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ILLICIT INSCRIPTIONS: REFRAMING FORGERY IN ELIZABETH GASKELL'S *RUTH*

By Sara A. Malton

> Forgery is now considered an offence of the greatest magnitude; . . . In proportion, therefore, as a nation increases in wealth by buying and selling, it will magnify the criminality of a fraud by which buying and selling may be checked. The change of opinion will show itself in the penal laws, and in the not less deterrent force of social reprobation.
>
> — Luke Owen Pike, *History of Crime in England* (1876)

I

THE NARRATIVE OF CONCEALMENT, revelation, and recovery in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853) turns on two forms of fraud: the heroine's disguise and an event that has received little critical attention, Richard Bradshaw's forgery. Abandoned by her seducer, Ruth initially regains her social and economic footing by adopting, with the help of the Bensons, a false identity for herself and her illegitimate son. But to their collective misfortune she is ultimately exposed and expelled from her position as a governess in the Bradshaw household. It is later revealed that the son of her former employer forged signatures on insurance documents for his financial gain, and we are encouraged to evaluate the varying penalties to which he and Ruth are subject. Despite Mr. Bradshaw's declaration before the defrauded Thurstan Benson that he will "be no hindrance to the course of justice" (404; ch. 30), the penalty that his son ultimately faces – a new business position in Glasgow – hardly accords with "an offence of the greatest magnitude" that Pike identifies above. The novel illustrates that while social, economic, and legal institutions serve to closet men's fraudulent activities, they subject women's acts of misrepresentation, particularly their crimes of the body, to a much more stringent, public form of regulation. As Richard himself affirms, "many things are right for men which are not for girls" (213; ch. 19).

Of particular interest, however, is the way in which the intersection of forgery and illegitimacy emerges as central to the novel's examination of the gendering of discipline. Indeed, forgery serves as a provocative analogue for the heroine's "spurious production," her illegitimate son, Leonard.[1] Forgery and illegitimacy share in the potential threat they pose to the foundational structures of patrilineal stability, such as inheritance, and, by extension, the stability of the capitalist system. And, like the forgery, the bastard is in fact most threatening

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once detected in circulation among the authorized: such currency illustrates not merely its own fraudulent status, but also the vulnerability of the system it has invaded and threatened to pollute.

Among recent discussions of Gaskell, Linda Hughes and Michael Lund attend closest to the provocative intersection of the textual artifact and the illegitimate child in her works.[2] Hughes and Lund usefully consider how women's letters and other documents typically exemplify impulses of community and sympathy, but also identify them as a register of Gaskell's view of her own fiction. In this regard, they follow in a critical tradition that has identified Gaskell's thematic preoccupation with illegitimacy as not only a form of social criticism, but also indicative of her sense of her literary output as marginalized, "illegitimate" productions. Yet the convergence of forgery and illegitimacy in Gaskell's writing gestures beyond her anxieties as a woman writer in the literary marketplace. She not only exploits what Natalka Freeland identifies as the "popularly recognized homologies" (214) between forgery and illegitimacy, but also invokes these "crimes" as a means to scrutinize key socio-political problems in her culture.

By contrasting cultural attitudes toward the fallen woman and her child with the leniency granted Richard, Gaskell invokes an important criminal and legislative history that Pike's claim above about the need for greater vigilance where forgery is concerned seems to overlook. Forgery had been a capital crime until, following lengthy debates over the rise of forgery prosecutions and executions, the 1832 and 1837 Forgery Acts removed it from the list of capital offences (Philips 233). By setting the novel in the recent past, the 1830s according to Alan Shelston (459 n. 3), Gaskell places Richard's forgeries in close proximity to a time when he may have faced execution for such crimes. And Richard may have been a prime candidate for conviction. According to C. H. Wall, writing in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1840, "the persons prosecuted for this offence were, for the most part, young men of extravagant habits, belonging to the middle classes of society" (482). This legal history, I would suggest, inflects Gaskell's depiction of the cultural attitudes toward kinds of "criminality" in her novel. Its relevance to the portrayal of Ruth's marginalization invites us to reconsider the way in which the novel identifies economic and legal relationships as significant registers of moral worth.

Acknowledging forgery's position as a crime of some severity can usefully expand our understanding of the taxonomies that Gaskell's novel at once invokes and queries. From the portrayal of Job Legh in *Mary Barton* (1848) to Roger Hamley in *Wives and Daughters* (1864–66), Gaskell's fiction shows her marked interest in classification and scientific observation – and their limits. In *Ruth*, her focus on criminal classification acutely illustrates the extent to which, as David Perkins has claimed, systems of classification "map the cultural world" and "shape our sense of national our sense of national and personal identity" (248–49). The classification of fallen women and prostitutes was of course a topic of much interest in the nineteenth century, and one that informs Gaskell's treatment of illicit sexuality in *Ruth*. In her discussion of the "discourse on urban investigation" (84) in Gaskell's fiction, Alexis Easley suggests that in *Mary Barton*, "[t]he middle-class reader is invited to assume the role of urban investigator – the sympathetic yet objective observer of domestic health and morals" (93). Yet in her portrayal of Mr. Bradshaw's failed efforts at domestic surveillance, where both Ruth's and, notably, his own son's fraudulence are concerned, Gaskell explicitly shows the limits of the forms of observation and definition upon which criminal taxonomies depend.

