Private Selves and Public Conflicts: Mastery and Gender Identity in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*

By Laura Alexander, High Point University, North Carolina, USA

Abstract:
Elizabeth Gaskell's "North and South" (1855) advances a radical social-moral agenda as it examines Victorian anxieties about public expressions of power and gender identity. The novel presents several competing articulations of the pragmatic industrialist, the intellectual gentleman, and the working class man. The "true man? (164) in Industrial England, a term Gaskell employs to describe the factory owner, Thornton, comes under particular scrutiny, as does the now famous Victorian feminine ideal of the 'angel in the house.' The pragmatic industrialist identity is challenged by Margaret Hale, the novel's heroine. Margaret appropriates a stereotypically masculine role to advocate for a better life for the factory men working for Thornton, who also serves as her love interest in the novel. At odds with the strong industrialist man "made of iron" (213) represented by Thornton is the 'man of letters' represented by the heroine's father, Mr. Hale, whose values and forms of work are regarded as weak, effeminate, and outdated by Thornton. While these gendered divisions of work existed before the mid nineteenth century, they came under pressure during the Industrial Revolution, as working-class men were increasingly ready to go on strike for better conditions and pay. This paper considers these gendered identities and competing forms of work and particularly examines Margaret's inner conflict, for she desires both to improve the condition of the factory workers in Milton-Northern and protect Mr. Thornton from mob violence and financial ruin.

1 Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855) advances a radical social-moral agenda as it examines Victorian anxieties about public expressions of power and gender identity. The novel presents several competing articulations of the pragmatic industrialist, the intellectual gentleman, and the working class man. The "true man" (164) in Industrial England, a term Gaskell employs to describe the factory owner, Thornton, comes under particular scrutiny, as does the now famous Victorian feminine ideal of the 'angel in the house.' The pragmatic industrialist identity is challenged by Margaret Hale, the novel's heroine. Margaret appropriates a stereotypically masculine role to advocate for a better life for the factory men working for Thornton, who also serves as her love interest in the novel. At odds with the strong industrialist man "made of iron" (213) represented by Thornton is the 'man of letters' represented by the heroine's father, Mr. Hale, whose values and forms of work are regarded as weak, effeminate, and outdated by Thornton. While these gendered divisions of work existed before the mid-nineteenth century, they came under pressure during the Industrial Revolution, as working-class men were increasingly ready to go on strike for better conditions and pay. This paper considers these gendered identities and competing forms of work and particularly examines Margaret's inner conflict, for she desires both to improve the

condition of the factory workers in Milton-Northern and protect Mr. Thornton from mob violence and financial ruin.

2 Set in an industrialized town in northern England, Milton-Northern, Gaskell's *North and South* teases out the gendered layers of the 'soft' southerner, Margaret, and compares her journey to the harsh, industrialized north with the more refined lifestyle she enjoys on Harley Street in the novel's opening. Margaret leaves behind the south, where women often are depicted as clinging to the domestic ideal, and she both nurtures and fights for Milton's factory workers, repurposing the meaning of 'angel in the house' to incorporate the homes of the suffering poor. Her commitment to changing their living conditions means that she must enter a more public space. Rather than passively accepting the deplorable conditions for the working men around her, she listens to them, visiting their homes and families, some of whom are dying as a result of the poor factory working conditions. Fearless, she braves illness and contagion, stepping outside of her genteel social class to collect their stories to share with Thornton, who firmly maintains the older, patriarchal order and scoffs at her perceived 'southern' weakness for them.

