

ABSTRACT

FISHER, HUGH VENSON. Perceptions of Gender and Perceptions of Quality: Comparing the Receptions of Dickens's *Hard Times* and Gaskell's *Mary Barton*. (Under the direction of Dr. Antony Harrison.)

Recent literary theorists have argued that, during the Victorian period in Britain, the perception of a work as “feminine” (whether due to its subject matter or its sympathetic portrayal of women) led to negative reception by contemporary literary reviewers. However, a comparative reception study of two Victorian novels of social critique – *Mary Barton* by Elizabeth Gaskell and *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens – indicates that gender perceptions of works in this genre generated different types of reception. *Hard Times* was critiqued in terms of its failure to adhere to the sentimental style of writing associated with Dickens's previous works, while *Mary Barton* was praised for its sentimental discourse, especially with regard to characterization. This disparity between the textual evidence of the reviews and recent literary theory suggests the need for a more detailed study of the gender stereotypes and perceptions of the Victorian reading public.

**PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER AND PERCEPTIONS OF QUALITY:
COMPARING THE RECEPTIONS OF DICKENS'S *HARD TIMES*
AND GASKELL'S *MARY BARTON***

by
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Introduction

The more I reflected on this unhappy state of things between those so bound to each other by common interests, as the employers and the employed must ever be, the more anxious I became to give some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people [...] I know nothing of Political Economy, or the theories of trade. I have tried to write truthfully [...] (Gaskell, *Mary Barton* 3-4)

To interest and affect the general mind in behalf of anything that is clearly wrong – to stimulate and rouse the public soul to a compassionate or indignant feeling that it must not be – without obtruding any pet theory of cause or cure, and so throwing off allies as they spring up – I believe to be one of Fiction's highest uses. And this is the use to which I try to turn it. (Dickens to Henry Carey, 24 August 1854; *Letters* vol. VII, 405, emphasis in original)

The novel of social critique, as a unique form, grew in popularity throughout the nineteenth century. Both male and female novelists produced fiction that focused on social issues; however, the impact of such works is difficult to judge and the writers of those texts were open to virulent criticism from reviewers of the time. Such reviewers exercised the power to affect the perception of novels by creating their own persuasive texts that were generally as readily available to potential readers as the novels themselves. Thus reviewers

in the British press had the potential to affect readers' perceptions of the accuracy and validity of works of fiction and to affect readers' freedom to interpret the text solely on its own merits.

Recent critical studies of the reception of Victorian fiction have offered a new and enlightening approach to discussing perceptions of gender and gender stereotypes in Victorian fiction by examining gender at work in the reception of important novels of the period. Those studies assert that perceptions of an author's gender and his or her adherence to or deviation from accepted gender roles had a greater impact on the reception of those works than previously noted. This is especially true with regard to the novel of social critique, judged by many reviewers of the time as an explicitly "feminine" art form because of the number of women writers in the genre.

Building on these recent reappraisals of the process of critical response in Victorian Britain, this thesis examines the critical works of Nicola Thompson, Mary Lenard, and other recent writers on gender and literary reception, applying their theories to the reception of Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*. However, while my study confirms some of the processes Thompson sees at work, analysis of the critical reviews of *Hard Times* calls into question her assumption of how Victorian audiences received texts by a male author writing in a typically feminine genre. My analysis asserts that, although contemporary responses to Dickens's *Hard Times* mirror to some extent the gender-biased responses to women's discourse that Thompson's work anticipates, the criticism leveled at Dickens in those reviews indicates a perception that this novel was less true to the expectations of sentimental literature that Mary Lenard identifies as hallmarks of that subgenre. This disparity is the direct result of the public's perception of Dickens as a sentimental novelist, stemming from the feminine

qualities of his previous works, which are best known for characters and scenes of great emotion, sensation, and sentimentality.

In order to reveal this process at work during the years following *Hard Times*'s publication in a single volume, I compare the reviews of Dickens's novel to those of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, a novel by a woman author but also a work that was originally published anonymously – and which, for this reason, provides a good counterpoint to my study of the effects of gender on the perception of a novel of social critique. Both novels approach similar issues of social reform and the rights of the working classes, and an analysis of the similarities and disparities between responses to *Mary Barton* (both before and after its author's gender was public knowledge) and responses to *Hard Times* shows that, at least in the case of Dickens's novels, Victorian reviewers' expectations were defined in terms of the presence or absence of the sentimentalist feminine discourse that had come to be expected of this highly-popular male novelist.

Such a comparative reception study has apparently never before been produced. The potential critical importance of this analysis lies in its identification of the extent to which reviewers discuss the success or failure of *Hard Times* along gendered lines in defiance of the expectations other feminist critics have suggested. Those reviews indicate that Dickens's contemporaries were disappointed by the novel's failure to adhere to the expectations of feminine and sentimental discourse – for, as Alexis Easley has argued, journalistic writing on social form was popularly associated with male authors while the novel of social reform was regarded as a predominantly “female” genre.

In the first chapter, I review pertinent literary criticism focused on issues of gender and reader response, along with recent criticism of Dickens and Gaskell. This literature review presents recent reader response and gender criticism prior to extending those studies to a work that has not yet been discussed in that context. The second chapter of this thesis studies the reviews of Dickens and Gaskell in order to identify instances of gendered language and references to “traditional” male and female roles that indicates a perceived transgression of those roles. I have chosen to limit my study to reviews from the six years immediately following *Hard Times*’s publication so as to capture the assumptions and biases at work in a particular historical moment. By comparing these reviews to those of Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* during an equivalent period of time, I intend to show how both novels, concerned as they were with working-class Britons’ living and working conditions, address similar issues, yet were received differently by the gender-biased literary reviewers of the day. The second chapter ends with a brief consideration of further avenues of study anticipated by my argument here.

Chapter One

Gender Roles and Gendered Perceptions: Recent Work in Victorian Literary Criticism

Wolfgang Iser's aesthetic theory of reader response observes that the process of reading itself, not authorial intent, is "the essential precondition for all processes of literary interpretation" (*The Act of Reading* 20). As such, the negative interpretations of *Hard Times* and other such socially-critical novels had the potential to affect readers' opinions of the authority of those fictional works by interfering with the process of reception. Iser asserts that, in the process of reading, "the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader" and is therefore dependent upon the reader's experience of the text, notwithstanding the intended consequences to any "ideal reader" envisioned by the author (21, 27). The process of reading should never be viewed, Iser argues, as a quest to establish a single authoritative meaning. However, such a task is exactly what the Victorian literary reviewer, in his or her socially-constructed role as authority on literary form, style, and quality, undertook.