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The position of the fallen woman and bastard child as permanently "marked" illustrates how such classification ironically resembles the act of minting. It places a stamp of kind and value on the object that resides unindividuated within a collection or group. That categorization is deemed to be final and determinant; the object's value and identity are wholly dependent upon the classification into which it falls. Responding to the taxonomic methods of contemporary urban observers, *Ruth* dramatizes the performative function of such classifications, which threaten to permanently inscribe the fallen woman and her child as degenerate and render it impossible for them to ever move beyond the bounds of that classification – without what Faith Benson terms "a talent for fiction" (*Ruth* 150; ch. 14). As Anita Wilson suggests, the novel shows how the operation of such "essentialism" depends upon "reductive categories which deny individuality and the importance of personal history" (108). The classification of the fallen becomes, in this view, itself responsible for their permanent degradation.

Such taxonomy is here shown to be necessarily dependent on faith in the visual, the reliability of which is shattered by the circulation of the forgery. *Ruth* raises questions about the supposed "visibility" of the fallen woman and her illegitimate child, suggesting that the presumed nature of that visibility is unreliable and stereotypically defined. In her ultimate portrayal of Ruth as a figure of redemption and social healing, Gaskell questions the extent to which taxonomies can legitimately claim to refer to inherent properties within the individual. By focusing on the way in which such forms of classification as "illegitimate" or "fallen" are often the product of social and economic marginalization rather than inherent immorality, Gaskell challenges the cultural assumptions that determine individuals' perceived social value. Toward the novel's close, Ruth's son, Leonard, is secured under the guardianship of a respected doctor, whose own mother was unmarried. Gaskell thereby enables Leonard's social and economic integration while challenging, as she does throughout her novel, the cultural insistence that moral turpitude is obvious and transparent.

Ruth thus draws our attention to those economic and legal circumstances that lent particular force to the connection between forgery and other forms of "illegitimacy" in the nineteenth century. Such a connection in fact finds frequent expression in the nineteenth-century novel. Forgery and forgers appear in works of fiction by Dickens, Collins, Trollope, Hardy, and many others in a manner that illustrates forgery's continuing powerful resonance in the Victorian cultural imaginary. Thus, in *Great Expectations* (1860–61), a novel preoccupied with literal and figurative forgery, Mrs. Joe includes forgery in her catalogue of the most heinous of crimes: "People," she tells young Pip, "are put in the Hulks because they murder, and because they rob, and forge" (15; vol. 1, ch. 2).

While the depiction of forgers and their crimes is often marginalized by the more central narrative focus, as in *Ruth*, on "social problems" such as illegitimacy, the appearance of fiscal forgery in Victorian literature, from Compeyson's organized forgery network in *Great Expectations*, to Glyde's forgery in the marriage register in *The Woman in White* (1861), to Hyde's suspected "forging" of Jekyll's cheques in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), registers an important response to a range of other "social problems" occasioned by the shifting social, legal, and economic conditions of the nineteenth century. Bringing together literal and figurative forgery as it does, *Ruth* invites us to consider how, for the Victorians, forgery was persistently implicated in questions surrounding the integrity of bodily and economic relations.

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Thus, while the convergence of forgery and illegitimacy in the novel forcefully literalizes Margaret Homans's claims about men's control of language and property, including women and children, it is important to attend to the way Gaskell's treatment of these issues arises out of what Hilary Schor identifies as the "specific cultural languages available to the particular woman writer" (7) at a particular "cultural moment" (47).[3] Pam Parker aptly observes that while *Ruth* "is often considered a redemptive tale of a 'fallen woman,' it is also concerned with the strategies individuals employ to survive the upheavals of shifting economic systems" (54). These aspects of the narrative, I would suggest, need not be considered as discrete parts of the novel. In its focus on fraud, bribery, patrimony, inheritance, and guardianship, *Ruth* reveals the fraught but inextricable interrelation between morality and money. It encourages its readers to reconsider fallenness as not merely a moral or a sanitary problem, but an economic circumstance as well.[4] Thus exemplifying Gaskell's ongoing engagement with contemporary discourses of political economy, law, and their social effects, *Ruth* provides a means from which we can begin to refine our understanding of the cultural conceptions of illegitimate issue in the period, both the body and the text, and the significance of their persistent association in nineteenth-century literature.

II

THE CULTURAL FOCUS on forgery had become particularly intensified in the late-eighteenth century, and it is a matter that continues to be of interest to Victorian writers. Dickens notes in his Preface to *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) that his inclusion of the case of Mary Jones, a woman executed at Tyburn in 1771 for shoplifting, "is no effort of invention. The facts were stated exactly as they are stated here, in the House of Commons" (3). Yet Dickens also includes in *Barnaby Rudge* a case that is an "effort of invention" – the execution of the bastard Hugh's mother for the uttering of forged notes. This is a subtle but important addition to the novel, which is set at a key point in forgery's legislative history. While the number of forgery cases had yet to reach the heights that would be seen in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, the executions for forgery in the 1770s and 80s were critical for establishing the public sense of the crime's severity.[5] Few though they were, forgery trials received enormous public attention. The notorious fate of Reverend Dr. William Dodd became a particular case in point, and his execution for forgery in 1777 would haunt the age.[6]

