can be ignored, and that Christian institutions must recognize these changes. By tracing the development of the female protagonists and their relationships to religion, I hope to demonstrate the significance of the authors’ creation of a space for expanding female influence. Reflecting the crises of the times in which they were written, *Mary Barton, North and South* and *Shirley* illustrate that the experience of tribulation instigates change, and
that the crises facing industrial England called for transformation in terms of politics, religion and sexual roles.¹

Early and mid-nineteenth century England, the world in which Gaskell and Brontë lived, was transformed by the growth of industry that sparked “a set of controversies about English social, material, and spiritual well-being” termed “the Condition of England Debate” (Gallagher xi). Since Gaskell and Brontë lived in northern England, the country’s industrial center, they experienced firsthand the consequences of a changing countryside. Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1854-55), as well as Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849) engage in this debate, and can be categorized as “industrial novels” (xi). Gaskell and Brontë’s similar authorial interests dovetail in these three novels, which all address the industrial workers’ plight, class tensions, women’s issues, and religious concerns; the authors choose to structure industrial social issues within the domestic setting (Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell* xvii), setting the stage for the exploration of female influence, as Gaskell and Brontë’s female characters move between the private setting and the political arena. I will focus on how both authors play with the genres of romance and realism, merging the traditional marriage plot with the social problem novel.

Brontë and Gaskell use ideas of Christian reform and a concern for the poor industrial workers while proposing a heightened position for women.

Chapter Two of this thesis traces Gaskell’s representation of Christian influence and female empowerment in *Mary Barton*. Influenced by her Unitarian faith, Gaskell insists that the actual circumstances of the industrial poor provide the foundation and justification for her novel. This reliance on factual information about the poor strengthens Gaskell’s authorial impact and personal ascension to a highly prominent public life. In *Mary Barton*, Gaskell faithfully reports the deplorable conditions of the industrialized poor by drawing on personal experience as well as
the Unitarian publication *Reports of the Ministry to the Poor, in Manchester* (Fryckstedt 72).

Although her first novel contains no clerics, by and large, Gaskell’s characters exhibit an abiding religious faith which seems to strengthen them as they encounter a variety of major life crises. The one exception to her overtly Christian portrayal of the poor is John Barton, whose spiritual journey and eventual redemption parallel the novel’s exploration of the poor’s dilemma and the potential for class reconciliation and reform. In tandem with a redeeming picture of Christian faith, Gaskell depicts a strong female presence in her representation of Mary Barton. Grounded in a belief in the supremacy of the truth (in this case, the fact of Jem’s innocence), Mary, like Gaskell, moves from the private to the public realm.

Chapter Three concentrates on Margaret Hale, Gaskell’s heroine in *North and South*. Ostensibly setting out to provide a more balanced view of the industrial debate than she did in *Mary Barton*, Gaskell’s second condition of England novel focuses upon the development of female influence. Originally titled “Margaret Hale” (Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell* 369), *North and South* sketches the development of her female protagonist and the importance of female authority in the domestic and political arenas. As in *Mary Barton*, Gaskell fuses the industrial novel with the romance and *Bildungsroman* genres; once again, the author employs a strong female heroine fortified by Christian ideals to bridge the gulf between her private and public plots. Although less obviously than *Mary Barton*, *North and South*, like its heroine Margaret Hale, functions as a mediator between England’s reading public and the social situations it presents (Schor 121). Margaret’s identity as a Christian, her growth as a potent, unconventional woman, and her navigation of the marriage plot reveal Gaskell’s ideal of an empowered Christian woman traversing various realms for society’s advantage. In both of her industrial works, Gaskell
emphasizes the Unitarian premise that faith leads to action (Fryckstedt 65). Religious empowerment helps propel her female characters from the private and into the public world.

In Chapter Four, I examine Brontë’s *Shirley*, a critique of the Church of England with a female viewpoint. Unlike Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*, *Shirley* includes many official representatives of the Church of England, but Brontë includes little graphic detail of the poor’s situation. Brontë exposes the flaws and personal idiosyncrasies of her clergy with a strong, satiric hand and draws on real life experiences to inform her portrayals. Although severely critical of her clergymen, the author affirms the importance of the church for society and incorporates some positive representations of clerics as well. Brontë’s characterization of her title character provides an exemplary depiction of a powerful woman, and Shirley’s alternative creation myths point to the possibility of a new, elevated place for women within a spiritual context. As in *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, Brontë’s female heroines achieve greater influence, benefiting their community en route.

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1 Gaskell and Brontë’s similar novelistic concerns and eventual friendship place them professionally, culturally, and personally in conversation with one another. We know, for instance, that Gaskell read *Jane Eyre, Shirley, Villette*, and *The Professor*, and that Brontë read *Mary Barton* while composing *Shirley*, as well as *Cranford* (193), *Ruth* (200) and *North and South* (Easson 330). Perhaps most significantly, Gaskell’s biography of her peer, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, inextricably links the two famous Victorian authors. These connections point to the textual synergy between their industrial works.
CHAPTER 2

MARY BARTON: GASKELL’S VISION OF AN EMPOWERED WOMAN AND FAITH

Elizabeth Gaskell’s first novel, *Mary Barton*, merges the condition of England novel with the romance. After the death of the Gaskell’s only son at the age of ten months, William Gaskell encouraged his wife to write a novel in order to distract her from her grief (Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell* 153). As she emerged from her own personal life crisis, Gaskell looked to the sufferings of the industrial poor surrounding her in Manchester and began her story (193). Published on October 18, 1848, *Mary Barton* was an instant success; Gaskell’s reviewers praised it for “its pathos and striking characterization” (Uglow, *Mary Barton* ix), but Gaskell was also criticized for not presenting the masters fairly and for escalating class tensions (xv). In *Mary Barton*, Gaskell sends a message to English Christians, exhorting them to see and meet the needs of the industrialized poor. While thus appealing to the public’s sense of Christian duty, she elevates the women’s position as an agent of change in the figure of Mary Barton.

Before addressing how Gaskell utilizes faith as a means of inspiration and confers her title character with social agency, it is important to note Gaskell’s personal religious background and philosophy. As Monica Fryckstedt argues, Gaskell’s Unitarian beliefs directly influence her composition of *Mary Barton*. In mid-Victorian England, Unitarianism was a minor but prominent wing of the Dissent (Fryckstedt 54).
until the late 1700s (63). Linked to liberty of thought and revolutionary politics, Unitarians generally supported the French Revolution and decreased in numbers until the mid 1800s (64). Doctrinally, Unitarians embraced “the unity of God” (65), but did not believe in the Trinity or Christ’s divinity. They focused on God’s compassionate character, viewing God as a loving Father rather than a Judge and rejected the idea of humanity’s total depravity, instead trusting in the goodness and potential of humankind. Emphatically optimistic, Unitarians “held that the reconciliation of man to God should be brought about through the life and work of Christ” (65) and viewed “their social duties to their fellow men as a step towards reconciliation with God” (65). Personal analysis dominated Biblical study, and motivated by the belief in an individual’s ability to think logically, Unitarians exhibited an unusual tolerance for other religious beliefs (66). This understanding of the importance of reason caused Unitarians to value education greatly and to view education as a curative for humanity’s ills; hence, in Victorian England, Unitarians had a great impact on social reform (66).

Descended from Unitarians, Elizabeth Cleghorn sustained strong Unitarian connections before she married William Gaskell, one of the most important Unitarian ministers in Victorian England. Pastor of the Cross Street Chapel in Manchester for 56 years (67), her husband maintained a position of religious prominence for decades, as is evident in his political activities and prolific publications (79-80). Although primarily focused on her family activities, Elizabeth faithfully co-labored with her husband in the church ministry, specifically educating girls in Sunday School (69). Although “there is a scarcity of direct evidence for Elizabeth Gaskell’s religion” (80-81), it is clear that she adhered to central Unitarian principles (81). Victorian Unitarians considered themselves
Christians; thus for the purpose of this study the term “Christian” broadly refers to the Unitarian definition of Christian tenets.

Thus grounded by the Unitarian “belief that social evils were humanly created, not God-inflicted, and could be remedied by human efforts” (Uglow, *Mary Barton* x), Elizabeth Gaskell composed *Mary Barton* in an attempt to help the industrialized poor. Gathering evidence from the Unitarian document, the *Reports of the Ministry to the Poor, in Manchester*, Gaskell endeavored faithfully to portray the deplorable conditions of the working class. Empowered by her belief system, Gaskell, a woman, became a potent agent of social change, effectively drawing the attention of England’s populace to the poor’s situation. Similarly, in *Mary Barton*, Gaskell chronicles the same two powerful elements of social change: that of a woman, Mary Barton, and a faith, Christianity.

Writing from the perspective of her own personal life crisis, Gaskell highlights the Christian endurance of *Mary Barton’s* characters in the face of great tribulation. This faith-based fortitude and consequent optimism engender an expectation for Mary Barton’s journey and eventual triumph. As a text, *Mary Barton* is an expression of both Gaskell’s optimistic faith and her confidence in female agency.

Gaskell’s Unitarian belief in the goodness of humankind is evident in her characterizations: the manner in which her characters respond to life crises displays Gaskell’s optimistic confidence in humankind’s ability to persevere. Even Sally Leadbitter, her least likable portrayal, softens in light of her relationship with her mother, and the villain, Harry Carson, retains gentleness in his position as beloved son and brother. In Green Heys Fields and at the Barton’s home for tea, Esther’s disappearance casts a shadow over the merry gathering, especially Mary Barton senior, who mourns her
sister’s absence. Alice Wilson’s thoughtless comment freshly draws forth Mary’s grief over Esther, yet Mary is forgiving and considerate of Alice, saying, “never think no more about it. God bless you, Alice” (*Mary Barton* 19). This kind of exchange reveals the Christian creed of forgiveness as a by-product of love; just as God demonstrates love toward humanity through forgiveness, so do Gaskell’s characters. This forgiving love prevails in the poor community throughout the novel. Gaskell’s poor are not perfect, sometimes blundering, but they share one another’s burdens and look past each others’ faults.

The death of the heroine’s mother during pre-term labor initiates the novel’s second life crisis, and John Barton’s response to his wife’s death uniquely marks him in contrast to the rest of his community. In the first chapter, during a time of prosperity and happiness, John vents his frustration about the disparity between the wealthy and the poor: “Does the rich man share his plenty with me, as he ought to do, if his religion wasn’t a humbug?” (11). John’s past sorrow, the death of his starving son, has led to his resentment against the rich. It is this bitterness, festering in John’s consciousness and exasperated by continued life disappointments, which ultimately leads to young Carson’s murder. Significantly, Hilary Schor notes that “in [Gaskell’s] letters she declares that ‘John Barton was the original title of the book. Round the character of John Barton all the others formed themselves; he was my hero, the person with whom all my sympathies went’” (15). Gaskell paints a realistic psychological picture of John’s descent into depression and violence. His distinctly un-Christian-like conduct, (beating his daughter, opium addiction and his eventual murderous act), stands out in contrast to the overwhelming goodness and strong faith of the other major characters. Gaskell
eventually reconciles John’s murderous descent with Christian redemption in his deathbed confession. His centrality to the text’s plot and to the author’s sympathies points to Gaskell’s Christian optimism and faith that good (Mr. Carson’s conversion and subsequent social action) can result from the direst of circumstances.

Gaskell continues her theme of Christian optimism in the face of monumental life crisis with Margaret Legh’s encroaching blindness. When Margaret reveals her secret to Mary, she expostulates, “Oh, God help me, Lord help me!” (48). Margaret’s great distress is intensified by her concern for her grandfather’s welfare. She knows that without her income (she is a seamstress), she and her grandfather will have very little to live on. Margaret’s blindness progresses, but her financial trouble is alleviated by her singing career, and she confides to Mary, “It did please God to make me blind” (95), acknowledging God’s sovereignty even over her great suffering. Margaret never complains but instead exhibits bravery, perseverance, and faith. Gaskell rewards this fortitude at the novel’s end: Margaret regains her sight, launches a prosperous singing career, and finds a life partner in Will Wilson. This reversal in fortune reflects the author’s Christian optimism.

Margaret’s deteriorating eyesight is quickly followed by another calamity, the fire at Carson’s mill. Gaskell draws attention to Jem Wilson’s public display of courage as he rescues two men from the burning building at great personal risk. This fire causes George Wilson and Ben Davenport’s unemployment, but Mr. Carson, whose mill was amply insured, enjoys extra leisure time at home. Gaskell details the squalid conditions of the Davenport’s cellar, drawing her description from the Reports of the Ministry to the Poor, in Manchester (Fryckstedt 93). In this episode, John and George serve as angels of
mercy to the Davenports, caring for them like family in sacrificial benevolence. Gaskell juxtaposes the deprived conditions of the Davenports’ with the lighted shops where John goes shopping and the opulence of Mr. Carson’s mansion where George turns to beg for an infirmary order. Gaskell repeats this pattern, contrasting the lavish lifestyle of the wealthy with the poor’s deprivation in *Mary Barton*. Ben Davenport’s faith during deprivation is evident in his letter in which there is “ne’er a work o’ repining: a’ about God being our father, and that we mun bear patiently whate’er he sends” (*Mary Barton* 65), and his dying words, “Oh Lord God! I thank thee, that the hard struggle of living is over” (71). Under the worst circumstances, the poor find solace in their Christian belief. Mrs. Davenport’s later development as an independent widow, supporting her young family, and her care for the Wilsons during Alice’s convalescence illustrate the resilience of the poor and their fortifying faith. Furthermore, in this episode Gaskell reverses traditional gender roles: John and George easily move into the domestic sphere, caring for the sick family in a traditionally feminine style, and Mrs. Davenport becomes the breadwinner for her family. Here, the ease with which Gaskell blurs traditional gender roles anticipates *Mary Barton*’s move from the private to the public realm: a life crisis is the springboard to greater freedom of movement for the sexes.

