

Shirley Foster, Department of English Literature, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN

“We Sit and Read and Dream our Time Away”: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Portico Library

The title quotation for this essay is taken from an early letter of May 1836, written to her cousin Elizabeth while Gaskell was staying at Sandlebridge with the infant Marianne. The letter describes one of the surely rare occasions when she was able to indulge her literary tastes to the full - here, with the delights of the Hollands' 'sort of little standard library' ¹. Yet if Gaskell was never again to enjoy a period of such complete relaxation, we know that she somehow always found the time to read; despite her frenzied activity in Manchester and elsewhere, books were a central element in her cultural life, and she kept up with the latest publications of the day as well as re-reading old favourites.

Information about her reading is particularly valuable for Gaskell scholars and enthusiasts: it adds to our knowledge of what an educated middle-class Victorian chose for the intellectual stimulation and amusement of herself and her family; and, more importantly, it has significant bearing on her own work, suggesting how her imaginative productions were inspired by a variety of literary sources, both consciously and by a process of cultural osmosis whereby ideas (or 'germs', as Henry James called them) grow out of exposure to a multiplicity of interconnected influences. There are several sources for this information, including Gaskell's own letters about what she was reading, and memoirs of friends such as the Winkworth sisters (who were also Portico readers) which mention shared literary enthusiasms. A major supplement to this information is supplied by details of William Gaskell's borrowings from the Portico Library in Manchester, the records of which cover the period from 1850 to Gaskell's death in 1865 (and beyond). This fascinating topic of investigation has already been brought to our attention in Barbara Brill's and Alan Shelston's pioneering article, 'Manchester: "A Behindhand Place for Books": the Gaskells and the Portico Library', in the *Gaskell Society Journal* for 1991². Moving on from this very useful overview, this paper will focus primarily on those areas of the borrowings which seem to have most relevance to Elizabeth's own literary undertakings.

The Portico Library, opened in 1806, was one of Manchester's major subscription libraries and an important source of reading matter for a professional middle class for whom buying books was still a considerable financial commitment. Until the early twentieth century, women could not be members, and therefore Gaskell could not borrow books in her own right. As a Regulation of January 1806 states, however, 'The Library and Reading Room shall be open to the Ladies of the respective families of subscribers', and clearly Gaskell herself made full use of this facility. Thus although the long list of borrowings in the fifteen years under discussion here were all made in William's name, we can be sure that many items were either taken out by him for his wife and daughters or were actually taken by Elizabeth under his membership. In any case, since William was Chairman of the Library from 1849 to 1884, there may have been some flexibility in the rules, enabling her to enjoy its facilities to a greater extent than most members' wives.

Proof that Gaskell read Portico stock is in fact provided by her letters. In December 1852, for example, she writes to Elizabeth Holland that 'Last week - no the week before, Wm brought me Bernard Palissy, but it so happened I had not a moment of time for reading except one day, when I got very much interested in four of 5 chapters, & then the book had to go back'³. The book referred to here is Henry Morley's *Palissy the Potter* (1852), a biography of the sixteenth-century French alchemist and potter, whose technique was much reproduced in the nineteenth century by Mintons of Stoke-on-Trent (there may indeed have been items of this pottery at Plymouth Grove). In the Portico records, we find that William borrowed the book several times at the end of 1852, so clearly Gaskell had had to read it in snatches whenever she had time. Similarly, when on 29th August 1859 she is recommending books about and places to see in the Lake District in a letter to Charles Bosanquet, the young man whom the Gaskells befriended in Heidelberg in October 1858, she adds that 'I have been reading White's Northumberland'⁴. Walter White's *Travel in Northumberland and the Border* (1859) is listed as having been borrowed by William on 20th August 1859, as well as again in 1860, thus further confirming that books he brought home were often for her perusal. Yet another confirmation that the Portico was the source of reading-matter for her is provided by her well-known letter to George Eliot of 10 November 1859, in which she describes how she 'singled out the 2nd No of Amos Barton in Blackwood, & went plodging

through our Manchester Sts to get every number, as soon as it was accessible from the Portico reading table'⁵.

