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“THE CULTURE OF HABITS AND DISPOSITIONS”:
ASSOCIATIONIST PSYCHOLOGY AND UNITARIAN EDUCATION
IN GASKELL’S *WIVES AND DAUGHTERS*

by
Lori Dickson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Department of English
Brigham Young University

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

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This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Lori Dickson in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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ABSTRACT

“THE CULTURE OF HABITS AND DISPOSITIONS”:
ASSOCIATIONIST PSYCHOLOGY AND UNITARIAN EDUCATION
IN GASKELL’S *WIVES AND DAUGHTERS*

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Master of Arts

Although Victorian psychology has been the subject of much recent scholarship, Elizabeth Gaskell’s work has not been considered in relation to nineteenth-century theories of mind. In this thesis, I argue that Gaskell’s final novel, *Wives and Daughters*, deals with associationism, an early branch of psychology that played a key role in public debates over cognition that took place throughout the century. Gaskell was exposed to associationism through her Unitarian faith, and Unitarian educators in particular articulated associationist principles in their writings about cognitive development. Gaskell was preoccupied with a similar model of learning throughout her fiction, and I read *Wives and Daughters* as a novel that redefines education in associationist terms, presenting the protagonist Molly Gibson’s education not as a matter of formal schooling but as a matter of experiential and psychological growth.

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Introduction

A sound and comprehensive acquaintance with the laws of our mental frame is of incalculable utility in the business of education. [. . .] It shews the vast importance of early impressions, of early attention to the culture of habits and dispositions.

—William Shepherd, Lant Carpenter, Jeremiah Joyce

Systematic Education (1822)

Making its formal debut towards the end of the nineteenth century, the discipline of psychology has been associated historically with a Modernist aesthetic rather than a Victorian one. However, in recent works such as Rick Rylance's *Victorian Psychology and British Culture* (2000) and William Cohen's *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (2009), scholars have begun to tap the rich theories of mind that existed in Victorian culture. Indeed, the Victorian period was a time of dramatic change for the study of mental development. As the nineteenth century dawned, the mind was located firmly within the province of philosophy; by its close, the spiritual mind had become the materialist brain—a subject of experimentation and measurement.

Despite the fascinating nature of this history, its implications for Victorian fiction have been overshadowed by the more obvious relationship between psychology and literature in subsequent periods. As Rylance claims, the Modernists' emphasis "on the fresh and challenging representation of fluid interiority (and [their] corresponding polemical rejection of stiff 'Victorian' repression and conventionality) too often obscures both Modernism's relations with its own past and, in its imagined leap beyond it, the real achievements of that past itself"(10). Even later psychological criticism that recognized

the importance of psychology in Victorian texts was based more on a twentieth-century model of psychology than on understanding these texts within their own historical context. Fortunately, this viewpoint has begun to give way to a more nuanced perspective on theories of mind in Victorian literature. Two recent monographs (Sally Shuttleworth's *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (1996) and Michael Davis's *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Psychology* (2006)) along with a multitude of articles have taken up this issue, re-evaluating canonical Victorian writers in terms of their exposure to and engagement with contemporary psychological theory. This movement to see Victorian psychology and literature in a common historical context has been quite widespread, and even authors like Dickens whose work is not usually considered psychologically "realistic" have been reconsidered in this sense.¹

Unfortunately, scholarship on Elizabeth Gaskell and psychology has lagged considerably, despite the fact that Gaskell is often grouped with Brontë, Dickens, and Eliot in criticism. Gaskell is, however, an ideal candidate for such an investigation. Because of her Unitarian background, she was familiar with associationism, an early theory of mind which played a key role in public debates over cognition taking place throughout the century. The associationists took a materialist stance towards cognition, claiming that mental development occurs through exposure to sensory impressions from the immediate environment. For Gaskell and the Unitarians, this theory particularly informed their views of education, and in this paper I will consider how Gaskell's final novel, *Wives and Daughters* (1865), grows out of her unique educational psychology. Heavily emphasizing the influence of environment on mental development and evaluating educational systems according to the habits of thought they produce, Gaskell's

Wives and Daughters relies on a distinctly associationist model of learning.

Associationism and the Unitarian Context

Nineteenth-century psychology was dominated by two broad perspectives on the origins of thought and learning. Faculty psychologists believed that human beings possess innate mental faculties. By contrast, associationists took a nurturist stance towards cognition, arguing that the mind and body were connected and that external experiences created human thought (Rylance 40). Gaskell tended towards the associationist explanation of cognition because of her religious background.² The Unitarians had espoused associationist ideas since the late eighteenth century when Joseph Priestley, a founder of Unitarianism, became interested in David Hartley's theory of association, writing a condensed version of Hartley's *Observations on Man* for his dissenting congregation (Dybikowski 81). The *Observations* (1749) was a seminal text that combined earlier ideas about experience-based learning into a cohesive theory of association; in it, Hartley suggested that all mental constructs have their origin in impressions received from the immediate environment. Theorizing that, in a chain, sensations created first simple and then complex ideas, he believed that this process of association would produce elaborate thoughts, emotions, prejudices, and social customs (Hartley 441–512).

Hartley's ideas were surprisingly influential over time. For Priestley's followers, Hartleyan philosophy and Unitarianism became so intertwined "that acceptance of the former was often a prime factor leading to the conversion to the latter" (Watts 41). Hartley's theory also impacted the general public as the basic tenets of associationism made their way into educational materials published throughout the nineteenth century.