Nicola Diane Thompson studies one aspect of the reviewer's function in *Reviewing Sex: Gender and the Reception of Victorian Novels*. Thompson analyzes over 100 reviews of four novels by male and female authors to determine how reviewers either accepted or deviated from conventional stereotypes of gender. Such a study is vital, Thompson writes, because the process of review in the Victorian press was both highly didactic and strongly informed by gender roles that were concretized social norms. As the size of the reading public increased, so did the demand for literary publications. "The literary magazine and the genre of the literary review served, under the aegis of the print media as a whole, as

educational institutions whose larger role in Victorian society was the cultivation and transmission of Victorian culture” (11). Aside from the value given to reviewers by the Victorian popular press as arbiters of literary value, their position was further privileged by practices of authorship and publication of their reviews: “Since reviewers were usually anonymous and often used the pronoun ‘we,’ the individuality of particular critics was suppressed. It was replaced by anonymous, oracular voices which seemed to speak with the authority of Culture behind them” (4). Such qualities, when coupled with the Victorian fondness for moral object lessons embodied in works of fiction (particularly the novel), underscores the role that reviewers assumed as the interpreters and transmitters of literary value to the mass reading public. Literary critics, Thompson writes, became “guardians and inculcators of artistic, ethical, and cultural standards”; the language used in many mid-nineteenth-century reviews reflects this moralizing tendency, as the reviewer saw it as his or her place to educate and acculturate the “multitudes” of readers (4-5).

This function differs, however, from reader-response theory’s assertion that, as Iser argues, “the interpreter’s task should be to elucidate the potential meanings of a text, and not to restrict himself to just one” (*The Act of Reading* 22); most criticism of novels in Victorian periodicals was focused not on explication of deeper meanings or the reading process but on a simple value judgment by the reviewer presented as the “opinion” of the entire periodical. Interpretation, as practiced by the Victorian literary reviewer, was more a process of meaning-creation within specific cultural norms rather than an attempt at assisting understanding. The literary reviewer often discussed the text solely in terms of his or her opinion of its quality.

Furthermore, a number of recent literary critics have argued that a novel's perceived adherence to or departure from gender norms affected Victorians' judgments of a text's aesthetic value. In order to reveal those aesthetic judgments at work in the critical reviews of *Hard Times*, I will first discuss Nicola Thompson's study of Victorian reception and the influence of gender on the review process to demonstrate how the comparison of Dickens's reviews with those of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* is pertinent to an understanding of the function of gender roles and stereotypes in the reception of Dickens's novel. In *Reviewing Sex*, Thompson finds perceptions of these roles and stereotypes to be among the most important interpretive factors at work in reviews of Victorian literature, regardless of whether those works were authored by males or females – as is emphasized by her choice to analyze the reception of male authors Charles Reade and Anthony Trollope alongside Emily Brönte and Charlotte Younge. Though Thompson's work discusses Gaskell and Dickens only briefly, and within the context of studying those four other authors, her study as a whole claims to provide a framework of expectations by which gender issues in the reception of other Victorian novels may be studied. However, in my second chapter I indicate ways that such a framework does not take into account the differing set of gender expectations ascribed to the novel of social critique.

Chief among Thompson's assertions is that contemporary reviews of Victorian male author Anthony Trollope's novels show the effects of "gendered thinking" among literary critics of the day. Despite the fact that Trollope was as commercially successful as Dickens in the period when both men were writing, Trollope's standing among critics declined during the course of his career. Thompson argues that his critical reputation was adversely affected by his focus on feminine issues and the sympathetic portrayal of women in his novels. In her

chapter on Trollope's reception, Thompson examines reviews of his works beginning with *Barchester Towers* (his first major success) and identifies ways in which gender assumptions are reflected in them, emphasizing the seeming incongruity of a male novelist evoking a "feminine" or feminized response. For, in examining works of fiction and reviews from throughout the mid- to late nineteenth century, Thompson finds that "gender considerations influence how seriously Victorian critics take Trollope and that the often pejorative connotations of femininity can also be applied to men in Victorian literary criticism" (67).

Trollope's *Barchester Towers*, published in 1857, was a commercial and critical success, but Thompson's study of its reviews alongside those of later works reveal an increasing polarization of critical reviews along gender lines – in part due to the commercial success of female authors that acted as a spur to male authors to "edge women out" (66-67). Trollope was, at first, acclaimed as a "possible successor to the literary throne of Dickens and Thackeray" (67); reviews of *Barchester Towers* in major journals – among them the *Westminster Review*, *Athenaeum*, the *National Review*, and *The Times* – praised the author's rich imagination, the "clever" nature of the story, and (in a review in the *Leader*) "the astonishing energy with which the author writes, the sharpness and concision of his style" (23 May 1857; qtd. in Thompson 69). The *Westminster Review* article examines *Barchester Towers* in terms of gender, calling it "one of the most masculine delineations of modern life ... that we have seen for many a day" (October 1857; qtd. in Thompson 70). Trollope's persona in the novel is "clearly [an] orthodox middle-class Victorian gentleman as far as sex roles are concerned. [...] In her book on Victorian novelists, Mrs. Oliphant refers to both Trollope and [Charles] Reade as 'robust and manly figures'" (70-71). The "clarity" of

Trollope's writing style is considered, in contemporary reviews, alongside his personal habits of card-playing and hunting as evidence of his overwhelmingly masculine presence (71-73).

Nonetheless, despite such early assertions, critics also interpreted Trollope's body of work (and in some cases the man himself) as "feminine" on account of other aspects of his writing:

This perception grew stronger as the 1860s progressed. Occasionally such critics praised Trollope for the versatility and imagination that allowed him to exhibit supposedly feminine writing characteristics; more frequently, just as perceptions of masculine qualities in *Barchester Towers* raised his critical reputation, feminine associations with his later work are [...] responsible for critical attacks on Trollope, ranging from a refusal to take him seriously as a leading and important writer, to an affectionate dismissal of him as entertaining but slight. (74-75)

The sympathetic and positive portrayals of female characters in later novels such as *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, although judged as accurate by reviewers, were received negatively by reviewers who wished Trollope would devote his literary skill to other endeavors. Thompson quotes a piece in the *Fortnightly Review* which asks: "[...] as the prose laureate of English girls of the better class, why should not Mr. Trollope record something else beside flirtations that end well?" (1 February 1869; qtd. in Thompson 76).

Other reviewers made similar proclamations, and Thompson argues that – with the publication of more and more novels that focused heavily on traditional, typical Victorian female characters, their interactions, and their thoughts – more and more reviewers came to connote Trollope's work as less important than that of many of his male counterparts; such

facts, considered alongside his popularity with circulating libraries, helped bring about the view that Trollope was “a writer for women” (78). The *Literary World* stated this perception in 1884, comparing Trollope to Thackeray and proclaiming that Trollope is “nearer what we may call the female view [...] on the whole, that Thackeray is written for men and women, and Trollope for women” (23 August 1884; qtd. in Thompson 78).

Trollope’s focus on realistic portrayals of domestic life is identified as “feminine.” A Victorian author’s presentation of subjects typically associated with women, and the positive presentation of “typical” female characters who subscribe to Victorian gender norms is what Mary Lenard deems “sentimental” discourse in the fiction of the period. In *Preaching Pity: Dickens, Gaskell, and Sentimentalism in Victorian Culture*, Lenard studies Dickens’s writing style and subject matter, establishing it as feminine, and using Elizabeth Gaskell’s novels as a point of comparison to highlight the similarities in the two writers’ styles. Thompson and Lenard agree, independently of one another, that the presence of sympathetically-presented female characters and representations of women’s lives and pursuits in fiction by male authors led critics to perceive those authors as less critically important, less accurate in terms of their perceptions of society, and less authoritative when commenting on social issues.

