

## THE EARLY INDUSTRIAL NOVEL: MARY BARTON AND ITS PREDECESSORS

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When *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* was published anonymously in October 1848 the effect was electric. Contemporary writers and reviewers alike stressed the novelty of Mrs Gaskell's undertaking. Carlyle, for one, hailed the book as 'a real contribution (about the first real one) toward developing a huge subject, which has lain dumb too long.'<sup>1</sup> Still, despite such assertions, *Mary Barton* was hardly the first fictional attempt to render the problems afflicting the rapidly increasing manufacturing population of England. By 1848 there existed already a well-established literary genre of industrial fiction and only by placing *Mary Barton* against this neglected background can we hope to attain to a full appreciation of Mrs Gaskell's achievement.

The success of *Mary Barton* has traditionally been attributed to Mrs Gaskell's keen sense of observation, her great imaginative powers and her deep sympathy with the poor. In 1974, however, Michael Wheeler demonstrated that the novel not only sprang out of Mrs Gaskell's own observations in Manchester, but was also the product of her wide reading, stored in an unusually retentive memory:

A careful comparative reading of *Mary Barton* (1848), and of Caroline Bowles's *Tales of the Factories* (1833), . . . Caroline Norton's *A Voice from the Factories* (1836), 'The Dream' (1840) and *The Child of the Islands* (1845), 'Charlotte Elizabeth's' *The Wrongs of Woman* (1843–44), and Elizabeth Stone's *William Langshawe* (1842) and *The Young Milliner* (1843), suggests that those earlier works were all read by Mrs Gaskell, and all influenced her first novel.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Letter from Carlyle to Mrs Gaskell reprinted in A(nnette) B. Hopkins, *Elizabeth Gaskell: Her Life and Work* (London, 1972), p. 82, and in Winifred Gérin, *Elizabeth Gaskell. A Biography* (Oxford, 1976), p. 89.

<sup>2</sup>Michael D. Wheeler, 'The Writer as Reader in *Mary Barton*', *Durham University Journal*, lxxvii (1974–5), 93–4. In 1950 Aina Rubenius had suggested that Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna was read and used by Mrs Gaskell in *The Woman Question in Mrs Gaskell's Work* (1950; rpt. New York, 1973), pp. 281–3, a theory also subscribed to by Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (Garden City, 1976), p. 39, and by Ivanka Kovačević and S. Barbara Kanner, 'Blue Book Into Novel: The

Despite his accurate insight about Mrs Gaskell's relation to earlier novelists, Wheeler chose to concentrate wholly on the impact that the verses of Caroline Bowles and Caroline Norton had on *Mary Barton*. The aim of this essay is to examine how Mrs Gaskell drew on her familiarity with earlier industrial fiction. It will focus on Harriet Martineau's 'A Manchester Strike' (the first germ of *Mary Barton*), on Elizabeth Stone (to whom *Mary Barton* was actually attributed by the Mancunians on its publication), and on Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna (whose *Helen Fleetwood* is the only true forerunner of *Mary Barton*), and endeavour to show that it is Mrs Gaskell's greater artistry that places her in a category beyond her many predecessors.

## I

The first writer to attempt to use fiction to illustrate the complex problems of the new industrial society had been Harriet Martineau. Her twenty-three tales in *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832–4) were designed to popularize political economy by bringing it directly to the readers who 'wanted the book; and . . . should have it'.<sup>1</sup> In 'A Manchester Strike' (1832) she explores the scene that Mrs Gaskell was to make celebrated in *Mary Barton*. For this tale, greatly admired by the *Edinburgh Review*,<sup>2</sup> she received the impetus from the Manchester workers themselves; they 'were eager to interest me in their controversies about Machinery and Wages; and it was from them that I received the bundles of documents which qualified me to write "A Manchester Strike"'.<sup>3</sup> Though 'A Manchester Strike' aims at exposing the devastating effects of strikes for masters as well as men, it also sketches the rich and loving relationship between the protagonist William Allen and his daughter Martha, suggesting the mutual love and respect between Mrs Gaskell's John Barton and his daughter Mary, and introduces the plight of child workers, here anticipating novels like Frances Trollope's *Michael Armstrong*

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Forgotten Industrial Fiction of Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna', *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, xxv (1970), 162, n. 10.

<sup>1</sup>Maria Weston Chapman, ed., *Harriet Martineau's Autobiography* (Boston, 1877), I, 122.

<sup>2</sup>*Edinburgh Review*, lviii (1833), 26.      <sup>3</sup>*Martineau's Autobiography*, I, 163.

(1839–40) and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's *Helen Fleetwood* (1839–41). In the midst of propounding the principles of wages and capital, Harriet Martineau succeeds in drawing scenes loaded with sympathy for human suffering similar to those for which Mrs Gaskell was to be celebrated. The eight-year-old Martha, for instance, whose knees are so swollen from all the standing in the mill that 'her mother must bandage the joints while the child was at her work',<sup>1</sup> is subjected to working the night shift. At the factory, 'sighing at the thought of the long hours that must pass before she could sit down or breathe the fresh air again' (MS, 64), Martha is exposed to dust, heat and 'the incessant whizzing and whirling of the wheels' (MS, 65). Harriet Martineau deplores the crippling effect that mechanization has on factory children; even when released by the strike, they are unable to enjoy their newly acquired freedom:

It would have amused some people and made others melancholy to watch the sports of these town-bred children. . . . They could not throw a ball five feet from them, or flung it in another's faces so as to cause complaints and crying-fits . . . they were the worst runners that could be conceived. (MS, 110–11)