For example, the textbook *Systematic Education* describes the early stages of association in classic Hartleyan terms:

[T]he scent of a rose, the sound from a bell, the taste of an orange, the blow of a stick produce changes in the organ of sense; and these produce *sensations* in the mind. [. . .] *Sensations* soon cease after the exciting cause is withdrawn; but if they have been produced with sufficient vividness or frequency, the causes remain in the mind [. . . and] can recur when no change is produced in the organ of sense. These mental changes (which may be considered the relics of sensations,) are called *ideas*. (Shepherd, Carpenter, and Joyce 266)

Other treatises on association proceed in similar fashion, beginning with the mind's power to associate sensory impressions with each other and then into more advanced forms of cognition. However, as Rylance notes, these texts are rather vague about the way these associative chains are created, “[stopping] at the level of abstract description and [resting] on the exchange of nature/nurture statements of principle” (57). In other words, associationism was theoretically appealing because it offered a systematized explanation of cognitive development, but its principles were difficult to trace in a practical sense. Thus, Rylance quips, “a good deal of the associationist debate [was] merely a game of being ‘more nurturist than thou’” (57).

Indeed, such a rigid yet un-provable view of mental development opened up the associationists to critique. The faculty psychologists found their anti-essentialism myopic, and many pointed out the theory's lack of a mechanism to explain the process of association. However, this negative publicity only strengthened associationism's

presence in literary circles and the public consciousness. As Jill Matus points out, psychology developed within ongoing public discourse rather than in isolated theoretical discussions, and thus literature contributed substantially to the direction of psychological thought; she even claims that much of the fiction of the period can be read as a psychological text (1260). Associationism was attacked directly by several well-known writers—most famously Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* and Dickens in *Hard Times*—yet according to Rylance, fiction of the period tended to incorporate associationist ideas and terminology even while critiquing the theory's logical conclusions (55-56).

Mother and Writer: Elizabeth Gaskell and Associationism

Despite the controversy over this theory, associationism continued to appeal to Unitarians throughout the nineteenth century because it emphasized the influence of environment in people's development, thus validating their emphasis on social reforms. Believing that "life experience profoundly affects the individual, rather than innate predisposition," the Unitarians of Gaskell's day felt a divine mandate to shape the minds of their fellow beings by improving their material circumstances, and during this time Unitarianism became known as a sect dedicated to reforms in education, public health, working conditions, temperance, abolition, and women's rights (Millard 11).

Gaskell grew up with both an associationist focus on the influence of the environment and a Unitarian emphasis on reform, and her work reflects an interest in mental development and its implications for the formation of character. Jenny Uglow has mentioned this interest in her excellent biography, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, citing Hartleyan psychology as a possible source for Gaskell's associationist tendencies.

But apart from this brief reference, there has been almost no discussion of associationism in Gaskell's work.

Although Gaskell herself does not announce associationism as an informing theory for her writing, its explanatory power is everywhere in her fiction. This role is stated most directly in *Ruth*, where Gaskell's narrator claims that

The traditions of those bygone times, even to the smallest social particular, enable one to understand more clearly the circumstances which contributed to the formation of character. The daily life into which people are born, and into which they are absorbed before they are well aware, forms chains which only one in a hundred has moral strength enough to despise [. . .] when an inward necessity for independent action arises, which is superior to all outward conventionalities. (6)

Describing the influence of environment on both a historical and a more immediate scale, Gaskell characterizes daily life as a complex network of tradition, routine, and social convention—all of which combine to mold people's characters. Her wording, especially the term *chains*, is suggestive of Hartley's belief that mental constructs can become linked to one another through repeated exposure.

Although this particular reference to associationism in *Ruth* is quite direct, Gaskell usually deals with associationist ideas in the manner Rylance describes, using some specific Hartleyan terminology but mostly resting her case on broad assumptions about the role of nurture and environment in individual mental development.³ Her work is particularly occupied with discussions of education and learning. This approach to cognition is evident in a diary she kept detailing the development of her young daughter

Marianne. Gaskell mentions the importance of creating proper associations between positive behaviors and pleasure, negative behaviors and pain (“The Diary” 8), and she frequently worries about molding Marianne’s surroundings correctly, explaining, “I want to act on principles /now/ which can be carried on through the whole of her education” (“The Diary” 7). For Gaskell, education was as much about experiential learning as it was about formal schooling.⁴ For example, in an entry about her decision to send Marianne to infant school, Gaskell expressed concern about the “false ideas” that other children might introduce but ultimately decided that this experience was necessary for Marianne’s growth: “I am beginning to wonder if I have done right about this darling. [. . . But] our reasons for wishing her to go to school, are also strong; not to advance her rapidly in any branch of learning [. . . but] to give her an idea of conquering difficulties by perseverance; and to make her apply steadily for a short time” (“The Diary” 21–22).

