

To Have and to Hold:

Sexist Connotations of Gifts in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*

Elizabeth Gaskell's Victorian novel *Ruth* (1853) is a cautionary tale of stolen and unrequited love. When Ruth meets a charming villain, the well-mannered Mr. Bellingham, she is exposed to the ruthless nature of man as he is natural opposition to the more penitent values of grace, virtue, and ruth: *Ruth*, the ideal heroine, and Ruth, the epitome of Proverbs' virtuous woman. Juxtaposing such a pure female character to the wickedness of a socially attractive and suave male character allows Gaskell to imply what I will argue: The dehumanizing characterization of women reduces them to an organ, a uterus, as a false symbol of women's greatest gift and contribution to men, a baby.

With a feminist lens, gift exchange in the form of children and their presentation to men as a gifted apology and keepsake is a common thread that weaves through *Ruth*. The roles of women in their romantic relationships are scrutinized by Gaskell, so the flawed nature of childbirth as a commodity in exchange for a man's protection is rebuked by social and religious critique. With no shortage of sources that provide relevant contextual information, this essay compels another reading of the novel which examines the actions of a woman who sacrificed extensions of herself to perpetuate the idea of love.