3 Thornton is called "master" (110) by his workers, a class distinction with decidedly feudal resonances that Margaret deplores. Though Margaret disagrees with Thornton, she defends, rescues, and teaches him empathy. Her 'feminine' interference, as Thornton perceives it, nevertheless lessens social class tensions among the men, saving Thornton from near-mutiny even as it threatens his masculine authority and identity as a "true man" (164) among his workers. By the end of the novel, however, Thornton comes to see the necessity of Margaret's intercession on their behalf. He is persuaded by her reasoning and persistence and also by her sexuality. Though frequently frustrated by Margaret, Thornton also finds her alluring and unlike any woman he knows. Her crossing of a hetero-normative gendered space to enact social change both frightens and excites him. It also emasculates him, stripping him of power in front of his men and causing an identity crisis for Thornton, who consistently shows contempt for male characters who are not what he considers masculine enough. The novel, however, validates Thornton's 'feminization' and Margaret's 'masculinity' and suggests that tearing down traditional Victorian gendered roles is a necessary precursor to breaking down the wall between "Masters and Men" (110).

4 Feminist critics of the novel have traditionally understood Margaret’s public persona conflicting with the private, domestic cultural ideals appropriate for mid-century Victorian women. Deanna L. Davis examines larger feminist issues at stake in Victorian conceptions of womanhood in the novel and views Margaret as a character that struggles with the idea of

maternity and nurturing others, which drains her. Davis also views Margaret as able to return to an inner self through solitude when on the brink of collapse (520-5). Patsy Stoneman traces feminist criticism in *North and South*, arguing that the class issues Marxist readers have raised often overshadow the gender issues, even for feminist critics. Because Margaret's character does not achieve social reforms through politically contentious means, critics have tended to see her character as not feminist enough, or not feminist at all. The idea of "maternal thinking" that Stoneman identifies (90) allows readers to see Margaret's position as outside a polemic that pits women against men. The idea of the nurturing mother must reject these kinds of hostile relationships (Stoneman 90).

5 Margaret's return to a private self allows her to endure hardship even though "self-care" sometimes conflicts with the nurturing roles Gaskell gives her heroines, often poised between their roles as 'angels in the house' and enactors of social change. This interpersonal conflict remains tied with one in which Margaret must confront masculine and feminine roles for herself, both as a mother-like figure who nurtures and a father-like figure who must care for her family and, in the end, for Thornton, reversing traditional categories and courtship rituals.[1]

6 Stoneman argues for the novel's importance in terms of the convergence of gender and class, with Thornton as a character that crosses gendered lines as well (118ff.). Margaret teaches him to feel, a typically feminine role, but she goes on to save him first from a threatening mob, then from financial ruin; she is the dominant figure to enact change in the novel, and this 'mastery' of Thornton fuels their sexual frustrations and longings for each other. The novel ends with expected closure and their union even though Stoneman reminds readers that Margaret continues to feel shame about her public role after the last unifying embrace with Thornton (ibid.).

7 By repudiating a private, 'feminine' role and its ideals, deciding instead to engage a public self that will test her relationship with Thornton, Margaret forces a crisis in Thornton, whose own masculine identity eventually crumbles in the face of financial disaster. Barbara Leah Harmon argues that reforming women by the mid-nineteenth century promoted social reforms like female suffrage and made the private sphere public by collapsing the divisions that traditionally separated them. Nevertheless, Harman argues that the public space remained a promiscuous one for women like Margaret, whose entrance into it has sexual implications Gaskell does not reject; rather, she embraces the possibilities this may offer for Margaret's

[1] The same happens in Charlotte Bronte's novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847).

own sexuality, which she publicizes rather than conceals in the novel (365ff.). Elizabeth Starr likewise asserts that Mary Barton and North and South not only reveal Elizabeth Gaskell's ability to mediate between two worlds, the private and the public, but also help her to establish literary authority by the moral reform she desired and ostensibly achieved through her novels. In Starr's assessment, Gaskell works out her own issues as an author and a woman through these novels, as her heroines occupy public roles akin to her own (395-404).