Unitarian Education and Associationist Learning

As is evident from Gaskell’s diary entries, education was a key context in which she and the Unitarians applied associationist principles—a point that is a central concern in her final novel, *Wives and Daughters*. The Unitarians’ ideas about education dated back to Priestley who, because of his investment in associationism and Enlightenment thinking, promoted a modernized curriculum (Watts 38), and their educational philosophy was influential for progressive educational thinkers like Maria and Richard Edgeworth and Mary Wollstonecraft. Unitarian children of both genders were taught modern languages and history, English literature, science, geography, and political economy,⁵ and the Unitarians also worked extensively to provide progressive education to the general public.⁶

Psychology's influence on the Unitarians' educational views is most evident in the materials that their educators produced. Writing in the tradition of manuals like the Edgeworths' well-known *Practical Education* (which promoted a progressive, hands-on education for children), these educators created various guides for parents, students, and teachers.⁷ The Unitarians' educational materials covered many of the same topics as *Practical Education*; however, they differed slightly in that they were explicitly intended to apply principles of association to people's development in a practical sense. For example, Anna Laetitia Barbauld described her *Hymns in Prose for Children* as being designed "to impress devotional feelings as early as possible on the infant mind [. . .] and thus, by deep, strong, and permanent associations, to lay the best foundation for practical devotion in future life" (vi).⁸ Lant Carpenter wrote *Principles of Education* for Christian parents, applying associationism to children's physical, moral, and intellectual growth. And William Shepherd, Jeremiah Joyce, and Lant Carpenter designed *Systematic Education* as a two-volume textbook for the dissenting academies and as a leaving-home present for Unitarian young men (Issitt 165). They presented associationism as a foundation for many of the subjects they covered, from logic to political economy.

Because the Unitarians ascribed to this associationist view of learning, they saw education as encompassing much more than rote learning: rather, education was a matter of understanding students' inward psychology, and many of their educators posited an experience-based system of learning in their texts, focusing on altering the circumstances of students rather than on the subjects taught. For example, Carpenter claims, "[i]t is a most erroneous idea in education, that nothing is done except when children are engaged in the usual rudiments of instruction. A child watching the motions of objects [. . .] is

engaged in a work which it should be our aim as much as possible to aid and encourage, and from which we may expect very valuable results both on the faculties and furniture of the mind” (27–28). In his introduction to *Principles of Education*, Carpenter expands his definition of education to include not only schoolroom instruction but “*the education of circumstances*,” “*accidental education*,” and “self-culture” or “voluntary exertions of the mind” (1–2).

This unique Unitarian psychology of learning plays a major role in Gaskell’s fiction. As Uglow suggests, “Hartley’s belief that ideas and attitudes are developed from an early age from the ‘associations’ of sensations led to a preoccupation with education and upbringing—a theme of Elizabeth’s writings from her earliest stories to her final novel, *Wives and Daughters*” (5). Indeed, Gaskell characterizes education in broad, associationist terms throughout her work: she critiques outdated schooling for the lower classes in *My Lady Ludlow*; she deals with classical versus practical education in *North and South*; she addresses the issue of women’s education in *Cousin Phillis* and *Sylvia’s Lovers*; she humorously critiques conduct-book learning in “Morton Hall”; she writes self-educated characters into *Mary Barton* and *Cousin Phillis* (Thiele 274–275; Millard 12); and she shows the importance of parental teaching in “Hand and Heart” and *Ruth*. Underlying Gaskell’s wide-ranging treatment of education is the key assumption that learning proceeds from exposure to one’s environment. Thus, “early attention to the culture of habits and dispositions” (Shepherd, Carpenter, and Joyce 262) is a primary concern for Gaskell, and her characters’ education is, more than an accumulation of knowledge, a matter of psychological growth.⁹

“A question for a philosopher”: Mental Habits and Experiential Education in
Wives and Daughters

Gaskell’s final novel, *Wives and Daughters*, is heavily invested in questions of mental development and how people learn, yet these issues have been overlooked in scholarship.¹⁰ Considering the novel’s critical reception, this omission is not surprising. For almost a century after its publication, readers and critics viewed *Wives and Daughters* in much the same way they saw Gaskell herself—as charming, unsophisticated, and domestic.¹¹ This assessment has begun to change recently, however, with scholars approaching Gaskell as (if not a philosophical novelist like George Eliot) an insightful “thinker-in-fiction” (Boiko 85) and *Wives and Daughters* as a narrative centered around “systems of knowledge” and “ways of organizing thought and judging behavior” (Schor 183–184). Such scholarship has moved beyond the label of *provincial novel* to explore issues such as social classification, Darwinism, and imperialism in Gaskell’s final work.¹²

From this perspective, *Wives and Daughters* is also a careful study of the effects of environment on individual mental development. Not only does the narrator suggest that this issue is important, but it is a continual point of interest for the characters themselves. For example, considering the moral turpitude that her stepmother has brought to the household, the protagonist Molly Gibson wonders with a Unitarian moral consciousness, “how far it was right for the sake of domestic peace to pass over without comment the little deviations from right that people perceive in those whom they live with. Or, whether, as they are placed in families for distinct purposes, not by chance merely, there are not duties involved in this aspect of their lot in life” (371). Upbringing

is also a concern for her stepsister Cynthia, who wonders to Molly whether “if I had been brought up like you, if I should have been as good” (328). Even their usually superficial mother, Mrs. Gibson, has something to say on the subject. In a conversation with Molly she confesses, “I sometimes wonder what would have happened if you had been my real daughter, and Cynthia dear papa’s, and Mr Kirkpatrick and your own dear mother had all lived” (638). Musing about the shape this situation might have taken, she remarks, “People talk a good deal about natural affinities. It would have been a question for a philosopher” (638).

This “question for a philosopher” which Mrs. Gibson voices is, in fact, part of the nature/nurture debate that the faculty psychologists and the associationists engaged in across the century, and *Wives and Daughters* continually runs up against issues that were part of this debate: How do children come to develop the way they do? Are certain personality traits innate? What role do environment and upbringing play? Gaskell responds to these questions in *Wives and Daughters* through an associationist discussion of learning, and an important aspect of the novel is the way she evaluates models of education by the mental habits they produce, refiguring successful education as not only a matter of formal schooling but as an experiential process.