Paul Baines sees the prosecution and hanging of Dr. Dodd as an exemplification of the "new commercial concern over forgery in the eighteenth century" (3). This concern was fuelled by a growing sense that the emergent system of credit and commerce was under increasing threat. As a result of the introduction of paper notes and the suspension of cash payments by the Bank of England during the Restriction period (1797–1821), and the "flood of poor-quality, small-denomination notes" (Baines 9) it occasioned, the period between 1790 and 1820 saw the proliferation of both forgery and convictions for this offence.[7] Despite the Bank of England's increasingly hegemonic control of the issuing of notes, which would culminate in the 1844 Bank Charter Act, its notes were notorious for the ease with which they could be forged during the nation's vast "reliance on inconvertible paper" (Poovey 8). While in 1806 barely 3000 forged notes were presented to the Bank of England, by 1817 this number had grown to 29,000 – a figure indicative only of those spurious notes that were detected (Fetter 72). The numbers of hangings for forgery jumped accordingly.[8]

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Especially as their numbers would sharply rise into the early decades of the nineteenth century, forgery executions would come to exemplify what Dickens saw as the failures of the violent force of law – and the excesses of those who hold its power.[9] As he states in his first volume of *Household Words* (1850),

> The arguments in favour of death punishments never fail so signally as when brought to the test of the scaffold and its effect on Bank Forgeries. When these were most numerous, although from twenty to thirty persons were put to death in one year, the gallows was never deprived of an equal share of prey during the next. As long as simulated notes could be passed with ease, and detected with difficulty, the Old Bailey had no terrors for clever engravers and dexterous imitators of the hieroglyphic autographs of the Bank of England signers. (617)

The ease with which forgeries could be carried out was far too tempting for adept imitators. And executions were not, as Dickens points out, working as a deterrent against further crime. Their numbers are, more precisely, a measure of legal and social failures.

While Dickens expresses his outrage at the proliferation of hangings for petty forgery offences, forgery "networks" had also become an increasingly organized, urban phenomena, as his own portrayal of Compeyson's organized "business" of "swindling, handwriting forging, stolen bank-note passing, and such-like" in *Great Expectations* shows (348; vol. 2, ch. 3). Clive Emsley suggests that the growth of new capital legislation that developed in the latter part of the eighteenth century had in fact been particularly aimed at:

> forgers from the respectable classes, people who rarely appeared as defendants in the courts and especially not on capital charges. Adam Smith, and others, stressed the dangers to economic life if frauds attacking the circulation of promissory notes were allowed to increase and go unpunished, especially since paper was becoming more and more important in commerce and the production of wealth. (255)

Forgery was seen to pose new and more threatening challenges to the economy, as it was not merely confined to lower-class criminals, but, as in Richard Bradshaw's case, was often hidden behind a mask of respectability.

The cultural anxiety surrounding forgery also points to broader unease about the dominance and susceptibility of the "cash nexus": the proliferation of pecuniary crime, speculation, and economic crises into the mid-century created a widespread sense of economic vulnerability and meant that crimes such as forgery would be acutely felt. While, as Baines suggests, the eighteenth-century "monetary environment . . . contained both practical (monetary) and symbolic (cultural) risks which forgery exposed" (15), ongoing financial unrest in the nineteenth century consolidated forgery not only as an act of sinister fraud, but also a site of cultural and economic exposure.

The reappearance of the forger in nineteenth-century literature – even (or perhaps especially) at the narrative margins – speaks to the way in which the period was haunted by the intangibilities of a modern capitalist economy. Suggesting that novels such as Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847) and Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) respond to "a perceived shift of influence from traditional structures of wealth based on the massive fixities of landed property to new ones based on the liquidities of manufacturing, commerce, speculation, and credit," Christopher Herbert aptly describes how "the distinct characteristic of Victorian

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money was its ever-more-tenuous relation to tangible reality (188).[10] The dominance of credit occasioned the unsettling translation of identity into paper as "the self circulated as a name on a document, simultaneously powerful and vulnerable to forgery" (Baines 14). Forgery thus comes to embody rising concerns about the legibility of an individual's moral and economic worth. The "monetary form of value steadily erodes the significance of face-to-face interpersonal credibility" (Crosby 230), producing fears that were heightened by the bank failures that persisted throughout the first half of the century – "in numbers alarming enough to keep the public wary of the banks" (Poovey 21) – and the recurrent economic crises that punctuated the period.[11] In the novel, forgers are shown to possess a particular capacity for exploiting the resulting interpretive flux.

Gaskell's *Cranford* (1851–53) surely registers this sense of fiscal uncertainty.[12] When in "Stopped Payment" Miss Matty meets Mr. Dobson while on a shopping expedition, she immediately suspects that his five-pound banknote, which the clerk has just pronounced worthless, is forged. The facts of the case reveal that the note is not forged, but it may as well be so: the bank issuing it, the Town and County Bank, in which Miss Matty has invested her savings, is on the verge of collapse. Both the possibility of forgery and the shaky ground upon which this bank, like many, found itself speak to the extent of widespread economic vulnerability in the period. Furthermore, the scene reveals how individuals such as Miss Matty are far more connected to this unstable world of banking and investment than they may appear. Despite its apparent exclusion from modern progress, "the commercial world, in which banks run insolvently, in which there is much dishonesty and selfishness, is of course still felt as a force surrounding Cranford" (Mitchell xv). Even the narrator's capitalist-father, Mr. Smith, is perpetually vulnerable to its exploits, having "lost upwards of a thousand pounds by roguery only last year" (145; ch. 15).