Gaskell continues her examples of life crisis when the Wilson’s twin boys, Joe and Will, contract a fever and die, and Alice, their aunt, claims Gaskell’s authorial focus. Alice’s willingness to help is plain when she immediately, without being asked, goes to her brother’s house after hearing of the twins’ illness. After their deaths, Gaskell gives Alice the most direct narratorial space in the chapter, and the point of her discourse is to testify to God’s control over human plans. Alice avers, “The Lord has taken them from
some evil to come, or He would na ha’ made choice o’ them” (78). Gaskell gives voice to the faith that sustains her poor.

As E. Holly Pike notes, “Gaskell presents Alice as a good character through her possession of Christian virtues” (38). Perhaps the most saintly of Gaskell’s characters, she is not exempt from the pattern of misfortune that the author weaves into the text. Beset by extreme poverty, Alice nonetheless is always available and willing to lend a helping hand to her neighbors. As she ages, Alice experiences first deafness, then blindness, and finally a paralytic stroke which renders her semi-conscious until death. When Mary expresses sympathy over Alice’s hearing loss, Alice responds, “Yes, dear, it’s a trial; I’ll not deny it. Pray God give me strength to find out its teaching. . . . But I’ve much to be thankful for. I think I’m a comfort to Jane” (122). Although Alice emphasizes her desire to understand the didactic nature of her distress and dwells on her life blessings rather than deficits, she is honest enough to first admit to Mary that her deafness is “a trial.” Alice’s faith and coping mechanisms operate within the reality of her condition; she is not in denial, but rather chooses to live as best as she can within her limitations. Knowing that she can console Jane sustains her: Alice derives joy from helping others and will not succumb to the tragedy of life. Alice’s exemplary character has a direct impact on Mary, who, bereft of a mother figure, gleans inspiration from Alice’s faith and fortitude in the face of suffering.

Gaskell emphasizes this connection between Alice and Mary when Alice thinks she may have caused Mary to stumble after complaining about waiting to hear from Will. Initially, she asks Mary’s forgiveness “if [she] weakened [Mary’s] faith, by showing [Mary] how feeble [hers] was” (146). Directly after this, Alice’s foster child Will returns
home, and she is overcome with joy to “see” him, but the happy occasion does not
distract her from repeating her anxiety to Mary: “My dear! I shall never forgive myself,
if my wicked words to-night are any stumbling-block in your path …. Mary, don’t let my
being an unbelieving Thomas weaken your faith. Wait patiently on the Lord” (147).

Reminiscent of Alice’s earlier conversation with Mary’s mother, this request for
forgiveness underscores the link between Alice and a mother figure. Alice’s concern for
Mary and respect for God’s precepts cause her to encourage Mary and correct herself.
She has no pride; her theology and concern for Mary’s spiritual development prompt her
to action. Gaskell rewards Alice by giving her the two things she most desires: to be
reunited with Will and to visit the home of her youth. Alice does not literally return
home; however, while in a coma, her ramblings show that she has returned home in
memory, and Gaskell emphasizes her happy state (251). Alice functions as an example to
Mary, a spiritual mentor who lives her faith and by example makes an impression.

Alice’s poverty and physical debilitation do not stop her from “loving her neighbor as
herself” (Matt. 19:19). Alice’s optimism reflects the power of faith that Gaskell hopes to
make an impact on her readers and functions as a precursor to Mary’s growth as a heroine
in her forgiveness of her father.

In *Mary Barton*’s second half, Gaskell turns from her slower-paced narrative,
which depicts the struggles of the Manchester poor, to Harry Carson’s murder and the
chain of events that follow. Having established John Barton’s tragic character and
floundering faith in contrast to the other characters, she returns to John and the
consequences of his life crisis. As Gaskell combines the political and domestic plots, she
also unifies the spiritual community in Manchester through John Barton and Mr.
Carson’s conversions. Before turning to John’s greater plot line, it is important to also look at Job Legh and his spiritual growth in the text. For Gaskell, spiritual development leads to action; Job, John and Mr. Carson illustrate Gaskell’s motif of passage from the private to public arenas. As each man transforms inwardly, he moves out into the community.

After listening to Mary’s troubles regarding Jem, Job describes his faith: “It’s not often I pray regular, though I often speak a word to God, when I’m either very happy, or very sorry” (Mary Barton 259). Early in the novel, Gaskell has gone to great lengths to introduce Job as a serious scientist, representative of a group of unrecognized intellectuals among the working class. A spinner by trade, Job’s true passion is his study of insects and rare animals. After Job labels himself as not particularly religious, his prominence in the latter section of Mary Barton and his expressions of religious belief become much more pronounced. Just as Alice gives spiritual encouragement to Mary, at Mary’s sick bed, Job counsels Jem: “Thou must trust in God, and leave her in His hands” (Mary Barton 335). The scientific man of intellect seems to be more a man of faith than he realized.

Job’s journey also highlights the movement between traditional gender roles and the Good Samaritan theme found in the text. As Schor points out, Job Legh’s assumption of the narrative from John Barton about his London journey is a prime example of how Gaskell moves from the political to the domestic plot in her novel (16). Additionally, Gaskell shifts from John’s bitter spiritual struggle with existing societal inequities to the more optimistic Christian community that derives support from unlooked-for generosity. In Mary Barton, Gaskell claims this good Samaritan spirit for her poor community. In
Job’s tale, again a life calamity, the premature death of Frank and Margaret Jennings, young Margaret’s parents, takes center stage. Old Jennings, Frank’s father, and Job travel to London to bury their children and take custody of the infant Margaret. On the way home, an unnamed woman graciously feeds Job’s party breakfast and pays special attention to little Margaret, who is being awkwardly cared for by her grandfathers. The grandfathers function in a nurturing, mother-like role to the baby, so much so that old Jennings dons a woman’s sleeping cap in order to soothe her. This movement between conventional sexual roles sets the stage for Mary’s repositioning from the private to public realm.

Job’s belief in and understanding of God become more evident as he converses with Mr. Carson at the novel’s end; Christian beliefs influence the political discussion of Job and Mr. Carson. Job views scientific and industrial inventions as “gifts of God” (Mary Barton 381) and admits

that it is part of [God’s] plan to send suffering to bring out a higher good; but surely it’s also a part of His plan that so much of the burden of the suffering as can be should be lightened by those whom it is His pleasure to make happy. . . . The duty of the happy is to help the suffering to bear their woe. (382)

Job has entered into the political debate at the core of the novel, combining reason and an appreciation for progress with a spiritual perspective. He addresses suffering, the overwhelming force in the lives of the industrial poor, and in this case also relevant to Mr. Carson, acknowledging that affliction has a didactic purpose, but stresses the responsibility that people have to alleviate distress when possible. Job seems to have
channeled the author’s voice, speaking with conviction and spiritual authority. It is significant that Job closes his conversation with Mr. Carson with a type of benediction, saying, “I’ll pray for you. . . . and I’ll ask God to bless both to you now and for evermore. Amen!” (383). Job’s faith lends him power and sincerity, and the courage he displays in this conversation has a great impact on Mr. Carson. On the very next page, Gaskell details the changes that took effect in him:

The wish that lay nearest to his heart was that none might suffer from the cause from which he had suffered; that a perfect understanding, and complete confidence and love, might exist between masters and men; that the truth might be recognized that the interests of one were the interest of all, and, as such, required the consideration and deliberation of all; that hence it was most desirable to have educated workers, capable of judging, not mere machines of ignorant men; and to have them bound to their employers by the ties of respect and affection, not by mere money bargains alone; in short, to acknowledge the Spirit of Christ as the regulating law between both parties. (384)

This creed expresses Gaskell’s ideal of Christian brotherhood as a means to alleviate class tensions and help the industrial poor; as we shall see, the author expands this in *North and South*. For Job and Mr. Carson, their spiritual development leads to action. Job boldly speaks to Mr. Carson, and Mr. Carson institutes significant alterations in the way he runs his business.

If Gaskell develops Job’s Christianity to help initiate great social transformations, what is she doing with John Barton? From the beginning, John cannot divorce his faith
from political action. In this sense, he seems to have gotten Gaskell’s mantra right: faith begets action. While talking to George in Green Heys Fields, John first evokes Biblical authority when governing his family. He objects to Mary, his daughter, being made a lady on this basis: “I’d rather see her earning her bread by the sweat of her brow, as the Bible tells her she should do … than be like a do-nothing lady … going to bed without having done a good turn to any one of God’s creatures but herself” (10). John cannot reconcile a self-centered existence with God’s word. The source of his heart struggle is that he views the rich people’s Christianity as “a humbug” (11). This hypocrisy, coupled with his heavy life misfortunes, creates John’s disillusionment. In John, Gaskell merges her critique of the industrial system with her call for Christian reform. He sees the gulf between the rich and poor like Dives and Lazarus; it is insurmountable, and the thought that the rich will receive punishment in eternity is cold comfort to John’s earthly sorrows. As Gaskell’s narrator clarifies, “John Barton’s overpowering thought, which was to work out his faith on earth, was rich and poor; why are they so separate, so distinct, when God made them all? It is not His will that their interests are so far apart. Whose doing is it?” (169). John’s crisis of faith involves his inability to reconcile the idea of God as loving Father with the unnecessary suffering of the poor.

It follows then, that the weapon that John uses to murder Harry Carson is stuffed with the paper on which Mary has copied Bamford’s poem, “God Help the poor” (110-112). Gaskell cleverly unites her domestic story (the poem was transcribed onto a Valentine that Jem had given Mary), her overarching spiritual theme, and the political plot in John’s act of murder. Ironically, John is not aware of Harry Carson’s plan to seduce Mary; his violent act is based purely on political grounds; however, the poem
copied onto the Valentine, Jem’s expression of love, alludes to the personal reasons John has to harm Harry. This connection on the parchment reflects Gaskell’s awareness of how deeply she interconnects the domestic, political and spiritual threads of Mary Barton. John’s murderous deed does not need the additional motivation of his daughter’s position as Harry’s sexual victim. John’s rage, fueled by his domestic woes, is embedded more deeply in his crisis of faith. Further irony is present when John says goodbye to Mary before leaving to kill Carson. His words, “God bless thee, Mary! - God in heaven bless thee, poor child!” (197) sound odd on the lips of a pending killer. By abandoning Mary, he leaves her more vulnerable to Harry’s advances, but by killing Harry, he eliminates her danger. As John invokes God’s blessing on his daughter, at some level, his faith exists. Although Gaskell unequivocally indicts John’s violence against Harry, identifying it as sin, his deed is complicated by Harry’s unknown intentions towards Mary. Furthermore, Gaskell’s poignant commentary, “Are ye worshippers of Christ? Or of Alecto? Oh! Orestes, you would have made a very tolerable Christian of the nineteenth century!” (212), occurs after she details Mr. Carson’s vengeful ethic, describing it as pre-Christian. Her condemnation of Mr. Carson’s sin rivals or tops that of John Barton’s, regardless of the scope of the latter’s crime.

After John murders Harry, he temporarily vanishes from the narrative. His act and absence prod the progression of Mary’s story, the romance, and facilitate Mr. Carson’s movement, but his return and presence as an undetected murderer stall the love story. John must be dealt with before Mary has the freedom to marry Jem. Crushed by the weight of his sin, John confesses to Mr. Carson, and the rich man’s grief causes John to finally cross the gulf that separated Dives and Lazarus. He empathizes with Mr.
Carson as a fellow bereaved father, and “now he knew that he had killed a man, and a brother” (363). This revelation brings about his contrition, and he asks for Mr. Carson’s forgiveness, claiming, “I did not know what I was doing” (363). Here, Gaskell illustrates the power of paternal feeling and Christianity. With his recognition of the rich’s status as “brother,” John is able to surmount his antagonism for the rich. Instead of “other,” Mr. Carson becomes one of his kindred. Furthermore, with the confession and redemption of a premeditated, self-confessed murderer, Gaskell reenacts the crucifixion story when Christ tells the thief on the cross, “today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). The power of Christianity is that even a murderer can be redeemed and Christian brotherhood established between grim enemies.

Gaskell’s evocation of the crucifixion takes center stage as Mr. Carson’s recognition of Christ’s words on the cross prompt him to reread the gospel. The power of Christ’s story permeates not only that of the cold-blooded killer, but also the proud, broken-hearted father. Gaskell blends their stories, showing the similarities between Mr. Carson and John Barton’s childhood exposure to the Gospel. While Mr. Carson is reading Scripture and pondering its import, John relates his spiritual history to Job, Mary and Jem. Mary Lenard observes that Carson’s conversion results after reading the Bible, but John Barton’s occurs after recalling the Bible (126) and posits that Carson’s middle-class status is significant because that is Gaskell’s target audience. “Gaskell invites her readers to put themselves in the place of Carson, to be ‘converted’ by the text of the novel, even as Carson is converted by reading the Bible” (126). Gaskell cements Mr. Carson and John’s kinship with, “God be merciful to us sinners. - Forgive us our trespass as we forgive them that trespass against us” (369). “The Christianity of this picture of
brotherhood is obvious in the recognition of essential humanity despite differences of circumstance. The references to the parable of Dives and Lazarus . . . reinforce the explicitly Christian nature of the relationship Gaskell envisions, as does Mr. Carson’s conversion” (Pike 28). John’s struggle, John’s sin, John’s redemption and understanding of Christian brotherhood illustrate Christianity’s power in a more dramatic way than the quiet, abiding faith of Alice Wilson and the other working class characters; however, they both reveal the faculty of redeeming faith which transcends and unites the domestic and political spheres.

Gaskell’s focus on crises – crisis of faith and life circumstances – as well as optimistic outcomes anticipates her heroine’s predicament. The spiritual connections that the author makes between faith and action create a platform from which to launch Mary Barton into the public sphere as a strong female presence. “Mary’s most remarkable attribute as a woman in Victorian literature is her independence” (Lansbury 31). Gaskell highlights the power of Christian belief in tandem with the empowerment of the female in Mary Barton. “It is Mary who redeems both Jem and her father . . . this redemptive power is not the passive grace exerted by the angel in the house . . . instead, Mary confronts society at every turn and eventually overcomes it” (Lansbury 23). Mary faces the crisis of being motherless, a crisis of sexuality, the crisis of her lover’s trial and her father’s guilt. Mary’s triumph over multiple life crises reveals Gaskell’s faith-influenced optimism. Like Gaskell, Mary finds her voice in Mary Barton.

