

# Philip Hepburn, Stephen Freeman and the American Context of *Sylvia's Lovers*

Emma Sdegno

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

**Abstract** *Sylvia's Lovers* is a novel about war. It is a historical novel set in the years 1793-1800 during the Napoleonic wars, and written by Elizabeth Gaskell in the years 1859-62 when the American Civil War broke out, in April 1861. Examining Gaskell's correspondence with Charles Eliot Norton in the years 1861-63 and the articles Norton wrote in support of the War and the anti-slavery cause, this paper explores the way in which the news coming from America and the debates on the contemporary events left a significant mark on the second part of the novel. The implied reference to the context of the American Civil War would shed new light on Gaskell's narrative choices concerning the plot and the main male character's development, which has been substantially overlooked.

**Keywords** Elizabeth Gaskell. *Sylvia's Lovers*. Napoleonic Wars. Charles Eliot Norton. The Advantages of Defeat. American Civil War. Anti-Slavery movements.

**Summary** 1 "Fact and Fiction Clumsily Combined". – 2 An American Novel. – 3 War Settings. – 4 Romance Heroes. – 5 Stephen, the Freedman. – 6 Conclusion.



Edizioni  
Ca' Foscari

## Peer review

Submitted 2023-05-18  
Accepted 2023-07-03  
Published 2023-10-30

## Open access

© 2023 Sdegno |  4.0



**Citation** Sdegno, E. (2023). "Philip Hepburn, Stephen Freeman and the American Context of *Sylvia's Lovers*". *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie occidentale*, 57, 303-322.

## 1 “Fact and Fiction Clumsily Combined”

Critics have generally expressed difficulties with regard to many aspects of Gaskell's historical novel and in particular its last part, where the dependable Quaker shopkeeper, deeply in love with Sylvia, leaves his wife and daughter in search of atoning for his sin, reappearing on the field of the battle of Acre under the assumed name of Stephen Freeman. There is a large consensus that this latter part of the novel is the weakest, flawed from a narrative point of view. Only recently has this ‘flaw’ been tentatively attributed to Gaskell's ideological resistance to war. But an analysis of the novel's *dénouement* is still lacking. The purpose of this paper is to focus on the ‘heterogeneous’ elements of which the final chapters were composed, and relate them to the historical context of the years during which they were composed: in so doing I hope to shed some light on the novel's ‘awkward’ turn away from realism.

It may be helpful to begin by mentioning some critical readings. Sharps (1970, 394) considers the historical material in chapter 38 as merely a “filler” that “might have been omitted with advantage”, and claims that “on occasions the novelist's descriptions of historical events appear to be rendered externally, almost from a text-book point of view” (Sharp 1970, 385-6). He points to “a striking instance of fact and fiction being clumsily combined” in the episode at Acre, and wonders “*what sources is she relying on for these passages*”, without seeming to take the question seriously or attempting to answer it (Sharp 1970, 386). Jenny Uglow attributes the final chapters' change in tone and mode to its “long gestation”:

*Sylvia's Lovers* had taken three years to write, years eroded by illness and travel, by family crises, by war in America and hardship at home. The long gestation of this novel partly explains the change of tone in each volume: the vital, energetic realism of the first volume, written rapidly in the spring 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 in the shadow of the cotton famine. (Uglow 1993, 504)

Uglow sees Gaskell's treatment of war as deliberately fictional: “the scenery is truly ‘scenery’, like the painted backdrop of a play or the fashionable panorama of the day, with the reader placed firmly outside the action and invited to ‘look again’” (Uglow 1993, 525). Chapter 38, “The Recognition”, is set on the battlefield of the 1799 siege of Acre where Stephen Freeman, an obscure and selfless soldier, rescues his rival in love. According to Uglow, the scene reveals Gaskell's ideological stance towards the war, her denial of “the worth of heroic

violence, however justified the cause" (Uglow 1993, 524). Its lack of realism therefore betrays a response to the uncomfortable topic of war and military heroism. O'Gorman supports Uglow's reading and qualifies the change in chapter 38 as a genre shift in which novel gives way to romance, – "as *Sylvia's Lovers* deepens its dependence on facts, it reads more like a romance, [...] plainly Philip's action in saving Kinraid from death is that of a romance hero (even if it is more a product of inertia and lifelessness than bravery)" (O'Gorman 2014, XXI-XXII). Genre switching would thus appear to be Gaskell's way of framing discourse on war by rejecting the language of realism, and foregrounding fictionality: "Reparation is achieved as a piece of theatre" (O'Gorman 2014, XXI-XXII). Schor qualifies the "tragic - morbid - overtones [that] take over" in the latter part of the novel as a feature of Gaskell's turning the domestic plot to melodrama:

critics have raised this question to focus on the generic switch into melodrama at the novel's conclusion, when the two heroes find themselves at the Siege of Acre and – improbably – recognize each other. But this one melodrama of doubling – the moment when the heroes face unexpected similarities where they had previously perceived difference, and finally see each other as trapped by the same plot – is part of a larger pattern of doubling (formal and thematic) throughout the novel: plots that trap, confuse, and narrate their characters; plots that force on characters' unexpected returns. (Schor 1992, 157)

The genre switch from realism to melodrama Schor sees as occurring within "a larger pattern of character doubling in the novel". It is of course a feature typical of 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel that is worth reminding ourselves. For Peter Brooks the mode of representing human events in an overstated theatrical form, opens up a narrative space in which universal forces of good and evil clash, and class struggles take place (Brooks 1976).<sup>1</sup> One may recall that for Lukács melodrama encodes the grammar of the historical novel, where action is generated by incredible coincidences in which the world and chance are interwoven (Lukács 1963). Individual destinies depend on the larger history within which they are immersed, so that the novel stages "the exceptional character of the typical everyday situations", by representing historical conflicts through the lens of the characters' private struggles (Lukács 1970, 142).

