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Feminine Victorian Prose Writing in Quest of 'the' Voice: Elizabeth Gaskell

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Our approach to the issue formulated in the title "Feminine Victorian Prose Writing: in Quest of "the" Voice: Elizabeth Gaskell" relies on the already notorious pun engendered by the homophones "voix" and "voie", used by Luce Irigaray in her essay, "This Sex Which is not One", whose basic assumption is that "trouver une voix, c'est bien trouver une voie", "that is finding a voice (voix) means in fact finding a way (voie)" (qtd. in Lanser, 1992:3) able to send the message of change and anticipate the women writers' movement from the margin of the literary tradition to its center that is, the way in which the gender ideology of the 19th century is brought into the foreground and questioned by means of novel writing in particular, and prose writing in general.

Structure:

The first chapter marks our own "quest" of an appropriate narratological approach as a tool for the analysis of Gaskell's work, and recommends one that combines the analytic methodology and terminological precision of narratology with contextualizing practices of feminist criticism, which works as a bridge between the textual and extratextual voices. This aspect was particularly important for Gaskell's daring project on the transformative role of literature, and was achieved by means of polyphony of voices, both fictional and extrafictional that help the reader to build an image of the author's identity, beliefs, attitudes and goals, and to internalize the message she wants to convey.

The second chapter enlarges upon the gender ideologies and myths of womanhood in 19th century Victorian England, in an attempt to establish a correlation between the literary genres women 'tried' their hand on and their gender. We have also briefly analysed their endorsement of writing as the only option for their assertion as either public speaking figures or simply financially independent persons, depending on each female writer's personal ambitions, as

well as the imagery attached to the woman as either respectable, "Angel in the House", or fallen, mad "Woman in the Attic". The third part of this chapter revises the way in which life documents such as letters, diaries, historical biographies and travel literature, on the one hand, prepared women for fiction writing and, on the other points to the way in which these documents were used to "veil" women's private stories.

The following three chapters are an analysis of Elizabeth Gaskell's authorial voice as it results from Charlotte Brontë's biography, from her novels but also from her Gothic short-stories, so appreciated by Charles Dickens, who openly admitted her storyteller talent by calling her "my dear Scheherezade"; Scheherezade, "the manipulator of male desire, the designer of endless narrative, the woman storyteller telling stories to win her husband and save her own life" (Schor, 1992:3). For the Victorian Scheherezade, telling stories was synonymous to telling both the story of her becoming as a writer, and to re-telling or re-writing the Victorian woman's story through that of her female characters.

Our conclusion revisits issues related to writing as a profession, such as: social class, education, means of support, and age at first publication but also the strategies women writers used in order to overcome their "anxiety of authorship" and cope with their will to write and be published in a society that sees women's work and earning money as declassing, even degrading and, above all, extremely dangerous. We have taken Elizabeth Gaskell's case as an example only to restate the essence of her quest of 'the' voice, which, for her times, still remains a case of 'preaching' or 'silencing' as opposed to 'chatting', both parts of an always double voiced, or even more accurately of a plurivocal discourse.

Choice of author:

Probably the most important question to be answered is: why Elizabeth Gaskell and not another Victorian female writer belonging to the 'golden- series' Brontë-Eliot?

Our choice of the author is based on the peculiar place Elizabeth Gaskell holds within the literary market of the Victorian time, on her place among the literary figures of the epoch, both male and female, on the way the public perceived her, and received her literary creations, on the themes she dared to write upon, on having openly assumed the act of writing by eventually publishing under her own name and submitting herself to both praise and acerbic criticism when her writing contravened to the commonly accepted moral standards. Elizabeth Gaskell's special position, in spite of the controversial subjects such as working-class politics or prostitution, is attested by the fact that from the publication of her first novel, *Mary Barton*, in 1848 until her death she was perceived as one of the foremost novelists of the day, which makes her initial exclusion form the short list of women writers that were worth analyzing, and her identification with the dozens of other commonplace and conventional writers look unfair and thoughtless. We are mainly referring to two of the landmark studies in feminist criticism: Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own: British Women Writers from Brontë to Lessing (1977)* Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (1979)*, which contrast Gaskell's conservative, maternal, and domestic approach to literature to the Romantically subversive energies of the Brontë sisters. Able to deal with what Victorians themselves would have described as domestic, conventional fiction, but also to point to social injustice, to the evil residing in the lack of tolerance and to the hypocritical understanding of Faith, Moral and Christianity, Gaskell reveals to the reader as a woman writer struggling with the literary plots she has inherited and with those who had the last word in her own quest of "the" voice, that is, the publishing authorities in the marketplace.

Gaskell's critical reception:

In spite of her notoriety during the Victorian period but also because of her reception during the period, Gaskell did not enter the literary canon before the second half of the 20th century. The controversy over Gaskell's early works stimulated a range of

responses, not only from professional reviewers, but from friends, from novelists and other writers, from public figures, and from ordinary people, published in important periodicals of the time *Atheneum, The Literary Gazette, The Economist, British Quarterly Review, the Christian Examiner, The Guardian etc.* As Angus Easson shows in his valuable collection, of Gaskell's contemporary critical reactions, she was often compared and related to the tradition of British and European novel. Early comparisons are with Wlater Scott and Maria Edgeworth, while Charlotte Brontë is an obvious point of both critical comparison and contrast, but George Eliot is also increasingly referred to, while Jane Austen, a strong presence in the reviewers' consciousness, is often successfully invoked, not always to Gaskell's disadvantage, both their penchant for details and their different sensitivity being thus highlighted.

Elizabeth Gaskell's literature has often been overlooked by literary criticism of the first half of the 20th century, being given more credit for the social picture and criticism of the time it illustrates. Gaskell's 'reassessment' began back in the 1960's with the publication of the Chapple and Pollard collection of Gaskell's correspondence or a series of texts on Gaskell's critique of industrial society, which turned the author of C*ranford* (until then perceived as a provincial author) into a novelist of social conscience, a status she maintained for several decades afterwards.

Starting with the late 80s, literary critics have directed their attention toward her artistic development as it results from the technique, the narrative discourse and her continuous questioning of the literary heritage she received. Nevertheless, she took rather long to establish herself in the US; in the mid 1980s she was hardly known there since even Gilbert and Gubar's work contains only five references to her on single pages. Besides, one of the most important researchers of Gaskell's work, professor Alan Shelston believes that even if it is true that the range and variety, qualitative and quantitative, of Gaskell's work was becoming increasingly acknowledged, the biographical, cultural and even genre-related aspects of her work were not being fully considered.