Mary’s life crises cause her character to mature. After Mary’s mother’s death, Mary is given “more of her own way than is common is any rank with girls of her age . . . all the money went through her hands, and the household arrangements were guided by
her will and pleasure” (*Mary Barton* 23). Gaskell stresses John’s indulgence of Mary, but Mary shoulders the duty of running the household. She cooks for her father and herself, irons his clothes, cleans the house, and most likely does the washing as well, in addition to working full-time as a dressmaker’s apprentice at Miss Simmond’s. When she is spending time with Margaret, her one friend, they are usually sewing together, and Mary only sees Harry Carson at work and on her walks home. In her household, Mary effectively functions as an adult rather than an adolescent. Mary’s first life crisis, the premature loss of her mother, forces her into a leadership role that she assumes with grace. Like her friends, Mary meets her life challenge without complaint.

Mary’s second life challenge is understanding her sexuality. At sixteen, when Mary must choose a profession, she is aware of her great beauty because of the comments she receives from factory people and others. “With this consciousness she had early determined that her beauty should make her a lady” (26). Because dressmakers were clothed nicely and did not do dirty work, Mary chooses the dressmaking profession. She wants to maintain her appearance and use it to her best advantage. In the novel’s first half, Mary’s conduct is typically seen as giddy and immature as she flirts with Harry Carson, but her behavior is anything but naïve. Harry notices that “there was something of keen practical shrewdness about her” (81), and he finds this attractive. “Mary was ambitious, and did not favour Mr. Carson the less because he was rich and a gentleman” (81). Determined and calculating, Mary encourages Harry’s advances because he is a vehicle to achieve her aspirations. Moreover, Harry is an especially suitable candidate because of his parents’ background. Mary knows that they were of the working class: in fact, his mother was a factory worker, so he is less likely to object to her lower class
status. Like her Aunt Esther, Mary views her sexuality as a commodity and attempts to use it to raise her place in society.

Mary understands the importance of maintaining her virginity; as long as she keeps aloof from Harry’s sexual advances, he will continue to pursue her, and the only barter he can offer her is a marriage license. When John travels to London as a Chartist delegate, Mary decides “that she would not be persuaded or induced to see Mr. Harry Carson during her father’s absence” (90). Mary realizes that as a young woman home alone, she is especially susceptible to Harry’s passion. Besides being generally unpleasant, Sally Leadbitter’s visits to Mary at home seem particularly threatening, because Sally’s interest in Mary’s affairs is selfishly motivated and profit driven: Sally benefits financially from Mary’s flirtation, and Mary’s sexual purity and reputation are of no concern to her. Mary’s sexual protection is her community of neighbors. When Sally threatens to tell Harry to visit Mary at home alone, “Mary flashed up. ‘If he dares to come here while father’s away, I’ll call the neighbors in to turn him out’” (93). Mary understands Harry’s desire to keep his romantic interest in her quiet; if she calls the neighbors, it will expose Harry publicly, and Mary must keep her bargaining chip, her sexuality, safe at all costs. Harry’s admission that he was not planning on matrimony solidifies her decision to end the relationship. Sally rightly assesses to Harry, “But if you did think of marrying her, why . . . did you go and tell her you had no thought of doing otherwise by her? That was what put her up at last!” (138). Mary realizes the danger her sexuality has placed her in and avoids crisis by physically escaping her would-be seducer. Even though Mary occasionally blunders, she has her wits about her, and her flirtation and careful maintenance of her sexuality highlight her intentional ambition; she makes
sure to maintain her sexual purity and ability to navigate society as a young beauty. Gaskell’s portrayal of Mary is a Bildungsroman; after learning her lesson with Harry Carson, she forsakes her vanity and flirtation as foolishness and pursues the maturation of her love for Jem.

The agency and independence that Mary attains in the novel’s second half have their foundation laid in the first, and Gaskell accentuates Mary’s identity as a Christian heroine in the ways Mary takes action, an expression of her faith. Mary establishes herself as a kindly neighbor: she sews a mourning dress for Mrs. Davenport, and even in her great distress after Jem’s arrest, she takes time to feed the starving Italian boy. Moreover, Mary’s forgiveness of her father confirms her as a powerful Christian example. Gaskell unites Mary’s crisis of sexuality, lack of maternal guidance, and Jem’s trial in the appearance of her Aunt Esther. Esther’s status as a prostitute serves as a warning: she is what Mary would have become had she succumbed to Harry’s advances.

It is at Mary’s lowest point that her Aunt Esther appears at her door, equipping Mary for her most difficult, but most rewarding trial. As Hilary Schor points out, Esther’s arrival and mistaken identity as Mary’s dead mother is one of the oddest narrative moments in the novel (29). Mary’s dreams of her mother’s ghost seem to come to fruition when she opens the door to Esther. Gaskell has already made a point of identifying Mary with her absent aunt, relating John’s fears of Mary becoming like Esther as the reason for his not allowing Mary to work in a factory. Also, “the sayings of her absent, the mysterious Aunt Esther, had an acknowledged influence on Mary” (26), and the narrator repeatedly compares Mary’s good looks to her aunt’s. When Mary mistakenly identifies Esther as her mother, Gaskell brings to the forefront Mary’s deep
psychological need for a mother, and underscores how remarkably well Mary has turned out despite her mother’s absence. Schor argues that Esther’s position as a substitute mother buttresses Gaskell’s contention for maternal authority in the text (33).

“Reinstating the authority of the mother also places Gaskell as (maternal) author at the center of her text, and makes the mother the perfect novelistic authority” (33). Certainly it is no accident that Esther appears at Mary’s moment of greatest need, and Esther, despite her position as a social outcast, maintains her agency. Esther functions as a narrator, surrogate mother, and detective (30), adding to Mary’s empowered female position, and models for Mary the courage to leave the family. Her detective work indirectly casts Esther as a force of change in the public realm, as the paper she recovers from the crime scene spurs Mary on to the trial.

Gaskell’s Unitarian beliefs, particularly the “doctrine that man is fundamentally good and not tainted by original sin” (Fryckstedt 84), inform her depiction of fallen women. It is not surprising, then, that Esther prays for Mary (Mary Barton 125), and that Esther’s belief in Mary’s danger causes her to act by approaching first John and then Jem on Mary’s behalf. In this way, Esther exemplifies Gaskell’s principle of belief leading to action. Esther, entrapped in prostitution and alcoholism, is granted agency and the nickname, “the butterfly,” hinting at Gaskell’s belief in the unseen but redemptive side of fallen women. Notably, Esther is named for the Old Testament’s beautiful Hebrew queen who, using her status as the king’s wife, boldly speaks out in defense of her people, the Jews. The Biblical Esther’s actions in the domestic realm have dramatic consequences in the political world: the king’s second in command and an enemy of the Hebrews, Haman, is hanged, and the Jewish people are saved from extinction. Gaskell’s naming of Esther
reinforces her theme of women moving from the domestic to the public arena and having an impact. Far from a queen, *Mary Barton*’s Esther, from the lowest echelon of society, has agency and social influence; as female and double for Mary, Gaskell’s uses of Esther at this crucial moment points to greater empowerment for women.

Esther helps Mary meet the crisis of Jem’s trial. After receiving the evidence from Esther that incriminates her father and exonerates Jem, Mary reasons that if her father is guilty then Jem is blameless (244). Realizing that proving Jem’s innocence cannot be dependent on finding the real murderer but instead proving his alibi, she goes to Job for assistance. This sequence of reasonable, thoughtful action is the result of Mary’s years of independence: Mary’s domestic position of leadership as an adolescent prepares her for this challenge. As Lansbury observes, “[Mary] is the active force in the novel” (24). Gaskell’s heroine does not faint or swoon, but rises to the occasion, meeting difficulty with determination and foresight. Setting aside the public embarrassment that she encounters as a known flirt, Mary prioritizes Jem’s salvation from the gallows and convinces Job to help her secure Jem’s innocence. This action is a direct result of the evidence that Esther supplies.

Before Mary embarks on her journey to Liverpool, she asserts her active position while making plans with Job and Margaret. Job’s original plan is for him to search out Will, but Mary insists that she take on this responsibility. “She could not endure the suspense of remaining quiet, and only knowing the result when all was accomplished. So with vehemence and impatience she rebutted every reason Job adduced for his plan” (*Mary Barton* 278). Here, Mary refuses the role of the waiting female and asserts her ability to get the job done. Her subsequent adventure in Liverpool on the train and in the
boat proves that she has rightly claimed the lead in this endeavor. Certainly Job, as an elderly man, could not have undertaken the same path that Mary follows. What makes Mary’s actions more remarkable is that she has never left Manchester before. We have no record of her ever having been on a train, in a different city, or having seen the sea, yet she navigates these unprecedented experiences with relative ease. With this expedition, Mary moves from the domestic sphere and into the public arena, and it is in the most public forum, a legal trial, that Mary finds her voice.

Physically and emotionally spent, Mary finds the courage to speak clearly and honestly at the trial. Gaskell unites the romance plot with the political one: as a Trades union member, John murders Harry Carson because of Harry’s heartless caricature of the union representatives, not because of Harry’s involvement with Mary, yet Jem stands trial for a crime of passion, and Mary’s testimony exposes the deepest feelings she has for Jem. Mary’s words surmount the main obstacle (besides Jem’s possible death sentence) in the romantic plot: communicating to Jem her affection. For Mary, this is “a chance to speak openly, choose her life, and overcome some of the plots that have been written for her” (Schor 37). Mary determines the course of the romance and the political plot, and her action in speaking out reinforces Gaskell’s theme of faith begetting action. It is Mary’s unshakable faith in the truth of Jem’s innocence that buoys her. Although Jem performs some of the more conventional feats of a hero (rescuing two men from the burning mill, sacrificing himself instead of allowing harm to come to another), it is Mary who receives the authorial focus and is the hero of the book that bears her name. As Robin B. Colby observes, “[Gaskell] makes a place for women in the public/political domain. Moreover, she inverts the power relations in the rescue sequence by placing
Jem’s life in Mary’s capable hands (41). Her actions bear great import, both personally and politically: she gets her man, and perhaps more significantly, she achieves social justice by thwarting Mr. Carson’s unrestrained thirst for vengeance. Gaskell makes it clear that it is Mr. Carson’s lavish spending and political influence that rush Jem’s trial. By producing an alibi and saving Jem from the gallows, Mary not only enacts social justice, she halts the consequence of corruption that stems from Mr. Carson’s interference.

Does Mary maintain her agency at the novel’s end? Pike reads Mary’s post trial illness as a necessary infantilizing move after her independent actions (42), and claims that “Mary is reborn into the innocent, Christian childhood of those like Alice, who know their proper place” (Pike 41-42). Lansbury, on the other hand, argues, “it is not weakness but the deliberate evasion of the truth that reduces Mary to nervous hysteria after Jem has been acquitted” (46). It is the knowledge that Mary’s father is the real murderer, Mary’s fear that by saving Jem her father will perish, and, of course, the physical toll of many days without much nourishment and emotional excitement, that causes Mary’s illness. This episode suggests that Mary’s triumph is tempered by her human frailty, making her more accessible to Gaskell’s readers. Although Mary’s lover is now free, Mary knows her father’s guilt may now be exposed.

Whatever its symbolic significance, Mary’s illness does not diminish her courtroom victory. Furthermore, “Mary Barton, though deeply in love, can turn away from Jem to nurse her father alone” (Lansbury 111). This act proves that Mary has not lost her agency even after she is united with Jem. Gaskell’s suggestion of Christian brotherhood may not offer a compelling solution to the industrial labor problem, but she
does present a strong heroine in her depiction of Mary Barton as Mary triumphantly encounters multiple life crises and successfully transfers from the private to public arena. “The last image of the novel – a woman recovering her vision – is an interesting note to end on, for it is the image of a woman being empowered” (Colby 44-45).

Gaskell states in her preface to *Mary Barton*, “I have tried to write truthfully” (4), and commitment to the facts is the foundation on which Gaskell bases her Unitarian faith (Fryckstedt 79), and her hopes for her novel. This reliance on verity becomes a theme in *Mary Barton*, particularly toward the end. Just like Mary, Gaskell bases her foray into the public realm on the conviction that the evidence (the deplorable conditions of the working class) will speak for her. When Job tries to temper Mary’s enthusiasm about producing an alibi for Jem, cautioning her, “Don’t build too much on it,” Mary replies, “I do build on it … because I know it’s the truth” (*Mary Barton* 258). At the trial, Jem advises his mother on the witness stand to “tell the truth” (318), and it is Will’s indignation as someone “who has told God’s blessed truth” (328), when accused of accepting a bribe, that clinches Jem’s acquittal. Gaskell indicates that there is power in sticking to the facts; this power lends Jem confidence when facing Mr. Carson at the novel’s end (379), and certainly buoys the author in her rise to public fame with *Mary Barton’s* publication. In a letter to Edward Holland on January 13, 1849, Gaskell asserts, “those best acquainted with the way of thinking & feeling among the poor acknowledge [Mary Barton’s] truth; which is the acknowledgment I most of all desire, because evils being once recognized are half away on towards their remedy” (Chapple 42).

Gaskell’s reliance on the truth informs her faith, her portrayal of femininity and her personal ascension to authorship. As Schor expresses, “*Mary Barton* contains within
it the story of Gaskell’s learning to speak, a rewriting of stories female heroism and female authorship played out in a world of spectacle and silencing in which Gaskell finds for herself a language ‘expressing her wants’ that is more than just ‘a cry’” (37). As an outward expression of her social convictions, fortified by her Unitarian belief and her view of women’s potential, *Mary Barton* established Gaskell as one of the foremost female writers in mid-Victorian England. With the publication of her novel, Gaskell attempted to accomplish social justice and place an obstacle in the paths of the masters of industry. For Gaskell, faith inspires women to take an influential role in the public arena.
Notes

1 Based on J.G. Sharps work, Lenard notes that the date typically given for publication is October 25, 1848, but October 18, 1848, seems more logical because a review of *Mary Barton* was published in the *Athenaeum* on October 21, 1848 (114).