Formal education is a prominent theme in the novel, with most of the characters traveling outside the small town of Hollingford to obtain schooling. Roger and Osborne attend Rugby and Cambridge, Mr. Gibson receives medical training in Scotland before starting his practice, Cynthia goes to a finishing school in Boulogne, and Mrs. Gibson runs her own boarding school and works as a governess. People in the town are judged by their educational pedigree—as Molly finds out when Lady Cumnor asks about her

schooling, expecting her to possess “all the usual accomplishments” (132)—and education in Hollingford is often a matter of appearances rather than learning, such that at the neighborhood charity school the students are taught “to sew beautifully, to be capital housemaids, and pretty fair cooks, and, above all, to dress neatly in a kind of charity uniform devised by the ladies of Cumnor Towers” (7).

The novel is set in the 1820s and 30s, and Gaskell treats such outdated attitudes towards education with her characteristic biting humor. However, the way she evaluates these systems of education is also clearly influenced by associationist thought. Unable to trace the exact process through which associations occurred, Unitarian educators often wrote about associationism by focusing on the mental habits that resulted from exposure to particular environmental influences. Carpenter, for instance, covers the habits of observation, attention, and abstraction in *Principles of Education*, explaining how these learned traits can be cultivated. For example, he states that the habit of abstraction can be encouraged by such activities as “[an arithmetic problem] performed without the aid of the pen or pencil, the description of some former object of observation, the construing or parsing of sentences from the Classics without book, and similar exercises of the mind” (60). He claims that as these associations are strengthened through repetition, the distinct trait of abstraction will emerge. Such positive mental habits were, for associationist psychologists and educators, the desired end of all their careful attention to people’s surroundings.

Following this same approach to learning, Gaskell deals with educational systems in the novel not in terms of common debates over curriculum or teacher credentials, but by looking at the mental habits that different models of education produce.¹³ She

particularly targets the negative mental habits of her university-educated characters, showing that Osborne's dated and impractical university schooling burdens him with ways of thinking that diminish his manliness and strength.¹⁴ When Osborne comes home from school, his father describes him as "half a woman himself, he spends so much money and is so unreasonable" (392), and his time spent indoors studying and writing poetry reinforces his tendency towards self-absorption. According to the authors of *Systematic Education*, inappropriate reading material was a key source of negative mental habits: "The well-disposed young often fall into a desultory mode of reading, and form injurious habits of mind, for want of something to fix their attention" (264). And as many critics have pointed out, Osborne is associated with Romantic literature—a body of work which, according to Julia Wright, Gaskell identifies "not with the transcendental self, but with Wordsworthian egotism, an unproductive attention to feeling that must be supplanted for the patient to mature and find health" (165). Certainly, as sympathetic as the narrator is to Osborne's plight, she finds him patently self-centered.

Gaskell also shows that accomplishment-based education for women in the novel promotes detrimental ways of thinking. As Mary Waters notes, Mrs. Gibson's behavior matches the advice given in Dr. Gregory's conduct book, *A Father's Legacy*, and she tries to pass this perspective on to Molly, encouraging her to gain superficial accomplishments and hide her intelligence (15). Ironically an educator, Mrs. Gibson embodies nineteenth-century concerns about incompetent women instructing the next generation of mothers. Uninformed herself, Mrs. Gibson is "weary of girls as a class" (125) and hardly fit to teach anyone. Not surprisingly, Mrs. Gibson makes sure that her daughter Cynthia follows in her footsteps, learning to speak French, "repeat the 'Prisoner

of Chillon' from beginning to end" (267), and imitate the latest fashions. And at face value, this schooling seems to accomplish Mrs. Gibson's purpose, as every man who meets Cynthia is, grudgingly or not, captivated by her "very winning ways" (391).

However, this accomplishment-based education leads to the mental habit of falsehood, both outright deceit and subtler social posing.¹⁵ As Carpenter explains, "truth cannot be found by that mind which has been trained up to falsehood by early habits of inaccuracy" (73), and Gaskell bears out this concern in her description of Mrs. Gibson's habitual deception. The narrator describes her words as "always like ready-made clothes, and never fitted individual thoughts" (307), and her never-ending stream of aphorisms humorously belie her hypocrisy: "Constancy above everything" (356), "the memory of the dead ought to be cherished" (356), "simple elegance" (356), and so on. Each phrase throws into relief the false nature of Mrs. Gibson's manners, which are about the appearance of virtue rather than virtue itself.

Although Mrs. Gibson genuinely seems to believe her conduct is correct, Cynthia's falsehood is more insidious because of her own self-awareness. She is, perhaps, the novel's most painful example of associationism at work in accounting for the development of character. According to Carpenter, affection between parents and children is a learned behavior that affects children's psychology: "by pleasures derived from the care and tenderness of parents, and by the privations and pains which their care and tenderness alike may cause, a vast number and variety of impressions are produced, which all uniting and blending together, constitute the filial affection" (173). Cynthia, however, is not given this care, and this lack of affection alters her very nature. In a conversation with Molly, Cynthia blames her disingenuous character on her mother,

saying, “Somehow I cannot forgive her for her neglect of me as a child, when I would have clung to her [. . .] I have grown up outside the pale of duty and ‘oughts’” (223–224). A self-proclaimed “moral kangaroo” (221), Cynthia is in the habit of “withholding facts” (448) as Molly puts it, putting on a front for the men around her like her mother does, adapting her behavior to their tastes and interests. She believes her personality has been inescapably influenced by this training, claiming, “It may be wrong to care for people’s good opinion – but it is me, and I cannot alter myself” (547). Gaskell seems to agree, showing that Cynthia’s and her mother’s upbringing has damaged their ability to react genuinely to others.

