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# ‘There is great need for forgiveness in this world’: The Call for Reconciliation in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Sylvia’s Lovers* and *A Dark Night’s Work*

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‘You must forgive him—there is great need for forgiveness in this world.’

(Elizabeth Gaskell, *A Dark Night’s Work*, 175)

The last five years of Elizabeth Gaskell’s life (1860-65) were characterised by activity. She travelled in Germany, Switzerland, France, and Italy and was involved in relief work for the Lancashire Cotton Famine. She also wrote two full-length novels, a number of short stories, and several non-fiction pieces. Josie Billington comments on ‘the sheer pressure of time’ Gaskell was under when she was writing *Wives and Daughters* (1864-6): ‘the result at once of an inordinately busy life and of the need to meet serial deadlines’ (225). This essay argues that in her novel *Sylvia’s Lovers* (1863) and her novella *A Dark Night’s Work* (1863) Gaskell responds to the ‘pressure of time’ with an emphasis on the urgent need for reconciliation. It also suggests that she negotiates the causal relationships between past and present by highlighting how the rifts of trauma might be transformed by a renewed understanding of oneself and one’s community.

In *Sylvia’s Lovers*, it is not until Sylvia Robson comes face to face with her estranged husband Philip Hepburn on his deathbed that she recognises the limits of her perception. While Sylvia puts aside her earlier desire for vengeance, Philip replaces his idolisation of her with a knowledge of heavenly comfort. Sylvia’s broken words, ‘“Oh wicked me! Forgive me- me – Philip!”’ (500), articulate the shift that both experience: from prioritising their own emotions to surrendering themselves and recognizing their need for mercy. The final pages of *Sylvia’s Lovers* reveal that Sylvia’s story enters tradition in a distorted way as she becomes known as the wife who ‘lived in hard-hearted plenty’ while her husband died of starvation ‘not two good stone-throws away’ (502). These concluding remarks are indicative of what Deirdre D’Albertis describes as Gaskell’s increasing anxiety about the ability of ‘novelistic solutions’ to ‘represent (and if possible, heal), social discord’ (81). More than this, they reveal Gaskell’s growing scepticism about the idea of progress. Developing Marion Shaw’s claim that ‘the great lesson of *Sylvia’s Lovers* is the painful truth of history that there is not necessarily a purposeful, progressive narrative of human life’ (88), the following discussion reads Gaskell’s late fiction in the context of the mid-nineteenth century shift from a preoccupation with Atonement narratives of original sin and divine punishment to a focus on an Incarnation-inflected teleology where the concern was with Jesus as a *man*. Boyd Hilton details how this shift involved a move from retributive attitudes towards a celebration of gentleness and compassion. He comments that, by 1870, ‘it was commonplace for Anglicans to assert that a theological transformation had recently taken place, whereby a worldly Christian compassion, inspired by the life of Jesus, had alleviated such stark evangelical doctrines as those of eternal and vicarious punishment’ (5). When Gaskell’s late fiction is considered in terms of the shift Hilton details- a shift that was gaining momentum through the 1860s- its engagement with the intellectual context of Incarnational thought comes to the fore.

In October 1859 Gaskell’s ‘Lois the Witch’ appeared in three instalments in Charles Dickens’s *All the Year Round.* The storyresponds to the journal’s preoccupations with historical re-imaginings with a scepticism about the reconciliation of past and present and about the place and significance of acts of Atonement. Serialised alongside Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) – which presents the execution of Sydney Carton as an act of heroic self-sacrifice – ‘Lois the Witch’ has Ralph Lucy remark that, despite his joining in with the prayers of the repentant judge who condemned his beloved Lois to death, nothing can ever bring ‘“[her] to life again, or give me back the hope of my youth”’ (225). Ralph’s regret over the needless death of Lois points to a critique of the Atonement doctrines and a celebration of incarnational compassion and co-operation that finds later expression in *Sylvia’s Lovers* and *A Dark Night’s Work*.