2 I agree with Fryckstedt; writing as an outpouring of her Unitarian beliefs, Gaskell employs *Mary Barton* as a megaphone to England in an attempt to wake up the English middle-class to the industrial workers’ plight. My argument goes in a different direction than Fryckstedt’s, focusing on Gaskell’s inclusion of Christianity as a powerful life philosophy and the development of Mary Barton as a strong female character who acts with agency and instigates social change. The faith that the working-class people share serves to bind and strengthen them in their sufferings. John Barton and Mr. Carson’s conversions show the power of Christianity to transform people, and as a result, change society.

3 Unitarians were particularly supportive of scientific progress and saw no conflict between religion and science (Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell* 6). Gaskell’s portrayal of Job reflects this.

4 Colby reads Mary as empowered and a representative of working class women and argues that “Gaskell challenges the Victorian conception of gender-based division of labor that separated the public and private domains” (33).

5 Pike reads *Mary Barton* as attempting to assert the ideology of Christian brotherhood as a solution to industrial problems between the masters and workers; however, Gaskell’s parent/child metaphor undercuts the message of brotherhood.
6 Lansbury reads this action as exemplifying the importance Gaskell places on duty and the author’s ideological understanding of the balance between passion and responsibility; her heroines (in contrast perhaps to Brontë’s) are governed by both motivators (111).
CHAPTER 3

GASKELL’S STRONG CHRISTIAN HEROINE: NORTH AND SOUTH’S MARGARET HALE

North and South, Elizabeth Gaskell’s second industrial novel, began appearing in Charles Dickens’ journal Household Words in September 1854. Dickens solicited Gaskell’s work for his periodical, and initially, Gaskell was a happy contributor, but as time passed, Gaskell began to chafe under Dickens’ editing, specifically regarding the length of her novel (Uglow, Elizabeth Gaskell 368). It had been six years since Mary Barton’s publication, and this second condition of England novel, in answer to criticism that her first novel was unfairly balanced in favor of the working classes, was intended to give the masters more of a voice in the industrial debate. Gaskell does this in part through her creation of John Thornton, a positive portrayal of a master. She also addresses the industrial question in the political discussions of John Thornton, Mr. Hale, and Margaret Hale. Margaret’s identity as an agent of Christian reform; her development as a strong, unconventional woman; and her participation in the marriage plot demonstrate Gaskell’s belief in how an empowered Christian woman can negotiate the domestic and public arenas in order to benefit her community.

As in Mary Barton, Gaskell does not directly critique Christian institutions. Instead, faith is a part of her characterizations: Mr. Hale, Margaret and Bessy Higgins exemplify sincere faith, although they represent distinct Christian sects. Mr. Hale, notable as North and South’s only clergyman, leaves the Church of England because of a
crisis of belief. Gaskell does not specify what Mr. Hale’s doubts are, but she emphasizes his sincerity and continued expression of faith. Literally abandoning his role as minister, Mr. Hale conveys his religious conviction through his actions, as do Margaret and Bessy. The traditional church takes a backseat to the characters’ practical application of Christian mores.

As in *Mary Barton*, *North and South* chronicles a series of life crises, and the responses of the characters to these crises reveals their nature. In contrast to *Mary Barton*, Gaskell’s optimism in *North and South* is tempered: Mr. and Mrs. Hale do not triumphantly endure their life crises, and Bessy, although brave, becomes a victim of the industrial world. I will explore how Gaskell’s more realistic optimism in *North and South* involves Margaret’s movement toward greater female agency within her society’s traditional conventions. In her latter novel, the merging of Margaret’s faith and non-traditional femininity strengthens Gaskell’s case for the impact of Christian sisterhood on the Victorian world.

Gaskell portrays Margaret Hale as an exemplary Christian through her actions rather than her words. While *Mary Barton*’s working class characters continually refer to God and their faith, Margaret quietly expresses her adherence to Christian values. This reflects the author’s Unitarian ideal of faith resulting in action (Fryckstedt 65). As Robin Colby notes, “Gaskell allows her female protagonist to *act*; by *doing*, she defines herself and has an effect on the world around her” (47). Although it is impossible to divorce Margaret’s Christianity from her overall character growth, here I want to focus on the specific deeds that identify Margaret as a Christian and even a Christ figure: her ministry
to the sick and poor, her reliance on scripture, her response to her own sin, and her interactions with Thornton.

From the novel’s outset, Margaret’s consideration for the afflicted is evident as she ministers to the needs of the Helstone parishioners. For example, “[Margaret] made hearty friends with them … nursed their babies; talked or read with slow distinctness to their old people; carried dainty messes to their sick; resolved before long to teach at the school” (North and South 18). Margaret does not miss her life of ease in London: instead, she invests her time and energy in the Helstone community, following Christ’s example by caring for the downtrodden. For Margaret, the principle of philanthropy is so ingrained in her being that it is a natural extension of herself: her Christian beliefs set the foundation for her actions.

This Christian philanthropy is continued in Milton Northern with Margaret’s friendship with Bessy Higgins, a working class girl who claims equality with Margaret. Margaret’s first conversation with Bessy involves Bessy’s declining health and Margaret’s gift of flowers, a gesture which demonstrates Margaret’s compassion for Bessy’s suffering. Gaskell frames Margaret’s most explicit utterances of faith within their relationship; since Bessy is an overt Methodist and often speaks of eternity, Margaret engages in religious discussions with her. Significantly, Gaskell balances these talks with actual physical care. For instance, during Margaret’s first visit to Bessy’s house, Margaret reminds Bessy of God’s sovereignty over her circumstances, and later, “Margaret held [Bessy] in her arms, and put the weary head to rest upon her bosom. She lifted the thin soft hair from off the temples, and bathed them with water” (84). This kind of nursing is repeated often by Margaret: she rubs Bessy’s feet (138), as well as
reminding her that they “have a Father in Heaven” (94), and reading Bible passages to her (126). Gaskell’s theme, which she expresses in *Mary Barton*’s preface, is reiterated in Margaret’s story: while on her way to visit Bessy “as [Margaret] went along the crowded narrow streets, she felt how much of interest they had gained by the simple fact of her having learnt to care for a dweller in them” (91-92). When Bessy dies, Margaret agrees to see her corpse laid out, even though the thought of viewing a dead body makes her uncomfortable; while looking at Bessy’s lifeless form, “a deep calm entered [Margaret’s] soul . . . . all beautiful scriptures came into her head” (201). Milton’s poor, through her personal engagement in Bessy’s life, become real to Margaret instead of a faceless crowd; it seems Gaskell depicts her middle class heroine as an example to her middle class readers, inviting them to make the same discovery that Margaret does.

Gaskell furthers this idea with her evocation of the parable of Dives and Lazarus in *North and South* (137). Given that Gaskell uses this parable so prominently in *Mary Barton* to express John Barton’s frustration with the gulf between the rich and poor, it is significant that Bessy’s appropriation of the parable differs greatly from John’s. She declares to Margaret, “if yo’ ask me to cool yo’r tongue wi’ th’ tip of my finger, I’ll come across the great gulf to yo’just for th’ thought o’ what yo’ve been to me here” (137).

Unlike John, Bessy envisions reaching out to her wealthy counterpart in kindness because of the way Margaret has shown love to her. Bessy and Margaret’s relationship exemplifies Gaskell’s hope for bridging the class divide, and this healing takes place within Margaret’s expression of Christian faith and charity to Bessy. Margaret’s response to Bessy, “some of us have been rich, - we shall not be judged by that poor accident, but by our faithful following of Christ” (137), encapsulates Gaskell’s message
in her industrial novels. The author emphasizes the arbitrariness of the assignation of people to one class or another and exhorts them, no matter what their demographic, to follow Christ’s example, as Margaret demonstrates.

The heroine’s care of her invalid mother further illustrates her Christian character. Bessy’s illness parallels that of Margaret’s mother, although Gaskell highlights Mrs. Hale’s unpleasantness in contrast to Bessy’s endearing qualities. Mrs. Hale chooses not to attend her niece’s wedding because she is ashamed of her clothing; in Helstone, she languishes, a mock invalid and a living complaint, and she shows favoritism toward her son Frederick, calling for her “little first-born child” (118) when in distress, and telling Margaret that as a baby she was “an ugly little thing” (184) in comparison to her handsome brother. Additionally, distancing her heroine from her mother by her preferment for her brother and her servant, the author observes that “Mrs. Hale did trust in Dixon more than in Margaret” (207). Despite her mother’s personal faults, Margaret faithfully nurses her mother through her illness, showing what it means to love the unlovely. Margaret is able to look beyond her mother’s flaws, ignore personal slights, and care for her mother with a saintly fidelity.

Of course, at the novel’s end, Margaret continues her social work in London. Now independently wealthy and essentially autonomous, she braves the disapproval of her relatives in order to assert her right to work among London’s poor. It seems Margaret’s desire to be useful and active as a Christian philanthropist, begun at Helstone and continued in Milton-Northern, comes to fruition in London. We know that formerly her Aunt Shaw insisted that Edith and Margaret be accompanied by a servant when venturing out in public, yet after seaside contemplation, Margaret follows through on her
determination to “[take] her life into her own hand,” understanding that “she herself must one day answer for her own life, and what she had done with it” (377). Here, Margaret’s realization that she will “one day answer for her own life” refers to her belief in divine accountability. Although not explicitly stated, Margaret’s motivation for her chosen work stems from this conviction. Her social benevolence described by Edith’s disdain for “those wretched places she pokes herself into” (387), speaks volumes as to the nature of the work. Strengthened by her belief, Margaret’s identity as an autonomous heiress is underscored by her personal creed of Christian charity.

Furthermore, Margaret’s reliance on holy writ to inform her personal life philosophy emphasizes her Christian ideas. Margaret’s Biblical understanding informs her political views: when discussing the responsibilities of masters to their workers, Margaret fortifies her point by referring to the Bible: “there is not human law to prevent the employers from utterly wasting . . . away all their money . . . but that there are passages in the Bible which would rather imply . . . that they neglected their duty as stewards if they did so” (108). Moreover, Margaret posits that “God made us so that we must be mutually dependent” (112). Like Gaskell, Margaret chooses to undergird her political opinions with religious principles. As already discussed, Margaret employs scripture in her friendship with Bessy, faithfully reading it to her (181). After the heroine’s mother’s death, she finds solace in John 14, which begins, “Let not your heart be troubled” (230). Similarly, Margaret comforts her father in his grief by “repeating all the noble verses of holy comfort . . . and she herself gained strength by doing this” (245). In times of crisis, Gaskell’s female protagonist turns to the Bible, thus distinguishing her as a woman of religious conviction.
Both Margaret’s willingness to lie in order to save her brother and the remorse she feels afterwards testify to her Christian character. In the passages preceding Margaret’s falsehood, the author presents her heroine as on the verge of a physical and emotional breakdown. Her mother dies shortly after her one female friend, Bessy expires, and Frederick’s presence as a fugitive adds intense anxiety to Margaret’s bereavement. Margaret is solely in charge of her mother’s funeral arrangements and functions as the family’s bulwark, and her lie is motivated by a desire to keep Frederick safe. Even though Gaskell gives Margaret ample ammunition to excuse herself for her lie, Margaret refuses the opportunity, taking full blame for her sin. In a contemporary review of *North and South* in the *Athenæum* on 7 April 1855, Henry Fothergill Chorley asserts that “[Gaskell] … takes pains to show how blame-worthy Margaret was” (Easson 332). After lying to the police inspector, for the first time in the text, Margaret engages in an action typical of the Victorian heroine: she faints. Her subsequent physical illness also testifies to the import of her falsehood. Dixon describes her as “more dead than alive” (257), and her father recognizes her infirmity. After discovering that her misdeed has no consequence on her brother’s safety, Margaret is deeply humbled and castigates herself for “having failed in trust towards [God]” (260). Immediately, Margaret seeks and finds solace in sincere prayer, and she values spiritual pardon (261). Even in her lie, she puts others’ needs (her brother’s safety) above herself. At this point, Margaret realizes that she loves Thornton, but she sacrifices his good opinion in order to ensure Frederick’s wellbeing. Gaskell employs Margaret’s untruth as both an impediment and catalyst to the romance plot as she uses it to reveal her heroine’s deep faith.

Finally, Margaret’s relationship with Thornton also calls attention to her faith.
Margaret rejects Thornton’s first proposal, in part, because she views his devotion as idolatrous. Thornton wants to make her an object of worship with his love, but “being a Christian, she cannot accept human love as a substitute for worship” (Lansbury 112). Lansbury goes on to argue that Margaret’s initial rejection of Thornton, based on her Christian stance, includes a refusal to become the “Victorian ideal of femininity” (113), which banishes women from the public sphere and imprisons them in the domestic one. According to Lansbury, Gaskell’s portrayal of a Christian heroine coincides with her vision of a strong and mobile female.