Preaching Pity focuses on sentimental discourse as it is found in Dickens and Gaskell, comparatively – identifying the key qualities of sentimental writing as the use of didactic object lessons to instruct and emotional images to evoke pathos, and identifying that literary style as the product of female writers of social critique. Lenard gives authors including Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Gaskell credit for developing this unique style of writing, while asserting that Dickens attempted to claim that mode of writing as his own by accusing similar authors of imitating his “Dickensian” style

(4, 93-95). Lenard's assessment of the similarities between the two authors is particularly helpful in its focus on establishing Dickens's writing style as uniquely feminine:

Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Dickens share at least two significant qualities as novelists: namely, an interest in social issues and a corresponding conviction that fiction could change society for the better by influencing the audience. In addition, both authors share a quality that most critics have seen as a weakness: the tendency to deal with social issues in their fiction by resolving conflicts through feminized conventions such as religious conversion and emotional reconciliation. (109)

Nonetheless, "Gaskell's use of sentimentalist discourse was received differently than Dickens's use of the same discursive techniques because there was no slippage between her physical gender and her use of sentimentalist discourse" (111).

Lenard finds that Dickens, both in his writings and in the mass public's perception of him as an author and social reformer, is identified with "feminine" cultural qualities and assumptions, as defined by feminist critics Nancy Armstrong, Jane Tompkins, and others. While masculine modes of discourse are typified by their focus on the intellect, financial and physical power, objectivity and realism, Dickens was identified with the feminine binary opposites of these – namely, emotion and a focus on "the heart," sympathy, and spiritual and moral power (77-78). This makes it less surprising, perhaps, that Trollope makes a clear reference to Dickens in *The Warden* when presenting fictional novelist "Mr. Popular Sentiment," as Thompson notes.

Dickens: The Critical Heritage, edited by Phillip Collins, reprints this scene from *The Warden* as an example of how the Dickensian persona was reflected in Victorian fiction.

Trollope's Mr. Bold remarks on Mr. Sentiment's talent for portraying characters truthfully and accurately, with Bold remarking that "If the world is to be set right, the work will be done by shilling numbers" (Collins 323). The fictional(ized) Dickensian author is described as most talented in presenting "second-rate characters" most realistically:

If his heroes and heroines walk upon stilts, as heroes and heroines, I fear, ever must, their attendant satellites are as natural as though one met them in the street; they walk and talk like men and women, and live among our friends a rattling, lively life; yes, live, and will live till the names of their calling shall be forgotten [...]. (Collins 323)

Yet other writers, among them Fitzjames Stephen, criticized Dickens's "melodramatic and sentimental stock-in-trade" at the same time that the Victorian reading audience flocked to Dickens's sentimental works of fiction (80). Lenard argues that the disparity of gender expectations and what Dickens (as a male author) produced resulted in an ever more negative portrayal of the author and his works – quoting, as an example, Pelham Edgar's 1934 formalist study in which Dickens was named "one of the anomalies of literature who would seem to have produced a great result by defective means" (qtd. in Lenard 82).

Lenard suggests that *Hard Times* may have been negatively affected by its comparison to other novels that took up the subject of factory workers and the problems of the working classes – among them, *Mary Barton* and works by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frances Trollope, and other female authors (93-97). In Lenard's estimation, the sentimental subject matter of Dickens's novel is reason enough for its poor reception, but I believe that other forces are at work. The most sentimental moments of the novel – Stephen Blackpool's

pathetic relationship with his wife (and Dickens's inherent, if ineffective, argument against the marriage laws of the time); the comic portrayal of Mrs. Gradgrind that is unexpectedly, and pathetically, reversed in her death scene; and the violent and undirected passions of Louisa as contrasted with the submissive, typical femininity of Sissy Jupe – all of these scenes were concerned with issues that Victorian readers typically considered feminine by nature. They are also panned by critics as among the least realistic scenes in the book.

It is for this reason that, notwithstanding Thompson and Lenard's perceptions, I argue that the critical reviewers of Dickens's *Hard Times* did not respond negatively to the mere presence of feminine, sentimental discourse in this novel (which is the response that Thompson's and Lenard's criticism would suggest). Contemporary critics indicate, by use of gender biased language in their reviews, that such scenes do not achieve the emotional and cathartic quality of Dickens's previous novels, especially failing to develop and provide female characters on the order of *Oliver Twist*'s Nancy, *The Old Curiosity Shop*'s Little Nell, and others in addition to these which are specifically mentioned by reviewers of *Hard Times*. Such textual evidence differs greatly from the types of responses that would be expected as a result of Thompson's study, which indicates that a prevailing focus on feminine characters and sentimental situations ought to result in negative reactions. On the contrary, as I will show in the following chapter, contemporary readers came to Dickens's novels expecting sentimentality and emotion, especially regarding feminine characters, and a failure to meet readers' expectations is evident in contemporary reviews.

To illustrate the similarities and differences between responses to a male-authored novel of social critique and one authored by a woman, I have chosen to compare reviews of *Hard Times* to those of *Mary Barton* by Elizabeth Gaskell. Although *Mary Barton* received

a mix of positive and negative reviews, drawing criticism from those who believed its depiction of working conditions and of factory owners' ideologies inaccurate, Gaskell was less controversial than other female writers of the time and was perceived to be less of a transgressor of accepted gender norms. This is the argument presented by Deanna L. Davis in "Feminist Critics and Literary Mothers: Daughters Reading Elizabeth Gaskell." Davis believes Gaskell to have been unjustly overlooked by feminist literary critics of the twentieth century specifically because of her acceptance of Victorian gender constraints. In commenting on this, Davis notes Gaskell's potential to subvert twentieth century critics' assumptions about whether or not women could overcome the Victorian era's gender constraints without being seen as "controversial" or "radical," and argues against the assumption that women in the Victorian period were incapable of achieving literary success on equal footing with men.

Davis notes the "virtual silence" of Gilbert and Gubar on Gaskell, which Davis considers exemplary of discomfort among feminists when faced with Gaskell's ability to dwell within socially-acceptable roles and still produce fiction that indicted inequalities within that social system. "The critics [Gilbert and Gubar] make four mentions of 'Mrs.' Gaskell and one brief reference to Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, each only in relation to another woman writer treated more extensively," Davis writes (515). Other critics "seem genuinely puzzled by Gaskell's continued allegiance to some of the most restricting codes with which Victorian women were faced, though they are unwilling to write off this literary woman as a mere pawn of the patriarchy" (516):

We can arrive at a fuller understanding of Gaskell's fiction if we see her in her full complexity: not as either a mouthpiece for Victorian patriarchy or a rebel

against the cult of womanhood, but [...] a nurturing woman who eventually comes to realize that her needs must matter too. (532)

An example of Gaskell's decision not to rebel against convention is the fact that the novelist chose not to use a pseudonym for *Mary Barton*, even though Gaskell had previously done so in her journalistic writings – a fact which Alexis Easley finds most revealing in *First-Person Anonymous: Women Writers and Victorian Print Media, 1830-70*. Gaskell had previously used a male pseudonym in her journalistic work for *Howitt's Journal*, which Easley believes stemmed either from the desire to avoid the negative image commonly ascribed to women who wrote about social issues, or to benefit from the positive connotations ascribed to the (predominantly male) cadre of urban investigative writers – the image of “a middle-class man whose access to working class neighborhoods and domestic spaces would not seem morally compromising” (81, 87).