In a letter to her daughter Marianne Gaskell in 1854, the Unitarian Gaskell balances an expression of the comfort she finds in the communal prayers of the Anglican Church service with her conviction that ‘Jesus Christ was not equal to His father.’ It is important, she tells Marianne, to ‘define … to ourselves’ the difference between Anglican and Unitarian doctrine on this matter in order that ‘the nature of God, and tender Saviour’ be understood and love be directed appropriately (May-June 1854: *Letters* no. 198a). As Timothy Larsen explains, Unitarians believed that

Christ came to declare something that was equally true before his death: namely, that God is merciful. In this scheme, one simply repented and determined to live a future life in which one did not engage in sinful practices and then a merciful God allowed one to go forward in the expectation that this resolve would prove good. (149)

Both Gaskell’s letters and her husband William Gaskell’s sermons demonstrate a commitment to the role of human partnership with God in relieving the suffering of a broken world. In a lecture published in 1860 William Gaskell reasons that if Christ is to be regarded as ‘one who could be “touched with the feeling of all our infirmities”’ and as ‘our brother… there is a strong encouragement for us, and a power to quicken us in the pursuit of holiness, which we feel we should lose were we to adopt the ordinary [Trinitarian] belief’ (23). The example of Christ is, he argues, ‘his doctrine embodied and living before us, animating, strengthening, consoling and exalting one made in all things like unto ourselves’ (24). Gaskell’s late fiction extends these ideas by enacting an Incarnation-inflected dynamic whereby the work of grace is enabled when characters forego self-interest.

Although as a Unitarian Gaskell never subscribed to the doctrine of the Atonement, her fiction of the early 1860s corresponds with contemporaneous ‘vogue’ for historical reconstructions of the life of Jesus that prioritised a developmental, rather than revelatory, vision of God’s interactions in the world (Hilton 299). While her earliest work considers the implications both of what it means for one man to die vicariously in the place of another and of revelatory transformation, the focus of her later fiction is on the continuous interpersonal relationships that have the potential to bring reconciliation. For example, while both the eponymous protagonist of ‘The Heart of John Middleton’ (1850) and Mr Bradshaw in *Ruth* (1853) experience sudden revelations that move them from a Calvin-inflected focus on the Atonement to a more nuanced understanding of what it means to experience and express grace, the characters in Gaskell’s later writings enact a more gradual and Incarnation-inflected development towards Christ-like compassion.

In her discussion of Gaskell’s engagement with modernity, Linda K. Hughes describes how *Cousin Phillis* (1864) and *Wives and Daughters* (1865-6) express a ‘diminished reliance on structural dyads (worker and owner, north and south)’ and reveal Gaskell’s ‘increasingly sophisticated ability to create a world embedded in an intricate matrix of ongoing social and historical change’ (‘*Cousin Phillis*’ 106-7). Although Hughes offers a convincing argument for locating ‘the turning point for this new development … in the composition of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857),’ which demanded the subject be placed ‘in a fully imagined world within which multiple interactive influences … shaped Brontë’s complex life and works’ (107), the wider context of the move from the ‘Age of Atonement’ to an age of Incarnation provides the backdrop through which this shift in emphasis can be more fully appreciated.

## The Fragility of Human Connection in *Sylvia’s Lovers*

Andrew Sanders comments that Gaskell’s idea for *Sylvia’s Lovers* had, almost certainly, ‘grown both out of [her] long-fostered fascination with the sea and out of [her] new and extended acquaintance with Yorkshire as a result of the researches involved in the composition of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* between 1855 and 1857’ (vii). In acknowledging the tensions between the time of ‘our forefathers,’ who lived in the whaling-port of Monkshaven in Yorkshire during the French Revolutionary Wars, and the ‘present time’ (68), when Monkshaven had become a ‘rising bathing place’ (502), Gaskell’s penultimate novel attends to how the passage of years brings changes for good and bad. The uneven gestation of *Sylvia’s Lovers,* and its expression of how the legalized ‘tyranny’ of impressment had far-reaching effects, transforming behavior and expectations in family and romantic relationships, contribute to the text’s changes in tone and pace (6). Biographer Jenny Uglow describes

the vital, energetic realism of the first volume, written rapidly in the spring of 1860; the intensity of the second, full of death and loss, composed slowly during 1861; the spiritual allegory of the third, a desperate search for belief in a better world, written amid the shadows of the cotton famine. (504)

Amid the busyness of her life at this time, Gaskell remained a voracious reader as is seen in the allusions to contemporary fiction, poetry, and theology that permeate *Sylvia’s Lovers*. She had, for example, begun writing *Sylvia’s Lovers* after writing to George Eliot to express her admiration for *Adam Bede* (1859) on 3 June (*Letters* no. 431) and 10 November 1859 (*Letters* no. 449). Responding to the second letter, Eliot explains to Gaskell how she read the early chapters of *Mary Barton* while writing *Adam Bede* and acknowledges that she shared Gaskell’s ‘feeling of Life and Art’ (11 November 1859, *George Eliot Letters* 3, 198-9). In *Adam Bede* and *Sylvia’s Lovers*, a shared approach to writing historical fiction is evidenced through the similarities in the narrative voice; both novels consists of the reflections of an older narrator who, after the pattern of Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814), reflects on events ‘Sixty Years Since’ (Shaw 77). In common with *Adam Bede*, too, *Sylvia’s Lovers* emphasizes the significance of confession, especially the disclosure of wrongdoing to another, over and above the giving and receiving of forgiveness.

