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**“Common Rules of Street Politeness”? The Clash of Gender and Social Class in Representations of Street Harassment by Elizabeth Gaskell and Eliza Lynn Linton**

By [Flore Janssen](#), Birkbeck, University of London

<1>In her preface to *Mary Barton* (1848), Elizabeth Gaskell described the novel as exploring “the romance in the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets of the town in which I resided” (xxxv). The preface thus immediately evokes the image of a crowded urban environment in which women and men belonging to different social classes are forced into close proximity with one another: “elbowing” suggests contact that is accidental and inevitable in the “busy streets,” but which is, nevertheless, also transgressive. The streets in Gaskell’s example reflect the changing make-up of industrialized Victorian Britain, as the use of the same public spaces at the same time forced different social groups into unavoidable interaction that infringed social boundaries linked to gender and class in different ways. This sharing of public space and the erosion of pre-existing gender and class relations that it occasioned are a central theme in *Mary Barton*, a story about working-class life in Manchester in the 1840s, as well as in *North and South*, the novel about the clash between cultures in a fictionalized Manchester that Gaskell serialized in *Household Words* in 1854–5.

<2>As the social changes in industrialized urban Britain were widely recognized, popular writing became a key site for attempts to work through these changes and the social anxieties they created. This is prominently reflected in the rise of the social problem novel, which Gaskell embraced to critical and popular acclaim. More immediate, parallel versions of these social debates were also carried out in the pages of the burgeoning periodical press, where opinions were expressed in a variety of forms including short fiction, reader correspondence, and opinion pieces such as those by Eliza Lynn Linton. Gaskell’s own interaction as a middle-class woman with working-class inhabitants of Manchester motivated her to write *Mary Barton*, and later *North and South*, aiming to inspire in her readers the heightened interclass understanding

which, she felt, increased interaction between social classes should bring. Another perspective in the debate over the renegotiation of public space, however, was that increased contact between genders and classes transformed the streets into a place of danger, specifically for women whose presence in the streets as they engaged in paid work, social ventures or shopping trips was widely debated in the mid-nineteenth century.

<3>This article will examine a number of these commentaries, including Gaskell's novels, Lynn Linton's opinion pieces, and contemporary letters to periodicals, with reference to the mid-century debate around street harassment, a specific social problem that was acutely representative of the conflict over the renegotiation of public space between people of different genders and social classes. From work by historians such as Lynda Nead, Judith Walkowitz and Lucy Bland it becomes clear that, by the mid-nineteenth century, street harassment was an acknowledged problem that was openly discussed in the British press; as this article will show, it was also a recurring theme in work by both Gaskell and Lynn Linton. Mid-Victorian issues of gender and class linked to changes in men and women's social roles and the structures of families, homes and workplaces are crystallized in these discussions of street harassment, which often regarded it as a problem proceeding from the mixing of different social groups in the public sphere.

<4>Gaskell and Lynn Linton both had successful, independent careers as popular writers. Much of the work of both initially appeared in widely read periodicals, a mode of publication that relied on the authors' ability to produce regular contributions designed to be to the taste of the periodical's editor and readers. Their writing may therefore be seen as developing in dialogue with its own readership, reception and popularity. Their work required them to participate in the public sphere, not only because they were working women and public figures, but because their role as social commentators—Gaskell through her social problem fiction, Lynn Linton as a journalist—relied on their ability to describe and analyze contemporary urban life in ways that their readers would recognize.

<5>The two authors were associated with very different kinds of urban environments: Gaskell introduced her readers to Manchester in the 1840s and 50s, while many of Lynn Linton's popular periodical articles in the 1860s emphasized her knowledge of London. Although the routines and class relations of these two cities differed, with Manchester developing around the textile industry, while London's economy was based on service rather than manufacturing, both writers include instances of harassment as a feature of street life in their respective cities, and both appear to consider it not only common, but to a great extent inevitable. Their interpretations of harassment and its causes have significantly less in common, however. This article considers how Gaskell and Lynn Linton, two popular writers whose work functioned as social commentary, used examples of street harassment to participate in wider debates about

the changing perceptions of gender and class roles in mid-Victorian Britain, and to further their own social agendas within these debates. As will become evident, both viewed harassment as symptomatic of broader social developments, whether for better or worse—an approach which, in both cases although in different ways, diverts attention away from the violation of the bodily integrity of the victim of harassment. As they attempted to construct a social explanation for the harassment they observed, both authors, though with different motivations, generally ascribed responsibility for the harassment to the victim rather than to the perpetrator. By situating these two authors' treatment of street harassment within the popular contemporary debates surrounding gender anxieties in a changing society, I demonstrate how the representation of street harassment in mid-Victorian social commentary tended to be more concerned with the behavior of the woman experiencing harassment than with that of the harasser. My analysis will contrast fictional representations with contemporary commentaries as well as historical analyses of harassment of women in the Victorian public sphere in order to explore how writers used an acknowledged threat to women to support their own broader arguments regarding the renegotiation of the public sphere and the fiction of "common rules of street politeness."

