



## Mary's Absolute Value: Gaskell's *Mary Barton* as a Magdalene Type

By Jill Kriegel

If, as C. S. Lewis believed, “an absolute of literary value is its capacity to express great myths”, Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* can be seen as a Mary Magdalene figure.<sup>1</sup> Like Mary Magdalene, Mary Barton’s “sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she love[s] much”, and ultimately her own reformation provides the path for others to repent and change.<sup>2</sup>

In *Mary Barton* Elizabeth Gaskell focuses on the problems of working conditions in factories and employs the realities of her day to elucidate the plight of the downtrodden. These social issues brought forth many visible atrocities and, as such, presented Gaskell with material highly conducive to the moral theme so prevalent in her novel. Alexander Welsh names Gaskell as part of the group of “Dickens and his contemporaries [who] were steeped in the Christian tradition—Pauline, Augustinian, and Puritan—of two cities: the earthly city of men and the city of God.”<sup>3</sup>

As a heroine, as a paragon of religious strength, and as a path to salvation, Mary Barton is not only Gaskell’s literary and moral contribution to readers of her own age, but also a symbolic Magdalene model to readers of any age. In *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, Walter Houghton maintains that for Newman and his contemporaries, the

central aim was to make men good Christians—that is, real instead of nominal Christians . . . But they were aware that in doing so, they would be making men good citizens . . . In this way, the social need for moral earnestness gave fresh impetus to the Christian revival

and increased its influence.<sup>4</sup>

As such, through novels such as *Mary Barton*, it is conceivable that just such a revival as Newman proposed is possible in any age. While Gaskell considered herself a liberal Christian, her work still resonates with an urgency for change and repentance, thus illuminating through her characters her eschatological concerns for her society.

Long before her positive influence manifests itself, Mary Barton herself is led astray by worldly desires, “the pomps and vanities awaiting her . . . The pride of having attracted someone so far above her in station.”<sup>5</sup> Unwilling to see beyond Harry Carson’s suave veneer, Mary shuns Jem, her true love, “her preserving angel”, while her superficial love for Carson is never more than “a bubble, blown out of vanity.”<sup>6</sup> When Mary does at last realize her misplaced affections for the tempter, she is brought face-to-face with the evil, far-reaching effects her indiscretions will have on even the most pure.

Clearly, Mary must change because, as C. S. Lewis reminds us, “when the relevant difference between Divine ethics and your own appears to you, you will not, in fact, be in any doubt that the change demanded of you is in the direction you already call ‘better.’”<sup>7</sup> Of course, Mary has no idea what will be required of her. While she sees clearly that “no luring temptation should ever again induce her to hearken” to vain glory,<sup>8</sup> she cannot yet comprehend the trials required of her to expiate her sins and save her loved ones. Early on her penitential path, she “resolv[es] to do nothing, but try

and be patient, and improve circumstances as they might turn up.”<sup>9</sup>

Once Jem is accused of the apparently jealous murder of Harry Carson, Mary knows she must absolve him because it seems that her indiscretions led him to the crime, for “was it not she who had led him to the pit into which he had fallen?”<sup>10</sup> She does not yet see that he is “as innocent as the babe unborn” and, therefore, makes it her duty to restore his name and save his life.<sup>11</sup> It is only with the help of her aunt Esther that Mary finally learns, in addition to saving Jem, she must protect her father, John Barton, because he is the true murderer. Driven by his passion for justice for his fellow oppressed weavers, Barton murders Harry Carson, the youthful symbol of industrial greed. Earlier, kindling Barton’s animosity, the Carsons, both father and son, deify themselves, believing that in all their self-centered actions “it was the employers’ will, and that should be enough for the employed.”<sup>12</sup> Thus forgetting his own humble beginnings, the elder Carson promotes his son’s arrogant bravado, continually ignoring the starvation and misery of his employees. Harry’s murder thus positions Mary to absolve innocent Jem, bring forgiveness to her sorrowful father, and convert the ambitious, cold-hearted Mr. Carson.