But it is her handling of the relations between masters and men that makes 'A Manchester Strike' so relevant to *Mary Barton*. The scene in which Mrs Gaskell's Wilson vainly seeks help for the fever-stricken Davenport at the millowner Carson's house, is anticipated in a scene in 'A Manchester Strike' in which two workers call on the millowner Mr Elliott. In *Mary Barton*, Henry Carson, the industrialist's son, displays his indifference to the plight of the mill-hands:

Meanwhile, the younger Mr. Carson had ended his review, and began to listen to what was going on. He finished his breakfast, got up, and pulled five shillings out of his pocket, which he gave Wilson as he passed him, for the 'poor fellow'. He went past quickly, and calling for his horse, mounted gaily, and rode away. He was anxious to be in time to have a look and a smile from lovely Mary Barton, as she went to Miss Simmonds'.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Harriet Martineau, *Illustrations of Political Economy* (London, 1834), III, 64. Page references hereafter given in the text, e.g. (MS, 64).

<sup>2</sup>Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), ch. 6, p. 109. All page references are to this edition, as it is more readily available than the Knutsford edition, and will hereafter be given in the text, e.g. (MB, 6:109).

By having Henry Carson give a coin to Wilson, Mrs Gaskell makes him at once less of a stereo-type than Harriet Martineau's Elliott and yet also paradoxically more culpable in his too-ready evasion of misery. Mrs Gaskell thus complicates Harriet Martineau's similar portrayal of Elliott:

As soon as they approached Mr. Elliott's house, they perceived that gentleman mounted on his favourite hunter, . . . He was too much occupied with his own affairs to see them coming, for the most important part of his morning's business was setting off for his ride; and he had eyes for little less while he was admiring the polish of his boots, adjusting his collar . . . and patting his horse's neck. (MS, 28–9)

Elliott contemptuously dismisses the petition for an equalization of wages presented to him by the two delegates, Allen and Hare:

Elliott glanced his eye over it as well as the restlessness of his horse would permit, and then struck it contemptuously with his riding-whip into the mud, swore that that was the proper place for such a piece of insolence, rode up against the men and pranced down the street without bestowing another look or word upon them. (MS, 29)

That Mrs Gaskell drew on her familiarity with this passage is evident from her rendition of still another scene in which she, like Harriet Martineau, contrasts the earnestness of the workers, now a delegation of 'five, wild, earnest-looking men', and the insolence of the millowners 'rather affronted at such a ragged detachment coming between the wind and their nobility' (MB, 16:233). In this second scene, the soon-to-be-murdered Henry Carson even surpasses Elliott in cruelty when he takes out 'his silver pencil' and draws 'an admirable caricature of them—lank, ragged, dispirited, and famine-stricken' (MB, 16:235). Still, Mrs Gaskell differs greatly from her predecessor. Whereas Harriet Martineau objects to the behaviour of Elliott on purely economic grounds, by stressing his disregard for his own interests and those of the country at large, Mrs Gaskell's criticism is based on moral principles: she skilfully portrays class differences that screen masters from workmen and prevent the former from treating their hands 'as brethren' (MB, 16:232).

Harriet Martineau's William Allen anticipates Mrs Gaskell's John Barton. Persuaded against his will to accept the chairmanship of the strikers' Union, Allen is unable, once the strike is over,

to find employment; he, the reasonable strike-leader, highly esteemed by the masters, is reduced to a street-cleaner toiling 'with his water-cart in summer and his broom in winter; enduring to be pointed out to strangers as the leader of an unsuccessful strike' (MS, 133). Though never approaching the tragic stature of John Barton, Allen nonetheless possesses a grain of tragedy. Despite their identical integrity of mind, perseverance, intelligence and honesty—qualities cherished in the Lancashire race by Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Stone and Mrs Gaskell—both characters fall due to flaws inherent in their characters. With its Manchester setting, its emphasis on the lack of communication between masters and men, and its portrayal of an energetic, intelligent worker suggesting John Barton, 'A Manchester Strike' is the first piece of industrial fiction that can be called a forerunner of *Mary Barton*.

Although Mrs Trollope was eager to make 'the facts stated in her book authentic and accurate',<sup>1</sup> *The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* (1839–40) 'never became', as her eldest son says, 'one of the more popular of my mother's novels.'<sup>2</sup> *Michael Armstrong*, which the author herself deplored that few cared 'much for . . . except the Chartists',<sup>3</sup> possesses little affinity with *Mary Barton*. Yet it incited two writers to compose novels refuting Mrs Trollope's picture of mills and millowners: Frederic Montagu and Elizabeth Stone. Of these, Montagu's *Mary Ashley, the Factory Girl: Or Facts upon Factories* (1839), a deservedly forgotten novel of whose existence few critics seem to be aware, bears little resemblance to *Mary Barton*.<sup>4</sup> The year 1839, however,

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Adolphus Trollope, *What I Remember*, 2nd ed. (London, 1887), II, 8.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. II, 7.

<sup>3</sup>Frances Eleanor Trollope, *Frances Trollope. Her Life and Literary Work* (London, 1895), I, 301. Mrs Trollope was right. The journals so eager to review her travel books ignored *Michael Armstrong* with the exception of the *Athenaeum*, which published a most scathing review. (10 Aug. 1839, pp. 587–90).