### **Debating Street Harassment in the Periodical Press**

<6>In *Victorian Babylon* (2000), Nead draws attention to a public debate on street harassment that flared up in *The Times* on 7 January 1862. A letter to the editor, entitled "Cowardly Insults To Ladies" and signed "Paterfamilias from the Provinces," complained that the writer's daughter and another female relative had been followed and spoken to by a young man while shopping on Oxford Street (7). The letter prompted a number of responses as correspondents gave their own opinions and experiences of the safety, or otherwise, of London streets for unaccompanied women, and the discussion soon spread to other periodicals as well. Lynn Linton's intervention in the debate was an article entitled "Out Walking," published in *Temple Bar* in April 1862. From the first she makes her role as a social commentator, well aware of both public concern and contemporary reality, very clear. She writes:

Every now and then the daily press enlivens the dull seasons by opening up some new question of social politics ... quite lately it was on the difficulties of London walking, and the absolute certainty of all good-looking girls being spoken to and insulted unless under the protection of masculine muscles. One always gets some good out of these discussions, and of course there is always a substratum of truth underlying their more apparent absurdities; but "writers to the *Times*" have the knack of exaggerating, and generally leave out all the other side ... ("Out Walking" 132)

Lynn Linton was herself a successful journalist and social commentator, and a financially independent working woman—she had famously become "the first woman journalist in

England to draw a fixed salary” when she joined the staff of the *Morning Chronicle* in 1848 (Anderson). Ruth Hoberman states, however, that “Linton was no friend to the new ‘wild women’ she saw emerging, but she was willing to accept the woman who does her work without attracting notice” (495). This idea of women’s correct behavior in the public sphere emerges clearly in Lynn Linton’s analysis of the examples of street harassment, and of the explanations for them, which had been put forward in the course of the debate in *The Times*, and later in the *Saturday Review*. According to Lynn Linton, women who did not draw attention to themselves in public were generally safe from harassment: she stated that, “[i]f [a woman] knows how to walk the streets, self-possessed and quietly ... —she is for the most part as safe as ... in her own garden” (“Out Walking” 132–3). Her explanation for the occurrence of street harassment was that certain London girls provoked unwanted attention from strangers through remediable faults in dress, appearance or attitude. Thus, in Lynn Linton’s view, the question of street harassment was clearly linked to women’s behavior and appearance. This willingness to blame individual victims for what was an acknowledged and widespread problem reveals her own social anxiety regarding changing gender roles.

<7>Elizabeth Wilson describes how “occasions when respectable women were mistaken for prostitutes” contributed to mid-nineteenth-century anxieties regarding class and gender, since “[t]he very fact that such mistakes could occur undermined ancient beliefs in the ‘natural distinctions between ranks’, or ... classes” (30). Lynn Linton tries to contain this threat by pointing to visible signs typifying the social identity of women on the streets. Thus, she argues, women who may, in character, be modest and innocent, sometimes appear, because of their dress, to belong to a designated group of women whom, in Lynn Linton’s social analysis, it is acceptable to harass. According to Lynn Linton: “If she dressed like a modest woman, she would never be mistaken for anything else ... But the young person is obstinate in her bad taste and fatal love of finery; so street-loungers teach her cruel practical lessons on the value of correct personal decorations” (“Out Walking” 134). Lynn Linton, here, places the responsibility for harassment squarely on the shoulders of the ignorant young woman who, in her view, does not display the signs of her respectability outwardly and clearly. Failure to do this risked, as Bland puts it, a confusion of “[t]he prostitute and ‘respectable’ woman,” who were supposed to be “recognizably differ[ent] in dress” (119): a blurring of gender and class boundaries that Lynn Linton presents as a threat to the social structure.

<8>This interpretation of street harassment diverts all responsibility away from the men who could, Lynn Linton suggests, be trusted to know the difference between women who were “respectable” and women who were not, if this were outwardly apparent. She writes of the modest but badly dressed woman:

Look into her face steadily, and you will see the pride sitting on her lip, and the innocence in her eyes; but how many men are physiognomists? and who among the ordinary loungers can distinguish attraction from solicitation, and discern the signs that label them distinct and apart? (“Out Walking” 134).

Lynn Linton is not alone in conflating women’s dress, appearance and behavior in a narrative that suggests women were themselves responsible for inviting harassment, whether they were aware of it or not. One respondent to “Paterfamilias” in *The Times*, who signed herself “Puella,” explicitly classes clothing as part of a woman’s demeanor. She writes: “If young ladies from the country ... will walk down Oxford-street dressed in red cloaks and pork pie hats with white feathers (a dress most suitable for the country, but hardly consistent with the quiet demeanour for walking in the streets of London), they cannot expect to escape the notice of those few despicable idlers” who will harass them. Their experience, then, is put down to their unfamiliarity with London customs; Puella assumes that “a longer experience of London will show the young ladies in question that it lies greatly in their own power, by attention to quiet dress and behaviour, to prevent such annoyance” (10). The suggestion here, however, is not that the mistake of the women in question was to dress or act like prostitutes; rather, Puella implies that the harasser recognized from their dress—which, it should be noted, she herself assumed they must have been wearing, as there is no indication of this in Paterfamilias’s original letter—that they were new to London. It is clear, therefore, that sexual and class identities on the urban streets were considerably more complicated than the stark and convenient distinction between women who were “respectable” and women who were not, and examples from *The Times* as well as other sources, including Gaskell’s representations, indicate that harassment did not always proceed from a confusion of these two imaginary categories of woman. In framing her social commentary within these definitions of female identity, then, Lynn Linton was restructuring the debate surrounding street harassment in order to enable her to use it to illustrate what she felt to be the inherent dangers in the changes she observed in contemporary gender and class identities.