As in *Ruth*, in *Cranford* an individual's legitimacy is shown to be dependent on interpretations that are often unreliable. The line between the spurious and the authorized note had become literally blurred, as the dubious position of country bank notes meant they, and their possessors, could have currency one day and be "little better than wastepaper" (*Cranford* 123; ch. 13) the next. With the rise of the money market, the expansion of the banking system, and the vast circulation of (often unreliable) paper instruments, speculation and report increasingly replaced former measures of trustworthiness; individuals simultaneously felt subject to seemingly arbitrary economic fluctuations that were beyond their control. Such unpredictable fluctuations both saddled individuals such as Miss Matty and Mr. Dobson with a host of new interpretative challenges and created for many a sense of pervasive arbitrariness and powerlessness: as Dobson says when faced with his worthless banknote, "there's no help for it" (123; ch. 13).[13]

Significantly, the narrative also invites comparative readings of Matty's financial fall and recovery, which is enabled by a friendly, communal effort, and the sexual "fall" and exile of her brother, Peter. Publicly flogged by his father for parading in jest while disguised as a fallen woman with a "little baby, with white long clothes" (52), Peter flees abroad. This exile of "Poor Peter" is an extension of his lack of legitimacy, which necessarily excludes him from the family unit, impoverishing each member until his "happy return" at the novel's end. The varying treatment of Matty and Peter in *Cranford* offers an encapsulation of those issues that Gaskell revisits at length in *Ruth*: both scrutinize those factors that prevent or facilitate one's reintegration into the community, and, in doing so, show how the discourses of sexual and economic decline can be usefully read as mutually constitutive.

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Indeed, the stability of a bank – and its notes – was, rather like female virtue, only as good as its reputation. The unstable economic climate that persisted into the mid-nineteenth century continued to position forgery as a threat to both public and individual security and an emblematic crime for a kind of disease that could thoroughly infect the circulation of capital. Turning now to a closer examination of *Ruth*, we will see how this discourse of contagion was also embedded in the cultural understanding of fallenness and illegitimacy – an understanding that, through her deployment of forgery, Gaskell provocatively calls to account.

III

Ruth at once invokes and queries nineteenth-century assumptions about the bastard child, assumptions which reveal the effective criminalization of illegitimacy and its connection to documented truth. Ann Higginbotham, for example, articulates how the illegitimate child was seen as "evidence of [the mother's] sin" (260), the documentary proof of her sexual crime. In initially contemplating Ruth's situation, the Bensons recall Thomas Wilkins, who "went to sea and was drowned, rather than present the record of his shame. . . . the obnoxious word in the baptismal registry told him that he must go forth branded into the world, with his hand against every man's and every man's against him" (121–22; ch. 11). To pass off Ruth's son, Leonard, as legitimate, then, is to conceal the "obnoxious *word* " that would attest to the truth of his identity. Ruth's act of fornication inscribes her body with the taint of impurity, and Leonard simultaneously stands as the "badge of her shame" (119; ch. 11). Her illegitimate child thus acts as a textual document that articulates the truth of her crime, a document that Ruth, with the Bensons' encouragement, forges into a feigned identity that would conceal that truth.

Like Richard Bradshaw, Ruth puts in place of the true text a forged copy that threatens the value of the original. Legally fatherless, Leonard can only be associated with the maternal line, but in posing as a legitimate child, he pollutes the pool of "authorized" paternal reproductions – legitimate heirs. Ian Haywood's assertion that "[a] statement intended to defraud is not a forgery unless it hijacks authority" (7) is dramatized here: a defiance of authority is precisely the impulse embodied by the illegitimate child, particularly one who would pass as legitimate. Ruth thus creates a "fictionalized legitimacy" (Taylor 136–37) for Leonard, and that fiction poses a direct challenge to patrilineal authority, revealing as it does the very contingencies of legitimacy as a cultural category.

Gaskell's focus on the social understanding of legitimacy places her within the context of debates regarding the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which "ended outrelief for unmarried women and curtailed the availability of assistance from the father of an illegitimate child" (Higginbotham 260). Prejudice against unmarried mothers and their illegitimate children was manifested in economically punitive measures.[14] Legitimacy is in this context derived from a capacity to either carry out or possess labor: inherent in the prejudice against illegitimate children was the assumption that they would not contribute profitably to the economy either through labor or the circulation of capital. Instead, they were, like their fallen mothers, parasitic. They were considered by many to be a "drain on scarce communal resources" (Macfarlane 75), to threaten the economic and moral health of the nation, including the continuity of authorized patrilineal inheritance, and to produce, by extension, generalized "death, poverty and social distress" (Reekie 34–35).

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Gaskell's portrayal of Ruth's circumstances responds subversively to these widely-held assumptions, insisting that her readers reconsider just who pays the price for illegitimacy. The novel makes clear the economic hardship incurred by the unmarried mother as a result of social prejudices that perpetuate her impoverished circumstances. Faith Benson rightly suggests that masquerading as a widow will save Ruth "much awkwardness" (130; ch. 12) and ward off suspicion. Yet given the fact that the New Poor Law "meant that the unmarried mother was in the same position as the destitute widow" (Taylor 131), the very form of Ruth's disguise may subtly comment on the financial jeopardy into which unmarried mothers were often lightly tossed. The structures of patrilineal inheritance and ownership are shown to put the innocent at perpetual risk. Indeed, from the novel's opening Ruth is the victim of others' financial exploits. Upon her father's death, he is discovered to be deeply in debt, and she is then thrust into the hands of an unreliable guardian, who soon sends her into dressmaking. There, Ruth's beauty is immediately considered something to be bought and sold, likely as it is "to do credit to [Mrs. Mason's] 'establishment'" (8; ch. 1).