<sup>4</sup>Two scholars mention Montagu's *Mary Ashley*: W. H. Chaloner, 'Mrs Trollope and the Early Factory System', *Victorian Studies*, iv (1960), 165, and Dora Rayner, 'Mrs Gaskell's *North and South*', Diss. Bedford College, London, 1968, p. 23. Frederic Montagu is ignored by standard sources of information. By the courtesy of Mr R. Walker, Librarian of Lincoln's Inn Library, the following information has been made available: 'Frederic Montagu was admitted to Lincoln's Inn in 1830, "aged 20, Sixth son of Basil Montagu of New Square,

was also to witness the appearance of a third industrial novel, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's *Helen Fleetwood*. Other contributions would establish the genre more firmly: Elizabeth Stone wrote *William Langshawe, the Cotton Lord* (1842), Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna resumed her exposition of the evils of child and female labour in *The Wrongs of Woman* (1843–4), and Disraeli published *Sybil: or the Two Nations* (1845).

Whereas the relation of *Mary Barton* to the works of Elizabeth Stone and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna requires a fuller treatment in subsequent sections of this article, the relation between *Sybil* and *Mary Barton* can be quickly sketched. In Gerard Walter, Disraeli introduces a noble, thoughtful man full of enthusiasm for the rights of the poor, a man of exceptional integrity. It is his concern for his fellow-men not his self-interest that induces him to undertake a dangerous course of action, and in this Walter resembles Harriet Martineau's William Allen as well as John Barton. The total alienation between rich and poor is emphasized in *Sybil*, where Disraeli observes that "'atween the poor man and the gentleman there never was no connection".<sup>1</sup> For Disraeli, the lack of communication between the 'two nations' is 'the vital mischief of this country' (*Sybil*, III:1:166), responsible for many evils in society. This 'want of sympathy that unquestionably exists between Wealth and Work in England' (*Sybil*, V:1:336), can be ascribed, says *Sybil*, to the 'mutual ignorance between the classes' (*Sybil*, V.1.336). Here *Sybil* undoubtedly prepares the reader for *Mary Barton*.<sup>2</sup> John Barton was, as Job Legh explains to Mr Carson at the end of the novel, "'sadly put about to make great riches and great poverty square with Christ's Gospel'" (*MB*, 37:455), yet it was the total lack of concern that crushed Barton—the rich 'cared not whether he was bound for heaven or

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Lincoln's Inn Barrister". Since Montagu was never called to the bar, Lincoln's Inn has no further information about him.

<sup>1</sup>Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil: or the Two Nations* (London, 1881), bk. III, ch. I, p. 166. Page references hereafter in the text, e.g. (*Sybil*, III: 1: 166).

<sup>2</sup>Sir William Adolphus Ward's statement that, before beginning *Mary Barton* in 1845, Mrs Gaskell 'had remained quite unacquainted with both *Coningsby* and *Sybil*', is generally accepted by scholars. See Gérin, p. 86, n. 19. Although Mrs Gaskell was not influenced by *Sybil*, this novel is still part of the literary genre preparing the reading public for *Mary Barton*.

hell' (*MB*, 37:456). Thus, just as in *Sybil*, the reader finds in *Mary Barton* a strong belief that ignorance was largely to blame for the lack of understanding between rich and poor.

## II

When *Mary Barton* appeared anonymously in 1848 there was a general rumour that the author was Mrs Elizabeth Stone, with whose novels Lancashire readers were already familiar. Scholars have not asked themselves, however, why Mancunians should erroneously have thought *Mary Barton* to be a product of Mrs Stone's pen.<sup>1</sup> By examining *William Langshawe, the Cotton Lord* (1842) as well as her *The Young Milliner* (1843)—a social but not an industrial novel—I hope to show why Mancunians should have been misled in 1848.

Mrs Stone was the first Manchester resident to write a novel about the manufacturing districts. In *William Langshawe*, almost entirely neglected by scholars,<sup>2</sup> with her first-hand knowledge of Manchester society, she conveys a vivid picture of the rising

<sup>1</sup>Mrs Gaskell confuses Mrs Stone's married name and her maiden name when she writes to her publisher Edward Chapman: 'I find every one here has the most convincing proofs that the authorship of *Mary Barton* should be attributed to a Mrs Wheeler, née Miss Stone, an authoress of some book called the "Cotton Lord"' (J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard, eds., *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell* (Manchester, 1966), p. 63). Mrs Stone dedicates *William Langshawe* to her father John Wheeler, proprietor of the *Manchester Chronicle*. Not included in any standard reference work, Mrs Stone was a writer of educational works, and on the titlepage of *William Langshawe* she is introduced as the 'Authoress of "The Art of Needlework"'. Kathleen Foster, Language and Literature Librarian of the Central Library in Manchester, assures me that their catalogue as well as that of the British Museum confuses this Elizabeth Stone with an Elizabeth Stone, active between 1865 and 1880, who wrote under the pseudonym Sutherland Menzies. This assumption is based on a review of Stone's *God's Acre*, which states that it has been announced as the author's last work (*Athenaeum*, 19 June 1858, p. 781).

<sup>2</sup>Rayner devotes three widely typed pages to *William Langshawe* in her unpublished dissertation. This is, to the best of my knowledge, the only discussion of the novel. Wheeler (p. 100, n. 23) states that 'Elizabeth Stone's novel . . . provided the basis for a number of characters and plot motifs in *Mary Barton*: the similarities between the two novels are unmistakable. It is hardly surprising to find that Mrs Gaskell was also indebted to several passages in *The Young Milliner*. . .'