<9>Lynn Linton’s contention that the victim can be blamed for harassment gives an insight into one response to the debate on street harassment, and women’s social position more broadly, as it was played out through the medium of popular writing. As Nead points out, however, “[t]he argument that began to take form in the correspondence to *The Times* suggests that there were many different ways in which respectable women could inhabit the streets of London, and that respectability itself embraced a range of attitudes to the public domain” (63-4). The fact that the debate flared up in 1862 and prompted a wide range of responses suggests, furthermore, that it was not an immediate reaction to an abrupt social change, but rather addressed one aspect of the renegotiation of the use of public spaces between social

groups that had developed over the course of several decades of socio-economic change and its impact on the make-up of the urban environment.

### **Fictionalizing Harassment: Gaskell's Novels**

<10>The debate in *The Times* situates the problem of street harassment in London: Paterfamilias explicitly states that it was not something his daughters were obliged to safeguard against in their "large provincial town" (7), and both Puella and Lynn Linton consider it understood that it was a phenomenon for which women should be prepared in London. Gaskell's incorporation of street harassment to further the plot of both *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, however, proves that the problem was also well known in Manchester in the preceding decades, and that there, too, it was linked to the occupation of the same public spaces at the same time by people of different genders and classes. The protagonists of both novels, working-class Mary Barton and middle-class Margaret Hale, are obliged to walk through the city unaccompanied in order to fulfill their social and economic responsibilities, and this is what brings about their encounters with members of other social groups, which largely determine the plots of the novels.

<11>The eponymous heroine of *Mary Barton* is the daughter of widowed factory worker and trade unionist John Barton. She meets Harry Carson, the son of a factory owner, and her hopes of being elevated to the employer class through marriage lead her to spurn her honest working-class suitor Jem Wilson. In *North and South*, Margaret Hale moves to Milton-Northern, a fictionalized version of Manchester, with her aging parents from an unindustrialized village in the south of England. Her exploration of the town teaches her to understand the class relations between employers and employed in the industrial community, and later allows her to take a mediating role between the two classes. Neither of the young women has access to a chaperone; nor do they have a choice as to whether or not to venture into the streets, or when to do so. The nature of her work means that Mary is often forced to make her way through the city alone late in the evening, as "[h]er time for returning home at night must always depend upon the quantity of work Miss Simmonds [her employer] had to do" (28); she also moves freely between her own and her neighbors' houses to carry out her social obligations. Margaret's responsibility for her increasingly dependent parents requires her to run errands alone; as Sue Zemka points out, she "walks around Milton-Northern with a bold disregard for sexual impropriety, and in the process both she and the novel experiment with the sexually charged semiotics of working-class street behavior" (797). Both characters' presence on the street exposes them to cross-class contact which, in both novels, can take the form of harassment. Mary meets with Carson, whose sexual designs on her she initially misinterprets, thinking he intends to marry her; Margaret first comes into personal contact with Milton's factory workers because she is unfamiliar with the routines of the factory town, and therefore

finds herself sharing the streets through which the workers make their way to and from the factories between shifts, and their “carelessness of all common rules of street politeness” leads them to speak to her (*North and South* 81). In neither case, however, is it suggested that the two young female characters’ presence on the streets compromises their respectability: their work commitments and personal responsibilities require them to move across the town independently—and, indeed, the novels’ plots rely on the interactions between these women and the people they meet on the streets.

<12>In this context, however, it is important that instances of harassment are presented as nothing more than incidents that conveniently illustrate class relations in the industrial town, while they also further the plot. To analyze harassment as a social issue pertaining to a lack of respect for women’s bodily integrity, or to consider the real possibility of its causing personal distress or trauma to its victims, would compromise this narrative use of its occurrence. In both novels, Gaskell’s aim is to further mutual understanding and respect between classes, and focusing on harassment as a gendered issue would distract from the social points she is making. Her representation of harassment, therefore, is linked to a characterization of the women concerned, which is similar to the ideal of womanhood that Lynn Linton put forward in her 1868 article “The Girl of the Period.” Lynn Linton suggests that the ideal of English young womanhood “meant a girl who could be trusted alone if need be, because of the innate purity and dignity of her nature” (“The Girl of the Period” 339). The presentation of Mary and Margaret as young women who can be “trusted alone” is crucial to the plots of both novels, as these female protagonists motivate much of the action of the stories. Emphasizing their “purity and dignity” simultaneously helps to construct their characters as “heroines” and assures them of the personal freedom required to allow them to play active roles in the novels. Mary therefore ultimately escapes the consequences of her thoughtless flirtation with Carson because her personal pride and moral standards allow her to realize that the luxuries attendant on a marriage with him are only “hollow vanities” (*Mary Barton* 152). Gaskell tells us that, after having refused her honorable working-class suitor Jem, and understood her own feelings for him immediately afterwards, Mary “felt as if she almost hated Mr Carson, who had decoyed her with his baubles” (152). This view of both men is promptly reinforced by the revelation of Carson’s dishonorable intentions towards her. The fact that her own personal and moral insight had already caused her to decide to spurn Carson’s attentions before this point in the novel, however, show that he is not a genuine sexual danger to Mary, who is protected by her own “purity and dignity.”