Set in the Napoleonic Wars, *Sylvia's Lovers* features the 50-year displacement that Lukács pointed to as a typical time lapse of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century historical novel. In the first part of the novel, which is

<sup>1</sup> See also Mazzoni 2011, 275-84.

set in Monkshaven, characters and events stage the historical conflict in a realist mode. But can we relate the genre switch that occurs in the second part to a melodramatic romance mode, which, in challenging the form of the domestic novel, implies a wider global setting? And do the hero's displacement to the Middle East, and the changes of name and features that alienate him from the reader's sympathies fit better within a more precise frame of reference provided by the historical context of the years 1860-63?

Building on Gaskell scholarship this paper makes sense of the genre switch to romance, seeing it as the outcome of an experimental search for a form that would ingrain the painfully felt issues involved in contemporary war discourse coming from America. It would thus attempt to provide an answer to a set of questions on the novel that are still to be adequately answered.

## 2 An American Novel

Gaskell began *Sylvia's Lovers* in December 1859. By the time the American Civil War broke out in April 1861, Gaskell had written a quarter of it, and had adopted the provisional title *The Specksioneer* (i.e. the whale hunter). Only a few months earlier, in December 1860, she still thought she would finish the book soon; in fact it took her two more years to conclude. The War had threatened to involve also Britain, having caused the 1862 famine in the industrial towns as a consequence of the stop in the supply of cotton from America, and Gaskell was directly involved in supporting Manchester working class families during this time (Whitehill 2013, 74). When her publisher George Smith enquired about the progress of the novel, she replied in terms that put writing subordinate to peace and social welfare: "I wish North & South would make friends, & let us have cotton, & then our poor people would get work, and then you should have as many novels as you liked to take, and we should not be killed with 'Poor on the Brain' as I expect we shall before the winter is over" (Chapple-Pollard 1997, 697-8). Clare Pettitt suggestively defines *Sylvia's Lovers* as Gaskell's "American novel", seeing the war as having hindered composition: "it would have appeared much sooner and would have lost some of its tragic resonance had Gaskell not written it during the American Civil War" (Pettitt 2012, 615). But there is another deeper sense in which one can see *Sylvia's Lovers's* as an "American novel": if the Civil War had slowed down her writing, it had also become particularly relevant to a novel set during the Napoleonic Wars. The American conflict had brought the issue of war home, so to say, inducing Gaskell to think of it more broadly and deeply than she seems to have done at first.

Some important clues to this change can be traced in Gaskell's correspondence with Charles Eliot Norton during the years of the novel's gestation. The dedicatee of the novel's American edition, Norton was in fact Gaskell's main source of information on the war. The correspondence has been called "a staple of Gaskell scholarship" (Shelston 2001, 55), testifying to mutual deep esteem and affection and provides precious insights into the two authors' views of life, art, literature, and contemporary politics. Not only does it demonstrate her "interest and affection for Americans" (Shelston 2001, 55), it also provides some important clues to the way the novel was to progress. In her article on Gaskell's transatlantic connections Pettitt defines the correspondence as "central to understanding her widening sense of a world beyond her own national and political horizons", and registers a change in "the structure of Gaskell's fiction [...] in the late fifties and early sixties", which suggests "a global horizon that in her earlier work was present only through allusion" (Pettitt 2012, 600-1). More specifically, one can see how reports and reflections on the American Civil War reverberate on the novel's imagery and characters. The correspondence covers the years 1855-65, and is denser during the period 1861-65. These were the years of the American conflict, a topic that figures large in the letters. Norton was directly engaged in the Civil War as secretary to the New England Loyal Publication Society, a Northern propagandist body. Gaskell seldom writes about her work, but constantly fires at her American friend questions about the War and its purposes, about the composition of the armies, how victory could be attained, and peace restored, questions that provoke from Norton precise and extended answers. They often involve broader ethical issues: could any war be a just war? How does individual freedom relate to a citizen's duty towards his country? Gaskell's questions suggest doubts even scepticism. In her letter dated 10 June 1861 she avows her "puzzlement" and enquires about the "end proposed":

I half determined to do what I am doing now - take myself and Meta for average specimens of English people, - *most* kindly disposed to you, our dear cousins, hating slavery intensely, but yet truly *puzzled* by what is now going on in America. I don't mind your thinking me dense or ignorant, and I think I can be sure you give me a quiet *unmetaphorical* statement of what is the end proposed in this war. (Whitehill 2013, 82; emphasis in the text)

She interrogates Norton on the composition of the Northern Army, and how people came to commit themselves to fight the South, and ultimately on the question of compulsory enrolment, which had just been reintroduced in the Union Army:

What are you going to do when you have conquered the South, as no one doubts that you will. [...] *Conquering* the South won't turn them into friends, or pre-dispose them to listen to reason or argument, or to yield to influence instead of to force. You must *compel* them then to what you want them to do. (And what *do* you want them to do? - abolish slavery? Return to their allegiance to the Union?). *Compelling* them implies the means of compulsion. You will have to hold them in subjection by force, i.e. by military occupation. At present your army is composed of volunteers, - but can they ever leave their business etc. for years of military occupation of a country peopled by those adverse to them? Shall you not have henceforward to keep a standing army? - If you were here I could go on multiplying questions of this kind, but I dare say you are already tired and think me very stupid. (Whitehill 2013, 84; emphasis in the text)

Such detailed questions on conscription bear a direct connection to the impressment motif in *Sylvia's Lovers*, where the first part of the plot is wholly centred on the military raids that overturn people's lives in Monkshaven. Through this correspondence, Gaskell's ideas on the American Civil War evolved and so did the shaping of her novel's narrative solutions.