Lancashire cottonocracy. Her acute observations of the cotton-lords resemble, as far as accuracy and familiarity are concerned, Mrs Gaskell's descriptions of Manchester workers. It is, however, mainly in dialect, naming, characters and plot motifs that *William Langshawe* foreshadows Mrs Gaskell's novel. The early reader of *Mary Barton* held in his hand a novel whose outward appearance and disposition largely resembled that of *William Langshawe*. Both novels were published in two volumes, had chapters preceded by epigraphs taken from Crabbe, Wordsworth and Shakespeare, and both novels were pioneers in rendering the Lancashire dialect, although Mrs Stone's attempt is limited to very few characters in her novel. Furthermore, there are similarities in the naming of the fictional characters; just as Mrs Stone's working-class lover *Jem Forshawe* was to find his counterpart in Mrs Gaskell's *Jem Wilson*, so her *Henry Wolstenholme*, a millowner's son, undoubtedly anticipates Mrs Gaskell's *Henry Carson*.

Still, characters and plot motifs constitute more relevant resemblances between the two novels. Mrs Stone's working-class girl *Nancy Halliwell* and her two lovers was to find a parallel in *Mary Barton*, where *Mary* is torn between the flattery of *Henry Carson* and the genuine love of *Jem Wilson*. *Nancy*, whose mother is Mrs Langshawe's first cousin, is pretty 'and her countenance betrayed none of that want of energy or intellect which characterized her lover's, for there was self-will and a consciousness of beauty written in every line of it'.<sup>1</sup> In the same manner, *Mary Barton* 'knew she was very pretty' (*MB*, 3:62) and 'with this consciousness she had early determined that her beauty should make her a lady' (*MB*, 3:62). *Nancy's* attitude to *Jem Forshawe* is cool because of her aspirations to rise in life like the Langshawes. Once she had spent a week with them:

This mistaken indulgence was most prejudicial to *Nancy*. Ideas were then awakened in her mind, which, though they lay dormant for some time, had only wanted exciting: . . . She was now really attached to *Jem Forshawe*, but ambition and love waged severe warfare within her; and it was always an unpropitious hour for her lover's suit when any thought of 'Cousin Langshawe' crossed her mind. (*WL*, I, 116)

<sup>1</sup>Elizabeth Stone, *William Langshawe, the Cotton Lord* (London, 1842), i, 108. Page references hereafter given in the text, e.g. (*WL*, I, 108).



In Mary Barton love vanquishes ambition. Having turned down Jem's proposal she finally grasps the nature of Henry Carson's flattering attention and the true state of her own feelings:

... it had unveiled her heart to her; it had convinced her she loved Jem above all persons or things. But Jem was a poor mechanic . . . While Mr Carson was rich, and prosperous, and gay, and (she believed) would place her in all circumstances of ease and luxury, where want would never come. What were these hollow vanities to her now, now she had discovered the passionate secret of her soul? (*MB*, 11:176-7)

Mary Barton keeps her ambitious plans to herself, thinking of the day 'she should ride from church in her carriage . . . and take up her astonished father, and drive away from the old dim work-a-day court for ever' (*MB*, 7:121), dreaming, when scolded by her employer Miss Simmonds, of 'when she should drive up to the door in her own carriage, to order her gowns from the hasty tempered, yet kind dressmaker' (*MB*, 7:121). Nancy shares Mary's dreams, but being of a less reticent nature she openly asks her rich lover: "'And, perhaps,'" said she, when they were going to part, and her lover's flatteries had wrought her vanity to the highest pitch, "perhaps, then, next Christmas, I may be riding in my own carriage, like my grand cousin?"' (*WL*, I, 165). Nancy Halliwell is, no doubt, a forerunner of Mary Barton; the idea of delineating a humble girl torn between a rich and a poor lover, dreaming of rising in society and driving around in her own carriage was not original with Mr. Gaskell, yet her creation of Mary, portraying her inner thoughts and actions, is very much her own.

Moreover, Mrs Stone's attitude to trades unions anticipates Mrs Gaskell's; she resents their oppressive power and the violence used against 'knobsticks' (strike-breakers). Jem Forshawe is persuaded to join the Union and in an ominous scene he swears the oath blind-folded to participate in 'the *ASSASSINATION of oppressive or tyrannical masters*' (*WL*, II, 172), the impact of which weighs so heavily on him as to dement him; he is taken to an asylum. John Barton, with a strong and passionate nature, and hardly comparable to Jem Forshawe, has 'seen enough of what comes of attacking knob-sticks' and will 'ha nought to do with it no more' (*MB*, 16:240). The ominous atmosphere of the

clandestine Union meeting is there in both novels, yet in *Mary Barton*, when the workers meet to decide who is to murder Henry Carson, Mrs Gaskell creates a dense atmosphere unparalleled in *William Langshawe*:

Then came one of those fierce terrible oaths which bind members of Trades' Unions to any given purpose. Then, under the flaring gaslight, they met to consult further. . . . The gas was extinguished; each drew out a paper. The gas was relighted. Then each went as far as he could from his fellows, and examined the paper without saying a word. . . . He who had drawn the marked paper had drawn the lot of the assassin! (*MB*, 16:241–2)

The *Athenaeum* rightly observes that Mrs Stone's satire is directed against 'the worship of money'.<sup>1</sup> Her criticism of money as the sole end in life foreshadows Mrs Gaskell, constituting another reason why she should have been mistaken for the author of *Mary Barton*. William Bladow, a hermit, laments Edith Langshawe's future marriage:

. . . oh, there is sin, and crime, and misery,—misery so sad, so deep; and what causes it, Miss Langshawe—what induces to crime? and what leads to misery?—Money. What makes a man overreach his neighbour?—Money. What tempts him to murder a fellow-creature?—Money. What shuts his heart to affection, and his ears to every cry of virtue and honour?—Money. What makes a father sacrifice his child at the altar?—Money—money—money. (*WL*, II, 185)