In addition to reading books from the Portico, Gaskell may have had some input into the acquisition of its stock. In September and October 1853, she wrote to the publisher, Bentley, asking him if he was the publisher of Charles Reade's *Christie Johnstone* (1853) - which he in fact was - and if so, to include the price of the novel in his advertisements for it: 'Libraries will not order it without knowing the price, whh has hitherto been omitted in all advertisements' (29 September)⁶. On October 5th, she repeated the request: 'Will you be so kind as to put the price in the advertisements of 'Christie Johnstone?' I can't get it till you do: and I am sure it would be for your interest to do so; as here, at any rate, no library will order a book without knowing it's [sic] price' ⁷. The Portico, however, either showed less of Mancunian financial cautiousness than Gaskell supposed, or William as Chairman had conveyed her interest in the novel, since the Library Committee minutes of 6th October 1853 list *Christie Johnstone* among the books ordered at that time. William must then have acted on her behalf once the book was added to the stock: he is recorded as having borrowed the novel first on 3rd November 1853, and then twice more, in 1854 and 1856.

Details of William's borrowings are additionally important for Gaskell scholarship in that they provide information about Gaskell's own literary taste. Brill and Shelston have suggested that the reviews which William read in the periodicals taken by the Portico encouraged him to get hold of the books themselves. As the exchange with Bentley, noted above, indicates, Gaskell's interest in particular texts was also stimulated by references in other sources (perhaps such as the end-papers in published novels), and she was thus moved to seek out the books from the library - and possibly even to urge William to suggest stock purchases. In March 1860, she wrote to both Edward Chapman and George Smith asking who the author of *Mademoiselle Mori* was⁸. *Mademoiselle Mori* (1860) is a novel by Margaret Roberts (several of whose subsequent novels William also borrowed), dealing largely with a young woman's experiences in Italy. The subject clearly excited Gaskell, as did all books about Italy after she had made her memorable trip there in 1857; indeed, in 1860 William borrowed at least five books wholly or partially about Italy, presumably to satisfy his wife's voracious demand for them. Whether or not she discovered the writer at that time, she had obviously been enough inspired by references to it not only to inquire about its

authorship but also to get William to borrow it from the Portico for her. He in fact took it out a few months later, on 3rd July 1860, by which time Gaskell had probably already received a letter from Charles Eliot Norton, dated 2 June 1860⁹, recommending the work to her as in its way quite as good as Hawthorne's *Marble Faun* (another novel she read that year). Her ongoing enthusiasm for all things Italian, an enthusiasm shared by Norton, was undoubtedly stimulated by her American friend's good opinion of the novel of which she had previously heard.

Gaskell's literary taste and artistic judgment are also revealed through another Portico borrowing. This relates to Hamilton Aide, an aspiring young novelist of Scottish/Greek birth, whom Gaskell apparently met in Paris and Rome and whom she wanted to help (she was also much taken with his appearance, as she wrote to Smith: 'he is very amiable & kind, has lovely eyes, and neat little moustachios & favori. He is altogether graceful & gentlemanly'¹⁰). In 1858 she wrote to Smith about Aide, mentioning a manuscript of his which he wanted to be considered for publication, but she subsequently discovered that it had already been published as *Rita, an Autobiography* (1858) in Bentley's Popular Novels series. Smith had read the work and not liked it, but, in a later letter of February 1859, Gaskell expresses her willingness to try it for herself:

I have not seen Rita; but he [Aide] wants me to read it, and say if my
judgment agrees with that of Mr Smith', adding that although most of
the reviews speak well of it, yet that he has been much blamed for it's [sic]
publication by private friends. He *is* a nice person, though I suspect I shall
agree with the private friends rather than with the public reviews. ¹¹

On 10th February, she writes again: 'I cannot at present meet with Rita. I really do believe we Manchesterians are too English to have such a French novel in our circulating libraries. Nor am I in any hurry to express what I know will be my opinion to Mr Aide; for I like the little gentleman'¹². Four days