This combination of faith and fortitude is seen perhaps most interestingly in Gaskell’s portrayal of her heroine as a Christ figure during the strike. Like Christ on the cross, Margaret has the ability to see the mob as humans rather than a teeming mass of hatred. She stands between Thornton and the crowd and “[holds] out her arms” (North and South 162). For the purpose of saving another, Margaret uses her body as a shield and sheds her blood as a result. Moreover, she addresses the mob with “you do not know what you are doing” (163). These words in particular dispel any doubts as to Gaskell’s evocation of the crucifixion, because in the author’s earlier novel Mary Barton, they are the same words uttered by John Barton that trigger Mr. Carson’s conversion, causing him to reread the story of Jesus’ life (363). Initially Margaret’s sacrificial action, as with Christ, is misunderstood: the women servants and Thornton see it as a romantic gesture, thus denying Margaret the pure, divine-inspired motivation that accompanies Christ’s sacrifice. Rosemarie Bodenheimer observes, “Margaret is not allowed to hide and watch from the shadows as Brontë’s heroines do; she is made to share publicity and its attendant confusion with Thornton and to work out for herself the psychic consequences of her
assertion” (542). Margaret’s refusal to play the invalid role of the Victorian heroine and insistence that she go home rather than receive care at the Thorntons’ again demonstrate Gaskell’s movement away from the “angel in the house” position for her heroine. Yet Margaret retreats into rationalizing her actions as becoming of a woman: “I did a woman’s work” (*North and South* 173). Her shame for her perceived public display of affection illustrates the complex relationship Gaskell presents for a woman actively engaging in the political realm. Although Margaret’s actions are undeniably Christ-like, because she is a woman, her deeds are seen as an expression of her sexuality and desire for a powerful man’s love. This tension points to the heart of Gaskell’s vision for women in the text: as Margaret moves into the political arena and is taken seriously as a Christian representative, she is then, and only then, able to embrace matrimony. Margaret’s physical act which saves Thornton during the strike precedes the heroine’s financial saving of Thornton at the novel’s end. Gaskell envisions her heroine as a figure who redeems her beloved. This reversal of traditional gender roles places Margaret in the position of a savior.

If Margaret is then identifiably a Christian, she is also an unconventional Victorian heroine, particularly in regard to her strength (Colby 48). As Schor notes, from the novel’s first page, Margaret is set up in contrast to her cousin Edith (124). Edith slumbers, Margaret is awake; Edith exemplifies traditional feminine beauty, Margaret’s good looks are unconventional; Edith slides into marriage at an early age, Margaret refuses two socially suitable proposals. Whereas Margaret’s tall, stately form perfectly displays the royal-like Indian shawls, they “would have half-smothered Edith” (*North and South* 11). Although Margaret has an appreciation for the beautiful wraps and for the
finer things she experiences on Harley Street, she is impervious to the allure of wealth and prestige. Content in Helstone and Milton-Northern, yet equally as comfortable in the wealthy drawing room of Marlborough Mills and Harley Street, Margaret’s ability to move from one sphere to another is an integral component of her strength; she maintains agency no matter what her societal position. In a similar manner, Margaret is able to traverse sexual boundaries.

This crossing of boundaries and traditional roles is embedded principally in Margaret’s position within her nuclear family. Although separated from her parents for several years, Margaret immediately assumes an integral role in the household. After her return, her father, too weak to break the news to her mother about his resignation from the ministry, asks his daughter to tell her instead. Margaret illustrates the typically masculine traits of level-headedness, power, and moral correctness, and her father displays female characteristics (Lansbury 116). Gaskell also displays Margaret’s unusual strength as she conquers Dixon’s renegade commentary about her father; when Margaret rebukes the elderly servant, she garners Dixon’s respect and allegiance. The author comments, “Dixon . . . liked to feel herself ruled by a powerful and decided nature” (North and South 46), and Margaret is the only Hale to exhibit this kind of strength. Margaret manages her family’s removal from Helstone and move to Milton-Northern, because her mother is incapacitated by dubious illness, and her father is rendered immobile by a fragile and indeterminate character. It is Margaret who suggests her mother recuperate at the sea, Margaret who writes to Frederick, and Margaret who puts a plan into action to legally exonerate her brother.
Margaret’s familial power is most evident after her mother’s death. For instance, Margaret “had no time to give way to regular crying. The father and brother depend upon her; while they are giving way to grief, arrangements for the funeral seemed to devolve upon her” (230). Margaret’s position as the family’s junior member has no bearing on her responsibilities. Dixon intensifies the demand on Margaret’s fortitude with “[Margaret], You must not give way, or where shall we all be? There is not another person in the house fit to give a direction of any kind” (231). Already described as “act[ing] the part of a Roman daughter” (223), Margaret leads the Hale family, crossing the boundaries of what were traditionally seen as male and female roles (Colby 57).

When Mr. Hale suggests that he ask Thornton to attend his wife’s funeral with him because he cannot face it alone, Margaret’s decision to attend the funeral with her father further challenges traditional mores. As Alan Shelston notes, “the convention of middle-class women’s not attending funerals lived on in some areas of Britain well into the twentieth century. Margaret’s resistance to it is a further sign of her independence and her acceptance of responsibility” (North and South 244). Margaret’s domesticated leadership naturally translates into a public appearance. Since she is her father’s strength at home, she replaces Thornton as her father’s companion, asserting her right to mourn her mother publicly and to stand where a male typically would. “Margaret is not allowed a woman’s leisure to learn, and the narrative emphasizes instead the sheer strength of character required to get through all those simultaneous crises, and the continual pressure of responsibility for actions that bear heavily on other lives” (Bodenheimer 541).

As seen in the case of her mother’s funeral, Margaret’s strength in the private arena smoothly converts into the public one. Gaskell exhibits her heroine’s power most
notably during her brave interventions in social action. At the strike, “[Margaret] had
lifted the great iron bar of the door with an imperious force – had thrown the door open
wide – and was there, in face of that angry sea of men, her eyes smiting them with
flaming arrows of reproach” (*North and South* 162). Here, the heroine is the active
agent: she has “imperious force,” and instead of being defensive, she is in the position of
the attacker, “smiting them with flaming arrows.” Gaskell’s language unmistakably
renders Margaret commanding. In a similar way, directly following Bessy’s death,
Margaret confronts Nicholas Higgins, standing in his way when he intends to leave the
house to get drunk. “He looked ready to strike Margaret. But she never moved a feature
– never took her deep, serious eyes off him” (203). In both instances, it is Margaret’s
eyes that become her weaponry, and this time, “Margaret felt that he acknowledged her
power” (203), and he stands down. Although not nearly as public as her action at the
strike, it is Margaret’s relationship with Higgins, and consequently his connection with
Thornton, that instigates Margaret’s most meaningful social reform, Thornton’s
connection with his workers at Marlborough Mills. At the novel’s end, Margaret’s
private reflection at the seaside initiates her social work, and her personal feelings for
Thornton cause her to finance Marlborough Mills. Gaskell underscores this movement
from private to public, female to male worlds, through her heroine’s power, emphasizing
female influence (Gallagher 168).

If Gaskell deliberately constructs an empowered female heroine, how do we read
the author’s seemingly conventional adherence to the marriage plot at the novel’s
conclusion? Under pressure from Dickens, Gaskell hastened *North and South*’s ending in
order to meet a deadline (Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell* 368); in light of this dash to the press,
it is significant that Gaskell’s heroine maintains a type of autonomy at the novel’s end. Wealthy, independent, and actively engaged in social work, Margaret evades the suits of several possible mates and is able to live in harmony with her relatives while carrying out her own objectives. Although we cannot know Margaret’s actions after her marriage to Thornton, if she adheres to her established pattern, she will not retreat into the domestic realm. With Margaret’s maturation, Gaskell optimistically portrays the crossover between the private and public spheres. Margaret’s choice of Thornton, and indeed, her very act of lending him financial assistance to save Marlborough Mills, establishes her on equal footing with her future marriage partner. Intellectually and socially, Thornton has proven himself to be Margaret’s perfect match, and their courtship and individual development point toward an egalitarian union.

Gaskell’s attention to the sexual tension between Thornton and Margaret also marks him as her ideal mate: his consciousness of her arms, lips, and physicality corresponds to the heroine’s blushes, indicating her physical awareness in his presence. In the final scene, when Margaret “slowly faced [Thornton], glowing with beautiful shame” (North and South 395), the word shame can be misread as a negative emotional response during this climatic love scene; however, throughout the novel, Gaskell associates Margaret’s shame with her sexual awareness. After her refusal of Henry Lennox, Margaret “felt guilty and ashamed of having grown so much into a woman as to be thought of in marriage” (32). Gaskell furthers this connection when Margaret reflects on her actions following the strike: “a deep sense of shame that she should thus be the object of universal regard – a sense of shame so acute that it seemed as if she would fain have burrowed into the earth to hide herself, and yet she could not escape out of that
unwinking glare of many eyes” (174). Margaret’s sexual awakening is a part of her maturation: Gaskell’s choice of “beautiful shame” to acknowledge her heroine’s ultimate affection for Thornton demonstrates that Margaret has grown to embrace her sexuality; it has become lovely in its fruition and relationship to her rightful suitor. This sexual maturation is consistent with Margaret’s stance as a Christian heroine. In adherence to orthodox Christian mores, Margaret remains chaste while single, but when her marriage to Thornton becomes imminent, Margaret is able to embrace her sexuality.

Rather than offering a solution to England’s industrial ills, *North and South* submits an optimistic, moderate step forward in progress for better class relations. The hero and heroine’s development as individuals and ability to move toward one another in a romantic merger parallel the potential of mid-Victorian England to make progress toward better class understanding. Margaret and Thornton’s union will create a new entity; likewise, Gaskell posits that England can and should transition toward a new mode for bridging the gap between the classes. Bessy’s reading of the parable of Dives and Lazarus, one in which she crosses the divide to give aid to her friend in need, points to Gaskell’s idea of the power of human relationship to form a more compassionate, civilized world. As in *Mary Barton*, belief inspires action.
Notes

1 Catherine Stevenson asserts that Gaskell’s personal frustrations with authorship and women’s societal position reveal themselves in Bessy Higgins and Margaret Hale’s inability to speak, replicating authentic tensions for mid-Victorian English women. This is evidenced in the juxtaposition of the textual silences in *North and South* regarding women’s lives with the real-life conflict Gaskell had with Dickens while publishing the novel in *Household Words* (68).

2 Lansbury sees Margaret’s actions during the strike as prompted by “her awareness of a duty to others” (111).

3 Stevenson argues that although Margaret achieves a type of unconventional ideal in her social work, her eventual union with Thornton is a withdrawal into domesticity (80).

4 Gallagher addresses this crossover and asserts that it is ultimately contradictory, “question[ing] the logic and value of making metonymic connections” (179). Suggesting that these relationships have no logical basis and are, in fact, “a kind of anarchy of signification” (181), Gallagher argues that this arbitrary use of metonymic associations undermines the “ethical connection . . . between the public and private realms” (184). Thus *North and South* works against the ideologies it attempts to espouse. Although Gallagher presents an interesting argument, I believe she places too much emphasis on these minor metonymic connections, losing sight of the novel’s “big picture.”

5 I agree with Patsy Stoneman; she reads Margaret Hale and John Thornton’s “mutual partial emancipation from gender ideology is offered not as a resolution of class conflict
but as a necessary step in a political reorientation which would give higher priority to human need” (120).
CHAPTER 4

PRIVILEGING THE FEMALE VIEW AND SUGGESTING CHRISTIAN REFORM IN
BRONTË’ S SHIRLEY

Like Gaskell’s Mary Barton and North and South, Brontë’s Shirley combines a marriage plot romance with Victorian-era industrial unrest. Although Brontë sets her novel in 1811-1812 during the Luddite Riots, the author deals with many of the same topics as Gaskell: misunderstanding between masters and men, the reformation of a master, and the dire conditions of the oppressed workers. Whereas Gaskell’s portrayals foreground the workers’ plight, personalizing their struggles in the shape of Mary and John Barton, Job and Margaret Legh, and the Wilson and Higgins families, Brontë’s characterization of William Farren is the only suffering worker introduced in her text. Significantly, Brontë read Mary Barton while writing Shirley, and in a letter to Smith Williams on 1 February 1849, she confides, “In reading “Mary Barton” … I was a little dismayed to find myself in some measure anticipated both in subject and incident” (Rosengarten and Smith xi). Proof of Brontë’s editing of Shirley after having read Mary Barton has resulted in speculation on the textual synergy (xi). Brontë’s deliberate omission of the more dramatic and horrifying conditions for the poor workers seems to have been, in part, a movement away from Mary Barton and the condition of England novel.

Shirley, Charlotte Brontë’s third novel, “is far more consciously than either of her
earlier works a novel about the ‘woman question’” (Gilbert and Gubar 374). *Shirley* is also noted for being a social novel, one that expresses “dissatisfaction with … an inadequate church” (Rosengarten and Smith vii). In an unexpected manner, *Shirley* blends a critique of the church with the female perspective. In contrast to Kate Lawson,¹ and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar,² I believe Brontë’s holistic portrayal of Christianity to be moderate in the sense that the author recognizes the imperfections of Britain’s church, yet affirms its importance; at the same time, however, *Shirley*’s treatment of women indicates Brontë’s call for radical church reform in the female sphere.

Before looking into how Brontë illustrates her view of Christianity in the text, it is important to specify which aspect of Christianity receives Brontë’s focus. Like her sister Anne, Charlotte Brontë consistently evaluates clergymen based on their interaction with the poor; from *Shirley*’s first chapter, this is a litmus test for clerics. For instance, Mrs. Gale notes that the curates “treat her with less than civility, just because she doesn’t keep a servant,” but the rectors are “kind to high and low” (*Shirley* 8). In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë repeats this mode of evaluation, exposing Mr. Brocklehurst’s villainy through his cruelty and neglect of the poor at the Lowood School. The author concentrates on the social rather than the spiritual merits of the church. As Gilbert and Gubar note, the plight of the impoverished workers parallels the women’s situation in *Shirley* (374): irrespective of religious affiliation, Brontë assesses the clergy based on their dealing with the poor and women, drawing attention to existing inequities. The author’s portrayal of the clergy, Whitsuntide, the story of Eva, Shirley’s creation myth, and the heroines’ discussion with Joe Scott concerning 1 Timothy 2 all point to Brontë’s call for a more equalized position for women.
As representatives of Christianity, the clergy play a vital cultural role, demonstrating Brontë’s vision in the novel of the church’s strengths and flaws. Brontë differentiates between the young curates and experienced rectors: her contemptuous portrayal of the curates and the rectors’ generally complimentary depiction reflect her realistic observations of the church. Like Gaskell, Brontë grounds her portrayals in fact: “the curates had real life counterparts” (Rosengarten and Smith 648), as did the rectors (The Life 382-383). Shirley’s opening chapter draws a scathing depiction of the young curates, and in a letter to G.H. Lewes, Brontë asserts, “that first chapter is true as the Bible, nor is it exceptionable” (386), but in a letter to Margaret Wooler on 14 February 1850, Brontë writes, “I confess [Shirley] has one prevailing fault – that of too tenderly and partially veiling the errors of ‘the Curates.’ Had Currer Bell written all he has seen and knows concerning those worthies – a singular work would have been the result” (Barker 264). These declarations demonstrate the importance Brontë places on honest renditions and realistic portrayal. Like Gaskell, she defends her depiction as a factual representation. At Shirley’s beginning, Brontë’s emphasis on the curates’ failings and her insistence on the accuracy of her account reflect her concern for England’s Church.