8 Gaskell questions the idea of what 'masculine' means in Victorian England, strongly suggesting that it has become bound to class identity by the 1850's, as Industrial England conflicts not only with the dying ideals represented by the learned Mr. Hale but also with the demands, needs, and desires of the working class poor. Characters re-conceive what it means to be a man from a "true man" to a "gentleman" (164), just as Margaret's character questions what it means to be female. These questions destabilize fixed gender roles by the end, when older notions of masculinity give way to emerging ones that articulate the class struggles at stake in the novel.[2] Gender identities and class conflicts are mirrored throughout the novel, as Gaskell closely examines the way characters interrogate their own sense of purpose and identity in their private and public lives.

9 Gaskell initially develops gendered tensions between Thornton and Margaret through the sexual tension created by competing suitors. Literary historians have attributed these tensions in part, at least, to the constraints serial publication put on Gaskell, who, as Winifred Geren describes, felt a sense of disappointment at the final product and the limitations this kind of publication imposed on the creative process (142-158).[3] While the first suitor, Henry Lennox, who proposes marriage first to Margaret, represents London and the chivalric values of a romantic lover from the south, Thornton embodies Milton-Northern and its industrial values, which conflict with the more gently bred customs represented both by Lennox and the genteel, if poor, Mr. Hale. Lennox and Mr. Hale are both 'men of letters' who define themselves through their intellectual learning, but they cannot engender social or moral change. The novel upholds ethical action over passive learning. This activity becomes the most important value to the new, Industrial England in competition with the 'easy' living of the south.

[2] Henry N. Rogers III discusses the four major characters in the novel: Margaret, Mr. Thornton, his mother, and Nicolas Higgins as fundamentally all the same—they all have at their core prideful natures that conflict. While Rogers sees this pride as the origin of the tensions in the novel, I would extend his argument by identifying pride as a 'masculine' characteristic each of the characters possesses. This drives the tension because many masculinities compete in the novel for power, sometimes power over the self (61-4).

[3] See also Dorothy W. Collins's thorough analysis of Charles Dickens's editorial role in and constraining impulse over the novel (67-93).

10Gaskell likely based Mr. Hale on her own father, a Unitarian minister whose conscientious objections forced his resignation from the church in Failsworth, a town near Manchester (Pollard 11). After attempting scientific farming, he became, like Mr. Hale, a 'man of letters,' holding posts as editor of *The Scots Magazine* and occasional writer for *The Edinburgh Review*. Eventually moving to London, he ended his life as a Keeper of Treasury Records when an appointment as a private secretary to the Earl of Lauderdale, who was en route to India as Governor-General, failed (Pollard 12). Gaskell reflects these experiences in her novels to argue that a new kind of 'man of letters' was needed to address the kinds of social problems plaguing the fictional town Milton-Northern.[4]

11 The social inadequacies of the kind of 'man of letters' represented by Margaret's father, like Gaskell's, is in part due to its association by the industrialist classes with laziness, even effeminacy—two associations Thornton argues for in the novel. By contrast, the emergent industrialist identity prized hard work and an ascetic lifestyle, and the conflict between the industrialist, 'the man of letters', and the working class identities each contribute to the overarching impasse Gaskell tackles between these social classes and their ideologies of masculinity. In *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity*, James Eli Adams explains the way in which nineteenth-century writers wrestled with competing notions of Victorian masculinities. Adams explains that, by the final decades of the Victorian period, asceticism, an extreme form of self-discipline, was a rebellion against any hint of effeminacy, which became increasingly attached to the 'man of letters,' whose work required intellectual rather than physical labor and self-discipline. Although Adams primarily treats nineteenth-century male authors in his study, from Thomas Carlyle and Charles Dickens to Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, his book nevertheless offers a provocative analysis of the ways in which masculinities competed against one another over time and the course of changing economies—literally in Industrial England and socially in Victorian gendered ideals culturally constructed. Adams discusses 'feminine' self-discipline that was required for intellectual work, and Gaskell's novel reflects this friction in the Victorian male identity represented by Thornton. Anxious to separate themselves from effeminate slurs, the emerging industrialists like Thornton—efficient and hard-working—attached a stoic ideal to this 'feminine' characteristic, anticipating problems with gendered self-constructions in later nineteenth-century England. Self-discipline, as an emergent feature of the industrialist identity in the 1850s, redefined itself during the Victorian period. By the end of the