Given these previous circumstances and the amount of controversy surrounding women writers on social issues, Easley finds it difficult to know what prompted Gaskell's choice to publish the first edition of *Mary Barton* anonymously, noting that the author briefly considered using a male pseudonym (as noted in correspondence) – perhaps even one of those she had used in contributing to *Howitt's Journal*: “She may have believed that a social problem novel published under a male name would have the greatest authority in debates over the Condition-of-England Question” (91). However, Easley argues that the decision to choose anonymity heralds the transformational period during which Gaskell shed the masculine image and adopted the role of “Mrs. Gaskell, the high-profile woman of letters” (91), which was problematic in and of itself.

What Easley fails to explore is the realm of ambiguity that Thompson charts in the reception of the Bröntes' novels; Easley's discussion of *Mary Barton*'s initial reception occupies three sentences in which she notes the obvious fact that "Anonymous publication meant that neither the novel's narrative voice nor its audience was immediately classifiable in terms of conventionally masculine or feminine reading material" (91), before delving into a critique of the novel itself. Although Easley later writes that identification of Gaskell as writer of *Mary Barton* in December 1848 firmly established the author's intellectual persona, paving the way for later critical and commercial success, nothing is said about the effect on the novel's immediate reception that gender ambiguity might have played. Additionally, Easley notes that Gaskell's gender occasioned attacks both after the publication of *Mary Barton* and of *Ruth*; "The critical response to Gaskell's early novels thus constructs a contradictory image of her public persona: she is at once maternal sage and feminine transgressor, moral paragon and reckless social theorist" (99).

The fact that Gaskell's public persona is more traditionally "feminine" than those presented by many other female novelists makes critics' responses to her work an excellent counterpoint to reviews of *Hard Times*, especially in light of Thompson's assessment of the effect that perceptions of being "anti-feminine" or "rebellious" had on the reception of works by other female authors in the period. Thompson's primary example of such effects is the reception of *Wuthering Heights*, both as initially published under the name Ellis Bell and after the revelation of its author's true gender in the 1850 "Biographical Notice" by Charlotte Brönte – which Thompson calls "probably the most influential 'review' of all" (43). "Critical reaction to the 1847/8 edition of *Wuthering Heights* under the gender-neutral

pseudonym of Ellis Bell was one of irritated, frustrated bafflement,” Thompson writes; the lack of a clear gender connection is, she argues, evident in the tone and language of reviews:

The sense of relief felt by critics as they are finally provided with a context for *Wuthering Heights* is tangible in the reviews: this new context forms part of a pre-existing and elaborately structured hierarchy and pattern of gender roles and rules, and allows the reviewers a means of controlling and containing [the text] [...] In 1847, readers’ defense mechanisms and frustrated expectations led to an ambivalent mix of confusion, shock, and admiration. (46)

Thompson finds in those early reviews a challenge to the perceived authority of the reviewers, who “struggle in vain to judge the work by relating it to Victorian literary conventions” (46); they write invariably about the need for a moral lesson, the characters’ actions relative to social norms, and the roles of females and heroic (masculine) characters. Thompson argues that, when reviewers failed to find a moral for the story of *Wuthering Heights*, they invented one to suit their expectations; the lack of one, and the “unusual” portrayal of characters, left reviewers uncertain; “[...] the novel was not didactic, did not reflect Victorian middle-class society, and showed no sign of following in any literary tradition they could identify” (47).

In excerpts from the earliest reviews of *Wuthering Heights*, writers boldly assert that the novel could not have been written by a woman, as in the 1848 review in *The Examiner* that proclaims, “The Bells are of a hardy race. They do not lounge in drawing-rooms or boudoirs. They air they breathe is not that of the hothouse or perfumed apartments ... they are not common-place writers” (qtd. in Thompson 48); Thompson identifies the adjective “common-place” as a clear inference of the qualities associated with women writers –

“whereas,” she writes, “despite their shocking qualities, the Bells are pleasingly and originally masculine” (49). Once Charlotte Brönte published *Jane Eyre* under the name Currer Bell in 1848, comparisons to *Wuthering Heights* were made almost immediately. Despite positive reviews, Thompson writes, a number of writers were convinced that both Bells were the same author; the true gender of this unknown writer was still questioned.

Thompson posits that it is for this reason that Charlotte Brönte, in writing the “Biographical Notice” and preface to the 1850 edition of *Wuthering Heights*, adopted the stereotypical attitudes toward feminine writers that reviewers of the Bröntes’ novels had presented. In those writings, Thompson argues, Emily is intentionally presented as a weak and stereotyped woman – “passive, nun-like, innocent, domestic, and ignorant of the outside world” (52) – in an attempt to dilute the criticisms that would have been leveled at any woman for writing the patently “unfeminine” *Wuthering Heights*. Doing so allowed Charlotte Brönte to distance herself and her work from criticism of her sisters’ writings, which Thompson views as evidence of a contradictory, if not hypocritical, attitude on Charlotte’s part: her actions reinforced the selfsame gender stereotypes and assumptions against which she is ostensibly arguing (52-53). A very different tone dominates the reviews of *Wuthering Heights* written after the author’s gender was established, according to Thompson: “*Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brönte was somehow different from *Wuthering Heights* by Ellis Bell. [...] Even though critics previously had no doubt that the author was male, they now see internal evidence of female authorship” (57).

Throughout her book, Thompson analyzes critical reviews to find references to gendered behaviors, stereotypical views of masculinity and femininity, and differences in tone used in discussing male and female authors and their works. She concludes that,

generally, writers of Victorian-era reviews of fiction tended to judge female authors by whether or not their works confirmed the image of the “Angel in the House” with an emphasis on hearth, home, and family. Despite this, women whose fiction focused on these “socially acceptable” themes were in danger of being dismissed (along with their works) as being too simplistic. Women who dared to take up political and social critique, meanwhile, could be censured for daring to overstep the bounds of propriety. Charlotte Brönte was not the only woman who adopted a stereotyped view of feminine discourse: Thompson argues that the female reviewers of the era – naming Geraldine Jewsbury, Margaret Oliphant, and Elizabeth Rigby specifically – often judged women whose works transgressed these norms even more harshly than male reviewers did: “The anonymity of the reviewer, the use of the pronoun ‘we,’ and the ‘dominant discourse’ tendency inherent in the periodical and the review might well cause female reviewers to internalize the patriarchal voice of Victorian literary culture” (11).

My analysis of reviews of *Hard Times* alongside those of *Mary Barton* is not geared toward making or reinforcing judgments of literary quality or of the works’ actual effects (real or perceived) on the wider British reading public. In reader response terms, I find that the Victorian reviewers of Dickens and Gaskell were neither “naïve readers” in the sense of having any sort of disconnection from knowledge of social issues or gender biases prevalent in society, nor were they “ideal readers” in the sense of being “commentator[s] with scholarly competence, who [deepen] the aesthetic impressions of the reader whose understanding takes the form of pleasure, and who refers back to the text’s structures of effect as much as possible” (Iser, *The Act of Reading* 144). Instead, as Dickens and Gaskell

themselves perceived and as Thompson, Easley, and Lenard have argued, the reviewer at work in mid-nineteenth century literary publications was a willing participant in the gender-biased discourse of that era.