<13>It is also made clear that Margaret is in no personal danger from the factory workers who harass her. Although their attitude proves that what Margaret considers to be “common rules of street politeness” are not in fact shared between classes, it is suggested that these rules actually create distance between classes as they prevent communication—an artificial distance,

especially as the classes exist in such close proximity in these scenes as to be able to “elbow” one another. The factory workers’ touching Margaret’s clothes and commenting on her looks is presented instead as a way of establishing contact, and she will proceed to build on these first encounters the friendships that allow her to foster better interclass relations within the novel. Her initial discomfort at the experience of harassment is brushed aside, or even refigured as a positive experience, since to portray the working class as a menace to a young lady would directly contradict Gaskell’s representation of working-class people as deserving of more respectful treatment by the middle classes. Representing the harassment as a genuine threat, moreover, would lead readers to question Margaret’s wisdom in walking the streets as boldly as she does, which would compromise her position as the free agent of class rapprochement. As it stands, it is precisely Margaret’s status as an outsider in Milton, belonging neither to the employers nor to the employed, that allows her to play a mediating role in the local class conflict. It is necessary, therefore, that she should perceive the harassment she is subjected to as harmless or even endearing. The women’s unabashed commenting on and even touching of her clothes is explained through “such a simple reliance on her womanly sympathy with their love of dress, and on her kindness, that she gladly replied to these enquiries, as soon as she understood them; and half smiled back at their remarks” (*North and South* 81). Through this condescending emphasis on their “simplicity,” the women are rendered unthreatening.

<14>Unlike Lynn Linton and Puella, Gaskell in this scene makes a clear distinction between clothing, appearance and behavior as factors in harassment. While the female factory workers consider Margaret’s clothing a valid prompt to address and touch her, this is presented as straightforwardly understandable and endearing. Margaret’s male harassers, however, comment not on her dress but on her physical appearance. This does initially make her more uncomfortable, and their attentions have to be cast in a complimentary vein to make them less threatening. Phrases like “[y]our bonny face, my lass, makes the day look brighter” (82), immediately link their notice of her presence in Milton to their dreary circumstances, and foreshadow her ameliorating influence on their situation. This is emphasized in her first encounter with Nicholas Higgins, the trade unionist she will later convert to her own notions of how to improve relations between the employers and the employed. His remark that “[y]ou may well smile, my lass; many a one would smile to have such a bonny face” is complimentary, but also highlights the difference in their circumstances, evoking pity for this “poorly-dressed, middle-aged, workman;” and indeed, he “looked so careworn that Margaret could not help giving him an answering smile, glad to think that her looks, such as they were, should have had the power to call up a pleasant thought” (82). Margaret’s looks, here, become an enhancement of the personal charms that were cultivated in young middle-class ladies with the function of giving pleasure to men. The immediate addition of Higgins having a daughter of Margaret’s age, who—as a result of having worked in a factory from a young age—is too ill to look pretty, establishes him as an entirely unthreatening father figure. This image will later reassure both

Margaret and the reader that his union activities are not his first choice of action, and that he can be reclaimed as a patriarch within his own class, and as a loyal employee to a fair master. Thus Margaret's experience of harassment is not only trivialized, but in fact becomes a contributing factor to the benevolent role she will play in bringing the classes of Milton together. Cross-class harassment, then, in Gaskell's novels, appears both as an illustration and partial explanation of class hostilities, and as an aid to class rapprochement. The use of street contact in *North and South* is comparable to the "elbowing" Gaskell refers to in the preface to *Mary Barton*: it may be transgressive, but it is not dangerous; it is also unavoidable in the new social arrangement of the industrial town, and can provide the initial contact between social groups on which increased class understanding may be established. In this analysis, although the victim is not blamed, little attention is given to the characters' experience of the harassment itself: what is relevant to the working of the novels is Mary and Margaret's reaction to their harassers, and their behavior in the wider social environment in which the harassment takes place.