Towards the end of *Mary Barton*, Mr Carson forgives John Barton, his son's murderer; by reading the Bible he realizes that all men, rich and poor, are brethren, that it is our duty to forgive others, and finally the futility of worldly riches dawns upon him: '. . . he contemplated the desire after riches, social distinction, a name among merchant-princes amidst whom he moved, and saw these false substances fade away into the shadows they truly are, and one by one disappear into the grave of his son' (*MB*, 7:451). This scene has an obvious parallel in *William Langshawe*, when Mr Ainsley, feeling sympathy with his nephew Frank Walmsley and his consumptive teenage wife Bianca, reflects on the futility of worldly goods:

<sup>1</sup>*Athenaeum*, 1 Oct. 1842, p. 846. This is a negative review, perceiving the novel as an attack on 'the social circles of Manchester,' denouncing her satire on 'the taste for ostentatious display, and the coarseness of manners' as 'absurdly exaggerated.' The reviewer fails to grasp that Mrs Stone's satire is blended with sympathy and understanding. A somewhat more positive review appeared in the *Examiner*, 5 Nov. 1842, pp. 709–10.

The coffee came; and, as he sipped it in a desponding mood, Mr. Ainsley was led, for the *second* time in his life, to reflect on the utter inutility of magnificence and wealth as cordials to the heart when it wants solace.

... The second time was now, as he left a yet more melancholy couch, that of his young, beautiful, cherished, but, as he too surely felt, *doomed* niece, Bianca Walmsley. In his bitter burst of feeling, he looked on the magnificent appointments of his drawing-room, and on the splendid silver and rich china of his tea equipage, as it glittered under his eye, with almost a feeling of loathing 'I have toiled and struggled for a lifetime,' thought he, 'I have known neither rest nor respite till I obtained these things; and to what good? What can they obtain for me, for my *heart*?—Nothing.' (*WL*, II, 267)

Similarity of incidents does not, of course, place Mrs Stone and Mrs Gaskell on the same level as novelists. The last common plot motif we shall examine may help explain why only one edition appeared of *William Langshawe*, why it was not widely reviewed, and why Elizabeth Stone is entirely forgotten by literary historians and bibliographers alike, whereas Mrs Gaskell and her works attract more and more attention. The mirthful Christmas games of the Wolstenholmes, with whom the Langshawes spend the holiday, are interrupted some time after the son, Henry Wolstenholme, has gone down to the mill:

It might perhaps be about ten minutes after his departure, that a sudden knock was heard at the hall door. We all know how *readable* raps at the door are; how we arrange ourselves to welcome an aristocratic visitor, or assume an easy air of indifference for the reception of a 'snob', according to the intelligence given by the knocker; how all our nerves are strung to expectation by the postman's twofold rap, and how intensely anxious we are for a letter, although two minutes previously not one of our 'charming correspondents' was in our thoughts. But if an unexpected rap comes, unmarked by any of the characteristics we have mentioned, how everybody listens and wonders what it can be. So it was now. The knock was a sharp, sullen heavy knock, such as made everybody start and listen; conversation ceased in a moment, for it was an unaccountable knock at a strange time. The door was opened, and a voice was heard inquiring for 'the young master.'

'He is gone out,' said the servant.

Mr. Wolstenholme darted into the hall.

'Whom do you want, my good man?'

The man stepped into the hall, and moving his hat respectfully, asked, in a hurried manner, 'for the young master.'

'My son Henry is gone to the factory, not ten minutes ago; if you want him you had better wait a little while.'

The man looked distressed, first at the ladies, who had crowded into the hall, and then turning to Mr. Wolstenholme, said, in a low voice:

'If the young master *did* go out, sir, I'm afeard he is down in the loan, much hurt.'

At this moment, and before Mr. Wolstenholme could make any reply, a bustle was heard outside the door, which was instantaneously opened. A crowd of people appeared, and as they partly divided to enter the hall, Mrs. Wolstenholme, who had nervously pushed foremost, saw her eldest son, Henry, borne in by the men—a corpse.

Pass we this. (*WL*, II, 303–5)

This scene, in which Henry Wolstenholme, like Henry Carson in *Mary Barton*, is brought home a corpse, though not devoid of suspense, is marred by Mrs Stone's circumstantial way of telling it. The long explanation about different types of knocks and our response to them prevents it from becoming as powerful as the corresponding scene in *Mary Barton*. It would have fared differently under Mrs Gaskell's pen and she would hardly have concluded it by 'Pass we this'. The contrast is striking when Sophy Carson breaks the news to her father about her brother's death:

'Papa,' said she, softly. He did not stir.

'Papa!' she exclaimed, somewhat louder.

He started up, half awake.

'Tea is ready, is it?' and he yawned.

'No! papa, but something very dreadful—very sad has happened!'

He was gasping so loud that he did not catch the words she uttered, and did not see the expression of her face.

'Master Henry is not come back,' said nurse. Her voice, heard in unusual speech to him, arrested his attention, and rubbing his eyes, he looked at the servant.

'Harry! oh no! he had to attend a meeting of the masters about these cursed turn-outs. I don't expect him yet. What are you looking at me so strangely for, Sophy?'

'Oh, papa, Harry is come back,' said she bursting into tears.

'What do you mean?' said he, startled into an impatient consciousness that something was wrong. 'One of you says he is not come home, and the other says he is. No that's nonsense! Tell me at once what's the matter. Did he go on horseback to town? Is he thrown? Speak, child can't you?'

'No! he's not been thrown, papa,' said Sophy, sadly.

'But he's badly hurt,' put in the nurse, desirous to be drawing his anxiety to a point.