### 3 War Settings

Set in the late 1790s at Monkshaven, an imaginary place name for the whaling town of Whitby, *Sylvia's Lovers* opens with an *ouverture* descriptive of this stretch of coast, where sea and land are tightly intertwined. In this scenery, with the fury of stormy waves, press-gangs break in and force young men to conscription, ripping them from their homes and affections. A climax is reached in chapter 18 with the scene of the impressment of Kinraid, Philip Hepburn's rival in love. At this stage press-gang raids represent all one sees of the war of the time. Straightforwardly and metonymically connoted as violence, injustice, helpless suffering, war will bring about a chain of tragic consequences: from Philip Hepburn's 'lie' about Kinraid's capture, to Daniel Robson's disproportionate death sentence, from Bell's quiet drifting into insanity, to Sylvia's marriage to Philip, and her life of mourning relieved only by Bella's birth.

In the first part of the novel, military power is represented as an external destructive force that jeopardizes the lives of ordinary citizens. It is "pervaded" by the widespread feeling against impressment in England in the 1790s (Sanders 1978, 204) and amplifies the motif of blind press-gang violence in George Crabbe's 1812 narrative poem "Ruth". From this the novel takes the narrative core of a

young woman, whose betrothed is dragged away, leaving the pregnant Ruth to end tragically by throwing herself into the waves. The leaden atmosphere of Crabbe's *Tale of the Hall* sets the tone for the first part of *Sylvia's Lovers*, where the love plot, adumbrated in the title Gaskell finally chose for the novel, unfolds. As in Crabbe's poem, the overimposing land- and seascape enact the perpetual struggle of men and women whose lives depend on the sea. For these descriptions Gaskell drew from her familiarity with Whitby, as well as with the documented sources and living witnesses (Sharp 1970), just as Crabbe drew inspiration from Aldeburgh, the fishing community on the Suffolk coastline where he lived and which he rendered with the topographical precision praised by E.M. Forster (1941). The presence of the sea is even more powerful in Gaskell's novel, where it conveys the violence of the irruption of the distant war with France. Sadness and sense of tragedy pervade the first part of the novel, anticipating Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*, an opera directly inspired by "The Borough", another of Crabbe's sea poems. In chapter 18, when Philip Hepburn witnesses the impressment of Kinraid's, the landscape magnifies his psychological states and translates them into contrasting physical sensations. It is the murmur of the sea that charms Philip on his business expedition to London, allowing him to indulge into daydreaming, before this abruptly gives way to dark omen. The Monkshaven landscape has been rightly pointed to as "a major structural element of the story" as it is "on the littoral of high and low tide that a number of pivotal moments in the narrative occur" (Twinn 2001, 41). However, when Twinn points out that all the four capital moments are on the Whitby coast, she overlooks the major scene on the coast of Acre, where the military Philip Hepburn/Stephen Freeman rescues Kinraid.<sup>2</sup> This confirms the tendency to obscure the Middle Eastern chapters as a rather incongruous symbolical parenthesis and focus on the British setting only. In my view, instead, chapters 18 and 38 are to be read as tightly related. There is a sense in which one can see the scene on the coast of Acre at chapter 38 as paralleling the Monkshaven one in chapter 18, just as the setting for Kinraid's rescue by Philip counterpoints the episode of his impressment. This produces a mirror effect that shows war under a different light and with different associations. It is, in other words, a reconfiguration of the early scene in chapter 18 endowing it with a new meaning and value, moving away from Philip's personal vicissitude. It would be therefore maintained what Andrew Sanders de-

<sup>2</sup> Twinn applies to *Sylvia's Lovers* the argument that "geography shapes the narrative", by Moretti 1998. The four capital moments are the arrival of the whaling fleet (ch. 1), Kinraid's impressment (ch. 18), Kinraid's return to Monkshaven (ch. 32), Bella's rescue from the waves by Philip (ch. 45).

nies, when he asserts that in *Sylvia's Lovers*:

there is no attempt to interweave real people with fictional or to obliviously disguise a real place under a false name. In thus centering her tale almost exclusively in a fictional world, and in choosing her characters from humble stations of life, Mrs Gaskell moves her historical novel to an opposite extreme from the heroic mode [...]. (Sanders 1978, 204)

While in chapter 18 the haunting presence of war spreads through univocal signs in the British landscape, in chapter 38 the shore is that of the Holy Land, and the displacement in a romance mode generates multiple associations dense with Christian symbolism:

In the clear eastern air, the different characters of the foliage that clothed the sides of that sea-washed mountain might be discerned from a long distance by the naked eye; the silver gray of the olive-trees near its summit; the heavy green and bossy forms of the sycamores lower down; broken here and there by a solitary terebinth or ilex tree, of a deeper green and a wider spread; till the eye fell below on the maritime plain, edged with the white seaboard and the sandy hillocks; with here and there feathery palm-trees, either isolated or in groups - motionless and distinct against the hot purple air. (Gaskell 2014, 368)

As in chapter 18 the narrator takes us from sea to coast, and the vegetation is identified precisely: the olive and terebinth trees, the Kishon river, *the river of slaughter or dismemberment*, the fig-tree. The scene, described as if through the eyes of a foreign observer familiar with Hebrew symbolism, will be the setting for the battle to come. As in the first part war was made present through the violence of conscription of civilians, in the pivotal chapter 38, "The Recognition", we are on the battlefield of Saint John of Acre with Stephen Freeman, the name assumed by Philip Hepburn, fighting alongside the British and the Turks to stop Napoleon's attempted conquest of Jerusalem. The ground, covered with dead and agonizing bodies of the French and the British, is charged with sacred signs, which overtly recall the Crusades. The setting is described as in a history book, and the scene of the battlefield as in a war report. Against this background there appears an unnamed figure, only identified as Philip by his act of rescue. The scene doubles that of Kinraid's capture by the press-gang, his begging Philip to rescue him, and deliver his message to Sylvia.