Like her sexual ignorance, Ruth's financial ignorance is emphasized throughout the novel. She "knew little," for example, "of the expenses of a night at an inn" and "hardly. . . understood the numerous small economies which [Benson] and his sister had to practise" (133; ch. 12). Such vulnerability is centrally implicated in her sexual fall. It is in fact Ruth's inability to pay her tab that prevents her from abandoning Bellingham and seeking refuge with old Thomas at Milham Grange. At the same time, her economic agency is itself undermined by her lack of knowledge regarding those strictures that govern women's behavior and the grave effects of their violation. The first transactions between Ruth and Bellingham are economic ones: Ruth serves Bellingham as an employee at the ball, and he later charges Ruth with money to care for an endangered child, but primarily so that they might meet again. This manipulation, made possible by Bellingham's "careless liberality of money" (27; ch. 27), presents no little danger. Ruth's relationship with Bellingham immediately makes her, in Mrs. Mason's eyes, unfit for work as a seamstress, and, of course, Bradshaw's ultimate discovery of her "old offence" (337; ch. 26) puts Ruth and the Bensons in economic jeopardy, as public exposure of her previous conduct initially prevents her from obtaining further employment.

The legal, economic, and social repercussions attached to Ruth's "coming out" point to society's complicity in forcing women either to surrender their livelihoods and reputations once they admit to a sexual fall, or to hide, as Ruth does, behind a forged identity. That the criminal act of "concealment of birth" was so frequently committed by unwed pregnant women exemplifies the way in which social condemnation forces women such as Ruth into acts of stealth.[15] Bradshaw's response to Ruth's past most forcefully demonstrates the discourse surrounding women's moral crimes; although not punishable by law,[16] Ruth's past sexual relationship immediately marks her as a sexual degenerate worthy of the pseudo-legal persecution that follows. In confronting her with her crimes of "false pretences," "profligacy," "corruption," and "defilement" (337–38; ch. 26), Bradshaw invokes the language of law in order to transport its authority into his procedures of domestic policing: "If ever you, or your bastard, darken this door again, I will have you both turned out by the police" (341; ch. 26). Here, and throughout the novel, Gaskell demonstrates that in addition to the discourse of "fallen morality" surrounding illicit female sexuality and reproduction, the criminalization of such behavior was equally instrumental in its "detection" (376; ch. 28) and regulation.

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In his recent discussion of *Mary Barton*, Gordon Bigelow effectively examines Gaskell's focus on the destructive effects of limiting, classificatory language, such as that employed by the police, who proceed in a "routinized and repetitive fashion . . . and . . . perceive only the surface of a string of occurrences, without insight into their cause or connection" (148). This description invites comparison with Bradshaw's failed domestic policing and his limited readings of the circumstance surrounding Ruth's acts of deception. Far more intriguing than the pervasive surveillance in the novel is the way in which Ruth's disguise, like Richard's forgery, ultimately reveals the flaws of cultural confidence in detection, in observation as a means to classification and control.

Despite its apparent failure to account for the whole truth of Ruth's history and character, the language of Bradshaw's taxonomy was of course much in circulation at the time. As Sander Gilman has observed in his wide-ranging work on stereotyping, most of the "large and detailed literature concerning prostitution written during the nineteenth century . . . is devoted to documenting the need for legal controls and draws on the medical model as perceived by public health officials" (94). In their well-known writings on prostitution in the 1850s, W. R. Greg and William Acton promote such strict control as a means to ensure that such agents of disease are, in Greg's words, "checked, controlled, diminished, and finally extirpated" (458). Greg frequently invokes the common discourse of the legible, permanence of sin that made absolute a fallen woman's destiny along a downward trajectory toward ignominy and death. Yet Acton's discussion reveals the unreliability of methods of observation and regulation in its emphasis on the blurred distinctions between the prostitute and the pure woman: he speculates that "prostitution is a transitory state, through which an untold number of British women are ever on their passage" (73). While detecting "a distinct element of panic in Acton's picture of middle-class wifedom being secretly contaminated by a large and enlarging fraction of ex-prostitutes" (83), Michael Mason, in *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, describes how frequently in public places the "cues distinguishing the respectable from the disreputable may have been extremely slight (it was said that you could only identify the prostitutes at the Argyll Rooms by the fact that they left in cabs)" (101). While Greg associates prostitution with an ostensible violation of nature, "of truer instincts" (450), Acton suggests that the "Gorgon of the present day against whom we should arm our children should be a woman who, whether sound or diseased, is generally pretty and elegant – oftener painted by Nature than by art" (53).[17]

Such is surely the case with Ruth, whose grace and beauty, which are often viewed as signs of her virtue, receive much attention from both the narrator and those in the Bradshaw household. This portrayal contravenes the suggestion that the fallen woman is both a violation of nature and immediately identifiable. Ruth's ability, however temporary, to conceal her past and to work within the Bradshaw home undermines Mr. Bradshaw's self-congratulatory sense that he can exercise absolute control over his domestic police state, by observing Ruth constantly, like the rest of his family, often when she had "little thought it" (227; ch. 20). Although Bradshaw's family is terrorized by a kind of "surveillance-anxiety" that his installed "network of mechanisms" (Foucault 209), his family's "system of carrying constant intelligence to headquarters" (*Ruth* 223; ch. 20), have produced, he is little able to detect either Ruth's or his own son's deceptions.