In *Forgiveness and the Victorian Novel* (2015), Richard Hughes Gibson suggests ways in which the practices of forgiveness Eliot represents contribute to debates surrounding ‘psychological and communal healing’ (103). To illustrate this, he considers her rationale for replacing, in the prison cell exchange between Hetty Sorrel and Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede*, the more traditional conversion scene used by earlier novelists with a confession scene and argues that Eliot uses it to make a case for public confession in the sense of confession that is performed and not something that takes place inside the mind. To underline the significance of performed confession, he suggests that it reinforces the truth of Mr Irwine’s earlier insistence to Adam Bede that human lives are ‘as thoroughly blended with each other as the air they breathe: evil spreads as necessarily as disease’ (qtd. in Gibson 108). Ultimately, evil is stemmed as, through speaking out, the confessor is brought to a humility that dismantles any façade, and a recognition of the ‘blendedness’ between confessor and hearer restores the inter-personal community of the novel’s fictional world. The trial and confession scenes that Gaskell includes in both *Sylvia’s Lovers* and *A Dark Night’s Work* carry something of the germ of *Adam Bede* in that they enable the exposure of weakness and underline the interdependence that exists between the characters.

When Sylvia’s father Daniel Robson is imprisoned in Monkshaven for his role as ring-leader in the rescue of men who had been taken by the press-gang, Philip welcomes the chance to bring his cousin Sylvia – whom he hopes to persuade into matrimony – and her mother to his home. From there, he tells them, they might have the opportunity to see Daniel before he is sent to York Minster for the assizes. On the night of their arrival, Philip lets slip the possibility that Daniel might hang. Following his clumsy declaration, ‘“There’s not a thing I’ll not do; there’s not a penny I’ve got, - I’ll give up my life for his,”’ Sylvia is convinced of the probable fate of her father (301). She does not attend to Philip’s offer to ‘give up [his] life for [Daniel’s]’ because an atoning substitution is never really an option in this case. Nonetheless, Philip’s desire to become a hero and to give up his life for another, thereby proving his worth, haunts the remainder of the novel. Under the burden of his treacherous secret – that he watched as Sylvia’s lover Charley Kinraid was taken by the press-gang – Philip’s expressed wish to *be* an atoning sacrifice is indicative of the ‘religious feelings’ with which he attempts to ‘disguise’ his dangerous passion for Sylvia from himself (358). While his ensuing recklessness and willingness to die makes him a fearless soldier, his misplaced search for heroism associates him with legality rather than compassion and the ‘Age of Atonement’ rather than the age of Incarnation. While, at the Siege of Acre, Philip acts heroically when he risks his own life to save his rival, his words – ‘“I niver thought you’d ha’ kept true to her”’ – are indicative of his continuing self-interest (431).

On his return to Monkshaven as a burnt and disfigured pauper, Philip acts heroically when he saves his daughter from drowning in the sea. Significantly though, it is not this act that calls for the reader’s judgment to be mitigated. Instead, it is his subsequent humility; a humility that enables him to see Sylvia as she is for the first time. On his death-bed, Philip asks Sylvia for forgiveness: ‘“Little lassie, forgive me now! I cannot live to see the morn!”’ (495). His sense of urgency, brought on by his awareness of approaching death, reinforces a sense of the pressure of time. As Gaskell’s coda explains, the results of the act of repentance and forgiveness do not carry consequences for individual or societal progression: both Philip and Sylvia die young and their story is misremembered. Instead, it is implied that the consequences reach beyond the world and towards the eternal. Philip’s final words, ‘In heaven’ and his subsequent ‘bright smile’ indicate a perspective that transcends the earthly (500).