### **The Gentleman and the Cad: Gaskell and Lynn Linton's Standards of Male Behavior**

<15>The examples cited above make clear that the preoccupation of most participants in the mid-Victorian debate on street harassment was with the behavior of the women experiencing harassment, rather than with that of the men perpetrating it. Gaskell's stories unfold around the ways her female characters respond to harassment; Lynn Linton analyzes the ways she considers women to be inviting it. The question of what constituted good social behavior for men, however, was also a matter of public debate in the shifting social structure of industrial mid-Victorian Britain. Popular writers like Samuel Smiles, the author of the bestseller *Self Help* (1859), explored the idea of "gentlemanliness" as a class-less ideal of male behavior. His revised understanding of an archaic marker of social status reflected the rise of the middle class and its attempts to forge for itself a class identity based on emulating aristocratic manners. As Karen Volland Waters states in her study of the "gentleman" in the nineteenth century:

The clash between the historical status of the gentleman as originating in inherited position and wealth and the increasing democratization of the class system during the Victorian period multiplied the "contradictory possibilities" of the term and made the gentleman an idea toward which men could strive, but which they could never fully achieve (27–8).

According to *Self Help*, in contrast, every man, regardless of their social position, could behave in a "gentlemanly" way. Smiles states that:

The inbred politeness which springs from right-heartedness and kindly feelings, is of no exclusive rank or station. The mechanic who works at the bench may possess it, as well

as the clergyman or the peer. It is by no means a necessary condition of labour that it should, in any respect, be either rough or coarse. ... From the highest to the lowest, the richest to the poorest, to no rank or condition in life has nature denied her highest boon—the great heart. There never yet existed a gentleman but was lord of a great heart. (323–4)

This ideal is linked to the possibility, recognized by Waters in the context of several nineteenth-century novels, of being “a gentleman of [one’s] own class” (24): even without the visible symbols of the class status of a gentleman, the idealized behavior of the chivalrous male could be emulated. This, too, however, was linked to the middle-class version of the idea of the “gentleman:” the notion of refinement, as opposed to the “roughness” or “coarseness” that Smiles refers to, was designed on middle-class terms. Class separations were still maintained between the mechanic, the clergyman and the peer, who did not have equal access to the outward trappings of “gentlemanliness,” such as smart dress, or equal means to act with “gentlemanly” generosity or courage. The idea of “gentlemanliness” for a working-class man, therefore, in this analysis, was required to tally with middle-class conceptions of virtue.

<16>This notion of a middle-class perception of class-specific “gentlemanliness” is evident throughout Gaskell’s representation of her male working-class characters, who are presented primarily for a middle-class readership. Their behavior is morally driven, based on a desire to support their families—a Victorian middle-class ideal—and act as a mainstay of their community through mutual respect and practical aid. Thus, for instance, both Higgins and John Barton are shown offering personal and financial support to the families of their destitute neighbors. This representation of working-class characters who adhere to a moral code that her middle-class readers should find recognizable and admirable is an important factor in Gaskell’s appeal for increased mutual respect between social classes. The conception of moral behavior as classless comes across clearly in the juxtaposition of Mary’s two suitors. Carson, despite or because of his wealth and position, reveals himself to be a cad when he easily confesses: “You know ... how little my father and mother would like me to marry you. So angry would they be, and so much ridicule should I have to brave, that of course I have never thought of it till now. I thought we could be happy enough without marriage” (159). In contrast, Jem’s simply phrased declaration holds the heartfelt promises of emotional and economic protection and support that mark him out as a gentleman: “And now, Mary, I’ve a home to offer you, and a heart as true as ever man had to love you and cherish you; we shall never be rich folk, ... but if a loving heart and a strong right arm can shield you from sorrow, or from want, mine shall do it” (150). These exchanges are designed to prove that Jem possesses more innate “gentlemanliness” than Carson. The latter’s attempt to safeguard his position as a “gentleman” in the social sense—namely his wealth and his class superiority—has caused him to act in an ungentlemanly way towards Mary, whose vulnerable position as a young and honest working-class woman gives

her a claim to male respect and protection. This respect and protection is offered to her by Jem, who does not wish to change her social position or his own, but who exemplifies Smiles' values of "right-heartedness" and "kindly feelings."

<17>The same ideas of what constitutes masculine virtue underpin the pathos of John Barton's situation, which is illustrated by his decline from his status of working-class "gentleman" and paterfamilias. Gaskell shows how his working-class masculinity is broken down as grief, unemployment and hunger deprive him of his ability to support his family financially, physically or emotionally; he is not even able to protect his daughter from the sexual threat posed by Harry Carson. Eventually, his control of himself and his situation deteriorate to such an extent that he becomes addicted to opium and even so far forgets his fatherly responsibilities as to beat his daughter (*Mary Barton* 135). By making clear that his economic and personal circumstances, aggravated by industrial dispute, effected this transformation in an honorable working-class man, Gaskell illustrates the need for increased respect and communication between classes to prevent the kind of social hostilities the novel describes, which culminate in Barton's gradual self-destruction as well as Carson's murder.