Structurally, the author begins and ends her novel with the curates, thus highlighting their importance to the text, and the opening chapter “Levitical” immediately places the curates in the forefront. Their loud, rude behavior and animosity towards each other reveal their hypocrisy: clearly they do not heed the Biblical admonition to “love one another” (1 John 4:7). From the outset, Brontë uses a woman to judge the curates: Mrs. Gale, Joseph Donne’s housekeeper, despises them (Shirley 8). Christopher Lane points out Mrs. Gale’s dislike, particularly towards Peter Augustus Malone whom “she
has a powerful impulse to stab” (213). This extreme animosity from a female parishioner testifies to the curates’ culpability. Furthermore, the flaws that the curates demonstrate at Mrs. Gale’s table are the same ones they continue to exhibit throughout the novel. Mrs. Gale loathes the curates because they are “so high and so scornful” and “are always speaking against Yorkshire ways and Yorkshire folk” (Shirley 8). David Sweeting’s complaint that the roast beef is tough, Donne’s that the beer is flat, and Malone’s cry for “More bread!” illustrate the contempt with which they treat the starving community that they are supposed to serve. This scene resonates with William Farren’s opinion of the curates as expressed later in the text: “They’ve no manners; they talk to poor folk fair as if they thought they were beneath them. They’re allus magnifying their office” (324). Farren, one of the “poor folk,” attests to the curates’ ineffectiveness. Through the eyes of the women and the underprivileged Brontë exposes her curates’ faults.

The author continues her negative portrayal of the curates by illustrating how they each relate to Mary Anne Ainley, an impoverished widow, conveying their true character through their responses to her hospitality. Davy Sweeting, the least noxious of the three, accepts her cake and wine with grace, living up to his name. Donne displays his gluttony, “usually eating two pieces of cake and putting a third in his pocket” (270), and Malone “scorn[s]” Miss Ainley’s gift of refreshments. Despite their behavior, Miss Ainley views the curates as saints: “no matter how clearly their little vices and enormous absurdities were pointed out to her, she could not see them” (269). In contrast to Miss Ainley, Shirley Keeldar discerns the young clerics’ true character, ascertaining “that [the curates’] meddling fingers were not to be inserted into the pie” (269); thus Shirley carefully excludes the curates from any authority in her philanthropic plan to help the
Yorkshire poor. Brontë seems to be indicating that it is better to have a realistic view of the clergy than a naïve one, and the author employs her female characters to uncover the curates’ flaws.

Brontë returns to the curates in her final chapter “The Winding Up,” relating each one’s fate. Malone receives the author’s most ominous representation: his fate is so terrible the narrator will not explicitly relate it, but instead hints at its horror with, “Were I to give the catastrophe of your life and conversation, the public would sweep off in shrieking hysterics” (632). Brontë portrays Sweeting (and his wife) more favorably: “they lived long and happily together, beloved by their parishioners and by a numerous circle of friends” (633). Notably, Sweeting improves with age, actually becoming “beloved” in the Yorkshire community: this illustrates Brontë’s mixed attitude toward clerics. Tongue in cheek, the narrator comes to Donne, who “turned out . . . far better than . . . expected.” “His little school, his little church, his little parsonage” prospers as a result of his astonishing ability to beg from anyone. Brontë’s repetition of “his” and “little,” and elaborate description of Donne’s talent for solicitation leave no doubt as to Donne’s possessive selfishness and limited scope for life. Despite Donne’s prosperity, the text suggests his egotism does not reflect a positive connection with the community and would ill serve him as a “shepherd of a Christian flock.”

Significantly, the author mentions Malone’s replacement, another Irishman named Mr. Macarthey: “I am happy to be able to inform you, with truth, that this gentleman did as much credit to his country as Malone had done it discredit: he proved himself as decent, decorous, and conscientious, as Peter was rampant, boisterous, and ____ . . . He laboured faithfully in the parish” (634). Even though Macarthey seems to be positively
portrayed, the narrator also satirically notes his intolerance of dissenters. Brontë’s inclusion of Macarthey underscores the mixture of sarcasm and realism in her representation of the clergy. Unlike Miss Ainley, who blindly reveres all clerics, Brontë offers a layered portrait, sardonically exposing the foibles but praising the merits of the church’s representatives.

Brontë also presents the curates as potential marriage partners. In this role, the curates serve as comic relief as seen in the chapters “The Curates at Tea” and “Mr. Donne’s Exodus.” Caroline Helstone describes them as “shuffling curates” (Shirley 104) in comparison with Robert Moore, her beloved, and her description proves apt as they bumble into the room for tea: Malone stops short in the doorway at Helstone’s after seeing ladies seated in the room, knocks Donne into Sweeting, and Sweeting into Helstone (114). For the heroines, this type of behavior illustrates the ridiculousness of a curate’s courtship. The humor in this scene resembles the beginning of “Mr. Donne’s Exodus” when Tartar terrorizes Donne and Malone, causing them to flee up the stairs. When Donne hides in Mrs. Pryor’s room and locks Malone out, Brontë’s sarcasm peaks as she describes Donne’s self-interest as “nothing so merciless as terror” (277). Shirley’s young clerics cannot be taken seriously as suitors because of their character flaws.

Sweeting, the one curate who receives a semi-positive characterization, functions as a suitor to Dora Sykes, a minor character. Brontë distinguishes Sweeting from his fellow curates on several occasions: when Helstone visits the curates in “Levitical,” he addresses Sweeting exclusively, relating the news. In contrast to Donne and Malone’s experience with Tartar, Sweeting enters Fieldhead “caressing the guardian” (Shirley 281). He is the only one of the curates who gracefully receives a flower from Shirley, “like a
smart, sensible, little man, as he was” (282), and the author suitably pairs Sweeting with Hall, her most respected rector, in serving the Nunnely parish. Moreover, “David and [Shirley] were on the best terms in the world’” (283). Sweeting distinguishes himself as a clergyman who does some good for the community. Brontë qualifies Sweeting’s portrayal by showing growth in his character; as he matures, his merits emerge.

Malone’s position as a would-be suitor takes a more serious turn as Brontë reveals his motives for courtship and his potential for violence toward women. Before Shirley arrives in Yorkshire, Malone courts Caroline because he believes she is the heir to Helstone’s wealth (120), yet after Shirley’s arrival, he ignores Caroline in favor of the heiress (279). Moreover, when Shirley and Caroline find amusement in Tartar’s aggression, “[Malone] looked as if, had either of them been his wife, he would have made a glorious husband at the moment: in each hand he seemed as if he would have liked to clutch one and gripe her to death” (278). Brontë repeats this frightening insight into Malone’s character when he self-consciously offers Shirley a bouquet of cabbage roses, and she laughs at him: “Peter saw the laugh. . . he was made a joke of . . . his chivalry were the subject of a jest for a petticoat – for two petticoats – Miss Helstone too was smiling. Moreover, he felt he was seen through” (299). Malone responds with anger, even hate, as he glares at Shirley with a “fell eye”: his latent brutality precedes his expulsion from Yorkshire and unnamed crime. Malone’s scorn for his parishioners parallels his hate toward women; Brontë intimates that a correlation exists between good husbands and good priests.

In a less threatening but no less pathetic manner, Donne attempts to court Shirley. The author bluntly relates her contemptuous depiction of Donne and his would-be suit:
“he was a frontless, arrogant, decorous slip of the common-place; conceited, inane, insipid: and this gentleman had a notion of wooing Miss Keeldar!” (280). Brontë follows up this description of Donne with his memorable expulsion from Shirley’s garden. After Donne insults Shirley and the Yorkshire people, Shirley reaches her limit and ejects the offending priest with, “How dare the pompous priest abuse his flock?” (289). Furthermore, in “Whitsuntide” Brontë describes Donne as “dogmatical . . . pragmatical and self-complacent” and having a “turned-up nose and elevated chin” (296). His pride ill befits his profession. Immediately following this sketch, a unique narrative moment ensues: “Walk on, Mr. Donne! You have undergone scrutiny. You think you look well – whether the white and purple figures watching you from yonder hill think so, is another question” (296). Here Brontë changes tone so as to accentuate the passage. This brief paragraph indicates the importance of Shirley and Caroline’s opinions: Malone and Donne are neither good men, good suitors, nor good priests. Brontë’s narrator exposes Donne and Malone’s defects through her heroines’ viewpoint.

Although not faultless, in contrast to the curates, Dr. Thomas Boulty, Mr. Matthewson Helstone, and Mr. Cyril Hall serve as pillars in the community. Mrs. Gale values the rectors, for “they know what belongs to good manners, and is kind to high and low” (8). From Shirley’s beginning it is evident that the rectors are more in touch with their parishioners and care for the poor. Brontë illustrates this when the women consult them about their philanthropic plan: “all three gentlemen, to their infinite credit, showed a thorough acquaintance with the poor of their parishes, - an even minute knowledge of their separate wants” (272). In addition, Shirley describes the rectors as having “becoming, decent self-government” and as “admirable” (275).
Of all the clerics, Dr. Boultby receives the least attention in the text. Brontë introduces Dr. Boultby into the narrative with the following description: “a stubborn old Welshman, hot, opinionated, and obstinate, but withal a man who did a great deal of good, though not without making some noise about it” (Shirley 270). In a positive light, “[Shirley] had rather a friendly feeling for both [Dr. Boultby and Mr. Helstone]; especially for old Helstone” (270). Brontë tempers this rendering of Boultby with a less flattering picture in “Whitsuntide.” As Caroline serves him refreshments, “he took no manner of notice as she came near, save to accept what she offered: he did not see her, he never did see her: he hardly knew that such a person existed. He saw the macaroons, however” (300). Here Brontë stresses Caroline’s invisibility to Boultby through repetition. Boultby’s relation to Caroline brings his imperfections to light; this rendering realistically relates the humanity of the rector of Whinbury.

Brontë also endeavors to portray Mr. Helstone in a lifelike manner. On a positive note, Helstone’s generosity generally helps his parishioners. For example, “the two large schoolrooms of Briarfield [were] built by [Helstone], chiefly at his own expense” (Shirley 292), and he is largely responsible for the success of Whitsuntide: “It was a joyous scene, and a scene to do good: it was a day of happiness for rich and poor; the work, first, of God, and then of the clergy” (301). Brontë points out that the Whitsuntide celebration benefits all members of the Yorkshire community, crossing class boundaries, and rounds out Helstone’s complex portrait, listing his shortcomings along with his strong points: “He was a conscientious, hard-headed, hard-handed, brave, stern, implacable, faithful little man: a man almost without sympathy, ungentle, prejudiced, and rigid; but a man true to principle, - honourable, sagacious, and sincere” (37).
As the author presents her most memorable parson, a unique and significant narrative moment occurs in which she confronts the reader with her vision of what a good cleric should look like:

A parson . . . should be a man of peace: I have . . . an idea of what a clergymen’s mission is amongst mankind, and I remember distinctly whose servant he is, whose message he delivers, whose example he should follow; yet, with all this, if you are a parson-hater, you need not expect me to go along with you. (36)

Here the narrator delineates a “man of the cloth’s” ideal role and does not align herself with a “parson-hater.” This narrative distancing signifies that Brontë maintains an optimistic vision for the clergy and introduces Helstone’s representation in contrast to her standard. From this passage, it seems the author’s main criticism of the clergy is that they forget “whose servant [they] are.” The more a clergyman is his own man and less God’s man, the more he receives Brontë’s censure.

The rector of Briarfield’s character also contains some obvious negatives. Besides being misplaced vocationally in the priesthood instead of the military (37), Helstone’s glaring flaw is his negative view of women. Gilbert and Gubar recognize Helstone’s “personal courage and honesty, [and] . . . loyal fearlessness” and view him as “representative of the best in their society,” but also point out that he does not “respect or like the female sex” (376). Helstone “is not given to speak well of women” (266), will only converse about “slight topics” (100) with women, and the narrator holds him partially (if not fully) responsible for the untimely death of his wife (53). When Shirley, Caroline and Miss Ainley enlist his aid in organizing a philanthropic effort to help the
Yorkshire poor, “Helstone glanced sharply around with an alert, suspicious expression, as if he apprehended that female craft was at work, and that something in petticoats was somehow trying underhand to acquire too much influence, and make itself of too much importance” (272). The author repeatedly highlights Helstone’s antipathy for women in any sphere besides a subjugated domesticity. The text suggests that his positive rapport with Shirley is due to her masculine portrayal at the novel’s beginning. Admittedly, the rector is not an attentive guardian to Caroline, but he is generous to her, promising to provide for her financial future, and Shirley values him, enjoying his camaraderie. Helstone’s positive rapport with Shirley and deficient relationship with his niece reflect his goodness and imperfections; his rounded character seems most accurately to echo Brontë’s mixed review of the clergy. It is noteworthy that the chief flaw of Shirley’s most prominent rector is his marked dislike for women. Although generally displaying paternalistic benevolence toward women, Helstone is suspicious of them and remains distant from them, which reflects his inability to incorporate them into his world except in a limited, one-dimensional way.  