later, however, another letter to Smith makes it clear that he - presumably in answer to her earlier correspondence - has sent her the novel and that she has read it. Yet Portico records show that William in fact borrowed the two-volume work on 10th February, the very day that Gaskell claims still not to have seen it. (It was returned two weeks later). Could Gaskell have been guilty of lying to Smith, in order not to have to express an unfavourable opinion on it? Or had William not returned to Plymouth Grove with it before Gaskell had sent off her letter? Whatever the sequence of events, the whole episode clearly demonstrates Gaskell's unease when confronted by a text whose tendencies she could not approve. Her reading of the novel confirmed her anticipated dislike: 'It introduces one just exactly into the kind of disreputable [sic] society one keeps clear of with such scrupulous care in real life...I don't think it is 'corrupting', but it is disagreeable, - a sort of dragging one's petticoats through mud'¹³. By today's standards, *Rita* seems fairly anodyne, but its somewhat risqué Parisian setting, its characters of dubious morality (one of the English ex-patriots, Lady Janet, turns out to be the owner of a brothel; and the heroine's father has an illegitimate child), and its melodramatic plot, including an attempted forced marriage, would have shocked even liberal-minded Victorians, especially those sensitive to the moral effects of literary influences. Disapproval from one who had ventured into contentious areas with her own novel, *Ruth*, thus clearly has some force; Gaskell shows here that while she was prepared to challenge conventional attitudes to morally 'difficult' issues, she could not accept imaginative writing which seemed to go beyond the ethical bounds demanded of fictional representation. Interestingly, she was much more positive about a later novel of Aide's, *Carr of Carrylon*, published in March 1862 and also borrowed by William that month, perhaps because, as she wrote to Smith, 'very pleasant it was to be carried out of murky smoky Manchester into something so purely Italian as the beginning is, - it is a regular atmosphere of Italy'¹⁴.

Consultation of the Portico lending ledgers can also help to place hitherto undated Gaskell texts. In the *Gaskell Society Newsletter* of February 1999, John Chapple reproduces a short manuscript piece by Gaskell, a light-hearted parody of a conversation between herself and a 'literary lady'.¹⁵ On internal evidence, including reference to the death of Charlotte Brontë and Gaskell's use of blue paper, Chapple suggests a date between 1855 and 1857. The (satirized) references to various contemporary novels and

novelists, however, can help us to propose an alternative dating for this piece, if considered in conjunction with Portico borrowings at the time. In the skit, Lady J.H., an ignorant and silly woman, attributes the authorship of *Mary Powell* to Gaskell (who stoutly denies it). As Chapple notes, *Mary Powell* was written by Anne Manning and published in 1849. Portico records show that not only did William borrow this novel in 1851, but that he also borrowed several other of Manning's works over the next eight years, including *Deborah's Diary*, the sequel to *Mary Powell*, the year of its publication, 1859. Putative dating evidence is also supplied when another reference in the skit is illuminated by Portico records. Lady J.H., having mentioned a book by 'Miss Marsh', goes on to talk about 'the other book you know - about the man who was killed in the Crimea'¹⁶ which she attributes to Marsh. 'Miss Marsh' is Anne Marsh Caldwell, a novelist whose connections with and possible fictional influence on Gaskell are discussed below, and it is not impossible that there is a mention of death in the Crimea in one of her numerous novels of the 1850s. But in 1859, William borrowed Dinah Mulock Craik's *A Life for a Life* (1859), which although it is not specifically about a victim of the Crimean War, does deal quite extensively with a character who saves the life of another man in the Crimea. Given that Lady J.H. is portrayed as someone extraordinarily confused in her literary recall, her mistake could be intended as another item in the comedy. If, indeed, Gaskell had just read *A Life for a Life* (and this seems highly likely, since Craik was well-known to her), the joke material would have been ready to hand. It is possible, therefore, to suggest a date of 1859 for this piece, a date which of course cannot be definitive but which Portico evidence makes a strong probability.

As has already been suggested, the most important aspect of William's borrowings is their possible impact on Gaskell's own writing. Before turning to those which seem most relevant in this respect, however, it is worth noting the wide range of Portico texts which he - and undoubtedly his wife too - read or consulted. The number is itself large: in 1859, for example, William is recorded as having borrowed 101 books, and most of these are single issues, not repeated borrowings. A brief look at the range of these also suggests a highly cultured and mentally active household: all the major periodicals of the day, including the *North American Review*, the *Dublin University Magazine*, and the *Revue des Deux Mondes*; a large variety of fiction, including new publications, as well as old favourites by Jane Austen, Maria Edgeworth and Fanny Burney; much non-fiction which clearly relates to William's teaching and parochial activities,

such as Latham's *The English Language* (1850), Joseph Kay's *The Education of the Poor in England and Europe* (1846), accounts of criminal trials, essays on grammar and philology, and historical and social studies by contemporaries such as Newman, Carlyle, Sterling, Froude, Macaulay and Ruskin; and a good range of poetry, including *In Memoriam*, *The Prelude*, *Aurora Leigh*, *Marmion*, and Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'. Two other categories of borrowings are also of particular interest. Even before Gaskell started work on her *Life of Charlotte Bronte*, she and William both seemed to have been particularly fond of biography, and the records show many such items. The other significant occurrence is the number of travel books (with which the Portico was and still is especially well stocked): William took out books on America, Italy, Greece and Turkey, Iceland, the Middle East, Switzerland, Japan and New Zealand, as well as, nearer to home, guides to Scotland, Cornwall, and Yorkshire. Gaskell herself was, as we know, always ready to leave Manchester for more exotic locations, so many of these borrowings may have been for her; William, on the other hand, despite his reluctance go far afield, may have been an avid armchair traveller.