Ruth's circulation within what Bradshaw considers a closed system thus marks out his interpretive failures and his failures as a father, as do Richard's crimes.[18] Felicia Bonaparte sees a "psychological meaning" behind Richard's forgery, suggesting that the

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performative nature of the act gestures toward Bradshaw's parental inadequacy: "he is confessing metaphorically that the ideal his father sees is not his real self but a forgery" (48). Richard is effectively illegitimate, the nature of his crime aligning him with those age-old tropes that identify both the product and producer of counterfeiting as bastardized. Richard's false inscriptions thus carry a measure of revelatory value, articulating an absence of authentic paternal influence.

The sequence of revelations in the novel reveals the close interplay between metaphorical and literal forgery and their consequences. It is no little irony that Jemima's discovery of Ruth's "black secret" (325; ch. 25) is followed directly by Richard's allusion in the next chapter to his financial difficulties, which have arisen from various "speculations and messes" (330; ch. 26). Richard's careless fiscal philandering shows the double valence of "expenditure" in the period. His lack of concern for Benson's property mirrors Bellingham's attitude toward women's bodies; he violates and "spends" at will, careless of the consequences of unchecked expenditure. This revelatory dialogue between Richard and his sister also shows an acute contrast between Jemima's minimal response to Richard's duplicity and her vehement reaction to the revelation of Ruth's past and her subsequent desire to go "over every morsel of evidence" (326; ch. 25) regarding it. When Jemima queries her brother, "I heard you say that you'd more than you knew how to spend," he replies, "Don't you see that was the perfection of art. If my father had thought me extravagant, he would have kept me in with a tight rein; as it is, I'm in great hopes of a handsome addition" (330; ch. 26). Yet, despite his apparent "tight rein," Bradshaw has already shown his propensity for the manipulative use of money – in his inappropriate gift to Ruth and, especially, in his role in the election bribes. His hypocritical misuse of money is perhaps best embodied by his purchase of a front-row church pew. This act of self-interested economic display in a space intended for faithful devotion particularly manifests Bradshaw's critical failing. Like Richard, he views monetary dealings as utterly exempt moral imperatives.[19] Thus, when Ruth makes the muslin Bellingham purchased for her into baby clothes, Bradshaw takes her own meager dress "for stiff, hard economy. . . . And economy by itself, without any soul or spirit in it to make it living and holy, was a great merit in his eyes" (159; ch. 15). Here Gaskell not only prepares the reader for Richard's ultimate financial misdeeds, but also shows the extent to which he has inherited from his father a cavalier view of money and property that exists outside the realm of the "certain and inflexible" (240; ch. 21) moral justice upon which Bradshaw claims to rely.

By representing Richard as a forging thief, Gaskell questions the identification of unmarried women and their bastard children as the primary threat to a community's financial stability. The depiction of this and various other covert acts of economic fraud in the novel demonstrate how such crimes have extensively polluted the nation's political and economic system, and how the protection of such behavior perpetuates the oppression and exploitation of women and children, particularly of the lower classes. In the context of the novel, the covert and unpunished acts of fraud that sustain such extravagance threaten the financial and moral health of the nation to a great degree.

The novel indeed identifies the broader implications of such corrupt behavior. *Ruth* is a novel permeated by sickness and death. In this respect, it exemplifies how the fallen woman was persistently represented as a figure of physical, moral, and social sickness, a deadly contagion or, as Greg says, a "hideous gangrene of English society" (474–75). It also documents the conception of the bastard as an agent of death and disease (such anxiety

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about polluted economies will later become exacerbated to the point of parody in a novel such as Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), where the mass but illegitimate control of English property threatens to dominate via a disease of the blood). Confronting the persistent identification of the poor and marginalized – the fallen woman, the prostitute, the bastard – as agents of social and physical disease, *Ruth* relocates the actual source of such degradation.[20] While Mrs. Bellingham, who had wished to be "blind to the whole affair" (88; ch. 8), immediately identifies Ruth as the "real cause [of her son's] illness" (85; ch. 7), Gaskell forcefully inverts this application, situating Bellingham as the chief source of moral and economic disease in the novel; he falls ill at both its beginning and conclusion, and the typhus epidemic in the narrative's latter stages illustrates the pervasive effects of the kind of moral corruption he embodies. His use of a feigned identity, "Donne," and his ultimate survival illustrates Gaskell's careful rendering of him and Ruth as similar in action and yet subject to vastly different standards of judgment. In letters to Ruth and Benson, his mother refigures her son's affair with Ruth as mere lapse, dwelling on the duplicity of the fallen woman. She tells her son upon his recovery, "Don't be too severe in your self-reproaches while you are so feeble, dear Henry; it is right to repent, but I have no doubt in my own mind she led you wrong with her artifices" (90; ch. 8). Mrs. Bellingham's indulgence of her son knows no bounds: she was "always liberal where money was concerned" (91; ch. 8) and thus leaves Ruth a fifty pound banknote, one notably found lying on the floor in a "promiscuous" (107; ch. 10) fashion. Ruth is therefore aptly haunted by dreams of Leonard becoming like Bellingham, a man duly educated in the use of financial and social power to elude responsibility. While Bellingham is obsessed by his own aristocratic "blood of all the Howards" (47; ch. 4), a propensity for lying, rectified only by Benson's education and Ruth's maternal care, is all that the young boy inherits from his father.

