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FROM ELIZABETH GASKELL'S *MARY BARTON* TO HER *NORTH AND SOUTH*: PROGRESS OR DECLINE FOR WOMEN?

By Pearl L. Brown

ASSESSMENTS OF ELIZABETH GASKELL'S two novels of social purpose typically conclude that *North and South*, published in 1855, is a more mature work stylistically and ideologically than *Mary Barton*, published in 1848. *North and South* is said to integrate the narrative modes of romance and realism more effectively than *Mary Barton* (Felber 63, Horsman 284), and to provide a more complicated narrative structure (Schor, *Scheherezade* 122–23), a more complex depiction of social conflicts (Easson 59 and 93) and a more satisfactory resolution of them (Duthie 84, Kestner 170). *North and South* is also said to deal with “more complex intellectual issues” (Craik 31). And the novel's heroine, Margaret Hale, has been seen as Gaskell's most mature creation — a woman who grows in self-awareness as she adapts to an alien environment (Kestner 164–166) and, unlike *Mary Barton*, becomes an active mediator of class conflicts (Stoneman 120), the central consciousness that brings together “the lessons of social change and romance” (Schor, *Scheherezade* 127).¹ The reconciliation of these conflicts she inspires through her influence over both mill owner and worker has been praised as a more effective and credible narrative resolution to the social problems depicted in the novel than the reconciliation between mill owner and worker in *Mary Barton* (David 36).

I do not wish to reject these assessments but rather to examine what purpose Gaskell might have had in mind by writing two novels depicting similar conditions of urban unrest beyond the oft-quoted one that she wanted to provide a balanced perspective on the opposing positions taken by “Masters and Men” (156; ch. 15). Paired, the two works not only comment on the opposing views of the conflict between labor and capital but also provide a companion study of the difficulties nineteenth-century women faced, regardless of class, attempting to negotiate the public sphere typically reserved for men. Employing a wider class and regional perspective than *Mary Barton* and a middle-class rather than a working class heroine, *North and South*, more effectively than it could as an isolated text, documents the ways the lives of women had become more marginalized by mid-century, even as the male world of economics and politics had become more powerful influences nationally and globally. Thus, the difference in focus between the two novels provides

readers with a double perspective on ways in which class and gender interact in an industrialized society.

Scholarship on these two novels of social purpose has examined the ways Gaskell's second novel mirrors the social and economic changes that had occurred since the composition of the first novel. By the late 1840's and early 50's, Chartism had lost much of its impetus, but labor unrest was still very much in evidence. Economic conditions had improved somewhat over the depressed conditions in the 1830's, but English manufacturers faced increased competition from global markets (Duthie 75; David 26–27; Kestner 142–43). However, more important to Gaskell than the actual changes is the emergence of a new culture which the second novel also mirrors, along with the ways that culture shaped values and attitudes. The industrial community in Gaskell's *North and South* is far more single-minded than the industrial community in *Mary Barton* in its preoccupation with what Carlyle calls "cash nexus" (193), with the profit motive and laissez-faire economic policy. It is a particularly secular society that values utilitarian pragmatism, self-reliance, and material well-being over class and gender solidarity and communal interdependence. It is, as a consequence, a society that is paradoxically both more monolithic in its shared values and more divided in its increased emphasis on competition and militant mercantilism. In particular, *North and South*, when paired with *Mary Barton*, reflects the impact at mid-century of this new culture on gender roles and on the widening division between the public and the private spheres.² Opportunities and life choices for men may have improved somewhat with economic changes, but for women they seemed to have narrowed. Though economics and politics are still viewed as unpredictable forces in people's lives, both masters and men are shown attempting to take charge of their lives in order to effect some change and advancement. But a comparison of the two novels suggests that Gaskell sees women as having experienced a decline in the ability to control their destiny.

Paired, the two novels chronicle the ways in which changes in the marketplace could work to improve the prospects of a working class man like Nicholas Higgins, prospects not available to John Barton and his fellow workers in an earlier period. As mill owner John Thornton knows, unionism and strikes will not go away. Masters who do not experiment with different working relationships with their men will face difficult times ahead. For a mill owner such as Thornton, advanced technology and market expansion could feed the dreams of a global power and influence, dreams unknown to the mill owner Carson in the earlier novel. However, in her depiction of women, Gaskell seems to suggest that the opposite was the reality for them. While Gaskell shows working class women like Mary Barton and her community of female friends taking control of their lives and achieving some autonomy and independence during the 1830's and early 1840's, the appropriate time period depicted in *Mary Barton*, none of the women in *North and South*, set in the late 1840's and early 1850's, are shown as having gained any advantage in terms of having life choices beyond marriage or achieving an independent existence outside the domestic sphere appropriate to their social class.