It is evident, then, that many of these and other such borrowings were for Gaskell rather than solely for William, and it is their links with her own writing which is their most fascinating aspect. Some texts were put to obvious use. For instance, in 1851 William is recorded as having taken out Thomas Wright's *Narratives of Sorcery and Magic*, published that year. Wright's book contains a chapter on 'The Days of Satan in New England', an account of the Salem witch trials, and this probably supplied Gaskell with material for her short story, 'Lois the Witch' (1859); moreover, it suggests that the idea for the story had been gestating for some time before its publication, and that Gaskell had kept it at the back of her mind until she was ready to develop it.¹⁷ Similarly, on 23 November 1859, very soon after Gaskell had returned from her ten days in Whitby, where she was researching material for what was to be *Sylvia's Lovers*, William borrowed William Scoresby's *An Account of the Arctic Regions* (1821); this text not only discusses whaling in general, but also gives details of Scoresby's own voyages, which details are reproduced in Chapter IX of the novel in Kinraid's and Robson's accounts of their whaling exploits to which Sylvia listens so eagerly.¹⁸ Gaskell probably wanted to check the original again, when she had got further on into her novel, since Scoresby appears a second time under William's name on 21 May 1860, in the period when she was beginning to get fretful about the progress of her story.

Less obvious, but in some ways even more illuminating, is the possible influence on Gaskell of the contemporary fiction which was borrowed. Many of these novels are either forgotten today or are only just being 'recovered', but clearly at the time they formed an important part of the middle-class Victorian's reading material, even if, as was often the case, many of them turned out to be somewhat inferior productions. The power of suggestiveness is anyway not directly linked to artistic quality; and even among those novels that Gaskell herself would have acknowledged as second-rate there were ideas and images which had a particular resonance for her and fed into her own writing. This can be illustrated by reference to a specific fictional example.

William's fiction borrowings were particularly prolific in 1851, and it is especially noteworthy that in this year, as in much of this decade, a large proportion of the novels were by women (seventeen out of twenty-four have been so identified). Certain themes recur in these novels - unhappy female romance, often the result of forced marriages or parental pressures; legal disputes over inheritance; mysteries of birth and family relationships; revenge and redemption. Although it is arguable that these are the stuff of much mid-Victorian fiction, it is also interesting to see the extent to which Gaskell implements them in her own writing, and certain individual examples give evidence that there may be intertextuality at work here.

It has often been noted that Gaskell seems to have been particularly preoccupied with the theme of disappearance and re-appearance, often in a romantic context and linked to the subject of betrayed affections (as, for example, in 'The Well of Pen-Morfa' and 'Half a Lifetime Ago'). Her short piece, 'Disappearances', in *Household Words* of June 1851, first foregrounds her interest in this topic; though it is merely a factual rehearsal of various accounts of people who have vanished without trace, two of these concern bridegrooms who have disappeared on their wedding-days and another tells of a husband who abandons his wife and lives thereafter incognito married to another woman. The theme is taken up again in fictional form in Gaskell's short story, 'The Manchester Marriage', published in the extra Christmas number of *Household Words* for 1858, which deals with a woman who re-marries, assuming her first husband has been lost at sea; he returns, but is seen only by the family nurse who reveals her secret to the new husband when the unhappy survivor drowns himself in despair; the wife remains ignorant of his return. Both these short works clearly provide embryonic plots for *Sylvia's Lovers*, and discussions of the

novel often assume that the Charley/Sylvia/Philip story is in part a re-working of the earlier pieces. It is also often pointed out that the disappearance of a first lover and the subsequent successful wooing of a less desired lover make up the substance of Crabbe's poem, 'Ruth', in his *Tales of the Hall* (1819) which Gaskell probably knew (The likelihood of this text being influential on *Sylvia's Lovers* is of course increased because the cause of the disappearance is the seizure of the young man by the press-gang).