One man left his fellows, and came running forwards, forwards in among the enemy's wounded, within range of their guns; he bent down over Kinraid; he seemed to understand without a word; he



lifted him up, carrying him like a child; and with the vehement energy that is more from the force of will than the strength of body, he bore him back to within the shelter of the ravelin – not without many shots being aimed at them, one of which hit Kinraid in the fleshy part of his arm. (Gaskell 2014, 373-4)

While in the Monkshaven impressment scene the two civilians, Philip Hepburn and Charley Kinraid had been both helpless victims of a blind and cruel war, here in St John of Acre they embody two different types of soldier. The unassuming honourable Stephen Freeman guards and protects, clearly contrasting with Charley Kinraid, who appears as the light-hearted, offensive, commander of a band of soldiers, whose swearing and rough ways are repeatedly stressed as is his carelessness or ignorance of the sacredness of the place:

His heart was like a war-horse, and said, Ha, ha! as the boat bounded over the waves that were to land him under the ancient machicolated walls where the Crusaders made their last stand in the Holy Land. *Not that Kinraid knew or cared one jot about those gallant knights of old*: all he knew was, that the French, under Boney, were trying to take the town from the Turks, and that his admiral said they must not, and so they should not. (Gaskell 2014, 370)

#### 4 Romance Heroes

For her portrayal of these two types of soldier Gaskell seems to have drawn inspiration from Norton's writings. On 31 December 1861 Gaskell wrote to Norton thanking him for "that *beautiful* noble paper of yours on the Advantages of Defeat, – a paper that I have circulated far and wide among my friends, – and I only wish I had more of the same kind to show, – in order to make us English know you Americans better" (Whitehill 2013, 95). "The Advantages of Defeat" had appeared in the September 1861 issue of *The Atlantic* in the aftermath of the defeat of the Unionist army at Bull Run. The first major battle of the American Civil War had been fought near Manassas, Virginia, about thirty miles west-southwest of Washington D.C. on 21 July 1861, when two armies of each about 18,000 men, both poorly trained and poorly led, ended with the Union forces slow retreating in disarray. Writing to Gaskell on 12 August, Norton drew a lesson from that "disheartening" experience from the recent defeat:

it had been on the whole of good effect. It has deepened the spirit of the North, and led the people to a juster estimate of the magnitude of the struggle, [...] to a firmer conviction of the value and principles for which we are contending [...] and expressed his conviction that

the destruction of slavery would mark “the beginning of a most difficult but also inspiring period in our history”. (Whitehill 2013, 90)

In *The Atlantic* article he was to examine the causes of the defeat, pointing to the soldiers’ moral constitution: “a regiment of bullies and prize-fighters is not the best stuff to compose an army” (Norton 1861b, 362), and refuting a charge that the Unionist Army lacked “vindictiveness”:

“Your men are not vindictive enough”, Mr. Russell<sup>3</sup> is reported to have said, as he watched the battle. It was the saying of a shrewd observer, but it expresses only an imperfect apprehension of the truth. Vindictiveness is not the spirit our men should have, but a resoluteness of determination, as much more to be relied upon than a vindictive passion as it is founded. [...] The atrocities committed on our wounded and prisoners by the “chivalry” of the South may excite not only horror, but a wild fury of revenge. But our cause should not be stained with cruelty and crime, even in the name of vengeance. If the war is simply one in which brute force is to prevail, if we are fighting only for lust and pride and domination, then let us have our “Ellsworth Avengers”, and let us slay the wounded of our enemy without mercy; let us burn their hospitals, let us justify their, as yet, false charges against us; [...] War must be always cruel; it is not to be waged on principles of tenderness; but a just, a religious war can be waged only mercifully, with no excess, with no circumstance of avoidable suffering. Our enemies are our outward consciences, and their reproaches may warn us of our dangers. (Norton 1861b, 362-3)

Norton sketches a profile of the Union’s soldiers: “they are intelligent, independent, vigorous”; they possess sound motivation and “clear appreciation of the nature and grounds of the contest”, but need to be animated by the “spiritual principles from which [life] gains its worth [...]” (Norton 1861b, 363). Prominence is given to religion:

to be successful war must be a religious war, [...] not a war of violent excitement and passionate enthusiasm, not a war in which the crimes of cruel bigots are laid to the charge of divine impulse”, but rather to be fought “with dignified and solemn strength, with clean hands and pure hearts,- a war calm and inevitable in its processes as the judgments of God”. (Norton 1861b, 361)

<sup>3</sup> William H. Russell was special correspondent for *The Times* of London during the American Civil War; his reports on the crisis had such a strong impact on the whole American audience to force him to leave the country prematurely.