Nevertheless, we believe that Hilary Schor's study published in 1992, *Sheherezade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the*

Victorian Novel, or Deirdre D'Albertis' *Dissembling Fictions (1997)*, or Linda Hughes and Michael Lund's: *Mrs Gaskell and Victorian Publishing (1999)* did her justice by considering Gaskell's work in all of her dimensions- not just as writer, as working mother, as social observer but as someone working within the specific contexts of cultural influence and production. Bibliographies of English-language sources between 1991 and 2001 testify to an exponential growth in full-length studies devoted to her work (the full range of her work).

The publication in 2000 of a second collection of letters gathered by Chapple and Pollard and reunited under the title: *Further Letters of Mrs. Gaskell* extends reader's understanding of the multi-faceted life that Gaskell led, as a character acting into the heart of the period's social and cultural movement and which contradicts the persistent image that she led a life under the constraints of an ordered Victorian marriage or that her fiction reflects her basically bourgeois Victorian values, an image that recent criticism, and our paper tries to dispel. By contrast and without exaggeration, she lived a more varied life and produced more varied work than most of her contemporaries, and this was due to her life experiences which proved to be formative experiences and which made her far more restless and far more experimental as a writer. Besides, her letters reveal her ability to network her way in various social groups, an important aspect in her assertion as a writer.

If Gaskell's reception worldwide is documented with tens of titles many of them the result of PhD research papers, we cannot say this is also the case in Romania. Out of her six novels and novellas, and her more than 25 short-stories, or the notorious *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, only three novels have been translated into Romanian, speaking of that first reception phase of her work and the dichotomized perception of this author as either provincial or urban/social. The novels under discussion are *Cranford*, published 1970 by Univers Publishing House in Bucharest, translated by Liliana Popovici-Teodoreanu, *Mary Barton,* translated by Mircea Alexandrescu and Ralian Antoaneta and published by Editura de Stat pentru Literatură şi Artă in 1960, and two editions of *Nord şi Sud*, 1979 and 1995, translation signed by Vonghizaş Constantin and

published by Univers Publishing House and Vivaldi Publishing House.

When it comes to her critical reception, things are pretty similar, the only study we have identified in the online catalogues of our National Library being Elena Gherdan's: *Elizabeth Gaskell la răscrucea romanului Victorian,* published in 2003, a study that introduces Gaskell for the first time, as it seems, to the Romanian literary critical environment. Our desire to approach Gaskell's work from a different perspective explains our shift from 'story' to 'discourse', and to 'voice' more specifically, and our attempt to bring to the Romanian academic environment a vision upon her work that builds on the latest research in Gaskell's studies (books and articles published in International journals). Our paper tries to further Mrs. Gherdan's project bringing new elements to Gaskell's reception in Romania since it deals with the narratological category of voice not only in the novel but also in her biography of Charlotte Brontë and in her Gothic tales, a coronation of her sustained effort to rewrite the Victorian woman's story and voice her story as a Victorian author.

"The voice" as concept:

Our intention to deal with the narrative category of voice, therefore, is mainly motivated by the fact that literary criticism applied to Gaskell's writing has granted more emphasis on the "story" (histoire), disregarding to a certain extent the "discourse" (récit). As a result, elements of the story, such as the characters, the events, the recurrence of certain scenes and themes, the moral message conveyed by the feminine Victorian novel have been extensively analyzed, to the detriment of the way the story comes to life. Our analysis of the discourse draws its roots into Backhtin's sociological poetics and into the pragmatic views upon literature as a model of Speech Act/ communication in context.

As discursive category, the narrative voice holds, in our opinion, multiple valences, among which the reinterpretation of the relationship author/ narrator-narratee/ reader with the overt intention of creating a feminine audience capable to receive and decode the message transmitted by means of the text, in a period of time, and

within a culture that censors the feminine voice. Therefore, when we talk about producing a woman's "voice" in fiction we actually talk about the codes and expectations of both the literary and the social milieu, about the representation and interpretation of female fictional story-tellers within a particular canon.

Our project starts from the assumption that on the one hand, Victorian feminine writing is marked by gender (meaning that it bears the signs of the social, cultural and psychological constraints inflicted upon women), and on the other hand, that women's writing, Elizabeth Gaskell's as well, developed into a double- voiced discourse, both reinforcing and subverting the dominant, patriarchal one.

The authors that have provided the conceptual framework we have applied in our analysis of Gaskell's voice are the American feminist narratologists Susan Lanser, author of *The Narrative Act, Point of View in Prose Fiction(1981)* and *Fictions of Authority, Women Writers and Narrative Voice (1992)*, and Robyn Warhol's *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel (1989)*.

Building on Austin and Searle's **Speech Act Theory**, the feminist narratologist Susan Lanser comes with an improved interpretation of the basic paradigm of literature as communication, adding the contextualizing component to it and thus reaching a multilayered structure of the narrative situation that she eventually develops into the metaphor of the Chinese box, a sort of mise-en-abîme- like pattern of literature, by far more complicated than the pattern of verbal communication. Lanser identifies a surface level, a sub-text and even a third narrative level subordinated to at least two different voices. The voice of the surface level bears the attributes of what is commonly acknowledged as 'woman's language' or discourse: "polite, emotional, enthusiastic, gossipy, talkative, uncertain, dull and chatty", while the voice of the sub-text is simple and direct and bears the masculine-like authority and assertiveness a woman was not allowed to make use of openly, wherefrom the "potentially subversive power of 'women's language'" Besides, this play with voices may also account for the functioning of the three modes of speaking: the *authorial voice*, *the personal voice*, and *the*

communal voice. We obtain thus a play with voices through the novel which illustrate Bakhtin's theory of the polyphonic fabric of narratives.

Our next question then is how does this "pragmatic", "contextualist" approach serve feminist critics in their enterprise of defining female author's voice? It also makes a significant turn from an emphasis placed exclusively on the fictional voice(s) 'audible' at the level of discourse to the highlighting of the extrafictional voice, that seems to operate as the ultimate organizer and regulator of all the other voices placed in direct subordination to it (author, narrator, focalizer, character and reader).