By making Ruth's good works as a nurse public, Gaskell shows the positive, wide-ranging implications of her entrance into the community. She cleanses Eccleston of a vile contagion ambiguously born out of one summer's extreme heat. Although identified as typhus (422; ch. 33), this illness surely has sexual overtones, which are reinforced by Bellingham's connection to the disease and the narrator's questionable suggestion that it originated in the "low Irish lodging-houses" (424; ch. 33). Ruth's nursing prevents its further circulation and places her in opposition to the hideous effects of reckless sexual and economic expenditure, which have polluted of the community's financial and moral health. Her behavior thus acutely counters Greg's emphasis on "the deplorable extent and virulence of disease which prostitution is the means of spreading throughout the community" (476).

The ultimate redemption of Ruth by means of her active labor in the community suggests that the social dis-ease in the novel is at once a moral and an economic problem, which can be remedied only through re-integration on both fronts. The novel thus draws our attention to the way in which, at a time when the reliability of an individual's proclaimed legitimacy was under increasing assault, the conduct of monetary relationships was a key index to authenticity and credit, moral, fiscal, and otherwise. Society cannot, the novel suggests, continue to abide a fierce index of virtue against which women must be publicly measured if those possessed of its control relentlessly continue, where their own various "debts" are concerned, to fudge the numbers.

After Ruth's death, the debt owed to her sacrifice is repaid, most overtly through the communal acceptance – the legitimization – of Leonard. Inverting her initial condemnation, Ruth's public redemption occurs in open air, where Leonard can attest to his genealogy ("Sir,

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I am her son!"), be redeemed ("Thou! thou her bairn! God bless you, lad!"), and, as a result, circulate freely, secured under the guardianship of the illegitimate Mr. Davis (430; ch. 33). The letter that Ruth receives from the rector, Mr. Gray, on behalf of the Eccleston board serves as the final "testimony to [Ruth's] noble conduct" (433) and thus publicly reconstitutes or, indeed, rewrites the history of her fallen identity. Co-opted into oral and, particularly, *written* discourse Ruth becomes idealized in the history of Eccleston and transformed intoan acceptable kind of "common" woman.

Although this acknowledgment of Ruth's value to her community restores, to a great degree, her legitimacy and worth, it can be seen to naturalize her self-sacrifice as conventionally appropriate.[21] Yet it may also represent Gaskell's telling re-assignment of the forger's sentence of death. As the culmination in this narrative of censure and redemption, Ruth's death shows the extent of society's fraudulence and precisely the nature of the loss it must incur as a result. Just as Jemima asks so despairingly, "Who was true? Who was not? Who was good and pure? Who was not? " (326; ch. 25), so, then, does Gaskell's subtle treatment of forgery encourage her readers to query the value and veracity of contemporary assumptions about illegitimacy and fallenness, particularly those regarding their facile detection and regulation. *Ruth* scrutinizes the extensive role that social, legal, and economic institutions play in fabricating the "truth" of Ruth's sin and, in doing so, transforms the illegitimate child into an authentic cultural document.

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NOTES

I am grateful to Jill L. Matus, Alan Bewell, Marjorie Garson, and Scott Schofield for their thoughtful comments on this essay during its development.

1. Haywood and Teichman both aptly begin their respective studies of forgery and illegitimacy with reference to the *OED*, which demonstrates the extensive linguistic connections between these terms. "Forgery" is chiefly defined as "the making of a thing in fraudulent imitation of something; also, especially the forging, counterfeiting, or falsifying of a document" or "something forged, counterfeited, or fabricated; a spurious production." The *OED* meanwhile defines "illegitimate" as "1. not authorized by law; irregular, improper; 2. not born in lawful wedlock, bastard; 3. not correctly deduced or inferred," and it defines "bastard" as: "1. (child) born out of wedlock or of adultery, illegitimate; 2. (of things) unauthorized, hybrid, counterfeit." The etymology of "adultery" also demonstrates the connection between illicit sexuality and forged reproductions. "Adultery" is derived from the Latin *adulter*, which has as its primary meaning "adulterer," but can indicate the offspring of an adulterous person. It also has an alternative meaning: counterfeiter of coins.
2. Gaskell's treatment of economic fraud has received little attention, but critics have frequently focused on the prevalence of the lie in her narratives. Recent studies in this vein are d'Albertis's *Dissembling Fictions* (1997); Kucich's *The Power of Lies: Transgression in Victorian Fiction* (1994); and McGavran's "Honesty Admits Discourse: Lying in the Fiction of Elizabeth Gaskell" (1994).
3. Homans's well-known study, *Bearing the Word*, makes important claims about the link between reproduction and representation in writing by women such as Gaskell. Particularly relevant here is her discussion of the longstanding conception of the maternal body as the passive receptor of impregnation by male "texts" (157); the view of the female body as a mint that coined men's offspring persisted in nineteenth-century science. Biomedical discourse on inheritance, pregnancy, and genealogical traits reinscribed the illegitimate child as fostered apart from paternal surveillance in a female body, that "potentially dangerous growth medium" (156).