There is, however, another, hitherto unnoted, possible source of inspiration for Gaskell's treatment of the tortuous and tragic love triangle in her novel. In 1851, Caroline Norton brought out her *Stuart of Dunleath*, and William borrowed it this year and again in November 1859. Norton's novel, though primarily special pleading - deriving from her own personal circumstances - for redress of the iniquitous divorce laws as they affected women, contains a heroine who, believing that her first lover has drowned himself, marries another man whom she does not love, for the sake of her feeble and impecunious mother; after a disastrous and tragic period (including the death of her twin sons and the discovery that her husband has been unfaithful to her), her former lover returns and asks her to divorce and leave her husband and marry him; she, however, sees that her duty is to stay with the man whose children she has borne, and she rejects his proposal. The strong probability that Gaskell read this novel twice, first soon after 'Disappearances', and then eight years later, after the publication of 'The Manchester Marriage' - and this second reading must have taken place almost immediately after her return from the Whitby trip - makes the similarities between Norton's work and *Sylvia's Lovers* all the more striking. It also indicates how her imagination, already fascinated by this particular theme, could be re-kindled by renewed acquaintance with an especially suggestive literary text.

There is another instance of possible influence here. Gaskell's acquaintance with the novels of Anne Marsh Caldwell has already been posited above. In 1852, she probably read Caldwell's *Ravenscliffe* (1851), a particularly notable example of the unfortunate results of publishers' demands for three-volume novels at this time. As Chapple reminds us¹⁹, Caldwell was Dr Henry Holland's sister-in-law, and the family connection, rather than literary merit, may have been the stimulus for Gaskell's interest in the older woman's fiction. Despite its endlessly proliferated plot and melodramatic complications, *Ravenscliffe* is of considerable interest in that it offers another treatment of romantic misunderstandings: a woman's former

lover, who she mistakenly believes jilted her, returns and declares his continuing love; though she still feels attracted to him, she is persuaded to marry another man, and even when the lover appears on her wedding-day she refuses to abandon her formal vows of commitment. As with *Stuart of Dunleath*, the parallels between the plot of this novel and that of *Sylvia's Lovers* seem too marked to be co-incidental. While there is no evidence that Gaskell ever re-read it at a later date, it seems quite likely that this work as well sowed seeds which were to germinate and flourish in her own subsequent fiction. In this period, too, she herself was confronted with real-life unhappy romance when Meta's engagement to Captain Charles Hill in June 1857 was broken off a year later, after rumours of his unreliability; the conjunction of this event and the train of associations set off by her reading of both Norton's and Caldwell's novels may have provided the stimulus for her development of the theme.

This, then, is an area of research which is still ripe for investigation. Further exploration of Portico records may well turn up more evidence of intertextuality, this itself illuminated by references in the forthcoming new volume of Gaskell letters. The findings both confirm what we already know - that, alongside all her other activities, Gaskell was a voracious reader - and throw valuable additional light on her sources of creative inspiration and methods of composition. They also reveal how she, like Henry James's ideal novelist, is someone 'on whom nothing is lost!'²⁰

¹ *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. J.A.V.Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), p.6.

² *Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol. 5 (1991), pp.27-36.

³ *Letters*, p.218.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.572. 'Bosie', as he was known, was the son of a clergyman, living in Northumberland, hence Gaskell's references in the letter to places that he himself has mentioned to her.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.592

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.251.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.604, 605.

⁹ *Letters of Mrs Gaskell and Charles Eliot Norton, 1855-1865*, ed. Jane Whitehill [1932] (reprinted Hildersheim & N.Y.: Georg Olms Verlag, 1973), p.59.

¹⁰ *Letters*, p.523.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.525-6.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.528.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.679.

¹⁵ John Chapple, 'A (not) Imaginary Conversation Between a "Lady of Quality" and Mrs Gaskell', *Gaskell Society Newsletter*, No.27 (February 1999), pp.17-20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.18.

¹⁷ For more details about the background to this story, see Irene Wiltshire, 'Elizabeth Gaskell and Witchcraft: a consideration of "Lois the Witch"', *Portico Monograph* No.17 (March 1999). Wiltshire, however, does not mention Wright as a possible source.

¹⁸ See Appendix 1 to *Sylvia's Lovers*, ed. Shirley Foster, Penguin, 1996, pp.479-81.

¹⁹ 'A (not) Imaginary Conversation', p.20.

²⁰ Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction' (1884), in ed. Morris Shapira, *Henry James: Selected Literary Criticism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p.86.