And “*Religion*” – Norton concludes – must be “the watchword for our great struggle for liberty and right”, as it was the “watchword [...] when Cromwell’s men won the victory at Winceby Fight”.<sup>4</sup> The reference to Cromwell seems to mark a distance from Carlyle’s model of heroism. The word “hero” in fact occurs only once in the article and refers to Medieval knights as models of military virtue. Legendary and historical figures from Lancelot and Sir Philip Sidney, to Chevalier de Bayard share the qualities of paragons of a chivalric code of honour.

Though the science of war has in modern times changed the relations and the duties of men on the battle-field from what they were in the old days of knighthood, yet there is still room for the display of stainless valour and of manful virtue. *Honor* and *courage* are part of our religion; and the coward or the man careless of honour in our army of liberty should fall under heavier shame than ever rested on the disgraced soldier in former times. The sense of honour is finer than the common sense of the world. It counts no cost and reckons no sacrifice great. “Then the king wept, and dried his eyes, and said, ‘Your courage had neere hand destroyed you, for I call it folly knights to abide when they be overmatched’. ‘Nay’, said Sir Lancelot and the other, ‘for once shamed may never be recovered’”. The examples of Bayard,<sup>5</sup> – *sans peur et sans reproche*, – of Sidney, of the heroes of old or recent days, are for our imitation. We are bound to be no less worthy of praise and remembrance than they. They did nothing too high for us to imitate. And in their glorious company we may hope that some of our names may yet be enrolled, to stand as the inspiring exemplars and the models for coming times. (Norton 1861b, 365; emphasis in the text)

The popularity in America of Pierre Terrail, better known as Chevalier de Bayard, had been consolidated by William Gilmore Simms’s

<sup>4</sup> The reference to Cromwell in the context of a war discourse evokes Carlyle’s electing the Puritan leader as the champion of transcendent heroism in the last lecture of his *Of Hero, and Hero Worship and the Heroic in History*. Implied and unavoidable though the reference is, some remarkable difference is to be noticed. Firstly, Norton mentions Winceby Fight that is the first battle fought in 1643 by the parliamentary forces, which were actually led by Lord Edward Montague, Cromwell’s superior at the time. This is certainly due to the fact that Norton is referring to an early stage in the British Civil War as the American Civil War was. Secondly, Norton’s letter is free from the emphatic prophetic tones of Carlyle, whose Cromwell was the embodiment of the philosophy of the Great Man, dominated by the dogma of the hero. See Campbell 2006.

<sup>5</sup> An evidence of the popularity of Chevalier Bayard at the time is the presence of his portrait in the 1857 Manchester Exhibition (cat. n. 200), which Norton visited and reviewed when he first met Elizabeth Gaskell. The portrait was then attributed to Giorgione, now to Pietro della Vecchia (1603-1678).

*The Life of Chevalier Bayard*, first published in 1847, republished in a second edition in 1860 with the subtitle “The good knight, sans peur et sans reproche”. Simms, a supporter of the Confederate cause and slavery, wrote extensively on the history of the southern states, and Norton’s reference to Bayard and Lancelot would seem to implicitly allude to Simm’s edition of the book and claim for the Union the models of chivalric heroism that he had advertised and identified with the Southern cause. According to Norton these values and principles were embodied by the figure of the modern knightly soldier fighting for a good cause.

As Philip Hepburn turns into Stephen Freeman, he seems to take on the qualities of Norton’s religious soldier. His identification with a medieval knight is made explicit in chapter 52, when, back in Britain, Stephen is received by the Hospital of St Sepulchre as a bedesman: there one sleepless night, he picks up the *Seven Champions of Wisdom* and reads the life of Guy of Warwick. The story of the earl returning from the Crusades as a begging hermit to be recognized by his wife only on his deathbed, is a patent *mise en abyme* of the latter part of the plot in which Stephen Freeman returns to Monkshaven, and as he lies dying is forgiven by a finally loving Sylvia. The story of Guy of Warwick is not included in Richard Johnson’s 1596 *Renowned History of the Seven Champions of Wisdom*, to which the shorter title mentioned in the novel seems to allude, nor to any other similar collection.<sup>6</sup> Gaskell’s invented reference would seem to function as an intertextual marker alluding to Norton’s essay on the civil war and also to the vehement medieval rhetoric and imagery in his essays and in his correspondence with Gaskell. A medieval imagery that was inspired by Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement established in America at the time of the Civil War (Dowling 2007, 59).<sup>7</sup> There Norton had also praised the Sanitary Commission established in 1861 to help the wounded and sick soldiers of the American Civil War and defined them as “the descendants of the medieval knights of St. Lazarus, the Hospitallers, or the Knights of the Teutonic Orders”, the commission “was to the America of the nineteenth century

<sup>6</sup> The legend had circulated widely until the 18th century, in Bishop Percy’s *Reliques* and later in Thomas Warton’s 1774 *History of English Poetry*. Ronald Crane reconstructs this tradition and maintains that Guy continued to appeal to the general reading public owing to the persistence of a long-established tradition, and yet as the legend saw the beginning of a scholarly interest it also saw almost the end of popular interest. A much greater success attended *The Noble and Renowned History of Guy Earl of Warwick*, which was published in 1706 as the work of GL. Of all the prose treatments of the legend this was destined to achieve perhaps the greatest popularity. It was reprinted at regular intervals well into the mid-nineteenth century (Crane 1915, 184-5).

<sup>7</sup> Ruskin, who was on friendly terms with Norton, broke off the correspondence with him in 1864 until the war was over, as he thought the war “entirely horrible” (Dowling 2007, 80).

ry what the orders of chivalry were to Europe in their day" (Norton 1867; see also Dowling 2007, 55). The retreat in the Hospital of St Sepulchre seems to be a further allusion to this densely symbolical place for such a character as Stephen Freeman, whose chivalric cypher so closely leans towards the image of the unknown, self-effacing volunteer.