Philip had foreseen his death-bed reconciliation when, recuperating from battle, he had read himself into the story of Sir Guy, Earl of Warwick who, after seven years of fighting returned home as a ‘poor travel-worn hermit’ and was reconciled with his wife Phillis on his death-bed (465). Philip’s recognition that ‘Guy and Phillis might have been as real flesh and blood, long, long ago, as he and Sylvia had even been’ (466) testifies to Gaskell’s increasing insistence that the trajectory of an individual is shaped by ongoing immersion in the narratives of others’ lives. It also testifies to her prioritisation of ideas of adaptation and conservation over the Atonement-inflected ideas of sudden conversion.

Forgetting the selfish reasons he had for keeping Kinraid’s secret and for ‘having acted as he had done’ (465), Philip’s dying confession offers a challenge to the reader: to repent of the facades and lies that stand in the way of true communion with God and with one another. The narrative of his transformation follows a similar trajectory to that of Philip Edmonstone in Charlotte Yonge’s *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853). In a letter to French publisher Louis Hachette recommending several novels for translation, Gaskell criticises *The Heir* *of Redclyffe* for its lack of ‘event or story’ but appreciates its representation of the ‘progress of character’ (?22 March 1855: *Further Letters* 131). Her use of the names Philip and Guy indicate that she had *The Heir* *of Redclyffe* in mind when writing *Sylvia’s Lovers*. Discussing *The Heir* *of Redclyffe* as a ‘parable of actual life,’ which uses ‘realism to bring Christian “higher truth” home … to the massive novel-reading public of the mid-nineteenth century,’ Susan Colòn details Yonge’s representation of character progression (42). She describes how Yonge ‘reconfigures the types from the parable of the Pharisee and the publican from Luke 18 in order that a parabolic ‘message of moral confrontation’ might be delivered to readers (42). While *The Heir* *of Redclyffe* initially introduces Philip as the Pharisee and Guy Morville as the publican, it later re-introduces Philip as an ‘analogue’ to the apostle Paul (57). Despite the ‘radical redirection’ of Philip’s life, Colòn comments that ‘many if not most readers have resisted the shift of sympathy’ that the novel asks for in regard to him (58). One reason for this, she suggests, is that the novel uncomfortably ‘exposes the reader’s own likeness to Philip’ (59). Similarly, Gaskell’s representation of Philip Hepburn’s painful self-recognition indicates her shared commitment to challenging readers and to enacting the message that ‘the path to being a saint lies through the painful recognition of oneself in the Pharisee’ (Colòn 61). However, while *The Heir* *of Redclyffe* exemplifies the virtue of continual repentance through the characterization of Guy, *Sylvia’s Lovers* is very much of its time in that it draws on the wider intellectual context of Incarnation-inflected social thought in order to represent the ‘great need’ for reconciliation to mend broken connections and to enable a radical re-conception of oneself.

Sylvia’s illiteracy means that, unlike Philip, she comes to the scene of confession unprepared. As Hilary Schor comments, Sylvia cannot have her resolution within history ‘without a different alphabet, a different language’ (170). Without a literary precedent, her knowledge of herself is very much one that is rooted in her body and emotions. In response to Philip’s request that she forgive Simpson (the dying man who had given the evidence that led to Daniel’s execution), she utters the words that come to haunt him: ‘“it’s not in me to forgive … it’s not in me to forget”’ (332). Upon being pressed, her resolve hardens with the declaration, ‘“my flesh and blood wasn’t made for forgiving”’ (333). Although ‘her heart gr[ows] sad and soft,’ in comparison with what it had been when Philip’s Pharisaic demand that she forgive had ‘called out all her angry opposition,’ the timing of Simpson’s death means that her capacity to relent remains hidden from Philip (334). It is only in Philip’s death-bed scene, where Sylvia has the opportunity to perform her confession, that reconciliation is enabled. ‘“Will [God] iver forgive me, think you?”’ she asks Philip. The realization that she almost had him turned out to starve drives her to imagine herself ‘“among them as gnash their teeth for iver, while yo’ are where all tears are wiped away”’ (496). Following his own painful self-recognition, Philip is able to reassure Sylvia that God ‘“is more forgiving than either you to me, or me to you”’ (496). Sylvia’s reconciliation with Philip indicates her newfound humility: ‘it was Sylvia who held his hand tight in her warm, living grasp; it was his wife whose arm was thrown around him, whose sobbing sighs shook his numbed frame from time to time’ (499). This reconciliation testifies to the spiritual significance of human connections expressed through flesh and blood. Although the human connections might be forgotten or misunderstood through gossip, the novel’s coda suggests that, with the emigration of Sylvia’s daughter to America, their blueprint carries far-reaching effects. These effects are, however, wider than realist fiction can express and the silences that characterize the ending, point to the belief that practices of forgiveness and self-abasement find their appropriate conclusion in heaven.