The question to be considered in analyzing contemporary reviews of the novel is whether the reception of *Hard Times* indicates a negative reaction to the novel's sentimental subject matter (as the critics suggest should be the case) or, in fact, the opposite: a reaction to a perceived lack of Dickensian sentiment, particularly with regard to the presentation of female characters. I argue that the latter is the more accurate interpretation of those critical reviews, as I will indicate in the next chapter.

Chapter Two

Reviewing Sentimentality: Gender Perceptions in Reviews of Dickens and Gaskell

Similarities between reviews of Dickens's *Hard Times* and Gaskell's *Mary Barton* indicate the extent to which gender biases and the sentimental discourse in those works affected reviewers' responses to them. At the same time, contemporary reviews indicate the true genesis of *Hard Times*'s negative reviews: not, as Nicola Thompson's criticism would suggest, a perception that Dickens's novel was inherently sentimental, but rather the fact that it did not meet the expectations of sentimentality readers brought to the text on account of his previous works, especially in terms of characterization.

What I find to have taken place in the immediate reception of *Hard Times* is a transference of gender-biased feminine expectations to a male author who was perceived as a transgressor of expected gender roles, much as Thompson found Emily Brönte to have been in her study of reactions to *Wuthering Heights*. The difference in this case is the gender of the author transgressing gendered expectations: Dickens, though male, was highly praised for his sentimental characters and stories. The language of contemporary critical reviews demonstrates a negative reaction to the absence of these characters and scenes from *Hard Times*.

To demonstrate this process at work, I analyze critical reviews from major periodicals of the time,¹ first examining the contemporary reviews of *Mary Barton*, which exemplify the reception of a female author who is not seen as transgressing gender boundaries. Having analyzed those reviews to establish a baseline for comparison with Dickens, I next analyze reviews of *Hard Times*, comparing the reception of this novel with portions of reviews of

previous novels by Dickens. Doing so reveals reviewers' overall perception of Dickens, by 1854, as an author of sentimental literature; the response to *Hard Times* indicates a sense that the work did not fulfill reviewers' expectations of sentimental and feminine discourse, especially in terms of its characterizations of women.

Mary Barton was published anonymously in 1848, though Gaskell's name was added to subsequent editions within a few months and the fact of the novel's female authorship was soon known. One of the first reviews of *Mary Barton* to appear was John Forster's unsigned piece in *The Examiner*. Forster is among the few writers who can be proven to have reviewed both *Mary Barton* and *Hard Times*, which makes his responses to both novels very significant. Additionally, he was a friend and colleague of Dickens and an acquaintance of Gaskell, having been the reader at Chapman and Hall who reviewed *Mary Barton* before its publication (Easson 4). As one might expect in light of these relationships, Forster's reviews of *Hard Times* and *Mary Barton* are positive; however, probably for the same reason, Forster asks fewer serious questions of the texts on which he writes. What Forster does is write on both novels using gender-biased language, and in doing so he makes contradictory assertions about the way readers ought to approach those works.

Forster's review of *Mary Barton* in *The Examiner* of 4 November 1848 is perhaps most intriguing for its treatment of the novelist's then unknown gender. Though Forster obviously knew Gaskell, his review does not reveal that fact and, instead, presents a gender-biased rationale for inferring the writer's sex:

Unquestionably the book is a woman's. If one of its casual remarks had not betrayed this (it would seem unintentionally), we might have known it from

the delicate points of the portraiture of the domestic details, from certain gentle intimations of piety and pity perceptible throughout, and from the mixed diffidence and daring with which the question of employers and employed is treated in the course of it. (Easson 68)

Forster does not indicate which passage acted as a “casual” revelation of its author’s gender, but this list of aspects that “betray” *Mary Barton*’s female author includes all of the qualities that typically define sentimental writing. At the same time, his insistence upon hiding the true source of his knowledge reinforces the popular perception of the Victorian reviewer’s role as creator of literary value, an almost pontifical role from which Forster (using the editorial “we”) seeks to create an ideal (or idealized) response in his own audience.

The opening paragraph of Forster’s review of *Mary Barton*, aside from creating gendered criteria for knowing the author’s sex, calls the book “a story of unusual beauty and merit” and praises the then-anonymous author for her portrayal of the working class – but does so in an almost dismissive fashion. In comparing her hero to Gerard in Disraeli’s *Sybil* (Easson 70n), Forster says that “John Barton, on the contrary, is very ordinary homespun stuff. [...] There is no bragging, or telling of things fantastical. The book is an ungilded and sorrowful picture [...]” Rather than offer a solution to the problems of class that are presented, Forster suggests that *Mary Barton*’s author “*appears to think that good may be done by wholesome sympathy, and would seem to have written with this hope*” (68, emphasis mine). The number of qualifiers in that phrase serves to dilute any hope on the reviewer’s part that the novel will be successful in that regard by intimating the author’s intention, not her ability, to effect meaningful change.

Having introduced this uncertainty in the second paragraph, Forster begins the third by attempting to define the nature of the book for potential readers: “We should convey a wrong impression if the reader supposed the book to be a political novel. It is not that. The internal passions and emotions are its materials of interest”; as such, Forster focuses on “[t]he little girlish vanities which cost the heroine so dear” and “the irritable exactions of temper, which are bred by poverty as well as the humble religious patience which may alleviate and temper it” (69). Thus, even as he praises the work, Forster’s review affects the reader’s perception of its value as a commentary on class relations by emphasizing the novel’s sentimental aspects over a more masculine argumentative purpose. Forster observes that the novel contrasts the classes with the goal of “lessen[ing] the interval that separates them, and show[ing] with what advantage to both each might know more of the other” (68-69). Even as Forster praises the “power” of this first work of a new author – as inferred in the statement that *Mary Barton* “seem[s] to promise us a new novelist who is likely to deserve and obtain popularity” (69) – he also limits the extent to which his reader should consider the novel to be an effective political commentary, setting limits on readers’ expectations by the recurrent use of qualifiers and the insistence upon playing up the feminine aspects of the text.

Whether *Mary Barton*’s author was male or female was still unclear to most people at the time of the first eight reviews of the novel, published in the last months of 1848 before Gaskell identified herself to the general public as its author. Four writers default to the masculine pronoun, referring to Gaskell as “he” – although Henry Fothergill Chorley, reviewing *Mary Barton* for *Athenaeum*, inserts a question mark after the first use of “he,” and the *Inquirer* reviewer states in the final paragraph that “we half expect [the author] to be of the gentler sex” (Easson 75). Others avoid the issue by referring only to “the author” and

using no pronouns. But the fact that the author is a Manchester woman is known by the time the January 1849 piece appears in *The Eclectic Review*; the anonymous (and unknown) reviewer there identifies “the authoress [as] a Manchester lady” (96). The unsigned 28 February 1849 review in the *Manchester Guardian* also provides this intelligence and refers to “the authoress” throughout. However, even once her gender is revealed, other factors such as Gaskell’s maturity (as opposed to the younger Brönte sisters) and the fact that she is a mother and wife of a minister appear to mitigate the later negative responses to her work. The criticisms leveled at Gaskell in those later reviews attack her understanding of the relationship between the factory owners and the workers and the extent to which she understood the current situation in Manchester – although some recognize that Gaskell’s work is meant to reflect an earlier time, as is indicated in the later chapters of the novel. The public did not attack Gaskell’s characterization, however, even when these other aspects of her competency were critiqued.