In her turn, Robyn Warhol stresses the necessity to close the gap between narrator, narratee and receiver, focusing on those strategies that Genette calls "narrative interventions" that might lead to the creation of a sympathetic audience and bridge the narrator to the reading public, and at the same time, might account for the way Victorian novels try to communicate their message. She is interested in a technique extensively used by the nineteenth century female authors, the omniscient narrator's direct address to the reader in order to stir higher emotional response. As a matter of fact she rejects the commonly accepted opinion according to which "direct address is always a sign of bad writing" (Warhol, 1989: xiii), of didacticism and sentimentalism, her purpose being to analyse the role that direct address plays in realistic fictional discourse. Thus, her analysis is grounded on the distinction between *distancing strategies* (predominant, apparently, in male fiction) and *engaging strategies* (seemingly preferred by female writers), which in their turn would be used by a *distancing narrator* and an *engaging* one. Of the two, the latter was, according to her, preferred by female writers since such a narrator used engaging strategies that could have acted as mere vehicles through which women writers might have exerted influence on the readers, by placing the reader in direct relation to the text. Which is more, she believes that "gender in writing strategies arises from the writer's making a series of rhetorical choices, whether or not those choices are consciously intentional" (Warhol, 1989:19).

The engaging features of Victorian novels written by women have established a correlation between gender and genre strictly

linked to the *Prevalent Gender Ideologies and Myths of Womanhood in 19th century Victorian England,* and which could be summarized as:

a) the ongoing discussion on the woman mission (John Stuart Mill – *The Subjection of Women;* John Ruskin- *Of Queen's Gardens*, Sarah Lewis', passionate advocate of the eternal metaphor of "The Angel in House", *Woman's Mission)*;

b) the imagery attached to the respectable woman as "The Angel in House" or "The Perfect Lady" as passive, powerless, meek, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious and above all pure, influential within the home- The Perfect Lady" vs the "Mad Woman in the Attic", a metaphor that would define all women who did not fit into the Victorian categories of respectability;

c) the threat of the redundant woman and of her possible influence upon the values and morality of the middle-class hearth;

d) the rhetoric of paradisiacal innocence and purity, a mechanism of sexual repression to reach that "state of unique deficiency or mindlessness in their daughters of that most elementary, but forbidden knowledge of their own sexuality, instincts and desires as well as the knowledge of good and evil" (Cominos in Vicinus, 1972: 157);

e) the condition of the woman writer during the Victorian as a matter of choice between **pseudonyms** (*Cotton Mather Mills*: Gaskell's pseudonym for her first short stories published in Howitt's Journal), **anonymity**: a case of *Mary Barton, although she would have liked to publish it under a male pseudonym: Stephen Berwick (a tribute to her father William Stevenson, and to Berwick, the town he was born)*, or the metaphorical position of a **Victorian Scheherezade**.

Since this is the metaphor Dickens used with reference to Gaskell we feel it is worth expanding a bit on it. Just like the existence of the fictional female story teller depended on the King's good-will, Dickens' statement sets Gaskell in a subordination position, suggesting that her dependence, symbolical this time, and in terms of artistic career, hangs on his good-will. And, just like a Persian King, Dickens appears to rule over the kingdom of Victorian literature, a metaphor that has never been strange to literary criticism,

his name being almost automatically connected with the male literary production and authority of the time. In his kingdom, Gaskell seems to hold the preferential place of the official female story teller, but one who, like in Scheherazade's case, is never let to forget that a single mistake would be synonymous to a symbolic beheading and that her existence as an author is forever subjected to the will of her master. Her professional relation with Dickens was not exempt from troubles since, although they shared many artistic concerns, Gaskell's response and attitude to such a prescribed role was often rebellious and ended in Dickens' outbursts to his subeditors such as the one that has become notorious: "Oh! Mrs Gaskell-fearful-fearful! If I were Mr G. Oh heavens how I would beat her!"(in Uglow, 1993:395). His reaction shows a deterioration of the amiable relationship of the first couple of years. Still, regardless of the communication and temperament difficulties the two authors experienced, Dickens published about two-thirds of the stories and articles his 'dear Sheherezade' produced between 1850 and her death.

And again, just like in the case of the fictional Scheherezade, Gaskell's trick, as we shall see, is the anecdotal verging on the gossipy, and gossip turned to narrative discursive strategy.

The Liberation of a Silenced Voice: Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*

Published in 1857, the text was submitted to several readings and interpretations. Generations of literary critics have interpreted *The Life* as the result of a warm and cherished friendship between the two Victorian writers who had entered correspondence in 1849, after Charlotte published *Shirley*, and had met on a few occasions before Charlotte's death in 1855. From private topics related to family and health matters, to discussions about contemporary works of literature, the relationship between the two women appears to be one founded on affection and profound respect.

Starting with the 90s, literary criticism has ceased taking for granted this one-dimensional portrait of friendship promoting unconditioned love, of affection and complete lack of conflict and

rivalry. Instead, Deirdre D'Albertis' paper "Bookmaking Out of the Remains of the Dead": Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, published in 1995, Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund's 1999 book *Victorian Publishing and Mrs. Gaskell's Work*, or Juliet Barker's own treatment of *The Life* in her own biography of 1994, entitled *The Brontës*, or the most recent analysis performed by Amanda J. Collins and published in 2010 in the volume *Elizabeth Gaskell, Victorian Culture and The Art of Fiction: Essays for the Bicentenary* reveal a relationship marked by conflictual and ambivalent attitudes, by rivalry and ambitions of literary authority and authorization that dismiss older interpretations of a selfless and fascinated literary 'disciple' whose ultimate aim was "to do justice", or "pay tribute to a recently deceased friend […] in order to counteract erroneous and discrediting rumours and speculation" (Ganz, 1969: 182).

There is a great irony in the story of Mrs. Gaskell's becoming Charlotte's biographer, one which has only recently become central in interpretation of *The Life*, and which refers to the fact that the malicious article that determined Charlotte's family to ask for 'justice' quoted extensively from two letters Gaskell had written during her visit to the Lake District in 1850, to Catherine Winkworth and Charlotte Froude[1], letters in which, under the impression of her first meeting with Charlotte Brontë, she shares information Lady Kay-Shuttleworth had given her on Charlotte, which she took for granted, and on which the outline of the biography is grounded as well. The obituary in question was entitled "A few words about Jane Eyre", where Jane Eyre should be read as Brontë herself, while those "few words" were in fact details of Brontë's life "obtained from a private and we believe authentic source, though we do not pledge ourselves to their accuracy"; Alan Shelston remarked that "this letter in a way represents the *Life* itself in embryonic form".