## The Bonds of Confession in *A Dark Night’s Work*

Gaskell’s challenge to her readers in *Sylvia’s Lovers* to reconceive of themselves and their relationships, demonstrates the confidence of an author who is aware of the influence and reach of her fiction. In her discussion of ‘Gaskell the Worker,’ Linda K. Hughes explains that, between 1859 and her death in 1865, Gaskell was ‘not only at the height of her powers but was also being brought before more readers than ever before as a result of contributing to the *Cornhill Magazine* and *All the Year Round*’ (‘Gaskell the Worker’ 29-30). To emphasise the wide reach of Gaskell’s work, Hughes comments that whereas *Household Words* had averaged sales of only 36,000-40,000 issues per week, ‘*All the Year Round* initially sold around 100,000 copies per issue- and as many as 300,000 issues of its Extra Christmas Numbers’ (ibid). In *A Dark Night’s Work*, which appeared in nine instalments in *All the Year Round* between January and March 1863 and was issued as a one-volume novella in April that year, Gaskell responds to her ever-widening readership by demonstrating an awareness of the changing tastes of the literary marketplace. According to *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1863, ‘“a book without a murder, a divorce, a seduction or a bigamy, is not apparently considered worth either writing or reading; and a mystery and a secret are the chief qualifications of the modern novel”’ (qtd. in W. Hughes 4-5). As what follows will demonstrate, *A Dark Night’s Work* not only responds to this definition of the 1860s bestseller but also critiques the new vogue for sensational material. This discussion adds to Graham Handley’s recognition that the story subverts the sensation genre by offering not a ‘whodunnit’ plot ‘but the continuum of differently shared knowledge after the doing’ (66). Through its emphasis on shared knowledge, co-operation and community, the narrative subverts contemporary expectations through its exploration of the continuities, discontinuities, and ruptures that are involved in the lived experience of personal, technological, and teleological time.

*A Dark Night’s Work* is set in a provincial town ‘about forty years ago’ (1). On the ‘night’ to which the title alludes, Ellinor Wilkins, along with faithful servant Dixon, helps bury the body of Dunster, her father’s business partner, whom he had murdered in a moment of rage. Recoiling from the horror of the night’s work, Ellinor succumbs to a brain fever: a predictable malady for the sensation heroine. As she begins to regain her strength, she muses on how things might have been different had she, her father, and Dixon been open with one another in acknowledging the horror of the murder and burial:

She began to see that if in the mad impulses of that mad nightmare of horror, they had all strengthened each other, and dared to be frank and open, confessing a great fault, a greater disaster, a greater woe- which in the first instance was hardly a crime- their future course, though sad and sorrowful, would have been a simple and straightforward one to tread. But it was not for her to undo what was done, and to reveal the error and shame of a father. (119)

As it is, the secret shame of complicity in the murder weighs heavily on Ellinor. It not only leads to the end of her engagement with Ralph Corbet, but, with its ‘sudden shock,’ the horror of the ‘dark night’s work’ causes her to age prematurely and to experience time as a burden rather than as a gift (206).

As a reminder of the child she once was, Ellinor carries with her a locked writing case that holds the ‘treasures of the dead’: ‘the morsel of dainty sewing’ that her mother had left unfinished, ‘a little sister’s golden curl’ (280). When her father dies, she adds to these treasures the half-finished letter he wrote on his death-bed requesting that Ralph stand by his daughter as a friend if the deeds of the dark night become known. Emerging at each turning point of the plot, the writing case stands as a reminder of the inheritance that is emotional. From the start of the story, an emphasis on inheritance is maintained. Although it failed to earn him the respect he desired, Edward Wilkins’s concern in establishing his claim to the ‘De Winton Wilkinses’ arms’ is described as fitting for a time when ‘everyone was up in genealogy and heraldry’ (30). In what follows, any claim to aristocratic ancestors is rendered worthless in the face of tragedy and it is the fragile and incomplete remembrances that Ellinor carries in her writing case that hold significant meaning.