On the contrary, characterization is the one area where Dickens’s name is invoked, by way of comparison, in the course of praising Gaskell. The unsigned interview in the *Inquirer* states that *Mary Barton* “deserves a place beside the *Carol* of Dickens. It is an attempt to describe faithfully and simply the lives of the very poor [...] While perusing it, we do not feel that the poor are flattered, yet we leave it with the conviction that we know, as yet, but little of their worth and real greatness” (Easson 73-74), while the *Critic*’s review, also unsigned, praises Gaskell’s ability to create people and places: “he draws town scenes with almost the skill of Dickens, and his sketches of character are thoroughly life-like” (77). These early interviews praise Gaskell’s ability to provide a window into the virtues and vices

of the working class, as well as her presentation of what several reviewers refer to as the “Manchester patois” reproduced in her characters’ dialogue.

But even in the early reviews when the sex of the author is not clear, the discussions of *Mary Barton* emphasize the novel’s sentimental aspects, especially Christian values; the novel was reviewed most often by religious publications. The *Inquirer* praises the presentations of Alice’s faith in God and discussions of the “bitter temptation and subsequent fall” of John Barton (75); the *Eclectic Review* writer makes a solemn declaration that it is “in vain that Christianity has been preached from church and chapel [...] There was no power in the chapel to still the murmurs of the factory” (94-95). Gaskell’s novel is credited by the *Eclectic Review* with power to “subdue the evil spirit” of class animosity; as such, and in sharp contrast to Forster’s earlier ambiguous response, this reviewer describes Gaskell’s work using sentimental language of his/her own, foregrounding the novel’s perceived ability to affect readers’ sympathies through its skilful presentation of true-to-life scenes of poverty:

In this case, as in many others, we may live to employ fiction to arrive at truth; and of this we think the work before us a striking example. [...] The authoress, a Manchester lady, is anxious to bring the parties at issue to regard themselves less as employers and employed, than as men. She flings aside technicalities, not because she is wholly master of her subject, for that she evidently is, but because she would have her readers [...] follow her through the dwellings of the rich and poor, till they are impressed by what they see and hear [...] (96).

The “technicalities” mentioned here are no doubt those questions of accuracy on which Gaskell is later attacked. The *British Quarterly Review*, on one hand, attempted to denounce

Gaskell for the “very great injustice” her novel had done to employers in Manchester, and argued that the poor of the city were not the victims of heartless masters. “The distresses of the labouring poor are set forth in ample detail, and we cannot regard that as a fair picture of the state of society [...]” (107). Closer to home, the *Manchester Guardian* took up religious language not to praise Gaskell but to attack her novel’s implications. If read as a novel of Manchester at the time the book was published (as opposed to the more oppressive early part of the decade), then according to the *Manchester Guardian*, “The only fault of the book is, that the authoress has sinned gravely against truth, in matters of fact either above her comprehension, or beyond her sphere of knowledge.”

And yet, despite the attacks on the novel’s presentation of class strife in light of the supposedly more cooperative conditions that prevailed at the time of its publication, none of the negatively-inclined reviewers said that Gaskell’s characters themselves were inaccurate. Quite the opposite appears to be the case: the *British Quarterly Review* calls the representations “not overdrawn” when applied to the difficulties of the workers from 1840-1842, although presented as “too much in the melo-dramatic [sic] style” (111). The *Manchester Guardian* reviewer, meanwhile, prefaces the comment about Gaskell’s knowledge of the working class with extended praise:

As a whole, the tale is beautifully written; the characters introduced are graphically delineated; the events are so interestingly interwoven, and the groundwork is so artistically constructed, that whoever reads the two first chapters is sure to read the whole story. (120)

Indeed, Mary Barton is the only character from the eponymous novel to be a target of negative criticism, and this is because of a dichotomy sensed in the presentation of her

character as at once moral, sensible, and dedicated to her family, yet who is portrayed as coy and flirtatious whenever she interacts with Henry Carson: a number of reviewers refer to Mary's attitude toward Henry as "coquettish" (or some variation on the word "coquette"), highlighting the negative connotations of this aspect of Mary's personality. This duality in Mary's character is the only character flaw observed by more than one reviewer.

Despite the views of some critics that Gaskell's novel is inaccurate, and that its arguments about the condition of the working poor in England were a decade or more out of date by some reviewers' standards, the "angel's mission" (97) on which the *Eclectic Review* author is seen to have embarked was praised widely enough. Although I have only touched on them briefly here, what reviews of *Mary Barton* indicate throughout is the fact that – even before the novel was generally known to be the product of a female author – its subject matter and its function as a novel of social critique work make feminine authorship more likely: its overriding focus on family scenes, its sympathetic portrayal of female characters, and its clear Christian moral serve to position *Mary Barton* as a sentimental work. Moreover, it is clear from the language implicit in these reviews that Gaskell – both before and after her gender and identity were common knowledge – was not considered to be a transgressor of feminine roles. Clearly, those qualities named above and the adherence to established gender roles both in personal and professional life made Gaskell a more popular, if not more effective, novelist.

What bearing, then, do these fairly self-evident observations have on considerations of Dickens and *Hard Times*? They allow readers to note the ways in which Dickens – despite his obvious identity as a male novelist – was received by his contemporaries in much

the same way as a gender-role-transgressing female author such as Emily Brönte was received: with uncertainty, questioning, and a prediction of failure as far as the critical function of the novel itself was concerned.

Charles Dickens, as a male author, presents in *Hard Times* female characters who do not act in accordance with accepted gender roles. The novel's two mothers are either grossly unmaternal (as is the case with Mrs. Gradgrind) or consistently slandered and marginalized (Mrs. Pegler, Bounderby's mother). Other women in the text are lacking in feminine traits, as is the case with victimized and powerless Louisa Gradgrind and the overtly masculine Mrs. Sparsit, whose only function in the text is to serve as counterpoint to other male characters – there is not even the hint of a physical relationship with Bounderby, despite the trappings of their businesslike arrangement. The two women whose personalities are aligned with home, with emotion, and with the Christian sentiments Dickens strives to foreground in this novel, Sissy Jupe and Rachel, are similarly marginalized: Sissy disappears from the novel completely for many chapters, while Rachel's kindness toward Stephen and Stephen's estranged wife comes without any real reward for her in the novel but a suggestion that her "angelic" task will continue *ad infinitum* – and an inherent suggestion that such work will continue to be done without notice or praise. While some of the characters in *Hard Times* have qualities that evoke sympathy, there is none of the overriding focus on sentimental scenes of home that Gaskell presents in *Mary Barton* – and no true catharsis, other than Stephen Blackpool's death scene (which, in and of itself, does almost nothing to resolve the issues Dickens has raised concerning the lives of the workers, or to advance the development of any other character in the novel). At the same time that *Hard Times* attempts to argue in favor of the feminine and sentimental traits of fancy, imagination, and Christian kindness,

there are few characters or scenes in the text that exemplify the beneficial effects of such traits – and thus the text fails to provide not only what was expected of the feminized discourse of the novel of social critique, but also the focus on pathos that was a hallmark of Dickens's previous works.