Thus, we get a whole new dimension on essential aspects in biographical- writing such as: the relationship between author and subject, the politics of the personal, evidence and interpretation and

[1] see letters 75 and 78 in Chapple and Pollard, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, Manchester University Press, 1966, pp.123-128.

last but not least, the ethics of writing biographies. Gaskell's ambivalent position in *The Life* echoes Oscar Wilde's opinion on biographical life-writing: "Every great man has his disciples, and it is always Judas who writes the biography" (qtd. in Malcom, 2009:57). Put within the context of all the other printed texts on Charlotte's life and literary activity, Gaskell's text is more than a friend's tribute to a friend, it is a deliberate and engaged intervention in the public discourse where Charlotte's defence is also self-defence, where authorization of a sister novelist is also self-authorization, where the liberated voice is less Brontë's and more Gaskell's, where the text obtained following the process of selection and interpretation menaces the balance between recreation of one's life and entrapment of the same life.

Therefore, the main issue about Gaskell's biography remains the authenticity of the biographical document and the extent to which a biography that departs from the authentic document and turns to gossip can be considered a reliable one. Situated on the thin boundary between fact and fiction, social investigation and art, the attempted objectivity of biographical life- writing in reconstructing a character's life remains purely utopian since the biographer's work is always the purely subjective product of selection and framing or re-framing of a life, the final result being constantly a version of that life.

With Gaskell, the use of the gossiping, chatty tone is raised to the status of narrative strategy and it speaks of a vision on writing where the informal, the anecdotal and the confidential blend in a discourse that distances from the male one, and recommends an author who rejects the established patriarchal mode of authority in the attempt of imposing one that might be defined as specifically feminine. Whether we call it 'idle talk', 'chat' or 'gossip', this admittedly feminine discursive mode is shown to be aggressively rejected by Charlotte Brontë, while the strategy Gaskell uses distances the two authors by identifying Charlotte with "a male-inflicted model of literary authority" (D'Albertis, 1995:15). The implications of such a discursive mode are to be traced, as we shall see, on the level of the relationship between biographer and reading public, the final aim being to create a more intimate relationship, to

gain the public's trust, and validate her authorial voice in the larger context of the "voices" that make themselves heard in the biography. It stands as an attempt of self-authorization, of finding her voice by contrasting two different discursive modes. In 1985, Patricia Mayer Spacks furthered an interesting theory on gossip as a literary mode, which is grounded on the distinction between *serious gossip* and *malicious gossip*:

> "Serious gossip is a much more than casual conversation; it is an exchange of information and point of view that creates or fosters a sense of community and allegiance, a feeling of common significance and causes. It embodies an alternative discourse to that of public life, and it provides the language for an alternative culture" (in Maitzen, 1995: 375)

And indeed, with Gaskell, gossip is an exchange of information to foster a sense of community within the members of a larger readership, targeting at the middle-class women. Considered a strictly 'feminine preserve', gossip works as "mode of subterfuge", which, according to the same author, "invites the reader to a complicitous relationship" with the Victorian Sheherezade (Spacks in D'Albertis, 1995:14) and grants to the reader the privileged status of being among the few chosen to benefit from that information: "Now to gossip, which of course is a woman's pleasure" (Chapple and Pollard, 1966: 424, Letter 322). The pattern is not strange to Gaskell's fiction either, the author having already practiced upon it in *Cranford*.

But, in a system that bans women from public discourse or any other form of coherent and authorized discourse, 'gossip' becomes the articulating element around which a new community, having the same shared interests, beliefs or frustrations (that is, the defining elements of a community and the necessary condition for a community to exist) is brought to life. Able to build her own alternative discourse, the newly formed community is thus ready to construct her discursive identity, accentuating the distance between the discourse owned by "the One" and its own, which bears the mark of "Otherness". Thus, the narrator assumes in both cases the role of the interpreter (of a community or of a life), and when she chooses to

build her texts from women's private forms: letters, stories, conversations and gossip, what she brings into the foreground are the female community's discursive practices to which she fully adheres. In Charlotte's case the inability to handle and the unquestionable rejection of such an alternative discourse discloses a feeling of alienation from the female interpretative community.

Moreover, relating what others told her, and using second-hand stories might as well function as an effort of translating the responsibility of the facts stated to their generators that is, one more way of telling the truth in a slant manner. What we imply is that she plays with the voices of those whose stories she exploits, but especially with Charlotte's voice that she uses as a vehicle for her own ideas, an instrument behind which one can sense her own frustrations and discontent with the socio-cultural realities of her time. Her strategy lines with what Lanser has defined as the third authorial mode employed by the Victorian female writers, the communal voice. This entitles us to state that on the one hand the act of writing Charlotte's story was to a great extent an act of rewriting the image of herself within the coordinates of duty, modesty, propriety, artistic vocation and literary talent, and that the liberated voice in this biography is more Gaskell's and less Brontë's, while the conflict under scrutiny appears to be Gaskell's inner desire to accommodate her contradictory feelings of admiration and rivalry towards her friend.

Gaskell in the novel market:

The establishment of the professional woman writer, and the emergence of female authority through the act of writing, within such a conservative environment as the Victorian one, was always submitted to the "double critical standard", that is that they were "women first and artists second" (Showalter, 1977:73), while their literary productions were judged accordingly, lack of imagination being, to the Victorian Richard Holt Hutton, "the main deficiency of feminine genius".

The basic pattern of the women-centred novels is, in many ways, closely tied to conventional forms and aesthetic values, the

key-words when it comes to the structure of these novels being: a heroine's progress from unhappy conformity, through adversity, to autonomy, self-knowledge, experience, and eventually independence. Our aim then is to check to what extent Gaskell's writing matches this conventional paradigm and to what extent she succeeds in transcending and transforming the inherited literary patterns.