[4] For further information on Elizabeth Gaskell's family, see Arthur Pollard's "Mrs. Gaskell: Novelist and Biographer" (12-31).

nineteenth century, it moved from the 'feminine' to an extreme celebration of 'masculine' achievement typified in the homoerotic ascetic. Both Thomas Carlyle and later Walter Pater wrote extensively on this type. Pater's conception of the perfect male body combines athletic ability with morality and courage (10).

12 Gaskell works with gender complexity in Margaret's character as the concept of education and 'letters' is re-evaluated. She re-conceptualizes the purpose of 'letters' in an industrial world with new industrial values. Because she is a middle-class daughter of a parish priest-turned-tutor, Margaret has access to learning and thus a masculine world that women did not often have, but she rejects classical literature for working-class narratives, which she retells to 'educate' Thornton. Because Margaret perceives that new stories take precedence in Milton-Northern, the re-education of Thornton is equally important for the reader. Bessy and Higgins, the working-class poor, replace the 'dead,' classical authors; their narratives are more 'real' and pressing and become of central importance for understanding why Margaret must adopt a more 'masculine' public identity to change their lives. The novel rejects the idea that the classics can teach moral values in the new, Industrial England. They have no reforming power in an industrialized world and are attached to weakness.[5]

13 Consequently, roles for men and women become more complicated as the novel progresses and the working class Higgins comes into conflict with the industrialist Thornton. Margaret calls all of these masculine identities into question. Her refusal to stay in a domestic sphere, like her cousin Edith, and her refusal to marry Henry Lennox signifies Margaret's transgression of appropriate gender roles, which would deny her access to the public role she assumes in Milton-Northern.[6]

14 The novel opens in the drawing-room of elegant Harley Street, where Margaret's cousin Edith sleeps in an idyllic world in which Margaret, a poor relation, remains an outsider. The setting reinforces the differences between north and south, and Margaret's discomfort with the luxury of this existence becomes important later in the novel. Margaret in fact moves through three localities, the urban south, the rural parish, and the urban north. Harley Street creates a stark contrast between the wealthy and fashionable world of the Shaws in London, the genteel poverty and dying idealism of the Hales in Helstone, and the

[5] See Barbara Weiss's discussion of this, 274-287.

[6] These displacements, combined with the death of Margaret's loved ones, contribute to the novel's instability in Terence Wright's evaluation of a strong heroine forced to confront an unstable world. Ultimately, she must find a stable home in herself and in Thornton (97-100).

gritty reality of the Thorntons in Milton-Northern.[7] Characters reflect these landscapes; their identities change with every scene so that Margaret, though an outsider in Harley Street and even later in Helstone, must navigate all three worlds. The social problems force her to confront the death of her old life in London and Helstone. Mr. and Mrs. Hale, along with Mr. Bell, remain bound to a dying world of privilege and aristocratic values out of place at Milton-Northern. It is not surprising that they die in the novel; unlike Margaret, they cannot adapt to the new, Industrial England. More importantly, however, Gaskell does not intend for them to adapt. Mr. Hale's identity, his apostasy, scholarly ideals, and appreciation for the classical world, cannot conform or even imagine the new narratives of moral and social reforms the novel advocates.[8]

15 Likewise, Margaret's acceptance of Lennox cannot provide an adequate answer because it ignores the seriousness of the social problem that Margaret and Thornton's marriage, at least fictionally, resolves at the end. Lennox represents a world detached from Industrial England or its concerns. Though he, like Margaret, scorns the leisure world in which they live in the opening chapters of the novel, he nevertheless has characteristics of the London gentleman that Thornton scorns several chapters later. Furthermore, he speaks to Margaret as a lover, enticing her into playful language and into an Edenic pastoral landscape they paint together at Helstone. None of these literary traditions work in the novel because they neglect to consider the social world forcing its way into the idyllic language of the pastoral. When Margaret rejects Lennox, his first reaction is to act "lighter, cleverer, more worldly" (31), but even this creates a traditionally upper class identity for him as the rejected lover who admires an idealized woman but finds only disdain from his beloved.