<18>Gaskell's analysis of harassment, then, seems to rest on the "dignity and purity" of the character both of the woman suffering harassment, and of the man perpetrating it. How incidents of harassment are understood in her novels depends on the intentions of the harasser: the spoilt young Carson taking advantage of a giddy working-class girl versus, for example, the honest, fatherly Higgins expressing appreciation of a pretty face that has brightened his day. Lynn Linton's analysis of male behavior, on the other hand, is expounded wholly in relation to what she considers to be women's provocation. Where Gaskell aims, if not to break down class boundaries, at least to remove some of their rigidity in keeping apart individuals from different classes, Lynn Linton's adherence to the idea of women's identity as "respectable" or otherwise aims to protect respectable society from what she considers a dangerous blurring of class identities in the "girl of the period." She insists that "nothing in the world is rarer than a really unmanly and unprovoked insult to women" ("Out Walking" 137). In her analysis, as we have seen, men are well-meaning but honestly confused about which women they can address in a way respectable women would deem insulting. For intelligent and respectable women, however, as both Lynn Linton and Puella argue, "nothing in the world [is] easier than to avoid the frequent mistakes which are not meant to be insults" ("Out Walking" 137): all that is needed is a greater level of care in dress and demeanor to ensure that respectable women would be recognized as such, so they would no longer be exposed to what they consider offensive behavior—unlike unrespectable women, who, it is strongly implied, expect and accept harassment. Lynn Linton takes her argument further in her condemnation of the "girl of the period" whom she sees as trying to emulate "the queens of the *demi-monde*" ("The Girl of the Period" 340). Essentially, she is indicating, if a young woman tries to copy the

dress and behavior of unrespectable women, she should not be surprised if she is treated like one herself.

<19>In fact, Lynn Linton goes so far as to suggest that the “girl of the period” harms her own chances with men by ignoring what their behavior to her should teach them; namely that she “does not please men. She pleases them as little as she elevates them” (340). The fact that “though men laugh with her they do not respect her, though they flirt with her they do not marry her,” is presented as a credit to these men’s ultimate appreciation of good behavior in women. Failure to abide by pre-existing social rules is presented as the young woman’s “acting against nature and her own interests” with men as “she disregards their advice and offends their taste” (340). Thus, Lynn Linton argues, when women are harassed, this is an indication that they have offended the good taste of respectable men. If they made an effort to conform to male ideas of women’s proper dress and behavior, they would “elevate” men’s personal and moral character, rather than prompt them to speak disrespectfully to them.

<20>Smiles saw “politeness” as necessary to a “gentleman” of any class; but neither Lynn Linton nor Gaskell questions this quality in the men they describe as harassing women. For Gaskell, the harassment Margaret experiences simply reflects a difference in accepted social behavior between classes, while Carson’s harassment of Mary is easily combated when it becomes clear that she is too respectable to respond; for Lynn Linton, harassment is a “lesson” to the socially transgressive woman which, though it may be “cruel,” is just and appropriate.

<21>It becomes clear, then, that while both Gaskell and Lynn Linton recognize the reality of street harassment, both fictionalize the experience in order to incorporate it into their own social agendas. For both, this involves making suggestions about the intentions of the harassers and thus drawing attention away from the victims’ experience. In Gaskell’s representation, the harassers intend only to establish contact; Lynn Linton’s articles suggest that the harassers either do not recognize that the women they address are respectable, or, whether consciously or not, are indicating to immodest young women that they are displeased with their behavior. In all of these cases, the harassment, whether the harasser is conscious of it or not, functions to control women’s occupation of public spaces. As Bland puts it, “[f]or a woman to be unable to venture into [the streets and other public places] without fearing attack, being labelled ‘immoral’, or suspected of being a prostitute, necessarily acted as a constraint upon her freedom of movement” (119). It should be noted here that this “labelling” was done by female commentators such as Lynn Linton as well as by the harassers. Even for Gaskell, justification for her female characters’ presence on the streets is necessary; they are only permitted their freedom of movement by virtue of their evident respectability.

### **Women’s Occupation of the Public Sphere: Historical and Fictional Perspectives**

<22>At this point it is useful to contrast these fictionalized accounts with the reality of harassment in the nineteenth century. It is clear that harassment took place on the urban streets, and across social classes, although by no means exclusively in the cross-class ways portrayed by Gaskell and Lynn Linton, or by the working-class popular press that “regularly used images of working-class women attacked by upper-class rakes as a symbol of class exploitation” (Johnson 46). Patricia Johnson makes clear that “most working-class women were harassed by men of their own class,” and goes on to explain that this “harassment function[ed] to subordinate women, economically and socially” (46). Johnson’s analysis indicates that one aim of harassment in the workplace as well as on the street was to prevent women from occupying the public sphere on equal terms with men. This sense of inequality is emphasized by the assumption in both Gaskell and Lynn Linton that women’s presence in the public sphere should be justified: in other words, that they should have good social and economic reasons for being present on the street or in the workplace, and should ensure while they are in public that their behavior does not give any observer cause to question their reasons to be there.