'Hurt? Where? How? Have you sent for a doctor?' said he, hastily rising, as if to leave the room.

'Yes, papa, we've sent for a doctor—but I'm afraid—I believe it's of no use.'

He looked at her for a moment, and in her face he read the truth. His son, his only son was dead. (*MB*, 18:259–60)

These two lengthy quotations show how Mrs Gaskell's talent for intimating feelings, her powers of conveying an atmosphere loaded with suffering and her insight into human nature, making Mr Carson gradually perceive the truth, place her in a category of novelists outside the reach of Mrs Stone.

In Mrs Stone's *The Young Milliner* we find two characters which anticipate *Mary Barton*: Ellen Cardan, the young milliner, resembles Mary Barton in one respect, and Bessy Lambert, a shirtmaker who finally becomes a prostitute, brings to mind Mrs Gaskell's Esther. Ellen Cardan possesses exceptional beauty, which is remarked upon when she puts on a bonnet at the request of her customer: "'Look at Miss Cardan in that bonnet; really you should pay her a premium to stand in your shew-room—all your wax dolls would be at discount; no one would buy anything which had not been seen on her!'"<sup>1</sup> Her beauty suggests Mary Barton's. John Barton would have found it easier to apprentice his daughter 'had he known that if Mary had accompanied him the case might have been rather different, as her beauty would have made her desirable as a showwoman' (*MB*, 3:63).

In Bessy Lambert the readers of *Mary Barton* had already met a tentative sketch of a prostitute. Ellen Cardan, a frequent visitor of the Lamberts, has been prevented by work from seeing her friends. One day she runs into Bessy in the street, 'so beautifully dressed, that she did not at the moment know her' (*YM*, 293)—a Bessy who 'looked wretchedly ill'. After some time Ellen is stopped one day by someone in Regent Street, someone who says:

'Ellen, won't you speak to me?'

Ellen turned in haste, for well she knew that voice; but she gazed in horror on the face which the glare of the lamp exposed fully to view. Every trace of Bessy's beauty was gone; but that was nothing, health and shame seemed to be gone also; her features were pinched, and sharp, and miserable, her eye hollow, her cheek flushed; and as for her dress and appearance, even Ellen, inexperienced as she was, could not doubt the vocation of the exposed wretch before her. (*YM*, 341)

<sup>1</sup>Elizabeth Stone, *The Young Milliner* (London, 1843), p. 114. Page references hereafter given in the text, e.g. (*YM*, 114). This novel was reviewed by the *Athenaeum* on 6 May 1843, p. 437. The reviewer holds that it 'will neither travel far, nor do much good or harm'.

Bessy has left her lover and when Ellen Cardan asks her: ‘‘Where did you go, Bessy?’’ Bessy gave an agonized glance, as she said, ‘‘Don’t ask me that silly question, but ask yourself where I could go’’ (YM, 343). The similarities between Bessy and Esther are unmistakable. Esther, whose ‘glaring paint’ (MB, 10:169) aroused the contempt of John Barton, accosts Jem Wilson in the street. Jem, who does not recognize her at first, innocently asks her where she lives—‘She laughed strangely’ and says ‘‘do you think one sunk as low as I am has a home?’’ (MB, 14:214). Unlike Bessy, a minor character, Mrs Gaskell’s Esther is a tragic character of significance whose feelings of despair and degradation are carefully delineated. Notwithstanding the fact that both *William Langshawe* and *The Young Milliner* foreshadow *Mary Barton*, they do so only in incidents, characters and dialect, lacking the religious tone and challenge inherent in Mrs Gaskell’s novel, acknowledged by journals like *Fraser’s Magazine*, which ‘would placard its sheets on every wall, and have them read aloud from every pulpit, till a nation calling itself Christian began to act upon the awful facts contained in it, not in the present peddling and desultory manner, but with an united energy of shame and repentance proportionate to the hugeness of the evil’.<sup>1</sup>

### III

For a parallel to the religious message which is central to *Mary Barton* we must turn to Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna. Through her social work among the poor Irish in St. Giles, one of the worst London slums, she had first-hand experience of misery, squalor, ignorance and drunkenness, which aroused her indignation. In 1839–41 the *Christian Lady’s Magazine* published its editor’s *Helen Fleetwood*, a tale of Manchester workers.<sup>2</sup> In depicting human relationships in an industrial society she is a pioneer suggesting Mrs Gaskell, who, though of a totally different religious

<sup>1</sup>*Fraser’s Town and Country Magazine*, xxxix (1849), 429.

<sup>2</sup>Scholars have wrongly given the date for the serialisation of *Helen Fleetwood* as 1839–40. See Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (1954; rpt. Oxford, 1956), p. 118; Kovačević and Kanner, p. 160; and Ellen Moers, p. 24. The novel appeared in the *Christian Lady’s Magazine* from September 1839 to March 1841.

background, would still have shared many of Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's ideas about the divisions between masters and men, rich and poor and true Christians and hypocrites.