Gaskell's Realism as a Consensus of Voices: the "condition of England" novels (Mary Barton, North and South)

The industrial novel, or as Gaskell's contemporaries named it, the 'Condition of England' novel, was a hybrid result of her enterprise to adapt a particularly 'masculine' literary form, the political novel, to the 'feminine' concerns of domestic fiction. She used her compassionate imaginative vision to try to reconcile opposing classes, genders and regions as a possible cure for a divided nation. Gaskell's first novel, often assessed by literary criticism as less technically accomplished than the following ones, but written in an authentic Unitarian habit of questioning everything, displays fundamental doubts about authority, about the economy of the social hierarchy, and even, as Linda Hughes and Michael Lund show "about the authority of storytelling" (Hughes, 1999:35). The heroine's development from a voiceless individual who lacks public identity to a vocal and active one, able to determine a change, to reverse the course of action, and thus intervene in history, matches Gaskell's own search for public identity and voice, a movement from lack of confidence to a more confident stance.

Gaskell's project is translated into the text in a series of engaging strategies and techniques that the narrator believes would determine each reader to consider their personal responsibility to the people represented by the characters in the novel: the direct address, the footnotes, digressive explanations, auto-legitimative cultural references, quotations, a forceful assertion of community beliefs by the generic and inclusive use of 'we'. The comments she makes upon her own way of telling the story, draw attention, to her role as the source of the naratee's information. This common plane of existence could place 'you'/reader within the world of fiction, or the world of

fiction might be the world 'you' live in, while the inclusion of the author herself and the actual reader in the plural pronoun "we" links the former entities with the novel's characters, and underlines how much the narratee and the actual reader have in common with the speaker, as well as with those of whom she speaks.

The novel's coherence comes then from the narrator who mediates the complexity of the fictional world that reflects mimetically the real world, not only aesthetically but also ideologically. Gaskell's debut novel authorizes, this extradiegetic-homodiegetic voice, or auctorial narrator, (Stanzel, 1985) who occupies a 'higher' discursive level than the characters, entering into a compact with public naratees who are privileged to share the narrator's enlightened place. Therefore, the narrative voice becomes the source and evidence of the truth of the narrator's interpretation.

In *North and South*, Gaskell raises the Unitarian concern of how far the individual is justified in pursuing individual freedom of thought or action in defiance of social authority. The novel comes first of all with a shift in point of view, which is shared between the genteel middle-class Hale family and industrial, newly middle-class Thorntons. As compared to Gaskell's first 'condition of England' novel, *North and South* seems to be the more conventional text. This balanced, or more diplomatic, perspective on social relations is translated textually in a less intrusive narrating presence, and although the authoritative voice still definitely resides in and manages the text, the narrator of *North and South* makes no overt reference to either her direct participation in or knowledge of events.

Her writing of a novel that attempted to address working class unrest from the double perspective of the industrialist and of the workers is in fact an act of self-authorization, a claim that she can deal with the task she had previously designed for 'a wise man, practical and full of experience" and illustrated the revisionist potential of literature by asserting its connection to social and economic relations. And thus, through both her industrial novels, Gaskell assigned a new role to the woman novelist: that of "an intermediary between classes, educator of the lower orders, facilitator of negotiation or compromise, and advocate of the inarticulate oppressed" (D'Albertis, 1997: 58).

Gaskell's revision of a Victorian theme: the dialogic construction of "Ruth"

Elizabeth Gaskell's second novel, published in 1853, was definitely the most courageous enterprise on the social agenda of her 'novels with a purpose'. It reworked the theme of fall and redemption from a dialogic and problematic point of view. By pairing the voice of Christian charity and the voice of the symbolic order, the novelist succeeds in dissolving the communal point of view and in making a way for her own.

But Gaskell's justification enterprise is not restricted to the social impact of her literary production, it also refers to the self-conscious act of relating to her character and to the inherited narrative of the fallen woman. It refers to the extent to which she succeeds or fails in re-writing this narrative, but as it has been commonly agreed Gaskell's final martyring of her heroine duplicates in fact the retribution narrative of the paradigm she intended to criticize. Gaskell's intervention, by means of fiction, into the public discourse related to prostitution, women's sexuality and the discriminating double standard, was her attack on the complacent, hypocritical attitude of a so-called Christian nation although, in a way it identified her with the fallen woman of her novel[2]. It was also her way of speaking her mind out and challenging society, inscribing her literary discourse into the broader cultural discourse of the social history it belonged to.

Authorized by her very Unitarian heritage to challenge the patriarchal subjection of women, especially of those who failed to fulfil their socially defined roles, she designs and shares a new paradigm for the treatment of sin and fall where the rigid and reductive Old Testament ethic of justice is replaced with the compassionate New Testament ethic of charity. In this context, Gaskell's *Mary Barton, North and South* and *Ruth* are probably the best examples of the liturgy of rationalism and love that Unitarianism appears to be. And, when in the same novels, she urges her readers to

[2] She reports to Eliza Fox a *Gazette* reviewer's "deep regret that we and all admirers of Mary Barton must feel at the author's loss of reputation" (Chapple and |Pollard, Letter 151:223).

put into practice the message of the Gospel, her advice acquires the valence of a firm position in the religious debate of the 1840s and 1850s. Besides, although the position she takes is not doctrinal, the Spirit of New Testament Christianity permeates from each of her texts and creates the picture of the moral and spiritual atmosphere in which she grew up, an essentially Christian one.

As far as the governess theme is concerned, Gaskell's novelty resides in the fact that Ruth's sees her employment as a governess as a means of expiating her sin and of redeeming her soul and not as an opportunity to obtain (financial) independence. Besides, the topic holds, a very special place within the broad discussion on the Victorian gender ideology and its connection to fiction, whether written or read by women; ambivalent figure, the governess embodies two of the most important representations of woman connected to the theory of the separate spheres: "the figure who epitomized the domestic ideal and the figure who threatened to destroy it" (Poovey, 1988: 127). By the 1830s, the governess had become the subject of numerous novels, her position being debated extensively in periodicals and essays, which devolves from her incongruous social and financial status within the Victorian society. Ruth enters the Bradshaw family at a moment when Mr Bradshow: "was richer and more prosperous than ever; a keen far-seeing man of business, with an undisguised contempt for all who failed in the success which he had achieved. […] Stained by no vice himself, either in his own eyes or in that of any human being who cared to judge him." (R: 210). Therefore, Ruth fulfils a very important role in the Bradshaw household. Used to reinforce and perpetuate certain Victorian values, the figure as such remains, though, emblematic for the Victorian society first of all as a marker of a family's economic and financial position, as a symbol of economic power, breed and station. At the same time, the presence of a governess within a family indicated the extent to which a man's wife was truly a "lady of leisure" (Peterson in Vicinus, 1972:5), which underpins the ornamental function attributed to middle-class women and explains the automatic social lowering of those women who earned their existence. Still, Elizabeth Gaskell introduces a character who threatens to blow all borders of Victorian social conventions and

morality, because she complicates the equation and gives to a "fallen woman" the role of watching over the education and morality of a middle class family's daughters. Ironically, Ruth's voice within the Bradford household should bear moral authority and strengthen moral middle-class values, while in reality it is Ruth's fallen nature that practically deprives her of such authority and demolishes the middle-class Victorian family's construct about authority.