To succeed in her mission, Mary can no longer “do nothing . . . and be patient”; instead, she finds strength and comfort as she learns that “something to be done implies that there is yet hope of some good thing to be accomplished, or some additional evil that may be avoided; and by

degrees the hope absorbs much of the sorrow.”<sup>13</sup> With this resolve, she regains the respect of devout friends. The pure Margaret who temporarily shuns Mary as “a girl devoid of the modest proprieties of her sex” now sees her “with more . . . dignity, self-reliance, and purpose.”<sup>14</sup> Even Job, who is initially skeptical when Mary insists she can prove Jem’s innocence, begins to believe in her when he witnesses “the firmness of her determination.”<sup>15</sup> Mary’s influential strength, then, lies not in any religious sermonizing, but in her willful actions because, as Lewis contends, her “Divine ethics” call her to change.

Without doubt, Mary’s divinely inspired actions lead to triumph. In her fervent, agonizing search for Will, the only one who can prove Jem’s alibi, Mary clings to all hope, “although so slight and faint” and, therefore, prevails over the false accusations that nearly kill her beloved Jem.<sup>16</sup> Of course, Mr. Carson, “so stern and inflexible”, is outraged as he fails to avenge his son’s murder in court.<sup>17</sup> Would he ever believe that Mary, “the fatal Helen” in his eyes, will eventually save him from his vices with her unquestionable virtues?<sup>18</sup>

Throughout her diligent work to exonerate Jem, Mary never reveals her father’s guilt. After her own debilitating illness, she returns home, not to surround herself with the joy of Jem’s love, but to protect her father’s name and serve him “patiently . . . pitifully, as one who kn[ows] of some awful curse awaiting the blood-shedder.”<sup>19</sup> When Barton regains enough strength to confess his crime, he is indeed cursed, as Carson “will not spare the least pang the law can inflict.”<sup>20</sup> But, as Mary pleads for her father’s life, she also allows Mr. Carson the opportunity to be merciful and perhaps repent for the evils he permitted to rule his actions and those of his murdered son. At this point, John Barton and Mr. Carson at last comprehend the common ground on which they stand.

The mourner before him is no longer the employer; a being of another race, eternally placed in antagonistic atti-

tude; going through the world glittering like gold, with a strong heart within, which kn[ows] no sorrow but through accidents of Trade; no longer the enemy, the oppressor, but a very poor and desolate old man.<sup>21</sup>

For Mr. Carson, with ample time to contemplate his own desire for vengeance, “something of a pity would steal in for the poor, wasted skeleton of a man, who . . . implored his pardon that night.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, as he holds the repentant, dying John Barton, Mr. Carson, rather than seeking revenge or future riches, “[s]ees] these false substances fade away into the shadows they truly are.”<sup>23</sup> With his vices thus fading, Mr. Carson may heal and open himself to truth and virtue.

Humble and reverent, Mary Barton, a figure of the reformed sinner, Mary Magdalene, witnesses to her faith and expiates her own sins, unknowingly providing possible salvation to others. Alongside Mary, Mr. Carson prays at John Barton’s deathbed, “God be merciful to us sinners”,<sup>24</sup> no longer condemning John for his crime and now including himself among the guilty for his own deadly greed. Mary’s own conversion, then, from ambition and vanity to faith and love motivates those involved in the struggle between egoistical enterprise and humane justice “to acknowledge the Spirit of Christ as regulating the law between both parties.”<sup>25</sup> As such, Gaskell’s heroine speaks to readers of any time because, according to C. S. Lewis, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, through Mary Barton’s self-examination and painful reformation, she awakens her immediate world as she may ever instruct readers how to awaken theirs.

However Victorian may be this novel’s surface concerns of the inequalities born of industrialization, the constant reflection of the literary world upon the actual world of any generation offers to readers a Christological model. As such, from witnessing the effects of the heroine’s moral

development and the hero’s Aristotelian recognition and reversal, these readers may glean the knowledge of “for what end we have been born”<sup>27</sup> and choose a path of faith for themselves.

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## References

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3. Alexander Welsh, *The City of Dickens* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986), p. 57.
4. Walter Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale UP), p. 241.
5. All quotations from *Mary Barton* are taken from the Oxford edition, 1998. p. 133.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 195; 134.
7. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), p. 30.
8. Gaskell, p. 153.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 271.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 268.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 202.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 153; 288.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 294; 306.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 305.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 349.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 376.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 380.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 415.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 428.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 431.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 436.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 448.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 438.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 458.
26. C. S. Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 91.
27. Longinus, *On the Sublime*, Trans. Benedict Einarson (Chicago: Packard, 1945), p. 65.