Thus *Hard Times* was received within two differing and seemingly contradictory horizons of expectations: the popular idea of "Dickensian" fiction, itself overtly yet conservatively feminine and associated with cathartic, highly gender-stereotyped characters whose roles could be almost allegorical at times; and the novel of social critique, a mode of discourse that (as previously noted) was associated with the radically feminine. The responses to the novel are therefore uncertain, reflecting a lack of fulfilled expectations on the part of critical reviewers who approached *Hard Times* expecting to find different characters and situations from those which were actually presented.

This uncertainty is clear in the contradictory arguments and offhand manner with which Forster reviewed the novel in the *Examiner* of 9 September 1854. Rather than doing as those who follow in attacking some aspect of the novel individually, Forster does not downplay the novel's usefulness as a tool of social critique so much as he seeks to avoid the question altogether. Instead of inviting critique, he makes authoritative statements of its value. "So far as the purpose of *Hard Times* involves the direct raising of any question of political economy," Forster writes, "we abstain from comment upon it" (Collins 301). Instead, the reviewer proclaims that "the principle emphatically laid down [...] is one to which every sound heart responds"; the function of the text to underscore the need for fancy, or imagination, in the human experience is compared to the need for fruits and vegetables to

supplement a diet of meat. Having made this comparison, Forster delves into a contradictory appeal to pathos:

To enforce this truth has been the object of the story of *Hard Times*, and its enforcement is not argumentative, because no thesis can be argued in a novel; but by a warm appeal from one heart, to a hundred thousand hearts quite ready to respond. The story is not meant to do what fiction cannot do – to prove a case; its utmost purpose is to express forcibly a righteous sentiment. (301)

Two paragraphs later, Forster declares that “It is not necessary to review *Hard Times*” and points out the novel’s “close texture [...] the carefulness of its elaboration [...] and the unsuperfluousness of its details, as well as its whole interest” as merits worthy of general praise – and asserts that, those merits having been mentioned, “we have reported all that calls for report from us” (302).

Speaking from his authoritative and anonymous post as editor, Forster essentially argues that readers of *Hard Times* should innately see in the book’s subject matter cause enough to agree with its author. He suggests that an emotional response is the most acceptable response to *Hard Times*, and aligns the attempt to dissect and critique the novel’s argumentative function with those heartless philosophers that are Dickens’s villains – suggesting, outlandishly, that they would read this novel with “Blue Book in hand” (302). Yet no sooner has this identification been made than Forster reverses himself and identifies Dickens as a defender of “the search after statistical and other information by which only real light can be thrown on social questions. What is *Household Words* but a great magazine of facts?” (302). And yet in *Hard Times* the men who seek after facts (and only men are so identified) are generally shown to be deluded, hard-hearted, or lying. Forster’s defense, aside

from an illogical attempt to defer examination of the novel's value as a social critique, is to attempt a clumsy redirection of the conversation about the novel from the masculine realm of factual search to the feminine discourse of emotion and pity.

Just as he had done six years earlier in his review of *Mary Barton*, Forster uses language associated with the sentimental and feminine characteristics to describe *Hard Times*. By arguing that “every *sound* heart responds” to the principle Dickens expresses in the novel (301, emphasis mine) – that is, the principal that fancy is vital to life, that Christian ideals and sympathy are the cure for the problems of the working class – Forster asserts that the ideal reader of Dickens will agree with the “righteous sentiment” of the work (301). His attempt to paint Dickens's text as “artistic always, never argumentative” (302), as he had done by downplaying the function of *Mary Barton* as a social critique, relies on multiple references to Dickens's focus on “affections” and fancy – feminine traits, which in this review are given far more weight than the masculine focus on argumentative quality.

As stated above, a positive response is (arguably) to be expected of a reviewer who is biased in favor of the subjects on which he writes, but the fact that in both novels Forster makes use of gendered language to suggest that the proper reaction to the novels is an emotional response over a logical one – using the language of “sentimentality” to make those arguments – is very revealing, especially in contrast to other reviews that reflected an overall opinion among literary critics that *Hard Times* was not as enjoyable or well-written as previous works. One of the era's premier literary publications, the *Athenaeum*, typically devoted four or five columns to reviewing Dickens's novels, Phillip Collins notes in *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*. *Hard Times*, however, was “despatched (sic) [...] in half a column” (300). The *Athenaeum* reviewer does not mince words: *Hard Times* was “a good idea – but

[...] scarcely wrought out with Mr. Dickens's usual felicity" (300). The shortness of the review is an obvious indication of the desire to focus as little as possible upon the text's flaws (or the author's).

The first review to closely examine issues related to the novel's quality in depth appeared in the October 1854 issue of *The Rambler* – an unsigned review authored by Richard Simpson which sets the precedent of discussing *Hard Times*'s shortcomings not only in feminized terms but in terms of the novels that preceded it. In discussing the characters in *Hard Times*, Simpson focuses solely, and significantly enough, on the female characters Dickens presents, stating that the novel focuses on “the loves of Stephen.” Mrs. Sparsit is described as “a sort of brown-holland edition of Volumnia in our author's *Bleak House*” (Collins 303). The image of everyday fabric here meshes with the focus on the novel's female characters, who (like the novel as a whole) are dismissed as “stale, flat, and unprofitable [...] mere dull melodrama” (303). But where the accusation of “melodrama” in the *British Quarterly Review* piece on *Mary Barton* was tempered by the praise accorded to Gaskell's characterizations of women, it is specifically a lack of believable characterizations of women that influences this reader of *Hard Times* against the novel.

Yet a male character – in relation, however, to a female parent – was found to be the novel's most unrealistic in the unsigned October 1854 article in the *Westminster Review*. The reviewer found Mr. Bounderby to be Dickens's most egregious violation of reader's expectations. “[A] most outrageous character – who can believe in the possibility of such a man?” laments the critic, whom Collins tentatively identifies as longtime *Westminster Review* writer Jane Sinnett. The reviewer describes Bounderby's treatment of his mother and the lies that the character tells throughout the story; Bounderby is presented as a character

worthy of a theatrical farce but one whom “any reader of taste” will not accept as humorous (308). Why should Bounderby elicit such a negative response when so many of Dickens’s previous male villains had been every bit as bombastic? The answer lies, I argue, in the expectations of the reviewer, who made a point of foregrounding her (or his) dashed expectations regarding *Hard Times* at the start of the article:

When it was announced, amid the strikes and consequent derangement of commerce, that Mr. Dickens was about to write a tale [...] to be called *Hard Times*, the general attention was instantly arrested. It was imagined the main topic of the story would be drawn from the fearful struggle which was being then enacted [...] The inner life of those great movements would, it was thought, be exhibited, and we should see the results of the wrongs and the delusions of the workman, and the alterations of hope and fear which must from day to day have agitated him [...] delineated (305).