Hall stands out as the one faultless parson, seemingly securing the author’s complete approbation. He is esteemed for his “sympathy and loving-kindness for his fellow-men” (269), and “the truth, simplicity, frankness of his manners, the nobleness of his integrity, the reality and elevation of his piety, won him friends in every grade” (270). Everyone likes him: “his poor clerk and sexton delighted in him; the noble patron of his living esteemed him highly” (270-271). Both Shirley and Caroline delight in his company: for example, at Fieldhead in “Mr. Donne’s Exodus,” they flank his sides while walking in the garden (282), and in “Whitsuntide,” the ladies encircle “their favourite
pastor: they . . . had an idea that they looked on the face of an earthly angel: Cyril Hall was their pope, infallible” (300). In contrast to the curates, and even the other rectors, Hall’s outstanding characterization shows that Brontë has a vision for the possibility of a pastor living up to her ideal.

It is significant, then, that Brontë gives Hall the only truly didactic passage in *Shirley*. Speaking to Shirley and Caroline, he exhorts them to recognize the need for Christ’s salvation, “cherish humility” (286), to examine their own hearts, and to understand that a person’s value is based on her internal rather than external qualities. In this vein, he holds up Miss Ainley as an exemplary Christian: “she, with meek heart and due reverence, treads close in her Redeemer’s steps.” It is noteworthy that Hall pays attention to Miss Ainley, comparing her attributes to that of Christ’s in the novel’s one sermon-like narrative. Hall’s exaltation of Miss Ainley’s virtues reinforces Brontë’s focus on women of strength and character. This veneration echoes the narrator’s earlier commentary on the nature of a “clergyman’s mission” (36), which is to be Christ’s servant, messenger, and to emulate him. According to Hall, Miss Ainley fulfills this prescribed role. Furthermore, as Caroline readies for the Whitsuntide celebration, she thinks, “but, as Cyril Hall said, neither so good nor so great as the withered Miss Ainley” (294). Brontë employs Hall to point to Miss Ainley, elevating her status.

Whether as suitors, neighbors, uncles, husbands, or priests, Brontë depicts her clergy in a myriad of ways, with strengths and weaknesses, laughable and laudable qualities, portraying some as a blessing and others as a bane to the Yorkshire community. Each clergyman’s character mirrors his bond with one of *Shirley*’s female protagonists. Brontë’s depiction of the clergy and their relationships to Caroline and Shirley reveals
her complex feelings about the church and her goal of raising women’s position in society. Brontë’s marked concern for women is apparent in the way she relates the clergy to the women, privileging women’s perspective and evaluating the men of the cloth based on their relationships to women and the poor.

In “Whitsuntide” and “The School Feast,” the author furthers her elevation of women within the context of these Church of England celebrations. These chapters merit attention because Brontë begins and ends her novel with the clergy, and they appear approximately halfway through the narrative, suggesting their centrality to *Shirley*’s themes. Also, these episodes launch a sequence of six chapters which chronicle one of the narrative’s climaxes: the attack on Hollow’s Mill. Most importantly, at the conclusion of “Whitsuntide,” Brontë states, “Let England’s priests have their due: they are a faulty set in some respects, being only of common flesh and blood, like us all; but the land would be badly off without them: Britain would miss her church, if that church fell. God save it! God also reform it!” (*Shirley* 301). Striking for its directness and prayer-like language, this commentary conveys both a yearning for both improvement of faults and recognition of the church’s merit. This sentiment mirrors the author’s rendition of the clergy. In this conspicuous passage, Brontë emphasizes her evaluation of Britain’s church.

At the conclusion of “Whitsuntide,” another significant narrative moment highlights the importance Brontë places on the female perspective. Helstone organizes the marchers, calling aloud the names of the regiment leaders, first the women, then the curates. In a distinctive one-sentence paragraph, Brontë narrates, “And these gentlemen stepped up before the lady-generals” (301). Superficially, Brontë describes the
processional; however, the sentence’s ambiguity suggests that the priests physically present themselves to the women as if for inspection. In “The School-Feast,” Brontë continues to elevate the female position by pointedly showing men and women working together on equal footing. The chapter begins with the description of a “priest-led and woman-officered company” (302). From the outset the author establishes the importance of the women in the procession, and this is followed by Helstone showing more confidence in the women leaders than his male curates. After the Dissenters are spotted in the lane, Helstone cries, “You, boys, mind what you are about: the ladies, I know, will be firm; I can trust them” (303). Surprisingly, Helstone publicly acknowledges the women to be stronger and more courageous than the men. Next, as the procession strides toward the Dissenters, everyone marches boldly forward, “the Curates, too, being compelled to do the same, as they were between two fires, - Helstone and Miss Keeldar” (304). Shirley displays unusual leadership, co-leading with Helstone, and living up to her nickname, “Captain Keeldar.” In an instance of narrative doubling, after the Royd-lane incident, “Mr. Hall had taken care of Caroline, and Caroline of him” (305). Brontë seems to go out of her way to show her heroines as equivalents of the community’s spiritual leaders. Undoubtedly Brontë’s vision for women includes a co-mingling of caretaking responsibilities.

In light of this, Shirley’s imagined stories play an important part in the text. It is important to note that “the character of Shirley herself, is Charlotte’s representation of Emily” (Gaskell, *The Life* 379). Since Emily’s death occurred during *Shirley’s* composition, Charlotte’s illustration of her sister takes on a greater poignancy. Shirley creates her first myth, the story of Eva, a *devoir*, as an adolescent under the tutelage of
Louis Moore. Eva, an antediluvian figure, wanders alone in Nature, and is romanced by Genius, a god or angel-like figure. Genius loves Eva (or Humanity), and transports her into heaven and eternity when she, a mortal, expires (Shirley 490). In order to understand the devoir’s significance, its context must be considered. Originally Shirley’s composition, as a teen she recited it for Moore, her would-be lover, and he, many years later, recites it to her as an expression of his passion, wooing her with her own words. In contrast to Lawson, I read the devoir as Charlotte’s attempt to navigate Shirley’s (and consequently Emily’s) less orthodox Christian stance by blending Romanticism and Christianity, creating a “theological myth” (Miller 197), and as a request from Shirley to Louis to recognize women as men’s equals. When Louis recites it back to Shirley, he calls her to a passionate relationship and acknowledges her appeal for women’s equality, promising her an egalitarian union. In the devoir, “[Brontë] shows her critics that there is scriptural authority to prove that the purifying force of divine genius is as likely to be found in women as in men” (196). The devoir promotes an elevated female position within a Christian scriptural context. Of course, much like Brontë’s real life devoirs written for Monsieur Heger (Gordon 96), the devoir also functions as a part of Louis and Shirley’s courtship.

In a similar vein as her devoir, Shirley revisions Genesis’s account of creation: she combines Christianity with mythology. This amalgamation is evident as personified Nature prays (Shirley 319), illustrating Nature in communion with God. Eve represents Nature. Shirley’s creation myth is also akin to the devoir in that it places women on a par with men in the Christian account. Shirley emphasizes Eve’s equality with Adam: “That Eve is Jehovah’s daughter, as Adam was his son” (321). Notably, this statement
resonates with Charlotte’s nonfiction statement of Emily’s beliefs: “[Emily Brontë] held that mercy and forgiveness are the divinest attributes of the Great Being who made both man and woman, and that what clothes the Godhead in glory, can disgrace no form of feeble humanity” (Brontë, “Preface” 40). “Where Milton’s Eve is usually excluded from God’s sight. . . Shirley’s speaks ‘face to face’ with God” (Gilbert 372). Through Shirley, Brontë expresses a call for female equality.

Of course, Shirley’s creation myth asserts a much stronger female vision than that of the devoir. Brontë renders Eve with might; she is strong enough to be Christ’s ancestral mother (Shirley 320), and Gilbert sees Shirley’s Eve as “strong, assertive, vital” (371). While Shirley’s earlier figure of Eva is enmeshed in a sexual relationship, her later creation of Eve or Nature is a more powerful figure, a “woman-Titan” (Shirley 321), who communes “face to face . . . with God” rather than with a Son of God or angel. As Shirley matures, so does her vision of women.

Shortly after Shirley shares her vision of Eve, Joe Scott converses with Shirley, Caroline, and William Farren, and admonishes Shirley and Caroline to adhere to the Biblical standard for women, citing 1 Timothy 2:12-14: “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.” Brontë’s interpretation of this controversial scripture reveals more about her understanding of women’s roles in society and in the church. According to Thormählen, “with their commitment to the freedom of the individual to pursue truth and goodness unencumbered by restraints imposed by earthly institutions and their human representatives, the Brontës were taking a stand on the vexed issue of authority” (50).
This particular dialogue brings “the vexed issue of authority” in scripture to the forefront; the author seems to challenge the power that Joe endeavors to wield over her heroines.

First, Joe’s working-class position influences his stance. Since Joe is of a lower class than Caroline and Shirley, it seems as if he is using Scripture as a mandate to heighten his own status. Because Joe’s working-class masculinity is under attack in a culture that respects neither him nor women, he attempts to adopt masculinist authority, entering the conversation by telling them to go into the church, in an effort to coerce them into doing his bidding. Furthermore, although Joe is of a lesser class, he is Moore’s foreman, not one of the unemployed, starving workers. In fact, Joe seems to give Moore free rein in combating the uprising. Once again, Gilbert and Gubar’s link of the workers to the women in *Shirley* (375) sheds additional light on the passage. Also, Brontë makes it clear that it is “[Caroline] [who] criticizes Robert’s cruelty toward the workers” (*Shirley* 377): she warns Robert against prosecuting the workers who destroyed his frames, understanding their anger and the potential repercussions (379). Joe’s status as Moore’s foreman associates him more strongly with the patriarchal ruling class rather than the oppressed workers; this association suggests that the author questions his desire to command the women.

Second, Brontë’s portrayal of Joe renders his opinions suspect. At the outset of the discussion, the narrator reveals a personal motive for Joe’s resentment of women, specifically Shirley: “Joe, holding supercilious theories about women in general, resented greatly, in his secret soul, the fact of his master and his master’s mill being, in a manner, under petticoat government” (327). This motive casts Joe’s insistence on Biblical authority in a suspicious light. Additionally, Brontë presents Joe comically. In
fact, Shirley initially responds to Joe by teasing him: “I read just what gentlemen read” (327), and she expresses a desire to guard the mill using Joe’s musket (328).

Furthermore, Brontë underscores Joe’s pretentiousness throughout the passage. He “assume[s] a lordly air” (326), is “haughty” (327) and “stubborn” (329). Finally, Shirley calls him “Man of prejudice” (331). By the end of the passage, Joe has become a universal figure. Significantly, the author does not call him “Man of Christian Faith,” but “Man of Prejudice,” indicating Joe’s application of 1 Timothy 2 includes personal bias rather than an understanding of Biblical tenets.

Brontë strengthens the heroines’ positions by appealing to a scholarly technique for text interpretation. In order to arrive at a valid interpretation of Scripture, one must take into account the original Greek, the textual context, and look at other passages to give a broader sense of women’s role in Scripture. First of all, 1 Timothy 2 deals with public worship. Paul wrote this letter to Timothy “to supervise the affairs of the growing Ephesian church” (NIV 1833). This passage, then, refers to women’s conduct within the church, not as Joe claims, to the universal behavior of women. Therefore Shirley’s question, “What has that to do with the business?” (329) is apt, because Scripture does not put limits on women’s function in the public sphere/business world. In fact, in Proverbs’ “Ode to a Capable Wife,” the wife is praised for her business acumen. “She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard. She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong. She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. She makes linen garments and sells them; she supplies the merchant with sashes” (Proverbs 31:16-18,24). Paul emphatically states in Galatians 3:26, 28, “For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. There is no longer Jew or Greek,
there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.’

Joe’s attempt to exclude women from business and public affairs is not a Biblically supported position. Brontë, who referred to the Bible more than any other literature in her adult fiction (Miller 195), must have been aware of these other Biblical passages that espouse a greater role for women. Through her dialogue, the author poses a pertinent question that sheds light on the Biblical interpretation: Caroline asks Joe, “You allow the right of private judgment?” (Shirley 329) in respect to understanding the Scripture. Joe accedes, and later, Shirley comments, “You might as well say, men are to take the opinions of their priests without examination. Of what value would a religion so adopted be? It would be mere blind, besotted superstition.” Here, Brontë brings to the forefront the Evangelical tenet that encourages believers to study Scripture and utilize “private judgment,” which brings Shirley and Caroline’s focus on the importance of personal discernment to the forefront. The passage itself functions as a clever form of questioning the practical applications of 1 Timothy 2:12-14.

Finally, Brontë elevates her heroines in Shirley through her treatment of the traditional romantic ending: matrimony. Even though Shirley concludes with the classic double wedding, it is widely acknowledged that Brontë inserts constructs which complicate the novel’s conclusion: for example, Caroline and Robert’s less than ideal courtship seems effortlessly to slide into romantic understanding, and Shirley, beloved for her outspokenness and vivacity, fades into textual silence. Despite these issues, Brontë continues to privilege the women in Shirley, even as she confounds the typical marriage plot conclusion.
First, as Robert learns his lesson, Caroline achieves a type of victory. Like *Mary Barton*’s Mr. Carson, Robert, a mill owner and master, softens in his attitude toward the suffering laborers at *Shirley*’s end. After attempting to quench his thirst for justice against those who harmed his mill property through relentless pursuit of the guilty, Robert does not prosecute the man who shot him. Although he knows who the culprit is (Michael Hartley), Robert desists from taking legal action, and when Michael dies a year later, Robert gives Michael’s “wretched widow a guinea to bury him” (635). Forgiveness rather than vengeance guides Robert’s actions. In Robert’s discussion with Caroline, he looks forward to prosperity so that he can “take more workmen; give better wages; lay wiser and more liberal plans; do some good; be less selfish” (640). He declares to Caroline, “I will do good; you shall tell me how” (643). This comment indicates that Robert has a vision for Caroline’s influence and input on important matters of business and community action. Furthermore, Robert envisions “the homeless, the starving, the unemployed . . . com[ing] to Hollow’s mill” (644); Brontë links Robert’s consideration for Caroline with the suffering workers; as one rises in estimation so does the other. Although less obviously an egalitarian match than Shirley’s marriage, Caroline’s patience and goodness make an impression on Robert, and will, in turn, benefit the community.