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4. Deane's recent claims about "how thoroughly the domestic and the political overlap" (119) in a novel such as *Mary Barton* have equal application here.
5. The sanctity of property in the period also plays a key role here. See Hay on the way the proliferation of property legislation responded and contributed to the identification of property as *the* single measure of sacred social and economic value.
6. In addition to Baines, Burke also offers a thorough discussion of the Dodd case. Equally significant, however, and stranger than fiction, was a trial involving twin brothers Robert and Edward Perreau and a one Mrs. Rudd, Edward's mistress. After a lengthy show-trial, which astounded judge, jury, and public alike for its tales of illegitimacy, seduction, and manipulation, the Perreaus were executed for forgery in 1776. Andrew and McGowen offer an illuminating full-length study of the case and its implications for the cultural understanding of forgery in *The Perreaus and Mrs Rudd* (2001).
7. The Restriction was introduced to help finance the cost of war with France. As Poovey explains, by 1794, "the government's demand for funds exceeded the aggregate income of the country's entire population. . . . This suspension meant that the Bank was no longer willing to exchange a citizen's worn coins for gold bullion, and it was no longer willing to back the paper notes it issued with gold. . . . By the second decade of the nineteenth century, Britain was awash in paper money" (8–9).
8. See also Emsley 255–59.
9. Writing in the *Daily News* in 1846, Dickens thus expresses his utter revulsion at the sight of a public execution that he witnessed in 1840: "It was so loathsome, pitiful, and vile a sight, that the law appeared to be as bad as he, or worse; being very much the stronger, and shedding around it a far more dismal contagion" (qtd. in Collins 226). Although Dickens would eventually shift his position to one that, in an "entanglement of charitable sentiment and political unease" (Faulk 81), focused on the promotion of private executions, rather than their outright abolition, his articulation here of the visual violation occasioned by public execution – and its effects – is acute. He strikingly transforms the force of law into a kind of criminal that threatens to infect society with its violence and corruption, inciting further criminal acts. This is a provocative inversion of the typical identification of criminals as agents of moral, physical, and economic corruption, an identification that *Ruth*, as well, both invokes and queries.
10. Herbert joins with Crosby, Brantlinger, and Vernon in this regard.
11. Successive crises occurred in 1825–26, 1837, 1847, 1857, and 1866. The "heyday of bank failures and fraud" (Robb 57), the 1840s and 50s were fraught by major commercial and banking scandals. Banks in fact continued to fail more frequently than other type of company: According to Poovey, of the 291 banks established between 1844 and 1868, only 16% were still in operation beyond 1868 (21–22).
12. Miller's work on Gaskell is particularly relevant here. Miller's discussion of *Cranford* in his book *Novels Behind Glass* (1995) usefully shows the connection between Victorian visual and commodity cultures. Focusing on the legacy of the development of joint-stock companies, his essay, "Subjectivity Limited: The Discourse of Liability in the Joint Stock Companies Act of 1856 and Gaskell's Cranford," effectively describes the ramifications of this act for the cultural understanding of personal and public identity in a corporatized economy. He illustrates the act's implications for what Gaskell portrays as "the silent workings of the distant bank" on Miss Matty, who, like Dobson, "comes to embody the experience of investors in a climate of attenuated trust and increasing responsibility" (149).
13. Gilbart's "Ten Minutes of Advice About Keeping a Banker" (1839) is just one illustrative example of the newness of those financial instruments and mechanisms that we now take for granted. Gilbart explains for his reader the activities of a bank, who (i.e. members of which class) ought to keep a bank account, and why, how to properly present oneself at the bank, open an account, maintain a passbook and proper records of account, and how to make deposits and withdrawals.
14. Taylor describes in greater detail the punitive implications the New Poor Law had for unmarried mothers, many of whom were considered to be "deliberately producing children in order to claim from the parish" (130).

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15. The attitude of the Bensons' housekeeper, Sally, toward a local unmarried mother registers this connection between illicit sexuality, illegitimacy and criminality: "Why there was that Nelly Brandon's child as was left at the door . . . but I went off and told th' overseer, and th' mother was *caught*" (148; ch. 14; emphasis added). See Higginbotham on how the criminalization of "concealment," which "made secret childbirth a capital offence if the child died, even if there was no evidence of murder" (267), was intended to discourage infanticide. The penalty was reduced to two years in 1803, but concealment was still "the most common crime connected with the death of an illegitimate infant" (268).
16. As of 1834, fornication was no longer a punishable offence in England (Teichman 21).
17. Acton further intensifies anxieties by suggesting that prostitutes may frequently reintegrate themselves into society by posing as virtuous women. In her discussion of *Ruth* in *Unstable Bodies* (113–31), Matus offers an illuminating discussion of Greg's views on female passionlessness, as well as Acton's "nightmare" vision of women moving "unchecked and at will from sexual hire to marriage and motherhood" (125).
18. On this point, see Taylor 120–21.
19. Jaffe offers a provocative reading of the class tensions that vex the relationship between Bradshaw and Benson in the novel, tensions which she sees as being displaced onto the fallen woman plot.
20. See Herbert 203 ff.
21. Critics have persistently struggled with Ruth's death, which for many rings hollow given the critique of the fallen woman's plot that had gone before. Charlotte Bronte's complaint, "Why should she die? Why are we to shut up the book weeping?" (qtd. in Schor 72) is frequently cited in this regard. Schor, however, provocatively suggests that her death "may be an attempt to murder fiction itself, to reveal the tension between the pleasures of 'invention' and the viciousness of plot" (73) and to remind her readers of "the excessively plotted lives women lead" (75).

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