With 'editorial omniscience', Gaskell's narrator comments in his/her own voice while keeping his/her heterodiegetic position. The narrator's detailed accounts of Ruth's life from a farmer's daughter whose parents die when she is young, to the adolescent apprentice in Mrs Mason's dress shop, through Ruth's deepest feelings of isolation and loneliness, are meant to make the readers empathise with her, to engage emotionally in her plight and eventually to temper their critical reactions on the moment of Ruth's fall. Little by little the readers' culturally cultivated reactions are demolished and the conviction that, although a sinner she is not evil is rebuilt.

From a structural point of view the novel divides Ruth's life into three stages: sin, redemption and reconciliation through martyrdom.

As Hillary Schor notes: "critics have suggested that Gaskell remained to the end a middle-class Victorian wife, unable entirely to overcome her moral training, unable to imagine her heroine 'a heroine' apart from absolute martyrdom, absolute abnegation of self" (Schor, 1992:76). However, poor aesthetical scores from the critics and the air of artificiality might be a symptom of 'excessive' and multi-layered voicing within Ruth's narrative. The concession Gaskell made to the expectations of her severest readers tell of her own struggle as a literary apprentice to find her own voice, to make a move from a literary daughter to a self-created author, a move she is not yet capable to assume completely, but which shows her ready to question a stunningly masculine tradition, commenting on its tropes and icons. This ending juxtaposes, like in Mary Barton's case the writing of the heroine's story to that of the novelist's story and in this identification, both Ruth and her creator stand against the world, but this determines their symbolic crucifying: "And the crucifying crowd

here is both Ruth's community and Gaskell's readers, who would not be satisfied with anything less than death" (Schor, 1992:76).

Provincial life revisited. The country-life chronicler's voice: Cranford and Wives and Daughters

With *Cranford*, Gaskell's story of auctorial becoming starts its innovative construction that detaches from the very beginning from the pattern we have identified in *Mary Barton* and *North and South*: that of a heroine's progress. In fact there is no heroine in this novel, except for, as Hillary Schor has shown, the novelist herself, while the novel ranges among one of "the most original experiments with narrative and social observation". The consciousness able to read, interpret and translate for the (implied) readers the history of the Cranfordians, dead or alive, belongs to a narrator who states that she "vibrated" all her life "between Drumble and Cranford". Mary's affective vibration and hence her gradual emotional involvement in the life of the small town of *Cranford* marks Gaskell's shift from the widely spread 19th century technique of omniscient, impersonal, heterodiegetic narration, writers such as Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot, or Balzac and Sthendal, who believed in the novel as a mirror reflecting whatever passes by, used. What Gaskell's Mary Smith achieves is a story written out of her way of 'reading', matching, and linking written texts, social codes, dress codes or oral accounts.

The novelty of her narrator, a young woman familiar with the town, who no longer only half-hears or half-understands, was not late to be perceived and praised by contemporary critics[3]. For Gaskell it was vital to have such a 'flexible' consciousness that could move freely from one world to another, from past to present, from the female world of the 'Amazons', to the masculine universe of Drumble, in a constant and balanced state of detachment (so as not to

[3] "Miss Mary Smith cannot help revealing not a little of her own character in making so free with the characters of her friends- and a young woman more shrewd or penetrating, sharper in the midst of her indulgence, more critical behind her kindliness, or more knowing under the meek look of unconsciousness she is perpetually putting on, we have not encountered for a very long time" (an unsigned review of Cranford in the *Examiner*- in Easson, 1991:197).

take Cranford's "elegant economies" too seriously), and engagement (so as to be able to translate its customs for the uninitiated), but avoiding at the same time the implied superiority of an omniscient narrator.

Mary Smith has to find the voice to mediate the dialogic relationship between Cranford and Drumble, between an emotionally cooperative female community and a commercial, industrialized, egocentric and logic world. What Mary has to do is to fight the battle with her own consciousness and win over the patriarchal logic and reasoning she still appeals to when she advises Martha, Miss Matty's servant, under the circumstances of the latter's bankruptcy, to "Listen to reason", when she plans to stay without wages. The next step is the acceptance of communal strategies, a process even her father goes through. But for Martha, who all of a sudden appears as a very articulate person, "in full possession of her voice", reason is "what someone else has got to say." Only to continue in a play with words: "now I think what I've got to say is good enough reason; but reason or not, I'll say it, and I'll stick to it" (C:195). Martha's gesture is followed by the Cranford ladies who gather at Miss Pole's to give up her savings and help Miss Matty, which reduces the narrator's father to feminine muteness and tears, "brushing his hand before his eyes as I spoke" (C: 212). It is at this point that the anonymous female narrator, through her implication in the life of the community and the actions she takes, has managed to articulate her voice and is taken out of anonymity in an official ceremony, but inspite of the ideological shift that brings her recognition, the narrator's fate is to continue to 'vibrate' between Cranford and Drumble, between worlds that remain separate and almost mutually incomprehensible.

If *Cranford* is Gaskell's challenge to her own writing and authorial vision, her last novel, *Wives and Daughters* (1866), although never finished due to her sudden death in 1865, may be considered as the *summa* of her career as a Victorian female novelist.