16 As Margaret must come to terms with her father's decision to leave Helstone and a position as her father's "staff[…his] right hand," (169) she conceptualizes Lennox as part of a different world, one she has already left in Harley Street and another she will leave for Milton-Northern. His character and the world it represents envision an ideal of masculinity Gaskell sets up in the beginning only to tear down at the end, defeated finally by the social

[7] As Coral Lansbury has argued, the religious crisis in the novel has less to do with doctrine than with Mr. Hale's failure to minister to those who suffer. Both in Helstone and in Miton-Northern, it is Margaret who ministers. In Lansbury's assessment, this kind of failure results in the "militant socialism" (103) of Nicolas Higgins, the product of religious failure, which Gaskell envisions as inseparable from the social component tied to religion.

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reforms that have no place in this idealistic world that ignores the social and moral problems of Industrial England.

17 One of the first exchanges between Thornton and Margaret not only reveals the tensions between the north and south in England that drive their relationship, but also Gaskell's strategy for creating the industrialist masculine identity, or one that reflects the landscape. Thornton defends himself to Margaret:

> I won't deny that I am proud of belonging to a town—or perhaps I should rather say a district—the necessities of which give birth to such grandeur of conception. I would rather be a man toiling, suffering—nay, failing and successless—here, than lead a dull prosperous life in the old worn grooves of what you call more aristocratic society down in the South, with their slow days of careless ease. One may be clogged with honey and unable to rise and fly. (81)

His anxiety emerges throughout the novel as he struggles to define what a 'masculine' self constitutes in the new industrial world. He competes with other masculinities, including the "heroic simplicity of the Homeric life" (85) Mr. Hale represents, the "self-indulgent, sensual people […] with […] poorness of character" (85) Lennox represents, and the degraded man, represented in the suicide of Boucher and of his father, whose speculation and failure would not allow him to "bear the disgrace" (87).

18 Among the masculine identities Thornton challenges and confronts, the one he finds most problematic is that one between the "true man" (164) and the gentleman. Though he represents the 'master' in Milton-Northern, Thornton feels separation from the gentlemen of the South:

> a man is to me a higher and a completer being than a gentleman [...which is] a term that only describes a person in his relation to others; but when we speak of him as 'a man,' we consider him not merely with regard to his fellow-men, but in relation to himself,—to life—to time—to eternity. A cast-away, lonely as Robinson Crusoe—a prisoner immured in a dungeon for life—nay, even a saint in Patmos, has his endurance, his strength, his faith, best described by being spoken of as 'a man.' I am rather weary of this word 'gentlemanly,' which seems to me to be often inappropriately used, and used often, too, with such exaggerated distortion of meaning, while the full simplicity of the noun 'man,' and the adjective 'manly' are unacknowledged… (164)

Thornton cites Robinson Crusoe as an example of a "true man," and this example not only recalls the hero of the first published novel by Daniel Defoe, but also the first hero for the middle-class man. Gaskell draws parallels between them in several ways. Robinson Crusoe, imbued with self-discipline and an empirical impulse that guides him for more than twenty-five years on his island, struggles not to succumb to despair. He controls his emotions

through unparalleled examples of rational action demonstrated through his physical and psychological efforts to save himself, and his reliance not only on reason but also on a moral world divinely created and purposeful suggests an overwhelming need to see a higher force govern the threatening chaos both in nature and in himself. By citing Robinson Crusoe, Thornton redefines the role of 'man,' choosing instead of the ineffectual 'gentleman,' the pragmatic industrialist identity that has more in common with Robinson Crusoe based on their shared middle-class identity, their role as 'master' over others, and their struggle with emotion as they strive to 'master' themselves and the changing world around them. Each confronts emotion as a dangerous compromise to their practical sense of manhood. Excessive displays of emotion threaten emasculation for Thornton and potential insanity for Robinson Crusoe, the self-proclaimed king of the island and of its inhabitants.