In the context of the novel, Osborne’s, Mrs. Gibson’s, and Cynthia’s education—along with the mental habits they produce—is presented as intrinsically outdated. Their education represents the vestiges of an old system that is being left behind as the nation transitions into a new era of knowledge based on scientific inquiry and of class status based on merit. Much has been said about Darwinism and natural history in *Wives and Daughters*, with the general conclusion that Gaskell sees science as the hope of the future. This is partially true. The novel does depict a “changing world moving forward to a future enriched by scientific knowledge” (Warmbold 149), and Gaskell presents science as a progressive discipline in this novel and much of her other work. However, from the psychological perspective she is taking towards learning, Gaskell is equally wary of the negative mental habits a scientific mindset may produce.

Mr. Gibson is a case in point. His outlook on life has been shaped by his medical training to the extent that he applies intellectual standards to all areas of life, valuing objectivity and control. His approach to domestic trouble is, in his own mind, highly

deliberate and rational, as in his humorous medical prescription for the lovesick Mr. Coxe. Yet the narrator sees through some of Mr. Gibson's self-assured objectivity: "[Mr. Gibson] had rather a contempt for demonstrative people, arising from his medical insight into the consequences to health of uncontrolled feeling. He deceived himself into believing that still his reason was lord of all, because he had never fallen into the habit of expression on any other than purely intellectual subjects" (32). This emotionless intellectualism is common to the other scientific men in the novel, who are described as a class by themselves. The women dismiss them as "useless scientific men in all probability" (274), especially when it comes to dancing. But as Gaskell more seriously points out, these men are unserviceable in situations requiring sympathy and feeling. Mr. Gibson's scientific bent causes him to blunder at several crucial points, and even the otherwise exemplary Roger makes almost exactly the same mistakes, falling for Mrs. Gibson's daughter Cynthia and initially viewing women's learning as something to be manipulated for his own ends. Thus, as progressive as science may be, in Gaskell's mind it is not a sure way of understanding everything, and "surgeon though he was," Mr. Gibson is at a fundamental disadvantage because he "had never learnt to anatomize a woman's heart" (396).

Gaskell's response to the nature/nurture debate within Victorian theories of mind is most readily visible in her treatment of Molly Gibson's education. Because of the associationist perspective Gaskell takes toward learning—looking first and foremost at the problematic mental habits these models of education produce—she juxtaposes the problems in these traditional systems of education with principles of Unitarian educational psychology, presenting this as an alternative way to envision learning itself.

By portraying successful education as a process of psychological growth, Gaskell broadens the novel's definition of education to the kind of learning that Unitarian educators advocated, taking into account issues like Carpenter's "*education of circumstances*," "*accidental education*," and "self-culture" or "voluntary exertions of the mind" (1–2). As she had done in previous novels, Gaskell makes her case through the development of her female protagonist, and in contrast to characters marked by habits of entitlement and egotism, falsehood, and false objectivity, Molly emerges as an individual who learns not in a school but from her environment, developing habits of sympathy, attention to detail, and an inner drive for learning.

Wives and Daughters follows Molly's development from the beginning, the only one of Gaskell's novels to begin with the protagonist's early life as Gaskell was interested in tracing the role of early experience in Molly's thinking. Confined to the small world of Hollingford, Molly is disconnected from the education the other characters receive, and from her early childhood her father also curtails her learning, showing the same kind of old-fashioned prejudice that allowed the Cumnors' charity school to function. Only when he senses Molly's need for a chaperone around his young medical assistants does he engage a shopkeeper's daughter as a makeshift governess. He asks her not to teach Molly too much, explaining, "I want to keep her a child, and if I find more learning desirable for her, I'll see about giving it to her myself" (34). He even questions literacy for women as "rather a diluting of mother-wit, to my fancy" (34), and in contrast with the other characters who are defined by their education, Molly reaches adolescence with minimal instruction, an innocent, blank-slate figure.

The paradox behind Mr. Gibson's sexist agenda is that he shelters Molly from

some of the more damaging educational systems around her, yet his plan to keep her a perpetual child is impossible: Gaskell implies that Molly will inevitably learn and develop, and the *bildungsroman* plot unfolds as the story of her education in the expansive, Unitarian sense. The action of the novel really begins when Molly turns seventeen, a particularly important period in one's mental development according to the authors of *Systematic Education*, who claim that "between the age of seventeen and thirty (earlier or later), the character usually acquires its permanent bias" (Shepherd, Carpenter, and Joyce 263). Gaskell connects character development to immediate environment, and, as Angus Easson notes, at different locations in Hollingford Molly encounters different ways of viewing the world (*Elizabeth Gaskell* 194). At the Towers she is introduced to the aristocracy's attitude towards the lower classes and to the new order embodied in the rising scientific community. At the Brownings' she experiences class solidarity. At Hamley Hall she is tutored in natural history, family difficulty, death, and romantic love. And in her own home, she is exposed to standards of conventional femininity.