The truth is, in this novel too, revealed indirectly, while understanding remains, as in *Cranford*, a matter of interpreting clues that are often misread. Overhearing, eavesdropping, intercepting or

reading other people's letters[4] means living a mediated and, perhaps, phantasmatic life. Molly's inability to act and her need for a restorative agent suggests that she is part of the culturally already designed narrative that she only fills or fulfils in several ways. If gossipy discourse governs and builds Molly's plot, different kinds of discourse are used to dissect marital, parental relationships, or the commentaries on the interrelationships of heredity, upbringing and education: the historical, the legal, and the scientific.

Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* is a brilliant forerunner of the Victorian sort of novel that was produced during the last decades. It witnesses an ideological break that becomes visible in all the areas we have already mentioned: point of view, representation of reality, the construction of the character and the relationship to the audience. Besides, as Kristine Krueger has noticed Gaskell "investigates the sources of female authority, displaying fascination with marginalized women that became a constant feature of her fiction" (Krueger, 1992: 158). Representative for this second 'age' of the novel are Samuel Butler, George Meredith and Thomas Hardy, while of the female writers, George Eliot was the one that joined the process of transition to modernism.

Less certain about the accuracy of observation, questioning the status of truth and introducing the multiple point of view and subjective impressions, late Victorian novels have a hard time issuing a clear judgement on the subject matter. And this complicates the relationship between the author and the audience. The unity and the security of the bourgeois code, reflected in the emotionally complex heroes and heroines (built to embody ideals such as the rational man or the woman of virtue) is replaced by relativism, both in the conception of characters, and in the description of a world from which security and stability have practically disappeared.

[4] Elizabeth Gaskell herself was aware of how easily letters could become public property, which explains her request to her daughter Marianne: "Pray burn my letters. I am always afraid of writing much to you, you are so careless about letters" (in Uglow, 1993:243)

Marital life and Divorce Novels: *Sylvia's Lovers*

Sylvia's Lovers is her only full-length treatment of the theme of matrimony, which calls into question the social and political institutions that govern women's lives, and which is set on the background of the larger context we have dealt with above. Thus, the only example in Gaskell's novels of marital breakdown is to be found in this novel, whose plot covers the first years of a youthful marriage and centres around the romantic triangle made of Sylvia Robson, Philip Hepburn and the handsome Charley Kinraid to whom Sylvia loses her heart.

Gaskell's appreciation of the novel as "the saddest story I have ever written" stands to us for her sadness on having become aware and disappointed with the inherited plots she can no longer believe in and which she cannot fully rewrite. Thus, Gaskell wanted to suggest that inarticulate and illiterate women like Sylvia, who are taught to read and write by men like Phillip, reinforcing thus the myth of male authorship, or who, when finally integrated into a female community, reach literacy by means of religious texts, are not actually allowed to write their own narratives.

Unlike her previous novels, *Sylvia's Lovers* ends with a conclusion, separated by a row of asterisks from the novel "proper", a self-conscious move to draw the reader's attention upon the fictionality of the text, upon the forthcoming closure of a storytelling act, giving us both the "now" of the narrative moment projected on the background of the sea, present from biblical times, to the endless repetition of human experience. Gaskell uses the trope of the sea to conclude her novel in a mature and self-asserted voice by now able to admit that everything is relative, a vision upon life that will govern her discourse in *Wives and Daughters*, suggesting that "in the circling tides of history the only certainty is uncertainty itself".

The voice of the storyteller rises vibrantly in the opening paragraph of the novel's epitaph, directly addressing the reader but only as a frail reminder of the overtly engaging manner of *Mary Barton*, drawing us back into the narrative, into conversation, gossip and anecdote, and leaving the end open for further questioning of the female narrative through the two questions she will try to answer in

Wives and Daughters: "What became of the wife?"; "And the daughter?". The two questions lie unanswered in each of her novels, and through her unexpected death, in *Wives and Daughters*, too, as if to show that women's stories will remain unfinished "until there shall be no more sea". And thus, the ever silenced narrative in her novels, be they industrial, social, or provincial, remains the female narrative, doubling forever her cultural, historical and emotional study of the Victorian society, a society she put under the lenses of a microscope.

In *The Last Generation of England* she intended to draw a history of domestic life, and she extended this project to her whole work, revealing a history of the Victorian times told from a woman's perspective. Gaskell's literary career reveals an effort to depart from masculine forms of writing or genres, and adjust them to women's concerns and favourite means of literary expression, and thus the timid beginnings of the literary daughter turned into articulate creations of an established female writer. Her aim was to identify with a community of female writers and therefore the voice/ voices in her novel are most often overtly feminine being all along aware of all the dangers such public exposure involves. The solutions she found to protect herself from public opprobrium have been asserted as conventional and for a long period of time excluded her works from the Victorian female literary canon. What we believe however is that the sheer range of Gaskell's cultural vision has still much to offer to the understanding of the controversial and vast picture of Victorian culture and society.

Elizabeth Gaskell's Gothic Fiction

Turning to the Gothic *écriture* represented a maturity test for Gaskell's authorial voice. The author invests her former subjects into a highly symbolical composition. So Dickens' "dear Scheherazade", as he used to call her, set to work and, for more than a decade, she produced stories whose plots often built a world of mystery and of macabre, populated with ghosts, murders and robbers, with revenge and bloody resolutions, where the mixture of supernatural and realistic elements was directed to expressing her

deepest fears with regard to the threats the sexual and social powers that patriarchy posed to women, and to rethinking men and women's roles in society. Her Gothic fiction developed along with another highly appreciated Victorian genre, sensational literature, with which it shares a common feature: escapism.

On the verge between reality and 'uncanny', the stories that belong to the period marked by the beginning of her collaboration with Dickens, create a world where violence, curses, haunting, evil characters, hysteria and excess and madness are metaphorically used to explore, as Styler (2010:33) has shown, the causes, consequences and possible remedy of evil.

Although, highly appreciated by her contemporaries and especially by her publishers, Charles Dickens, and later George Smith, for her storyteller talents, Elizabeth Gaskell's shorter fiction, her ghost stories included, have been constantly treated as "minor contributions" (Ganz) to literature and, therefore, poorly dealt with by early contemporary critics. Her stories have often been taken at face value, while her craft and inborn storytelling talent undervalued. What Margaret Ganz sees in her short stories, for example, is mainly an attempt to "satisfy the public taste for inspiration as well as for mystery, adventure and exoticism" (Ganz, 1969:198) (that matched her own love for Gothic sensationalism) in search of financial reward, but she does not exclude the hypothesis that they might have worked as an exploration of certain repressed concerns and obsessions that she could not fully develop in her social novels.