19 What Thornton really rejects, as Adams explains, is the idea of the Carlylean dandy, the aristocrat who acts as a parasite on society. The dandy contrasts with the man of action characteristic of the newly emergent middle-class industrialist man in Gaskell's period (22). This anxiety, of course, had already emerged in two conflicting portraits at the turn of the eighteenth century between such dandies as George Etherege's Dorimant, the rake hero in *The Man of Mode* (1676), and middle-class capitalists like Robinson Crusoe, whom Defoe literally strips of any 'dandifying' materials. Not surprisingly, the two writers support differing political and social ideologies playing out on a national stage.

20 But as Adams notes, the contrast between Carlyle's hero and dandy necessitates a more complex understanding of Victorian masculinities. Carlyle's version requires the inclusion of 'feminine' feeling that conflicts Thornton, and what it means to 'be a man' becomes blurred throughout the novel. Although Thornton stoically proclaims himself a "man of iron" (213) and one who defies his feelings, or 'feminine' qualities that weaken his resolve, he remains insecure about this strength, struggling with the 'feminine' and 'masculine' qualities that emerge both in himself and in Margaret, whose 'masculine' attributes overtake her 'natural' feminine ones.

21 Indeed, Margaret exemplifies these 'masculine' attributes when she saves Thornton more than once, first in a dramatic gesture where she directly calls his masculinity into question as the mob threatens outside and then again at the end, when she saves him from ruin by her inheritance from Mr. Bell. Despite Mr. Thornton's firm resolutions, hard work, stern countenance, and harsh treatment of those who work for him, it is Margaret who must give him courage to face the strikers: "Mr. Thornton […]go down this instant, if you are not a coward. Go down and face them like a man […] If you have any courage or noble quality in

you, go out and speak to them, man to man" (177). And again, it is Margaret, not Mr. Thornton, who speaks to the crowd and "threw her arms around him," turning "her body into a shield from the fierce people beyond" (179). This act, which protects him from physical injury after a striker hurls a stone, nevertheless injures his self-conception as a "true man" (164); even so, it gives him the courage to face the mob, contemptuous of his 'hiding' behind a woman. His mother, as sternly 'masculine' in her demeanor and refusal to show 'feminine' weakness as her son is, taunts him: "Are you become so helpless as to have to be defended by a girl?" (186). The reinforcement of this 'weakness' haunts Thornton for several chapters; certainly it forces him to face his feelings for Margaret, but it also forces the reader to re-conceptualize her 'masculine' role in the novel, for it is Margaret who will effect change in Milton-Northern.

22 Like Gaskell, Margaret assumes a dangerous position as a moral reformer who must consistently reaffirm her femininity to counter the 'masculine' persona she adopts to serve her role in the novel—not the helpless heroine, swept up into a romance narrative, to be rescued and married—but the agent for reform, who mediates between two competing classes, the industrial class and the working class. Margaret takes an active role in saving Thornton, and she consistently reproaches herself for "defend[ing] that man as if he were a helpless child" (190)—an atypical role she resolves as 'woman's work' since it could have "saved one blow, one cruel, angry action that might otherwise have been committed" (191). Nevertheless, she feels

> a deep sense of shame that she should thus be the object of universal record—a sense of shame so acute that it seemed as if she would fain have burrowed into the earth to hide herself, and yet she could not escape out of that unwinking glare of many eyes. (191)