<23>The control of women’s occupation of the public sphere became increasingly urgent in the changing industrial and economic climate of mid-Victorian Britain, where economic crisis posed a threat to male employment and domestic control, a theme which Gaskell explores through the deterioration of John Barton. Judith Walkowitz explains this crisis in working-class masculinity with reference to the economic situation in mid- to late-Victorian London:

The decline in apprenticeship, an early and prolonged submersion in a female domestic culture ... , and the shaky parental status of casual laborers as unreliable breadwinners all tended to ... reduce the authority of the male head of household to an absent or decorative role, one highly vulnerable to parody as something of a “comic disaster.” (44)

Women emerging into the workplace and the public sphere more generally were representative both of this breakdown of traditional family relations and of the threat to male professions. For example, men’s trade unions campaigned throughout the century for a “family wage” which, by demanding for adult male workers a sufficient rate of pay to support a dependent family, relied on preventing women and children from working for lower wages. Kristina Huneault describes “the ideology of the male breadwinner and the concept of the family wage” as “entrenched” in “the second half of the nineteenth century” (7). These efforts to preserve a gender status-quo in working-class families and communities were by no means limited to the working class, however: concerns over the breakdown of the working-class family and over working-class women leaving the domestic for the public sphere were shared and fostered by the middle class. Deborah Epstein Nord points out that “[t]he largely middle-class rhetoric of opposition to women’s work in factories revolved around two major concerns: the displacement of male workers and the disintegration of family life” (140). This middle-class

notion of the family as the mainstay of society, like the trade unions' ideal of the "family wage," thus relied on a systematic denial of women's access to work and independence. This cross-class conception of gender clearly contributed to the creation of a cultural environment in which women's experience of harassment as signifying a lack of respect for them as individuals and as participants in the public sphere could be dismissed.

<24>Gaskell and Lynn Linton's contextualizations of harassment as symptomatic of social change places the problem firmly within the bounds of popular contemporary debates around these wider gender and class anxieties. Despite their own position as independent women with successful careers, their concern is not for women's empowerment in the public sphere. Lynn Linton's vehement condemnation of women dressing inappropriately for their situation in life, or drawing attention to themselves on the streets, evidently advocates a curbing of women's freedom; but while Gaskell's novels may rely on her characters' participation in public life to carry out their social responsibilities, they in fact also raise strong objections to women leaving home to work.

<25>*Mary Barton* dwells repeatedly on the harmful effects of sending women out to work in factories, since it prevents their learning household skills before marriage, while a woman who goes on working after marriage will be unable to provide her family with a nurturing home. Mrs. Wilson, the mother of Mary's suitor Jem and a former factory worker, states:

"I could reckon up ... nine men I know, as has been driven to th' public-house by having wives as worked in factories; good folk, too, as thought there was no harm in putting their little ones out at nurse, and letting their house go all dirty, and their fires all out; and that was a place as was tempting for a husband to stay in, was it?" (*Mary Barton* 139)

This example explicitly links women leaving the family home with moral deterioration and family breakdown: women's search for independence in the public sphere thus represents their abandonment of domestic responsibilities. This conception of working-class gender roles forms a counterpart to the feeling of masculine responsibility to provide for dependent women which, as we have seen, is a crucial constituent part of Gaskell's construction of her "gentlemanly" working-class male characters, Jem Wilson, John Barton and Nicholas Higgins. There is no reference, here, to the fact that the family might need the mother's or daughter's extra wages: the suggestion is that these working women made a free choice, to the detriment of their families. A woman in the workplace, like a woman on the street, could therefore be attacked on moral grounds; in Gaskell's novel, a justification has to be given for women's engaging in paid work at all, and women have to avoid drawing attention to their work, as in Lynn Linton's arguments women on the street had to avoid drawing attention to their person.

<26>Mary Barton manages both things as her work, crucially, takes place in what is represented as the relative safety of a woman-only workplace. The decision to apprentice her to a dressmaker proceeds from John Barton's desire to protect Mary from the fate of her aunt Esther, the factory girl-turned-prostitute who represents the terrible consequences of giving a young woman access to financial—and, to a degree, sexual—independence by means of her own paid labor in the public sphere. The first mention of Esther in the novel tells the reader how she “spent her money in dress, thinking to set off her pretty face.” Barton then relates, to the reader as well as to his neighbor Mr. Wilson, his prophetic warning to her: “I see what you'll end at with your artificials, and your fly-away veils, and stopping out when honest women are in their beds; you'll be a street-walker” (6). Esther, then, committed every solecism possible for a respectable woman in the public sphere: she drew attention to herself through her dress and behavior, and stayed out in public for her own amusement, rather than solely to carry out her responsibilities, like Mary or Margaret Hale. Thus, Gaskell explicitly links the ideas of women working, earning and determining their own presence in the public sphere with family breakdown as an inevitable consequence and prostitution as an added danger.