The question that raises then is whether Gaskell's tales of the supernatural and the macabre were mere ways of entertainment for a public touched by the mid-century crisis of faith, while at the same time following the male pattern of the genre, or another slant means of telling unspeakable truths.

Our thesis builds on the scholarship of Carol Martin, who, in an article on Gaskell's ghost stories, published in 1989, advances the idea of their being mainly bitter truths in disguise, which announces Deirdre D'Albertis' theory of the 'poetics of dissimulation' that she exposed in 1997, in her book *Dissembling Fictions*. Martin reveals Gaskell's disguised discontent with women's condition within the patriarchal society and with the sexual and social power of

patriarchy, a theory developed further by Diana Wallace in *Uncanny Stories: The Ghost Story as Female Gothic*. Unlike Martin who worked exclusively on Gaskell's short stories, Wallace places Gaskell within a broader context, dealing with two more authors, Mary Sinclair and Elizabeth Bowen whose gothic tales also denounce radically male power, violence and "predatory sexuality".

But the most challenging idea Wallace forwards is her identification of the Ghost story with the "double", with the "unconscious" of the realist novel, the place where, in our opinion, she voices the silences in her novels, which, in the case of a well-established social and domestic writer Gaskell was both during her lifetime and during the first decades of the 20th century, places these stories on a more privileged position than ever. One of the most recent interpretations given to Gaskell's short stories belongs to Rebecca Styles who starts from the assumption that Gaskell uses Gothic tropes to define evil as humanly created misery, which is identified with "erroneous parenting" as in *The Ghost in the Garden/ The Crooked Branch* (1859), or with social structures distorted by the ideology of privileged categories as in *The Poor Clare* (1856), and we would add, *The Squire's Story* (1853). Out of the thirty works of short fiction, nine are gothic in nature or contain gothic tropes. Guilt, madness, violent passions and other morbid states make the subject of *The Crooked Branch* (1859), while obsessive guilt, madness, violence and terror are the central elements in the tales of robbery, murder, supernatural appearances and strange curses, among which *The Old Nurse's Story* (1852), *The Squire's Story* (1853), *The Poor Clare* (1856), *The Doom of the Griffiths* (1858), *Lois the Witch* (1859) and *The Grey Woman* (1861) are the most accomplished from a technical standpoint. Our assumption is that while entertaining her public with tales of mystery and the macabre, the Victorian Scheherazade was steadily subverting her master's authority, creating, with each story she wrote, a place of her own in the "master's house" and justifying her authorial existence.

The Gothic as Mass Hysteria and the Threat of the Foreign Other in *Lois the Witch*

In *Lois the Witch* (1859) she retold one (fictional) story of the Salem witch-hunt of 1692 and built her characters, the setting and details of the action on historical facts. Gaskell had long been fascinated by witch-hunts, which might explain her choice of the pseudonym Cotton Mather Mills for her early *Howitt's* articles, reminder of the Puritan minister Cotton Mather, the author of *Memorable Providences Relating to Witchcraft and Possessions* that she was obviously familiar with. She had previously dealt with the theme of the threat of public hysteria and the destructive power of a vengeful community in *The Poor Clare* (1856) but here, by setting the action into the New World she could make better use of the clash between the One and the Other, between England and the New World as a critique against the evil residing in the uncontrolled power of privileged structures and discourses over unprivileged categories (be they gender, class, religious or all of them). What the two stories share is the same approach to witchcraft and witches that "are created by the hysterical imagination, and irrational projection of anxieties onto those deemed outsiders" (Styler, 2010:40). Lois the outsider, the Other, the Catholic young, beautiful and generous girl that lands on an unfriendly piece of land that from the very beginning bears the marks of instability and strangeness.

Lois's journey from old England to New England stands symbolically for a journey from sanity to insanity. With no one else to rely on, after her parents' death and the departure from the place that he identified with the warmth of the parental home, with faith and stability, Lois forcibly becomes a member of a defective family in a newly-founded community in a wild, strange and inhospitable land. If in Gaskell's rational Gothic, the horror lies as Rebecca Styler has shown, in the home and the secretly familiar, then in *Lois the Witch* the investigation of the psychodynamics of a dysfunctional family's relationships, is at its best.

Within the family Lois's genuine innocence and loving personality and health mindedness represents for the members of this closed micro universe, the threat of the Other and becomes the

scapegoat "onto whom the anxieties of the normal/privileged are projected" (Styler, 2010:41).

A plead for tolerance and a critique against religious persecutions, the paradigm that Gaskell creates in this short story would have fit any other historical period as well. Gaskell's Gothic fiction therefore reveals a lot more about her concerns, not only with a woman's position in society, but also with all its deep-rooted curses that struggle to reach the surface. They also reveal another side of the 'Victorian Scheherezade's creative power and imagination able to deal with both the rational and the irrational, the appropriate and the less appropriate, in a continuous move of covering and uncovering 'the other side of the tapestry', authorizing herself, with each piece of work she wrote as a strong feminine presence in the Master's house of fiction.

The paradigms she creates in *The Poor Clare*, or *Lois, the Witch*, when transplanted to the literary world, speak about the misbalance between the male and female literary discourse, about the power of the uttered but mostly of the written word, as an act of female emancipation, one that can, nevertheless, turn into a curse for the utterer and fall back on her unless it fits the canonical views. Therefore, they speak about the freedom of writing in an accepted female mode, the Gothic, with the mere purpose of entertaining, but also about developing subversive techniques of disguising monstrous, hideous truth into familiar figures and make them pass as inoffensive and conventional.

Conclusions:

To sum up with, we would like to restate that our research paper fits into the latest critical trends that place the analysis of Gaskell's work within a cultural paradigm of understanding the category of voice. This is the reason for which finding a voice (voix) is finding a way (voie) and a place within the social system, finding a solution both from the point of view of the narrative techniques (textual solutions) and from that of the connections established within the Victorian literary environment. Anyway, a distinction should be made between the themes of her literary works and the theme of this Victorian prose writer's self-assertion. Her themes

remain circumscribed to the mysterious feminine and, therefore, unanswered, while the theme of her professional development and assertion find their answer in her rightful and well-deserved inclusion within the literary canon.