The engagement between Ellinor and Ralph comes to an abrupt end after Edward Wilkins responds to Ralph’s questions about the marriage deeds with an alcohol-fuelled outburst of anger and accusation. Following his expulsion from the house, Ralph writes to Ellinor to release her from the engagement, giving the mysterious ‘secret affairs’ as the reason (174). With ambitions for a ‘high reputation’ in law, he acknowledges his dread of an obstacle that could bring disgrace and end his career (173). Ellinor responds to his letter by taking on the role of proxy and mediator:

‘I suppose I must never write to you again: but I shall always pray for you.  Papa was very sorry last night for having spoken angrily to you.  You must forgive him—there is great need for forgiveness in this world.’ (175)

As a participant in the ‘dark night’s work,’ Ellinor sees it as her filial duty to intercede for her father, recognising the ‘great need’ that the world has for relationships to be mended. Her promise to pray for Ralph is indicative of her reliance on God’s grace as the enabler of reconciliation. After the murder, it is only through prayer that she is able to draw strength. ‘“There is none other help but Thee!”’ she prays in her illness (115). When, after her father’s death, she moves to East Chester, she finds that the ‘sense of worship’ at the daily cathedral services ‘calmed and soothed her aching weary heart’ (195).

That Ellinor and Dixon can only find true and lasting peace once the awful secret is brought to light stands as the ethical turning-point of the novella. When Ellinor visits Dixon in prison, he recounts how he had, like her, sought to find relief in prayer as ‘“God knew what was in my heart better than I could tell Him”’ (277). He confesses, however, that it would only be after breaking the long-held silence on the subject that he might rest. Thus, his prayers of repentance were quickly followed by prayers that Ellinor might come to him in prison (277). In her request that Dixon forgive her, Ellinor expresses her belief that performed confession brings comfort and relief:

‘Forgive me all the shame and misery, Dixon.…’

‘It’s not for me to forgive you, as never did harm to no one—’

‘But say you do—it will ease my heart.’

‘I forgive thee!’ said he. And then he raised himself to his feet with effort, and, standing up above her, he blessed her solemnly. (296-7)

In common with Eliot, who had demonstrated in *Adam Bede* the healing power of public confession, Gaskell focuses on the dynamics of the relationships that restore life in moments of crisis. The fact that the secret of Dunster’s murder is uncovered through the process of railway expansion anticipates the way in which Gaskell’s *Cousin Phillis* (1864) and Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871-2) describe how railway expansion transforms the spatial and temporal landscape and calls for what Hughes describes as ‘a new way of seeing that ignores traditions and local, even national boundaries’ (Hughes, ‘*Cousin Phillis’* 96**)**. Indeed, it is precisely in ‘*this* world’ of technological progress and renewed vision that Gaskell uncovers the ‘great need for forgiveness’; a power that can re-build broken connections between past and present. The end of the novella sees Dixon integrated or, to use Eliot’s term, ‘blended’ into the family that Ellinor and Canon Livingstone start. His closeness to their ‘two little fairy children’ illuminates the generational and class bonds that confession brings (*A Dark Night’s* *Work* 298).

While Gaskell concludes *A Dark Night’s Work* as she had *Sylvia’s Lovers* by pulling the reader back into conversations of the present day, she does the opposite in many of her contemporaneousnon-fiction pieces. In these, she begins with an anecdote of the present day before launching into a historical account of the manners or customs of a particular region or group. Published in three instalments in *Fraser’s Magazine* in April, May, and June 1864, ‘French Life’ typifies this approach in its movement from descriptions of contemporary life in various French regions to an account of the murder of a seventeenth-century lady, Mme de Gange. Gaskell recounts that Mme de Gange, after a life full of tragedy, was brutally murdered by the brothers of her second husband. While she displays quick-witted responses to their attempts at murder by poison and sword that are worthy of any Gothic heroine, it is not her ingenuity that makes her story extraordinary. Instead, it is her willingness to forgive. As she lies dying, she forgives her husband and his brothers for their atrocities and, ‘fearing that her little son might at some future time think it his duty to avenge her death … tried to make him understand the Christian duty of forgiveness’ (‘French Life’ 749). As the above discussion of *Sylvia’s Lovers* and *A Dark Night’s Work* has suggested, such models of forgiveness and reconciliation, which Gaskell offers in her writing of the 1860s, challenge the perceptions of heroism and extraordinary individualism that characterise the ‘Age of Atonement.’ It is the struggle to be a compassionate parent, spouse, child, and neighbour rather than a hero that characterises her protagonists. Resonating with the dying plea of Mme de Gange, the struggles of Sylvia and Philip in *Sylvia’s Lovers* and of Ellinor in *A Dark Night’s Work* reinforce the ‘great need for forgiveness in this world’ and point to the repercussions of public confession in the next (*A Dark Night’s* *Work* 175).

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