<27>Margaret Hale, who appears to be an exception to these rigid ideas of keeping women at home, notably does not leave home to work: her mediating efforts between the social classes of Milton can be seen as merely an expansion of her domestic responsibilities. As a middle-class woman, her task is to provide moral guidance and emotional support; by doing this for the town in which she lives, she is merely extending this role beyond her own household, as did many women who engaged in charity work during this period—including, for instance, Gaskell herself. Thus, even Gaskell's active and independent-minded female characters still serve to reinforce the ideal of women as domestic and nurturing. This, again, is bound up with the idea of women's self-protection through their innate “purity and dignity.” Unlike Esther, Mary and Margaret are guided by their domestically-orientated responsibilities as they venture into the streets, and this is what ensures that their presence in the public sphere is not a cause for concern to their families or their readers.

<28>Walkowitz's description of women's position in the mid-Victorian public sphere reflects the way in which popular authors like Gaskell and Lynn Linton used images of women in public, and specifically on the urban streets, to illustrate their own social ideas. She states that, “[i]n public, women were presumed to be both endangered and a source of danger to those men who congregated in the streets. In the mental map of urban spectators, they lacked autonomy: they were bearers of meaning rather than makers of meaning” (21). In other words, the image of the woman in the streets could be used to represent a variety of ideas—as we have seen throughout the debate in *The Times* as well as in the work of Gaskell and Lynn Linton.

<29>While Lynn Linton's women are social "types" and certainly feature only as "bearers of meaning," however, it is impossible to deny that Gaskell's women, within their limited sphere, are acknowledged to have agency and to use it. As Nord makes clear, the question of women's participation in the public sphere is complicated in Gaskell's work:

[Gaskell] used her novels to ruminate on the linked potential for danger and power inherent in women's participation in the public domain of industrial life. ... In [*Mary Barton* and *North and South*] women work outside the home, give public testimony, intervene in class strife, flout laws and social convention, venture opinions about politics and the management of business, and enter forbidden or restricted areas of the city. All such public gestures in Gaskell's fiction offer women satisfaction, even triumph, and yet they also expose women to trauma and nearly irreversible disgrace. (142)

Thus, while Nord acknowledges the role of Gaskell's women as bearers of meaning, and the limitations this imposes on their public agency, she demonstrates that they can be "makers of meaning" to some extent within that sphere.

<30>Despite their concern with keeping women in their place, both Gaskell and Lynn Linton use images of women in the public sphere to illustrate contemporary shift in class relations and, if less explicitly, in relative gender status. It is important to bear in mind that the meaning borne by the women featured in the writing of Gaskell and Lynn Linton is made by other women, namely the writers who analyzed their situation from their own position as observers in, as well as of, the public sphere. Despite living during a period when "[t]he term 'public woman' was used interchangeably with the terms prostitute, streetwalker and actress; [which] all implied that the public world excluded respectable women" (Bland 118), Gaskell's and Lynn Linton's women, like their authors, can only offer a commentary on society by being publicly present in it.

### **Conclusion: Popular Fictions of a Common Problem**

<31>While the increasingly visible presence of women in the Victorian public sphere meant that street harassment became acknowledged as a problem and a matter for public and popular debate, the examples cited above reveal that it was rare for the problem to be discussed in terms of its impact on the women subjected to it: instead, the debate around street harassment saw it as representative of other social anxieties, particularly as they related to shifts in traditional class and gender roles. The acknowledged reality of street harassment meant that it was regularly referred to in popular writing, from novels to periodical articles; but the various commentators discussed in this article each found ways of fictionalizing the reality of harassment to underpin their own social views, and the experience of victims of harassment thus became a depersonalized example in a variety of popular, and to a greater or lesser extent

fictionalized, representations of contemporary urban life. Both Gaskell and Lynn Linton recognize verbal and physical sexual harassment of women in the public sphere as a reality and a common occurrence, but neither are able to see it primarily from the victim's point of view or recognize the harasser's behavior as problematic—indeed, both analyze its causes and consequences only in terms of their own social agenda. In Gaskell's widely read novels, harassment is used as a way of illustrating the interaction between social classes; in Lynn Linton's popular articles, it highlights what she considers the deterioration of women's social position. Both, however, invest the female victim of harassment with the greater degree of social responsibility: Gaskell considers the impact of harassment to be defined by the woman's response to it, while Lynn Linton considers the victim's appearance and actions to have invited the harassment, and sees it as corrective of women's transgressive behavior.

<32>The contemporary debate on street harassment within which I have placed Gaskell and Lynn Linton's representations suggest that the mid-Victorian popular narrative around street harassment generally served as a way of controlling women in the public sphere—whether through undermining women's work by harassing them in the workplace, or by blaming their experiences of harassment in the street on their dress and behavior. This shows that the debate around street harassment did not recognize it primarily as a problem with male behavior that could be traumatic for women and undermine them in their personal, social and economic pursuits. Rather, it reveals widespread anxieties around changing gender and class roles in the precarious environment of urban and industrial mid-Victorian Britain. As different commentators constructed their own conceptions of “common rules of street politeness,” it became increasingly clear that there was no universal set of rules for how to occupy the public sphere. The different rules proposed, then, reveal a great deal more about the commentators' own social concerns and agendas than about the behavior and motivations of the people using the mid-Victorian city streets.

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