In fact, Gaskell emphasizes the sheer number of environmental influences on Molly's growth as various characters take up her learning as their own project, assuming a sort of Rousseauvian mentoring role in her life. The narrator describes Roger as her Mentor and Molly as his Telemachus, explaining that every young girl "is very apt to make a Pope out of the first person who presents to her a new or larger system of duty than that by which she has been unconsciously guided hitherto" (147). Roger gives Molly moralizing counsel about how she should react to her father's remarriage and provides her with scientific reading material such as works by the Swiss naturalist, Francois Huber. Osborne counters this instruction with doses of Romantic poetry, Mrs.

Gibson tries to inculcate lady-like virtues, and Lady Harriet takes a surprisingly active role—giving Molly advice about avoiding Mr. Preston, lessening the social disgrace brought on by Cynthia's conduct, and orchestrating her reunion with Roger.

In one way or another, this constant dragging back and forth to different ideological perspectives makes Molly feel “as if she was an inanimate chattel” (611), and she complains to Roger that “It will be very dull when I shall have killed myself, as it were, and live only in trying to do, and to be, as other people like” (135). This kind of combined educational and psychological constraint is a common theme for Gaskell, particularly in later works like *Sylvia's Lovers*, *Cousin Phillis* and *Wives and Daughters* where men infantilize women as Mr. Gibson does Molly, saying “I know my little Molly – my silly little goosey – better than she knows herself” (121). Seeking to control the knowledge and thus the sexuality of the women in their life, these men map their own perspective onto women's experience (Morris xxii).

Although the men in these novels persist in believing they can control women's thinking by controlling their education, Gaskell counters this perspective, again, by pointing to the overwhelming influence of environment. Formal education is only one of many shaping forces on women's minds, and Molly is so successfully educated—despite these constraints—because of the private and almost imperceptible workings of her environment on her cognition. In her inner world of emotional experience, Molly undergoes sensations that help her develop the ideas and judgment necessary to evaluate the actions of those around her. Those who seek to control Molly's education are unaware that she is all the while progressing in this sense; in fact, when discussing Molly's nature, as they often do, they attribute her behavior to either innate goodness or a

lack of formal schooling—but never to her own mental growth. Miss Browning, for example, claims that Molly “will be a little lady as she always is, and always was, and I have known her from a babe” (237). Mrs. Gibson, on the other hand, points to Molly’s lack of “the refinement which good society gives,” mentioning her propensity to go upstairs two steps at a time (237). Lady Harriet claims that Molly is “truth itself” (526), and Mr. Gibson tells Mrs. Hamley that Molly is “a little ignoramus, and has had no [. . .] training in etiquette” (56). While on the surface these assessments are accurate, what Molly’s elders fail to see is that which is most apparent to readers—her ongoing, inner struggle to make sense of her world.

Aside from facts about Africa and English bees, what Molly learns in the course of the narrative is along these hidden lines, evident only through principles of mental development. In Hartleyan fashion, the sensations she experiences lead to ideas that shape her judgment and her actions. In this sense, her ignorant upbringing is, ironically, quite beneficial; instead of being damaged by the kind of education Cynthia received, Molly grows up surrounded by her father’s love and integrity, a standard she measures her subsequent experiences against. For example, on her first visit to the Towers, she senses how little she is wanted there, and she feels what it is like to be forgotten by Mrs. Kirkpatrick and treated as lower-class. When her father comes to pick her up, Molly is overcome with emotion, “quivering, sparkling, almost crying out loud” (25), and she describes her experience to him in these words: “I felt like a lighted candle when they’re putting the extinguisher on it” (27). This intense emotion is associated for Molly with the individuals she met at the Towers, and the same feeling returns to Molly some years later as Mr. Gibson tells her that he is going to marry again. When he says, “To Mrs

Kirkpatrick – you remember her? [. . .] You recollect how kind she was to you that day you were left there?” (111), Molly is overcome with the same sensation again, this time coupled with anger:

She did not answer. She could not tell what words to use. She was afraid of saying anything, lest the passion of anger, dislike, indignation – whatever it was that was boiling up in her breast – should find vent in cries and screams, or worse, in raging words that could never be forgotten. It was as if the piece of solid ground on which she stood had broken from the shore, and she was drifting out to the infinite sea alone. (111)

Such inner outbursts of feeling on Molly’s part reoccur throughout the narrative and are linked together into ongoing themes in her consciousness, creating, as Hartley suggested they would, complex thoughts and emotions. For instance, her feelings about the Towers are later tied to her dislike for the way Lady Harriet treats the townspeople. Her concerns about Mrs. Gibson are linked to earlier memories of her mother in their home. And her interactions with Roger particularly reoccur in her consciousness. Together, they discuss the feelings of anger and betrayal she is dealing with, and Molly thinks of his advice at difficult moments, asking herself, “What would Roger say was right?” (174).

From these associations developed through repeated sensation, Molly develops clearer and clearer ideas about the rightness or wrongness of what is going on around her, developing the kind of mental habits that Unitarian educators saw as the outcome of a proper experiential education. Thus, in Unitarian fashion, Gaskell portrays Molly as having strong innate potential, yet through her mental development her character expands and becomes more mature so that by the end of the novel, she is not just honest and

upright but grasps the importance of being so. For example, she moves from unthinking, “boiling” emotion on hearing that she is to have a stepmother, to careful pondering about her duty in this circumstance, to acting in a way that helps diffuse the tension at home. With her “observant eyes” she “discovers the nature of Roger’s attraction” to Cynthia (310) as well as the dynamics of the Hamley family and the changes in her own household. Her sense of judgment, which according to associationist educators is a trait stemming from careful observation, is likewise acute. Molly is the first to recognize her stepmother’s real character, and she boldly challenges Lady Harriet’s “way of speaking” as prejudiced and “impertinent” (162). So used to habits of honesty that she is unwell when she has something to conceal, and “[evincing] so much intelligence, and a mind so well prepared for the reception of information” (297) that even Lord Hollingford is impressed, Molly is a model of mental strength.