Mrs Green visits the millowner Mr Z's house in a scene that anticipates *Mary Barton*. Having left the squalor of her miserable abode, Mrs Green enters his house:

after treading with some wonder the chequered marble that graced the spacious hall, and passing between two rising platforms of rare and fragrant exotics that breathed perfume through the house, and crossing a circular space where the light from a lofty dome of glass streamed down on some fine antique statuary, she found herself in an apartment teeming with what to her rustic apprehension appeared the gorgeous magnificence of royalty. It was, indeed, a large and very handsome room, fitted up with no lack of either taste or cost; . . . From a folding door, the partial opening of which showed a table glittering with cut glass and silver plate, the accompaniments of the family luncheon, Mr. Z. advanced, and took his station before the fire-place, . . .<sup>1</sup>

Rubenius' theory, that Mrs Gaskell both read Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's works and was influenced by them seems very likely when we compare this passage with Wilson entering Mr Carson's house in *Mary Barton*. Just like Mr Z's house, 'Mr Carson's was a good house, and furnished with disregard to expense. But in addition to lavish expenditure there was much taste shown, and many articles chosen for their beauty and elegance adorned his rooms' (*MB*, 6:105). Mr Z's lunch table is paralleled by the breakfast table of the Carsons: 'In the luxurious library, at the well-spread breakfast-table, sat the two Mr Carsons, father and son' (*MB*, 6:107). It is to this scene that Wilson, 'the gaunt, pale, unwashed, unshaven weaver was ushered in' (*MB*, 6:109). Just as Mr Z's house appeared to have the 'gorgeous magnificence of royalty' to the rustic Mrs Green, so Wilson is also dumbfounded by the luxury of the Carson residence: 'There he stood at the door, sleeking his hair with old country [my italics] habit, and every now and then stealing a glance round at the splendour of the apartment' (*MB*, 6:109).

The theme of Dives and Lazarus is of paramount importance to *Mary Barton*, combining as it does the theme of rich and poor

<sup>1</sup>The Works of Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna with an Introduction by Mrs H. B. Stowe, 5th ed. (New York, 1847), I, 557. All page references to *Helen Fleetwood* are to this edition and are hereafter given in the text, e.g. (*HF*, 557).

with that of religion. John Barton, an embittered man, has lost faith in the rich as well as in religion:

'If I am sick, do they come and nurse me? If my child lies dying . . . does the rich man bring the wine or broth that might save his life? . . . No, I tell you, it's the poor, and the poor only, as does such things for the poor. . . . We are their slaves as long as we can work; we pile up their fortunes with the sweat of our brows; and yet we are to live as separate as if we were in two worlds; ay, as separate as Dives and Lazarus, with a great gulf betwixt us: but I know who was best off then, . . .' (*MB*, 1:45)

During his visit to London, Barton is struck by the great diversity of wealth displayed in the capital and his thoughts return to the subject of rich and poor: "'They are having their good things now, that afterwards they may be tormented.'" Still at the old parable of Dives and Lazarus! Does it haunt the minds of the rich as it does those of the poor? (*MB*, 9:142).<sup>1</sup> The implied answer is, of course, no. So it is in *Helen Fleetwood*, where Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's implication of the Dives and Lazarus theme, vested as it is in laboured and propagandist prose, foreshadows Mrs Gaskell. Mrs Green reflects on Mr Z:

There sat a fellow mortal, as frail a child of earth and of sin as herself; one who had worked his way, not by the labour of his own hands, but by the toil of others, to the possession of such wealth. . . . This, however, she felt was the fruit of enterprise and perseverance; . . . but these riches had hardened his heart, had stifled the pleadings of humanity, and made him not only cold and proud, but cruel. . . . He wants me to look round, to admire his glittering toys, to draw a painful contrast between this palace and my own miserable home; . . . 'Does he want me to covet? would he tempt me to steal?' Such cogitations were passing through the mind of the widow, and she felt them to be the suggestions of a wrong spirit, yet would not stifle them until the scripture recurred to her mind, 'Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his faith.' All was now changed: the contrast that struck her was no longer that of a haughty rich man, glorying in his possessions over a despised, impoverished fellow-creature, who groaned beneath the pressure of present difficulty and anticipated want: but that of a wretched being, who had his portion here, the good of this world having blinded his mind, lest the light of the glorious gospel should shine into it—one to whom the summons might come, 'This night shall thy soul be required of thee; then whose shall those things be which thou has provided?'—one of those rich men

<sup>1</sup>Mrs Gaskell alludes to Abraham's words to Dives: "'Remember, my child, that all good things fell to you while you were alive and that all the bad to Lazarus; now he has his consolation here and it is you who are in agony'" (Luke 16:25).



to whom the Apostle's awful apostrophe was addressed, 'Go to now; weep and howl'—yes, the contrast was between such a one and herself, poor in worldly goods, but rich in faith, and an heir of the kingdom of heaven; brought through much tribulation to seek, to know, to love the Lord; having her treasure laid up where neither moth, nor rust, nor thief could touch it; and knowing that, whatever might be her losses on earth, she had in heaven a better and more enduring substance. (*HF*, 557–8)

This lengthy quotation shows that the resemblance between *Helen Fleetwood* and *Mary Barton* is, as far as religious ideas are concerned, undeniable.

With South, one of Mrs Green's neighbours, as her spokesman, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna challenges the clergy for not showing concern with the poor; 'for the quiet way in which the clergy look on while the poor are destroyed around them, shows how little they care about them, bodies or souls.' (*HF*, 605). This idea recurs with great force in *Mary Barton*, where Mrs Gaskell, although a minister's wife, does not spare the clergy itself from her religious challenge. The sufferings of the poor made them suspect 'that their legislators, their magistrates, their employers, and even the ministers of religion, were, in general, their oppressors and their enemies; and were in league for their prostration and enthrallment' (*MB*, 8:126).

