

“As a child looks at a cake”: Hungering at Hope Farm in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cousin Phillis*

John Barton, whose cravings for food are wrought up “almost to an animal pitch of ravenousness,” is the first of many Gaskell characters to be visited, and sometimes convulsed, by hunger pangs. *Cousin Phillis* (1863-4) begins with the narrator’s “pride and satisfaction” at having taken lodgings above a pastry-cook’s shop – but it develops hunger as a “predominant feeling” both for him, of a Sunday evening, and for Phillis herself, most irrecoverably. Phillis’s unsatisfied longing is the emotion which the story ends by exploring. It connects her with Gaskell’s earlier heroines, marking her as a mute inglorious Charlotte Brontë and as a Cheshire cousin of the Margaret who “thought and wished too much” in *North and South*.

Perhaps, however, Phillis is a displaced person not just as to county but as to genre. Her affinities, and the story’s affinities, are as much with the poems of Tennyson as with the fiction that Gaskell already had to her name. What is different about the engagement with Tennyson here is that it moves beyond Gaskell’s previous passing interest in projecting Mary Barton as Mariana (when her cry “was ever the old moan of the Moated Grange”), or in adding a heroine called Ruth to the list of the Lady of Shalott’s descendants in the Victorian novel. In the latter part of 1859 Gaskell discovers a Tennyson fit for the 1860s, and it is at his *Idylls of the King* that she then says she has been looking “as a child looks at a cake.” This paper will consider her own hungry absorption into *Cousin Phillis* of one of the Idylls which so tantalised her on that groaning shelf of books, “Lancelot and Elaine.”