Margaret's subsequent excuse of her actions for Thornton reinforces the discomfort she feels as having assumed a public 'masculine' role.[9] She represents a feminine version of Carlylean manliness, a definition of the male identity he presents in several works devoted to pinpointing masculine identity. Herbert Sussman explains in *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* that Carlyle's articulation between maleness, an essential definition of unrestrained, dangerous male energy, and manliness, or self-discipline and regulation of male energy in *Sartor Resartus*, frames the debate between 'nature versus nurture' at the center of cultural debates about the Victorian

[9] As Susan Zlotnick explains, Margaret's sexual innocence at the beginning of the novel gives way to a recognition of her sexuality and preference for Thornton—it must, Zlotnick argues, because it takes recognition to achieve self-control and self-determination (114).

male identity. Carlyle's Past and Present presents the driven Abbot Samson, who controls his passions in a celibate lifestyle idealized in work, since his manliness allows him to control extreme passion without giving way to emasculation—the two dangers Sussman argues are present in Carlyle's definition of masculinity (25). Sussman traces this tension within the masculine identity throughout Carlyle's *Past and Present*, *Sartor Resartus*, "The Hero as Man of Letters," and *The French Revolution*, all works that fundamentally reject heterosexuality and the subversive female while celebrating male-male relationships that culminate in the all male community of *Past and Present*. Thornton similarly creates an all male community within his factory, one Sussman identifies, along with the emasculated Mr. Hale, as a Carlylean plot (27).

23 Gaskell actually presents a 'nightmare' version of Carlyle's definition of manliness, one that opposes his obvious anxieties about women. It is not Thornton whose manliness allows him to resolve two competing views of masculinity, one emasculating and the other too passionate; rather, it is Margaret, a 'subversive' woman who wrestles with restrictive social codes for women as she represses desire, who channels social action into Abbot Samson's noble energy. Her celibacy throughout the novel and her worry over expressing too many 'womanly' desires reveal an innate tension between her sexual identity and the moral and social role Gaskell gives her.

24 The way in which Margaret moves through gender roles ultimately stupefies Thornton, who, unlike Margaret, cannot control his feelings for her—he defies his own repeated insistence at his "self-denial" (85) when he sees her assumption of masculine authority blended with traditional femininity:

> He only caught glimpses of her; he did not understand her altogether. At one time she was so brave, and at another so timid; now so tender, and then so haughty and regal proud. And then he thought over every time he had ever seen her once again, by way of finally forgetting her. (208)

Thornton's assessment of Margaret's character only leads him to give way to his passions, and Gaskell describes him as "a fool in the morning" who "did not grow much wiser in the afternoon," since he possesses "a more vivid conviction that there never was, never could be, any one like Margaret; that she did not love him and never would; but that she—no! nor the whole world—should never hinder him from loving her" (208). In this way, Margaret commands power over him, as she does over her father and Higgins. Like Thornton, Higgins acknowledges the need for change at an individual level, and these individual changes, another theme Gaskell introduces, allow for the more widespread change in Milton-

Northern.[10] Margaret assumes a dominant position through her ability alternately to find inner 'masculine' strength for her father and to compete with Thornton and win him over. But she also adopts a feminine 'weakness' as the 'angel' that arrives to the Higgens' household to achieve the moral goals that ultimately unite these two classes and resolve the social problem that conflicts them.

25 The pivotal scene in which Margaret saves Thornton reveals this vacillation between the two competing identities that Margaret assumes, and they not only confound Thornton, they 'unman' him, or strip him of that Carlylean manliness that privileges self-control. As he anticipates his forthcoming declaration of love to her, the inner, chaotic feeling Carlyle rejects and Margaret suppresses rises within him, overtaking Thornton for several chapters:

> in truth, he was afraid of himself. His heart beat thick at the thought of her coming. He could not forget the touch of her arms around his neck…but now the recollection of her clinging defence of him, seemed to thrill him through and through,--to melt away every resolution, all power of self-control, as if it were wax before a fire…Strong man as he was, he trembled at the anticipation of what he had to say. (193)