*Helen Fleetwood* is the only industrial novel before *Mary Barton* in which the reader is confronted with such a thorough analysis of the effects of factory work on family life and with the shocking idea that the 'Christian' millowners, 'church-going people' who 'pay all the outward respect' (*HF*, 564) to religion, neglect their moral duties. Nevertheless, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna never succeeded in arousing the large novel reading public as did Mrs Gaskell.<sup>1</sup> The language, more appropriate to religious pamphlets than to a tale of Manchester workers, partly explains why *Helen Fleetwood* lacks the authenticity of Mrs Gaskell's novel. It is, however, the only industrial novel to develop the

<sup>1</sup>Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna did not address herself to the average novel reader. In her *Personal Recollections* (1841) (New York, 1858), p. 78, she relates how her meeting with Captain Phelan—her future husband—in London saved her, when in straitened financial circumstances, from the snares of becoming a novel writer. She would strongly have objected to being called a novelist; in her opinion she wrote a tale embodying certain religious ideas.

religious ideas which I take to be the core of *Mary Barton* and can, consequently, be regarded as its only true forerunner.

It is highly likely that for the composition of *Mary Barton* Mrs Gaskell also drew on her familiarity with *The Wrongs of Woman* (1843–4), another attack on woman and child labour by Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna. More than any preceding industrial fiction ‘*The Forsaken Home*’, one of the four tales which constitute *The Wrongs of Woman*, endeavours to analyse the evil effects on family life caused by women and children being employed in the mills rather than men. John and Alice Smith and their five children move to a factory town where they are appalled to find that only women are employed in the screw manufactories. Unwillingly John gives in, and Alice begins to work in a mill where

she sees several infants brought in by idle-looking, half-starved, or half-drunken men, and by children much too young for such a charge, to be nourished at the breast during this short cessation of labour. The wretched appearance of these babies wrings her heart: squalid, filthy, pallid, emaciated;—and with a general aspect of unnatural stupor for which she knows not how to account.<sup>1</sup>

Alice, resolute to keep up a neat home and prevent her unemployed husband from taking to drink, is gradually worn down by hard toil. Not only is she confronted with women who have become demented from having had to leave their new born babies, but, when her own baby dies from neglect, she begins to give way. Her home and children become indifferent to her, her husband drinks heavily, and she, a former paragon of female virtue, joins a club where she drowns her sorrows in beer. Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna’s disapproval of factory work for women was to find a parallel in *Mary Barton*, where Mrs Gaskell regrets that married women work in the mills. Jane Wilson tells Mary Barton how ‘there never was such a born goose at house-keeping’ (*MB*, 10:164) as she, which is hardly surprising since she had ‘been in the factory sin’ five years old a’most’ and ‘knew nought about cleaning, or cooking, let alone washing and such like work’ (*MB*, 10:164). Furthermore, the mill-workers in ‘*The*

<sup>1</sup>*The Works of Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna* (New York, 1846), ii, 425. *The Wrongs of Women* (American title) can be found in vol. 2, pp. 397–502. All page references are to this edition and hereafter given in the text. The four tales were also published separately.

'Forsaken Home' very much suggest the families described by Mrs Gaskell's Mrs Wilson who

'... could reckon up' (counting with her fingers) 'ay, nine men I know, as has been driven to th' public-house by having wives as worked in factories; good folk, too, as thought there was no harm in putting their little ones out at nurse, and letting their house go all dirty, and their fires all out; and that was a place as was tempting for a husband to stay in, was it? He soon finds out gin-shops, where all is clean and bright, and where the fire blazes cheerily, and gives a man a welcome as it were.' (*MB*, 10:165)

By its religious fervor and lightly disguised propaganda, however, 'The Forsaken Home' constitutes a far less effective challenge to the average reader than that voiced in *Mary Barton*; yet the ideas found in it are of interest since they constitute part of the literary tradition preceding *Mary Barton*.<sup>1</sup>

#### IV

By 1848 there existed a well-established genre of industrial fiction foreshadowing *Mary Barton*. Nevertheless, 'A Manchester Strike', *Michael Armstrong*, *Mary Ashley*, *Helen Fleetwood*, *William Langshawe* and *Sybil* all attempt, as we have seen, to portray the problems of the manufacturing districts. To succeed in this undertaking would have required a writer of a totally different calibre—a novelist whom William Rathbone Greg had not yet encountered when he reviewed *Sybil* in 1845:

A novelist who should depict all this with a faithful and courageous pencil unhampered by conventional ideas of verisimilitude,—who should draw his figures from actual life, and whose pictures would be the matured product of *inquiry*, as well as *observation*, would be a hitherto unseen phenomenon, and might do immeasurable service both to the class of whom, and the class for whom, he writes. . . . Indeed, duly to execute such a work as we have suggested, would require two qualifications so rarely found in combination—great powers of delineation, and intimate and prolonged acquaintance with the working classes—that we despair of its accomplishment till some one shall arise among those classes themselves. . . .<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Parts I, 'Milliners and Dressmakers', III, 'The Little Pin-Headers', and IV, 'The Lace-Runners', bear little resemblance to *Mary Barton* and, despite the literary merits of Parts III and IV, fall outside the scope of this essay.

<sup>2</sup>*Westminster Review*, xliv (1845), 146.

The despair of the *Westminster Review* was brought to an end in 1848 when Elizabeth Gaskell appeared as a novelist on the literary scene. She was, indeed, the 'hitherto unseen phenomenon', the first novelist writing of the manufacturing poor to possess both 'great powers of delineation' and 'intimate and prolonged acquaintance with the working classes'. It would certainly be a mistake to consider *Mary Barton* as a phenomenon appearing in a literary vacuum. It was, however, the first successful contribution to the industrial novel, towering above earlier attempts, and, in order to do Mrs Gaskell justice, *Mary Barton* should therefore be regarded as the *first peak* in a mountain ridge of novels, preceded by 'foothills' like *Helen Fleetwood* and *William Langshawe* and succeeded by other peaks like *Hard Times* and *North and South*.