Fittingly, the novel ends in the process of pairing Molly with Roger, the other most sympathetic character of the narrative. Initially, Roger makes some of the same mistakes as Mr. Gibson based on his socialization into patriarchal and rationalistic views; however, from his experience in Africa (a space outside the narrative that functions as an experiential parallel to his formal education at Cambridge), Roger somehow moves from being a messenger of patriarchal authority to a man who is aware of the needs of others—an incredibly important distinction for Gaskell, who throughout her work deals with the problems caused by men who are not in touch with their own emotions. As Linda Hughes claims, “Roger does not separate but rather conjoins science and nurturing as well as companionate relationships” (100). Thus, by the end of the novel, Molly and Roger have grown into a model couple. Molly is educated, in Lady Harriet’s words, to

be “capable of appreciating [Roger]” (620); Roger embarks on a progressive career in science; and both possess mental habits which will allow them to genuinely connect to others.

The last pages of *Wives and Daughters*, written just before Gaskell’s death, suggest that the value of these steps can only be understood with the correct mental training. In casual conversation with her husband, Mrs. Gibson—thinking of marriage for money and the possibility of making a match like Cynthia’s—remarks, “I should so have liked to belong to this generation” (646). Mr. Gibson responds in typical form: “That’s sometimes my own feeling [. . .] So many new views seem to be opened in science, that I should like, if it were possible, to live till their reality was ascertained, and one saw what they led to” (646). From the first page to the last, nothing has really changed in the older generation’s mindset: Mrs. Gibson is still thinking of social status and Mr. Gibson of science. Persisting in the mental habits their education provided them, they miss the progress their children’s generation has made in what Gaskell feels are more morally significant ways. Unaware of Molly’s inner mental development, her father treats her with the same paternal care as always. And by labeling her relationship with Roger as the “folly” of “a wise man of science in love” (644), Mr. Gibson overlooks that which in Gaskell’s view symbolizes what careful mental training can provide for the future.

Conclusion

Although Gaskell’s work has not typically been considered in relation to Victorian psychology, her fiction is firmly entrenched in the nature/nurture debate that drove competing theories of mind during the nineteenth century. Because of her Unitarian

background, Gaskell tended to approach this debate through an associationist perspective on education, and, as I have argued, Unitarian educational psychology was a significant context for her portrayal of learning in *Wives and Daughters*.

With the authors of *Systematic Education*, Gaskell would agree that “[a] sound and comprehensive acquaintance with the laws of our mental frame is of incalculable utility in the business of education” (262). In fact, *Wives and Daughters* is full of curiosity about how these abstract principles play out in the messy details of daily existence. By attributing negative mental habits to current systems of education—such as Osborne’s university learning, the women’s conduct book education, and Mr. Gibson’s focus on science—and then contrasting these habits with Molly’s experiential learning, Gaskell redefines the scope of education in uniquely associationist ways. Essentially, her version of learning offers both hope and concern for groups that have been left out of traditional schooling, and the novel is a call for closer attention to the way conditions of every-day life can mold people’s thinking.

This reading of one of Gaskell’s finest and most introspective novels helps widen the scientific context in which it is generally placed. Not only does Gaskell borrow from the discipline of natural history in *Wives and Daughters* to address the nature of her characters’ development; she also draws on the rising discipline of psychology, particularly associationism, which held such an important position within her Unitarian religious tradition. As scholarship continues to work towards a more unified understanding of Gaskell’s life and work, her unique perspective on learning may prove to be an important area of focus. This scholarship should acknowledge Gaskell’s overarching preoccupation with experiential education as well as the underlying

conditions that prompted it—the presence of competing nineteenth-century theories of mind which shaped Gaskell’s method of characterization and her message about the nature of social change.

Notes

¹ See Vrettos for an example.

² The influence of Unitarianism on Gaskell’s writing is a much-debated subject. Almost everyone who writes on Gaskell asserts the importance of religion in her thinking, yet it seems a matter of course to discount its influence in her fiction. As R.K. Webb has noted, organized religion is not a significant factor in the lives of Gaskell’s characters or in the solutions to the social problems she addresses (161). However, others such as John Chapple claim that her social vision is characteristically Unitarian (“Unitarian Dissent” 165). There is little consensus over which aspects of Unitarianism are influential in Gaskell’s fiction, and scholarship has, for the most part, settled for the vague assessment voiced early on by Angus Easson: “Gaskell’s Unitarianism is a presence, rather than a force: she is not a religious novelist, yet there is an informing spirit, brought into fuller play when needed” (*Elizabeth Gaskell* 17). Looking at Unitarianism from the perspective of associationist psychology helps to clarify at least one way in which Gaskell’s religion influenced her writing. (For criticism on Gaskell and Unitarianism see Watts, Chapple’s “Unitarian Dissent,” Webb, Millard, Knight and Mason, and Easson’s *Elizabeth Gaskell*.)