## 5 Stephen, the Freedman

Philip Hepburn's change of name when he joins the Royal Navy has gone substantially unexamined by critics. "Freeman" is either seen as related to his quest to free himself from his "sin of presumption" (Marroni 1987, 145), or to an attempt to (vainly) renew his life, as glossed by the narrator's own voice in chapter 34 - "with a new name, he began a new life. 'Alas! the old life lives forever!'" (Sanders 1978, 221). Yet, the context of the American Civil War that we have identified as a subtext to the novel activates obvious connections with the anti-slavery cause, for "Freeman" or more often "Freedman" is a noun that resonates strongly with the language of the Civil War. The referent of Lincoln's 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, the "Freedman" was the name of a social category constituted as early as 1848 (see Drake 1963, 176), one that was at the centre of social emancipation campaigns in the years 1861-71 which saw the birth of the Freedman's Aid Movement, and the Freedmen's educational Union. That the name "Freeman" was perceived as clearly connoted for an Anglo-American readership seems to be out of question, especially if attached to a *sui generis* war hero as a symbolic halo. Throughout the Norton-Gaskell correspondence, the abolitionist cause has a prominent place, as to Norton the Civil War was essentially an anti-slavery war - "to abolish slavery - to fight and die on the behalf of a powerless and despised people - was to regenerate the commonwealth at the deepest level of its founding principles" (Dowling 2007, 48). Norton frequently refers to the voluntary enrolment of black freedmen soldiers, a controversial practice that he strenuously supported at the time. It occupies a central place in his letters to Gaskell well after the publication of *Sylvia's Lovers* until her sudden death two months after the end of the war, as in a long letter dated 16 January 1865 (Whitehill 2013, 119). It was one of the main topics of their exchanges, where Gaskell voiced the charges, perplexities, and objections that were circulating in Britain and that were addressed to her as a friend of Norton's. Her mediatory position is very clearly stated in a letter dated 4 July 1864:

[...] two people - I won't say *who*, attacked me, saying your letter was ASSERTION, but not *facts*. I tell you plain out, because I always

do want to have FACTS if I can, on which your opinions are based. I *fully* believe you, because I know you; but what *facts* am I to give in answer to such speeches as this. "It is a war forced by the Government on the people, the orders for enlistment are not readily or willingly responded to, and the army is principally composed of mercenaries - German for the most part. 2ndly, it is a war for territory; the pretext of slavery is *only a pretext* with a large majority; a few more enlightened have it really at heart". And then they refer to the Emancipation Proclamation only setting the slaves *rebels* free; [...] Again they ask me by what force - standing army or military government - the rebel provinces if once conquered, are to be held? I know that all these questions arise out of the wicked mis-statements of the "Times" - but that they are difficult to answer, unless I simply reassert my faith in what *will* be, sooner or later. And then very good people say no great evil was ever put down by violence - that they even doubt if the abolition of slavery is worth the immense blood and sacrifice of this war, as by the spread of opinion it was almost sure to have been put an end to before 50 years were over by the slaveholders themselves - to which I reply by the annexation, etc. (Whitehill 2013, 113-14; emphasis in the text)

The letter continues with this reporting of the "very good people's" objections and solicits from Norton evidence to be forwarded back to them: "They own that in the beginning the South was rebellious, and treacherous, but they say that those who *hesitated* once as to the Xtian lawfulness of holding slaves, must now have assumed that it is part of patriotism to uphold slavery, and that it is a war of extermination" (Whitehill 2013, 115). Gaskell here plays her role of intellectual mediator which she had assumed throughout her social-problem fiction, where she had raised her middle-class readership's awareness of the most heated issues of the time by introjecting their judgmental gaze within the novels. In *Mary Barton* and in *Ruth* Gaskell's protagonists are marginalized characters who are exposed to the middle class characters' condemnatory gaze, which the self-reflective spectacle of the novel reveals as intolerant and unacceptable. In a telling scene in *Sylvia's Lovers* we seem to catch this judgmental gaze cast on Stephen Freeman, in a complex cross-reflexion where Stephen is both the victim and the subject of social fear/hostility. After his rescue of Kinraid, Freeman's features are horribly "blackened and scarred" by an explosion. Far from being just a narrative ploy for his return home in disguise like Guy of Warwick, this seems to be part of the new character that Philip Hepburn has turned into. The scene in which Stephen Freeman sees in the mirror an alien Other is quite telling, as his own gaze embodies the scorn of his community as a whole:

In the small oblong of looking-glass hung against the wall, Philip caught the reflection of his own face, and *laughted scornfully at the sight*. The thin hair lay upon his temples in the flakes that betoken long ill-health; his eyes were the same as ever, and they had always been considered the best feature in his face; but they were sunk in their orbits, and looked hollow and gloomy. As for the lower part of his face, blackened, contracted, drawn away from his teeth, the outline entirely changed by the breakage of his jaw-bone, he was indeed a fool if he thought himself fit to go forth to win back that love which Sylvia had forsworn. As a hermit and a beggar, he must return to Monkshaven, and fall perforce into the same position which Guy of Warwick had only assumed. (Gaskell 2014, 404)

In the reflected image the black man merges with the medieval knight. A few lines below the narrator describes the reflected image by pointing at the few distinctive features of a black man: “his gentle, wistful eyes, and the white and faultless teeth” – but seeing himself again through the hostile public gaze, he withdraws from taking even the outside position that he might just have been able to afford in the couch.

