

**Danielle Coriale, 'Gaskell's Naturalist', *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 63:3
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The development of naturalist science in the Victorian period provided an intellectual framework for classifying and interpreting change in the life of discrete organisms. But it also initiated a diverse cultural movement in English society that was thoroughly ensnared in economic matters. In her recent discussion of Elizabeth Gaskell's first novel *Mary Barton* (1848), Danielle Coriale reminds readers of the important function naturalism served in providing certain working-class men with a modicum of social mobility and respect. Coriale's objective in drawing attention to *Mary Barton's* careful manipulation of naturalist science is to identify the multiple – and often paradoxical – ways in which naturalism restructured the period's class relations and literature. Working through her analysis of Gaskell's novel alongside contemporary materials such as self-help guides, newspaper reports, and poetry, she provides a more complete impression of *Mary Barton's* politics than that which is otherwise available to Gaskell's readers upon first examination.

Part of the difficulty readers find in their attempt to interpret Gaskell's work stems from the problem of recreating her novels' historical context. Contemporary critics generally agree that Gaskell was mindful of Victorian public debates. Where this agreement usually ends, however, is in the question of specifics. In the first half of her study, Coriale is pragmatic; she sees the creation of Gaskell's naturalist Job Legh serving a dual purpose in, first, allowing Gaskell the opportunity to undertake "the risky project of representing working-class suffering to middle-class readers" and, second, permitting "the seamless integration of working-class characters into a legal plot" (351, 353). By establishing an important link between the novel's depiction of Legh and evidence of a fully formed working-class movement in the sciences, Coriale effectively repositions the novel in the midst of an ongoing debate on the use of science for social reform. In her view, because Legh draws upon his familiarity with science to act as a conduit between working-class and professional communities, Gaskell can explore the complex relationship between classes under socially acceptable circumstances.

Having suggested that Gaskell could not avoid naturalism's political influence in turning her readers' attention away from the radical Chartist discourse that runs throughout the rest of her novel, Coriale moves on in the second half of her article to historicize naturalism's influence on Gaskell's style. Here Coriale seems eager to avoid committing an intentional fallacy – perhaps too eager given her otherwise convincing claims for naturalism's impact on Gaskell's worldview. Yet while there is no doubt that some readers will look at this section of her article with regret that Coriale does not take her analysis further in "hinting at the deep interconnections" that existed between novel writing and natural history, most will likely accept her decision to avoid testing the limits of biographical truth and alternatively pursue a metaphorical link between Legh's negotiation of class and Gaskell's own negotiations as author given the otherwise circumstantial evidence she is forced to corroborate with in making her claims (349). Clearly, Coriale does not seek radically to alter our interpretation of *Mary Barton* and its content, instead, to add an informative, well-supported footnote to Gaskell's legacy.

Despite the article's limited scope, readers will find themselves impressed with its implications for future work in the history of science. In a significant attempt to situate her claims within the tangled web of cross-class communication, Coriale notes that while supporters of naturalism frequently cited its social function as a productive way to better

the lives of working-class men, their discussions often overlooked the importance of unequal access to knowledge within working-class communities as well as the tenuous relationship between intellectual and economic reform. In other words, while naturalism offered its supporters the illusion of social mobility, it ignored material conditions; a trend Coriale describes as “traveling in one place” (351). Rival reform movements, in contrast, while not necessarily more inclusive, were typically more conscious of material questions. From their potential hostility towards proposals that threatened to dilute more substantive social and economic change, it can be inferred that the value of working-class scholarship as a productive alternative to political action was not universally accepted among nineteenth-century reformers. Rather, it represented a partial though intellectually significant development in the mid-Victorian debate on social and economic issues.

Whatever one makes of *Mary Barton*, it is indisputable that Legh and the other working-class naturalists found in Coriale’s article were the byproduct of a Victorian class hierarchy in a state of flux. ‘Gaskell’s Naturalist’ thus deserves attention from scholars interested in Victorian studies for its ability to provoke important questions related to cultural capital, the history of science, and the Chartist reform movement of the 1830s and 40s. For while naturalism’s importance to nineteenth-century culture has long been self-evident, Coriale demonstrates its ability to assume unique forms in social practice – an observation of which any scholar would be advised to take note.

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