At first glance, Shirley’s silencing at the novel’s end seems to contradict the assertion that Brontë elevates her heroines. Certainly Brontë employs Shirley as an example of female empowerment; however, it is important to keep in mind Brontë’s reminder to the reader on *Shirley*’s opening page: “Something real, cool, and solid, lies before you; something unromantic as Monday morning” (5). In response to those early critics of *Jane Eyre* who condemned her first successful work as too passionate, Brontë
consciously set out to write a tempered romance, one that balanced individualism with communal stability. The narrative distance that Brontë imposes at Shirley’s end serves to remove the reader from the immediacy of romance, as does the silence imposed on Brontë’s spirited heroine.

For instance, in “Written in the Schoolroom,” Louis Moore narrates the climatic scene where he and Shirley finally declare their mutual love. Brontë gives the reader their conversation, but Louis’ pen referees the account. Since Louis controls the narration, his thoughts and emotions are sometimes presented, but Shirley’s remain cloaked, only discernible through the words that Louis claims she utters. Their wooing includes the master/pupil eroticism characteristic of Brontë in other works. According to Louis, after he openly declares his love for Shirley, her paramount concern is that they are “equals,” that he will “be good to [her], and never tyrannize,” and that he remember that she “is tameless” (623). This emphasis on equality between the sexes is reminiscent of Jane Eyre. Admittedly, this equality must be qualified in that it is dependent upon the good will of the man; this is as close as most married women can get in Victorian era England. In this sense, it is a limited victory; however, Brontë presents it as a powerful one nonetheless. Significantly, Gordon points out that “Protestantism (as Jane Eyre would assert to Rochester) licensed equality: souls were equal before God, and could make equal claims to the suffering that proclaims … a sense of identity” (62). Jane finds a type of equality within the Christian context. In Shirley, Brontë uses the Yorkshire community to showcase equality between Shirley and Louis. The final exchange of their passionate dialogue shows Shirley asking Louis to “share the burden” (Shirley 624) of her wealth and social position. She does not abdicate her power but rather posits a co-
governance. Louis’ inclusion of these details in his “little blank book” (610) expresses unspoken acknowledgment of Shirley’s marital vision. His personal journal will serve as a future reminder of their marital hopes and expectations.

Moreover, Shirley’s marriage to Louis Moore is an interesting gender reversal of Jane Eyre’s union with Rochester. In this instance, it is the woman of wealth and station who crosses class boundaries and marries the impoverished tutor. Prior to her marriage and textual silencing, Shirley rejects the proposal of titled Sir Philip Nunnely and rebels against the will of her uncle, Mr. Symspson, who represents patriarchal authority. We learn indirectly from Caroline’s conversation with Robert of Mrs. Pryor’s opinion of Shirley’s match: “Depend upon it . . . such a choice will be the happiness of Miss Keeldar’s life” (606). Shirley settles on Louis and in doing so asserts her right to individual choice despite societal expectations. Such a strong character could hardly be made quiet without her own consent. It seems that Shirley deliberately maintains her silence in order to establish her new husband’s position as her co-ruler of Fieldhead. Without her acknowledged acquiescence to his authority, the surrounding neighborhood, indeed, even her own servants would not have accepted Louis, a former tutor, as Shirley’s equal partner.

In fact, in the text Brontë indicates that Shirley’s quietude has this purpose: “A remark [Shirley] made a year afterwards proved that she partly also acted on system. ‘Louis,’ she said, ‘would never have learned to rule, if she had not ceased to govern: the incapacity of the sovereign had developed the powers of the premier’” (638). These are Shirley’s final words in the text, and are related without the interference of Louis’ pen. Shirley’s languishing silence, on the surface disturbing to feminist critics who laud her
agency throughout the text, achieves Shirley’s objectives. Her voluntary retreat from language promotes the egalitarian union she desires, and, in her own words, she remains “sovereign” and Louis the “premier.” Shirley’s choice of Louis as co-owner of Fieldhead and all the influence this position entails has direct consequence on her community. Brontë suggests that Louis and Shirley’s union will benefit society, as Louis is “the least presumptuous, the kindest master that ever was” (638), and Shirley has already proven herself to be a benevolent, wise mistress.

In Shirley’s final scene, Brontë uses the passage of time and an additional narrational layer to distance the reader from emotional involvement with the marriage plot’s culmination. In Shirley, the romantic ideal has receded into the dispassionate real world of industrial progress. As in Jane Eyre, Brontë places the narrative in the hands of a woman; this time an old housekeeper named Martha testifies to the industrial growth of the mill town, and specifically notes that “Mrs. Louis smiled when she talked: she had a real happy, good-natured look” (646). It seems Mrs. Pryor’s prophecy has come true: Shirley’s happiness expresses her matrimonial satisfaction and the Yorkshire community’s generally positive state of affairs. The double marriages balance each other in that as Caroline moves toward more authority and Robert incorporates her opinions into his public leadership, Shirley relinquishes her public influence and Louis assumes a greater role.

Without a doubt, Brontë celebrates female agency in Shirley. Her critique of the Church of England as seen through the representation of the clergy reveals a realistic understanding of church leadership, and significant narrative moments prove she has a vision for an ideal cleric and a hope for church meaning and reform. In its portrayal of
the events surrounding Whitsuntide, Shirley’s myths, the female protagonists’ discussion with Joe Scott, and the culminating double marriage, *Shirley* points toward a new role for women, which, in turn, will assist the community.
Notes

1 Lawson argues that Shirley’s “feminist dissent . . . undermines the conservative orthodoxy . . . of the established church” (730) and reads Shirley’s creation myths as another religious option. Lawson does not discuss the clergy’s role, which I believe to be a significant omission, considering their prominence in Shirley.

2 Gilbert and Gubar link women’s mistreatment with the worker’s oppression in Shirley, and see the novel as critically assessing women’s powerless stance. Brontë presents “a feminist critique of the biblical myth of the garden” (374). The doubling of Shirley and Caroline reinforces their refusal to accept a subjugated position in a male-dominated society. Caroline’s self-imposed hunger functions as her protest, and Shirley generates her own version of myths. The constructedness of Shirley’s conclusion troubles the reader’s perception of a happy ending, because, in Brontë’s time, women’s only option is marriage. I agree with Gilbert and Gubar’s equating of women with the oppressed workers, but take a different approach with Brontë’s presentation of Christianity.

3 Brontë introduces her ideal of a good parson in The Professor. Completed in 1846 but published posthumously in 1857 (Glen 7), this earlier work provides a clue as to Brontë’s clerical opinions. William Crimsworth, her protagonist, refuses the opportunity to become a cleric because he does not deem himself suitable for the profession and asserts, “A good clergyman is one of the best of men. . . . But I have not the peculiar points which go to make a good clergyman” (83). Crimsworth’s evaluation of the clergy illustrates that the author’s views on the subject have been developing for many years and add depth to her depiction in Shirley. It is significant that Crimsworth recognizes that he
is not a good fit for the vocation, while one of Helstone’s main flaws is that he has chosen the wrong line of work.

4 Although Charlotte Brontë was notably anti-Catholic, taken in context, this reference to the pope appears to be unrelated to her personal feelings on Catholicism. Here Brontë is merely emphasizing the admiration which Shirley and Caroline have for him.

5 Lawson reads the myth as “explain[ing] the terrible limitations placed on women’s roles” (“Imagining Eve” 412), and views Shirley in alarming subjugation to Louis (423) in a “rape fantasy” (421), Brontë’s elimination of a possible female utopia. I agree with Lawson in that the story must be interpreted within its context (Shirley and Louis’ romantic relationship), but disagree with her conclusion. I would argue that Shirley’s acceptance of Louis asserts her power: she defies her uncle and societal expectations by marrying beneath her, transcending class boundaries.

6 Miller reads Shirley’s devoir as Charlotte’s “creation myth about the female imagination” (195), attempting to assimilate Emily’s unorthodox beliefs and creative talent into a more orthodox combination of mythology, creation, and Christianity. This myth elevates the female artist to a “chosen” one (197), equal with men.

7 Within this context, it seems clear that although the author uses the word “priests,” Shirley is referring to the Church of England rather than Roman Catholicism. Earlier, Brontë writes, “Let England’s priests have their due” (301). Here, she clearly refers to the Church of England’s officers, not the Catholic Church.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In *Mary Barton, North and South* and *Shirley*, Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë bring to the forefront their concerns for the industrial poor, women, and issues of faith. Through their adherence and resistance to the traditional marriage plot novel, Gaskell and Brontë question the status quo, elevate their female heroines and pose significant queries about the practical application of traditional religious mores. Their industrial novels bridge the gulf between the domestic and public arenas, illustrating how two women, firmly entrenched in the private realm, can and do influence society. The juxtaposition of Gaskell and Brontë’s vision for reforming faith and female agency suggests the authors’ visualization of a better world in mid-nineteenth century England.

Gaskell and Brontë’s focus on crises in these novels reflects the challenges facing industrial England. Both authors incorporate a critique of Christian institutions into their industrial texts. Gaskell does so by largely omitting official church representation in *Mary Barton* and *North and South*; instead, the author highlights the faith of her characters without clerical mediation. More obviously, Brontë critiques the Church of England through her clerical portrayals in *Shirley*. Gaskell and Brontë accentuate the crises facing women and the working poor, connecting these crises with the crises facing Christian institutions; the authors demonstrate a collaborative call for transformation in the church as well.
Gaskell’s industrial works emphasize faith as grounds for action. The dilemma of the industrial poor prompted Gaskell to write *Mary Barton*, and Gaskell’s characters reflect this belief that faith and social action go together. This idea of faith serving as inspiration is not a clear motivator in Brontë’s *Shirley*; however, Brontë alludes to it in her clerical representations: it is Hall, the rector who serves his parish both humbly and faithfully, that Brontë elevates, and Malone, the curate who has potential for violence, who receives her most reprehensible portrayal. Brontë’s call for reform showcases her desire for church transformation and illustrates Brontë’s understanding of the connection between the church and the British people: “Let England’s priests have their due: they are a faulty set in some respects . . . but the land would be badly off without them: Britain would miss her church, if that church fell. God save it! God also reform it!” (*Shirley* 301). Brontë presents Shirley and Caroline’s plan to help the Yorkshire poor in a positive light, and her heroines use the church as a vehicle to implement their benevolence. Additionally, Shirley’s creation myths demonstrate an important link between women and religious power. Although Brontë does not highlight belief as the basis for action (and thereby a catalyst for female empowerment) in the same way as Gaskell, both authors present women as agents of change in their industrial novels.

*Mary Barton, North and South* and *Shirley* each use gender issues as a way of challenging claims to spiritual and social power. Brontë and Gaskell offer their readers empowered female protagonists who, strengthened by their faith and personal principles, move out of their private spheres and have an impact on their communities. Highlighting female influence, Mary Barton, Margaret Hale, Caroline Helstone, and Shirley Keeldar
illustrate how women can achieve a type of social reformation within the traditional
construct of the marriage plot.

In Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, the heroines clearly move
between the private and public realms, taking on greater agency. This female trajectory
differs in *Shirley*: at the novel’s conclusion Shirley voluntarily retreats into the domestic
arena while Caroline takes on a more influential public role through her relationship with
Robert. The endings in all three novels reflect an elevation of female agency; however,
Brontë and Gaskell recognize that their heroines’ empowerment depends upon their
choosing the right mates, and religious questions affect this choice. For Mary Barton,
selfless Jem Wilson is a better Christian man of character than Harry Carson. Likewise,
Margaret Hale chooses substantive John Thornton over superficial Henry Lennox, and
Shirley Keeldar opts for Louis Moore’s benevolent character rather than titled but inferior
Sir Philip Nunnely. In each case, the female heroine’s marital choice reflects her
religious mores, uniting the romantic plot with religious issues and finally social agency.
In this sense, the female protagonists’ ascendancy is limited within the Victorian marital
framework. The heroines’ progress parallels the improvement in class relations; the
authors project positive, though limited, steps forward for women and Victorian
England’s industrial dilemma.

The limited progress for women as presented in these novels is further
demonstrated as the heroines move back to the private realm at the novels’ conclusions.
Mary Barton retires to the home to rear children. Shirley Keeldar relinquishes a
prominent and powerful role in order to make way for Louis Moore. Caroline Helstone
presumably reigns at Hollow’s Mill’s hearth. Margaret Hale is the one possible
exception. Gaskell intimates that Margaret has found meaning in her social work outside her aunt’s home, and it is possible that her public philanthropy will continue after her marriage. The powerful presence of these women in the public arena illustrates Gaskell and Brontë’s idea for expanding roles for women, but the heroines are circumscribed by the Victorian social framework and ultimately return to the domestic venue.

Gaskell and Brontë reinforce their vision of advancement for women and the poor in their choices of settings at the conclusions of their industrial novels. In *Mary Barton*, Green Heys Fields is part of the past, but Canada represents opportunity and hope. In *North and South*, Margaret visits Helstone with Mr. Bell only to discover that her idyllic childhood world cannot exist unchanged: Milton-Northern is the future. The pastoral setting of Hollow’s Mill fades to an industrial vision in *Shirley’s* final scene. As Lansbury points out, “It is always memory, deceptive or actual, that helps to shape man’s vision of the real world” (26). It is the memory of Green Heys Fields, Helstone and Hollow’s Mill that helps to illustrate the authors’ dream for the future, a future in which the changing landscape suggests growth for women and the working class.

1 *North and South’s* Reverend Hale is a notable exception; however, he leaves the church at the novel’s outset.
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