Thornton must confront new feelings, and he eventually embraces both Margaret and a less 'severe' gendered identity also. Though he initially perceives such emotion as a stereotypically feminine weakness that he attaches to Mr. Hale and the south of England generally, Thornton begins to feel tension between his position as 'master' and his new feelings for Margaret as her would-be lover. His sexual attraction for her and need to have her prove more potent than his attachment to the "true man" (164) identity of the pragmatic industrialist. Margaret sees this and is able to use it to gain power in their relationship and get what she wants. The novel becomes a power struggle between the two characters, not only in their differing philosophies about the factory workers but also in their fight for dominance in the relationship. Margaret ultimately wins over Thornton to her side, and he accepts her reasoning and financial help. The novel ends idealistically, affirming Gaskell's social goals through Margaret's character.

26 This is not achieved until the very end of the novel. Chapter eleven opens with Thornton's assertion of an industrialist identity and thus a more 'manly' presence than he has in the strike scene. Though "he felt his power and revelled in it" (212), Thornton never reasserts total control over his emotional capacities, and he is ultimately subdued by Margaret.

[10] The idea of the individual, evident in Gaskell's original title for the novel, or "Margaret Hale", articulates her commitment to a reform program that begins within the individual. Shirley Foster notes that this theme connects the characters together, including Frederick Hale, whose individual freedom conflicts with the corrupt misuse of authority by the British Navy. Likewise, Mr. Hale's rejection of church authority and even Aunt Shaw's acceptance of her own actions at the end reinforces the theme of individual responsibility (112).

He cannot perpetuate the “man of iron” (213) identity and also pursue Margaret, a social reformer. This gender ‘softening’ functions as a way for Gaskell to resolve the tensions of the novel, though it complicates the Victorian gendered binaries that Gaskell wants to tear down.[11]

27 Marriage ultimately creates the compromise between many competing identities.[12] [2] Gaskell revises the standards of her day to allow for women to act as powerful agents for change. They not only engage men but enter and reshape their world.[13] Margaret’s ability to transcend structured binaries, her transgression of social and gender roles as she assumes a masculine identity, even if it threatens her physically and emotionally, presents a new understanding of masculine and feminine roles.[14] Gaskell’s great achievement, then, remains in creating a female character that not only achieves and wields social and personal mastery over Thornton, but also re-conceptualizes the definition of what 'masculine' and 'feminine' mean in Victorian England.[15]

Works Cited

[11] For further analysis of Margaret’s ‘softening’ tendencies as a way for Gaskell to explore women’s moral authority to change society, see Jane Spencer’s argument in "Elizabeth Gaskell" (75-95).

[12] Hilary M. Schor takes a different view of marriage and the ‘resolutions’ of the novel, arguing that the marriage plot does not resolve the tensions between classes but only advocates moderation. Instead of building up to resolution, Schor proposes that Gaskell builds the novel on oppositions, tensions, and conflict so readers may recognize them the way Thornton does (150).

[13] Both Henry N. Rogers III and Dorice Elliott view marriage as an answer to the novel’s social problems rather than as one that fails because it ends conventionally.

[14] Pearl L. Brown argues against this view of marriage in the novel by seeing Margaret’s role as a middle-class woman soon to marry Thornton as more confining that liberating. Mr. Bell, Lennox, and her future husband all manage Margaret’s life in some way, limiting her independence. By contrast, Brown asserts that Mary Barton, Gaskell’s working-class heroine in an earlier novel, actually has more freedom than the middle-class Margaret (350-2)

[15] For Julie Nash, *North and South* presents a complex view of the conflict between ‘masters and men,’ one not as radical as John Stuart Mill’s view but also not as paternalistic as John Ruskin’s desire to return to a medieval agrarian state. Rather, Nash believes that Gaskell walks a line between them, by recognizing that, while a utopia cannot exist between working-class and industrialist—a reality Thornton realizes—Christian compassion of the kind Margaret expresses holds promise for a more progressive relationship (22-28).

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