Such scenes abounded in other socially-critical novels, and *Mary Barton* especially: the suffering of families, the privation of mothers, the torment of children and young women – all of these things are carefully portrayed in this other socially relevant novels. The *Westminster Review* writer reacts strongly against Bounderby in the course of expressing a wider disappointment with *Hard Times*’s subject matter: to suggest that a man might be coarse and unfeeling is one thing, but the implication that a mother could be so unfeeling causes the reviewer’s strongest emotional response.

The passages from the novel that the *Westminster Review* writer chooses to quote further underscore the fact that gender expectations were at work: the first passage quoted is praised as exemplary of “Mr. Dickens’s style” and the other derided as “most intolerable

galimatias” [gibberish] (308, emphasis in original). Dickens’s description of Coketown from chapter five of Book I, the “key-note” description of the landscape of the city and its inherent argument against industrialization earns a positive reaction. The second passage is a narrative description of Mrs. Sparsit in Bounderby’s home from the first paragraph of Book II, chapter nine:

Mrs. Sparsit [...] kept such a sharp look-out, night and day, under her Coriolanian eyebrows, that her eyes, like a couple of lighthouses on an iron-bound coast, might have warned all prudent mariners from that bold rock her Roman nose and the dark and craggy region in its neighborhood [...] and so impossible her manner of sitting, smoothing her uncomfortable, not to say, gritty, mittens (they were constructed of a cool fabric like a meat-safe) [...] that most observers would have been constrained to suppose her a dove, embodied, by some freak of nature, in the earthly tabernacle of a bird of the hook-beaked order. (Dickens, *Hard Times* 146)

Femininity in the idealized, sentimental form associated with Dickens’s previous angelic women is completely absent from this description. Instead, the expected softer, sentimental nature symbolized by the dove is transformed into a “freak of nature,” so far different from the characters presented in novels of Dickens up to this point. More unfeminine female characters appeared in later novels – Madame Defarge in *A Tale of Two Cities* and Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*, to give two examples – but the suggestion of the reviewer here that such an image is “galimatias,” nonsense, underscores the sense that Dickens has not faithfully presented the sort of characters expected by his readers.

Mrs. Oliphant took up *Hard Times* and Dickens's reputation in *Blackwood's Magazine* in April 1855 – seven months after the single-volume edition of the novel was published. Oliphant's is the first review to discuss the book at length; also, because it is one of the few reviews unquestionably published by a woman, her critique of Dickens's portrayal of characters in *Hard Times* is all the more important. She is the first to set forth a division between Dickens's "successful" characterizations in previous works and the "unsuccessful" characterizations in *Hard Times*.

Oliphant praises Dickens's power to create realistic characters that draw readers into the heights of emotion and catharsis – and does so in highly-emotional terms. "Poor little Nell! who has ever been able to read the last chapter of her history with an even voice or a clear eye? Poor little Nell!" writes Oliphant, recalling the outpouring of response to the character's death with a patently feminine show of textual emotion before moving on to praise the "entirely yet so unostentatiously life-like" David Copperfield. Yet Dickens's newest creation is measured and found wanting: "[... In] *Hard Times* we discover, not the author's full and many-toned conception of human life, its motives and its practices – not the sweet and graceful fancy rejoicing in her own customs [...] but the petulant theory of a man in a world of his own making [...]" (330). The judgment presented here contrasts emotion, pathos, and fancy with Dickens's "petulant theory," again critiquing the novel's interaction with gender norms. According to Oliphant, the fiction of Dickens which is praiseworthy is that which presents the middle class accurately, with the comforts of home and family alongside the realities of social struggle:

This middle class in itself is a realm of infinite gradations [...] There is less daring and more timidity. There is the weaker spirit, which find in what it

doubts and trembles at, an evil and contamination which does not exist to the gay and light heart [...] but nowhere does the household hearth burn brighter – nowhere is the family love so warm – the natural bonds so strong; and this is the ground which Mr. Dickens occupies *par excellence* – the field of his triumphs, from which he may defy all his rivals without fear. (328-29)

However, *Hard Times*, according to Oliphant, lacks the pathos of home and family – the stuff of feminine discourse, generally, and that which is assumed to form an element not only of a novel of social critique but of a “Dickensian” novel like those the reviewer praises.

When these observations are considered against the expectations put forth by Nicola Thompson, the paradox inherent in the case of Dickens and *Hard Times* is the fact that the more masculine qualities of this text and its lack of expected sentimentalities appears to have worked to the novel’s detriment. The greatest failing of *Hard Times*, as reported by contemporary reviewers, is the lack of depth and emotional development of its female characters – whereas Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* is consistently praised for its presentations of deeply-moving characters even by those who attacked the author’s lack of knowledge of Manchester’s factories and their masters.

I argue that this difference in the responses to the novels stems from the fact that novels of social critique operated under a different set of expectations than other novels, especially regarding gender and the perceived veracity of characterization. The sentimental characters and situations whose presence Nicola Thompson found to be a negative influence on the career of Anthony Trollope seem to have elicited very positive reactions when Charles Dickens used them to comment, however indirectly, on the problems of Victorian society;

such scenes of hearth and home and the empowerment and foregrounding of typical Victorian female characters was a boon to the reception of *Mary Barton*, while the absence of such characters from *Hard Times* elicits all the stronger a negative reaction from critics. Thus, Thompson's claim that male authors were denigrated for presenting typical, non-transgressing female characters and sentimental situations in their works is not always the case: in the case of Dickens, the absence of such characters and situations appears to have been detrimental to the immediate critical success and the lasting reputation of the work. This critical response, contrasted with the positive reaction to Gaskell's characterization of typical and non-role-transgressing women in *Mary Barton*, indicates that the process Thompson believes to be at work does not form a general guideline for studying the interaction of gender roles and expectations in literary reception.

One avenue for further research in this area would be to analyze gendered language and assumptions as they may be found in the contemporary reception of other novels by Dickens. No career-spanning study of gender issues in Dickens's reception appears to have been published, although such an in-depth analysis of reviews of Dickens's novels could prove to be of critical importance. By charting the spectrum of reactions to characters and themes in Dickens's works, much could be inferred about the way that the literary critics of the Victorian era read and responded to his novels. Another potential avenue of interest is a study of gender in the reception of Dickens's non-fiction writings in *Household Words* and *All The Year Round*, though the process of response to such writings would of necessity have to make use of a wider range of less readily available texts. Gender-role expectations and reactions to character types are obviously affected by perceptions of the author's body of work and his or her own gender, but further study is needed before any further

generalizations can be made about how these responses occurred across gender lines and with other authors.

¹ The texts of critical reviews are taken from *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Angus Easson (Routledge, 1991) and *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Phillip Collins (Routledge, 1971). When the contents of these volumes are measured against the bibliographies compiled by Robert Selig (*Elizabeth Gaskell: A Reference Guide*; G.K. Hall, 1977) and R.C. Churchill (*A Bibliography of Dickensian Literary Criticism, 1836-1975*; Macmillan, 1975), respectively, these volumes are found to contain the majority of pertinent reviews of the novels, the few omissions typically being shorter reviews and/or those found in less influential publications such as *John Bull*.

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