He had saved some money from his allowance as bedesman and from his pension, and might occasionally have taken an outside place on a coach, had it not been that he shrank from the first look of every stranger upon his disfigured face. Yet, the gentle, wistful eyes, and the white and faultless teeth always did away with the first impression as soon as people became little acquainted with his appearance. (Gaskell 2014, 405)

## 6 Conclusion

Norton's involvement in the American Civil War and his passionate defence of the Unionist cause and his drawing on a repertoire of chivalric values and a medieval imagery seems to have left a substantial mark on *Sylvia's Lovers*. Gaskell had begun the novel before the outbreak of the war as a historical tale of love in which the focus would have been on the adventurous figure of Kinraid, and the plot and setting of Crabbe's poem on the tragedies of common people caught in the great web of history. When the Civil War broke out Gaskell's work on the novel came to a halt, not only because of her active involvement in supporting the working class in its struggle during the great famine caused by the war, but because she started considering the war from a more complex perspective, one which involved the issue of individual freedom and the need to defend it. The dilemma Gaskell faced as a consequence is well expressed in the conver-

sation between Daniel Robson and Philip Hepburn in chapter 4. The letters between Norton and Gaskell record an intense exchange in which the American friend provides the English novelist with matter that was to be imaginatively transfigured in the novel, generating a symbolic overload which at once disorients and attracts the reader. In bringing to light this substantial subtext to the novel, this reading provides supports to Shelston's statement that "America was always in her mind" and that Gaskell's critics should "examine the way her constructions of it played a part in her literary consciousness" (Shelston 2001, 62). A subtext that is implicitly but quite clearly evoked in Gaskell's dedication of the American edition of the novel to her "Northerners [sic] Friends, With the truest sympathy of an English Woman; and in an especial manner to my dear Friend CHARLES ELIOT NORTON, And to his Wife". This was also quite explicitly acknowledged by Norton who, after reading the book, recognized how much it owed to shared experiences, ideals and engagement:

I have read it with such feeling as few other books have ever called out in me. It is impossible for me to say to you what I should like to say, - for the words do not convey when written the true impression of feeling. But *Sylvia's Lovers* will be henceforth to me and to my wife not so much a book that we have read, as a part of the experience of our lives, - happy & yet half sad, quickening all true sympathies, widening our charity, and making part of our united secret treasury of precious common memories & affections. (Whitehill 2013, 100)

Over the pages of the same long letter he updates his English friend on the progress of the War, "the good work" it was accomplishing, the rapid growth of nationality feeling, the anti-slavery sentiment spreading through Missouri, Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky and Tennessee, and on the successful experiment of enlisting troops of "freed men" volunteers in South Carolina and Massachusetts (Whitehill 2013, 100-1). The letter, confidential but politically reserved in tone, is an interesting document both from a diplomatic point and from a literary one. It gives an idea of the exchanges between Norton and Gaskell and how the novelist became deeply involved with the American situation, as the direct addressee of Norton's regular and detailed reports.

And yet in the novel the "bright optimism" (Drake 1963, 703) that Norton expressed in his letters and in his articles on the Civil War dissolves into the atmosphere of Gaskell's "saddest Novel", whose pessimism and wretchedness surrounds the characters and radiates from Philip Hepburn-Stephen Freeman, the embodiment of so many allusions to Norton's ideal soldier. Thus the war atmosphere casts dark shadows on the love story: Stephen as soldier carries the heavy burden of a personal fate which represents the existential con-



dition of man in wartime, obsessively confronting a sense of mortality as both dark omen and present condition. When Philip returns to Monkshaven as an invalid, he confronts the idea of death – of his expectations, of the feared death of his beloved ones. And when, soon after he sees Sylvia and their child smiling and cheering the circus unaware of him and his disabled appearance, an image of loss is generated. This sense of death reverberates in the epigraph on the title-page of the novel, which quotes three lines from Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. An opening that sets the tone in an elegiac key of grief and mourning:

Oh for thy voice to soothe and bless!  
What hope of answer, or redress?  
Behind the veil! Behind the veil!

The epigraph omits the first line of the stanza – “Oh life as futile then, as frail” – thus attenuating the “most pessimistic stanza of the poem” (Shaw 2007, 87), which has been interpreted in relation to the framework of metaphysical doubt that was brought about by the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Jenny Uglow sees the lines as voicing Gaskell's “despair in her attempt to fit the bewilderment of nature into the meliorist framework of history and a trust in divine providence” (Uglow 1993, 506).

However, the sense of mourning that the lines cast on the novel may be more precisely related to the tragedy and horror brought by the War that Gaskell had so closely experienced through Norton. Once again, the correspondence may shed some light on this. In the above-quoted letter to Norton dated 31 December 1861, where Gaskell refers to “The Advantages of Defeat”, the essay that was to leave such a deep impression on the novel, she quotes a line from section ninety-seven of Tennyson's *In Memoriam* to express her painfully divided attitude towards the War: “Meta and I” – she says – “are very faithful Northerners: literally ‘faithful’ for when they quote New York reports of American public speeches quoting how you are determined to force us into war, our answer is something like that line of Tennyson's ‘I cannot understand – I love’” (Whitehill 2013, 96). The epigraph to the novel would seem to be another implicit and yet clear reference to her correspondence with Norton, a reference that her American friend must have recognized. It is another intertextual marker of that passionately and painfully reconstructed account of the Civil War that had contributed to shape Gaskell's “tragic” book. Thus, romance is largely indebted to Norton's medievalism and, through an allegorical mode, to the American context and the racial question, which quite significantly would be taken up in *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell's last unfinished novel.