³ In her fiction, Gaskell frequently deals with the end result of these associative “chains,” relating her characters’ surrounding environments to their deepest thoughts and emotions. Consequently, the strong effect of early life and socialization, particularly on gender roles, is evident throughout her short fiction (Stoneman 30; Foster 115–16). For

example, one tale, “The Heart of John Middleton,” describes a young man’s struggle to overcome his neglected childhood and desire for revenge in order to meet the expectations of his Christian bride. Other stories deal with issues such as the psychological effects of betrayal and the consequences of socializing men not to show emotion. Associationism is also at work in Gaskell’s focus on setting. Her narratives are, as Marion Shaw claims, “everywhere obsessed by history” (77), and Gaskell treats time and place as key influences on the development of individual mental traits. These forces combine most famously at the beginning of the *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, in which she describes Haworth as a wild and primitive influence on the Brontës’ writing. However, setting plays an important role throughout her work as she accounts for the development of her characters.

⁴ Gaskell was more interested in allowing her daughters to develop qualities of character than in regimenting their mastery of certain subjects, an approach that Patsy Stoneman describes as “remarkable for its time” (21–22). Throughout her letters Gaskell mentions decisions about which schools to send them to, what experiences to give them, and how to best prepare them for the roles they might occupy (Uglow 158; Colby, “Some Appointed Work” 91–92; Colby, “Model of Motherhood” 56–63; Rubenius 104).

⁵ Gaskell herself benefited from this perspective: she was well educated at home, at a respected boarding school, and in the home of a Unitarian minister (Millard 8; Chapple, “Early Years” 237–257).

⁶ The Unitarians instituted an impressive range of programs for the lower classes such as the ragged schools, Sunday schools, coeducational and infant schools, and mechanics’

institutes (Watts 162–180). Many Unitarians were involved in nation-wide educational reforms that occurred during the nineteenth century, including increased professional requirements for educators, standardization of secondary education for middle-class girls, and the creation of institutions of higher education for women. The Unitarians were also concerned with the direction that men’s higher education was taking, arguing that Oxford and Cambridge were not progressive or scientific enough. Gaskell was certainly aware of these issues, and her entire family participated to varying extents in educational efforts. She taught in the Sunday school; her daughters worked with girls’ secondary education; and her husband tutored female Unitarian students, taught literature to the working classes, and was heavily involved with the Unitarian academies in Manchester (Uglow 88–90, 613, 129, 114–115; Seed 21–22).

⁷ See Butler for a discussion of Maria Edgeworth’s influence on Gaskell, particularly in *Wives and Daughters*.

⁸ Originally published in 1781, this collection was translated into five languages and went through multiple British and American editions throughout the century. Gaskell was familiar with this and other Barbault texts (Uglow 27).

⁹ Various scholars have noted Gaskell’s expansive treatment of education but have not connected it to her associationist background. Instead, they have either assumed her treatment of education is unique to her or have attributed it loosely to her religion. For example, in an article on social change in *My Lady Ludlow*, Elizabeth Leaver states that this “novella is not only about formal or school education, but also about social and political education, labor relations, agricultural reform, gender issues, and the links

between all of these” (54). Mary Kuhlman describes Gaskell’s version of learning as “education through experience,” claiming that in *North and South* Gaskell emphasizes event, dialog, and movement as important categories of experiential schooling (19). Ruth Watts suggests that Gaskell’s novels follow a Unitarian course in being “very much about the education of women in the wider sense” (201), and Webb claims that “to take an obvious Unitarian concern, education is one of the principle motifs of the novels” (161).

¹⁰ Several scholars, however, have briefly mentioned the importance of education in *Wives and Daughters*. For example, in her early feminist study *Elizabeth Gaskell*, Stoneman states that the novel “for the first time makes central what had earlier been an unacknowledged problem; the education of daughters by wives to be wives” (113). Anna Unsworth also touches on the role of early environment and education, claiming that *Wives and Daughters* uses these issues to examine “the landscape of contemporary society and the question as to what are the lasting values in society and what may be done to improve them” (163). For scholarship on Gaskell’s treatment of education in fiction generally, see Leaver, Pettitt, Unsworth, Kuhlman, and Rogers.

¹¹ See Easson’s *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage* for contemporary reviews of *Wives and Daughters*.

¹² For examples see d’Albertis, Schor, Boiko, Hughes, Wright, Morris, Henry and Blair.

¹³ The forty-five years between the novel’s setting and Gaskell’s present were a time of profound change for the nation in terms of availability of and standards for education. Although public education was not compulsory until the 1870s and 80s, educational methods came under serious debate during Gaskell’s lifetime. And issues she mentions

in *Wives and Daughters*—such as working-class schooling, incompetent female educators, non-standardized girls' schooling, and outdated university education—became public knowledge through reforms (often headed by the Unitarians) that took place throughout the century. (See Green, Pedersen, and Steinbach for discussions of these movements and Watts for the Unitarians' involvement within them.)

¹⁴ Gaskell's focus on the universities is not surprising considering the Unitarians' feelings about Oxford and Cambridge. Their main complaint was that the universities persisted with classical education instead of adopting a modernized curriculum based on science. In the words of prominent reformer John Relley Beard, “[The universities] stand not as beacons bearing the torch before advancing civilization, but as monuments of the antique, the obsolete, the disallowed, the effete” (830–1). Gaskell's own father also wrote on this topic, advocating a modernized curriculum rather than an education in the classics (Uglow 9), and her husband was known for teaching modern British literature both in the Unitarian Academies and to the working class in Manchester (Uglow 114–116).

¹⁵ Various scholars have remarked on the prevalence of lying in *Wives and Daughters*. Falsehood seems to be a preoccupation for Gaskell, and d'Albertis argues that Gaskell not only deals with dissembling thematically but also uses it as an organizing principle for her whole body of work.

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