## Bibliography

- Armstrong, W.M. (1967). "The Freedmen's Movement and the Foundling of the Nation". *The Journal of American History*, 1, 53(4), 708-26.
- Blaine, M.E. (1992-93). "Carlyle's Cromwell and the Virtue of the Inarticulate". *Carlyle Annual*, 13, 77-88.
- Brooks, P. (1976). *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press.
- Campbell, I. (2006). "A Transatlantic Friendship: The Carlyles and Charles Eliot Norton". *Carlyle Studies Annual*, 22, 215-42.
- Carlyle, T. (1907). *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. London: Chapman and Hall.
- Catalogue of the Treasures of the United Kingdom. Collected at Manchester in 1857*. (1857). London: Bradbury and Evans.
- Chapple, J.A.V.; Pollard, A. (eds) (1997). *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Chapple, J.A.V.; Pollard, A. (eds) (2003). *Further Letters of Mrs Gaskell*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Crane, L.R. (1915). "The Vogue of Guy of Warwick from the Close of the Middle Ages to the Romantic Revival". *PMLA*, 30, 125-94.
- Dowling, L. (2007). *Charles Eliot Norton. The Art of Reform in Nineteenth-Century America*. Lebanon, NH: University of New Hampshire Press.
- Drake, R. (1963). "Freedmen's Aid Societies and Sectional Compromise". *The Journal of Southern History*, 29(2), 175-86.
- Forster, E.M. (1941). "George Crabbe: The Poet and the Man". *The Listener*, 28 May.
- Gaskell, E. (1863a). *Sylvia's Lovers*. London: Smith & Elder.
- Gaskell, E. (1863b). *Sylvia's Lovers*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Gaskell, E. (2014). *Sylvia's Lovers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lawson, B.S. (1999). "From *Moby-Dick* to *Billy Budd*: Elizabeth Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers*". *South Atlantic Review*, 64(2), 37-57.
- Lukács, G. (1963). *The Historical Novel*. Edited by H. Mitchell. Transl. by S. Mitchell. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Lukács, G. (1970). "Narrate or Describe". Kahn, A. (ed.), *Writer and Critic and other Essays*. London: Merlin Press, 110-48.
- Marroni, F. (1987). *La fabbrica nella valle: saggio sulla narrativa di Elizabeth Gaskell*. Bari: Adriatica.
- Marucci, F. (2003). *Storia della letteratura inglese*, vol. 3, tomo 2, 536-43.
- Mazzoni, G. (2011). *Teoria del romanzo*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- Moretti, F. (1998). *An Atlas of the European Novel*. London: Verso.
- Norton, C.E. (1861a). "The Laws of Race as Connected with Slavery". *The Atlantic Monthly*, 7 February, 252-4.
- Norton, C.E. (1861b). "The Advantages of Defeat". *The Atlantic Monthly*, 8 September, 350-65.
- Norton, C.E. (1864). "Our Soldiers". *The North American Review*, 99, 204, 172-204.
- Norton, C.E. (1867). "The Work of the Sanitary Commission". *The North American Review*, 104, 142-55.
- O'Gorman, F. (2014). "Introduction". Gaskell 2014, IX-XXVI.
- Pettitt, C. (2012). "Time Lag and Elizabeth Gaskell's Transatlantic Imagination". *Victorian Studies*, 54(4), 599-623.

- Rowe, A. (2020). "The New Creed of the Nation: Charles Eliot Norton, E.L. Godkin, and the Meaning of Freedom in the Civil War Era". *Journal of American Studies*, 54(4), 671-705.
- Sanders, A. (1978). "Suffering a Sea-Change: Mrs Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers*". Sanders, A., *The Victorian Historical Novel 1840-1880*. London: Macmillan, 197-228.
- Sanders, A. (1992). "Varieties of Religious Experience in *Sylvia's Lovers*". *The Gaskell Society Journal*, 6, 15-24.
- Schor, H.M. (1992). *Scheherazade in the Marketplace. Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sharps, J.G. (1970). *Mrs Gaskell's Observation and Invention*. Fontwell: Linden Press.
- Shaw, M. (2007). "*Sylvia's Lovers* and Other Historical Fiction". Matus, J.L. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 75-89.
- Shelston, A. (2001). "Alligators Infesting the Stream: Elizabeth Gaskell and the USA". *The Gaskell Society Journal*, 15, 53-63.
- Shelston, A. (2003). "From *Cranford* to *The Country of the Pointed Firs*": Elizabeth Gaskell's American publication and the work of Sarah Orne Jewett". *The Gaskell Society Journal*, 17, 77-91.
- Simms, W.G. (1847). *The Life of Chevalier Bayard*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers.
- Twinn, F. (2001). "Navigational Pitfalls and Topographical Constraints in *Sylvia's Lover*". *The Gaskell Society Journal*, 15, 38-52.
- Uglow, J. (1993). "Baffled Seas: *Sylvia's Lovers*". *Elizabeth Gaskell. A Habit of Stories*. London: Faber and Faber, 505-28.
- Watson, J.R.; Watson D. (2004). "Heroes and Heroines in *Sylvia's Lovers*". *The Gaskell Society Journal*, 18, 81-94.
- Whitehill, J. (ed.) (2013). *Letters of Mrs. Gaskell and Charles Eliot Norton 1855-1865*. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag.
- Yarrow, P. (1993). "Mrs Gaskell and France". *The Gaskell Society Journal*, 7, 16-36.