Gaskell's reflections on the condition of women emerge more clearly when the two novels are examined against similar structural and thematic patterns. Structurally, both novels use not only the conventions of the novel of social purpose or the industrial novel but also those of the female bildungsroman to present the maturation of young women in an urban setting. Thematically, both novels focus on disruption in the lives of individuals

and families in a society experiencing radical change. And both novels, though seeming to focus on the male world of politics and economics and the conflicts between "Masters and Men" (156; ch.15) are actually primarily concerned with women across social classes and generations. For *Mary Barton*, the only child of a working class family, and Margaret Hale, the only child of a middle class family, disruptions in their families combine with social and economic disruptions to hasten their maturation. Both young women must assume the role of primary caretaker and be the mainstay of their families. Neither woman has a strong parent figure to provide either paternal or maternal support. In fact, both fathers have lost their ideological moorings and have become weak and dependent on their daughters. Barton loses his faith in the Chartist cause and in Christian tenets, and Hale begins to doubt the articles of faith of the Church of England and sees no alternative but to leave his living as vicar at Helstone. Both daughters have weak, ineffective mothers.³ With the death of her mother and her father's unemployment, the young working class girl in *Mary Barton* is left to cope with the needs of her embittered, depressed father and to manage affairs of the home and seek training in some occupation in order to provide financial support. Similarly, the middle class Margaret in *North and South* is forced to take charge of many responsibilities after her father's religious doubts leave him unable to act decisively and responsibly as the head of his family. His daughter must manage the move from Helstone to Milton, convey to her mother her father's decision to leave the family home, and provide emotional support for both parents left paralyzed by the prospects of this economic, social, and psychological disruption in their lives.

Both women are spirited, strong-minded, and rebellious; but the middle-class Margaret, brought up by her London relatives, is, of course, far better educated than the working class Mary in the industrial North. Margaret has also had experiences Mary has not had, experiences that have made her knowledgeable about the larger world, having had to adjust to the moves from London to Helstone and from Helstone to Milton Northern. When Mary goes on her journey to try to help the wrongly accused Jem Wilson, it is the young woman's first excursion into the world outside of her immediate neighborhood. Everything seems strange and frightening to her. Also, Margaret, a vicar's daughter, has received a moral and cultural education while Mary has had the little expected of someone in her class. She is described as somewhat vain, flighty and silly by those around her and by some Gaskell readers too. By contrast, Margaret is thought to be centered, morally principled and wise beyond her years. She has been described as the manufacturer John Thornton's equal — their relationship "the mutual attraction of two proud and powerful natures" who are "alike in their energy and independence" (Gilmour 53). Thus, in Margaret, Gaskell has created a character with more than enough of the requisite strengths to take control of her life. In fact, as the daughter of an Anglican clergyman of a poor rural parish, she has had experiences that should have prepared her to forge an independent life for herself. Yet Gaskell shows Mary, the less articulate, less knowledgeable, and less experienced working class heroine, achieving greater autonomy and self-actualization in the industrialized England of the 1830's and early 40's than the middle-class heroine does in the late 1840's and early 50's.

Although both heroines willingly subordinate their concerns and interests to the traditional life choice for a nineteenth-century woman, marriage, midway through the narrative, Mary has pursued additional options. She has made decisions and taken action on her own accord. Rejecting her father's advice that she seek employment as a domestic

servant, she accepts instead a job as a seamstress with the possibility of a future managing a shop or perhaps owning her own. As difficult as seamstressing could be and was, to Mary it seemed to offer the possibility of improving one's lot in life and some guarantee of freedom and independence.⁴ By contrast, her middle class counterpart in the later novel, better educated, more sophisticated, and more experienced at adapting to new environments, is not shown actively pursuing any life alternatives beyond caring for loved ones and responding to marriage proposals.

Both women would seem to act decisively in their rejection of suitors. Margaret rejects both the life of a leisure class married woman and that of a manufacturer's wife in Milton Northern by rejecting Henry Lennox and John Thornton, and Mary initially rejects a working class life by refusing Jem Wilson's attentions and later rejects Carson's son as a means to improving her and her father's position in life. But, as wrong-headed as Mary's responses to her two suitors seem to be, they are at least based on her understanding of the conventional ways a working class woman might improve her life and that of her family. Margaret's rejection of Henry Lennox's proposal in the garden at Helstone does not reflect the level of understanding and discernment suggested by her character thus far. After all, the proposal comes only a short time before Margaret will have to cope with the breakup of her family home at Helstone. Yet, it is only at the moment that Lennox proposes that Margaret instinctively realizes what is on his mind, and then her immediate response is to wish herself back in the parsonage with her parents. The exchange between Margaret and Henry is couched in the language of modesty typical of the courtship narrative in nineteenth-century novels.⁵ Lennox worries that he has startled her too much; and, when he asks if she loves someone else, he immediately asks forgiveness, the question seeming to be "an insult to the pure serenity of those eyes" (61; ch. 3). Still, her response to his proposal would seem more appropriate from an "asexual, innocent being" (Felber 62), a child-woman who has given no thought to leaving the safety of her family and the duties of a daughter rather than from a maturing young woman capable of passion or discernment. And her later reaction to John Thornton's first proposal does not reflect maturity either. What is foremost in her mind when he proposes is "[t]hat ugly dream of insolent words" (241; ch. 22), the conversation she overheard between Fanny Thornton and a maid regarding Margaret's supposed public display of her love for John Thornton when she attempted to protect him from the mob.⁶

After rejecting these two proposals, Margaret, unlike Mary, is unable to articulate what she might do with her future outside of marriage and family. Once she has been freed from her role of caretaker to the sickly and elderly in Milton Northern by the death of her parents and Bessy Higgins, even her return to her place of growing up in London is not determined by her own choice but by her relatives and her guardian. In her article on women and work in this Gaskell's novel, Catherine Stevenson observes that, as an unmarried woman living with her well-to-do relatives in London, Margaret contemplates two courses of action — "the enforced idleness of a wealthy woman or the unpaid social work of that new breed of women emerging in the 1850s" (79). Charity work is briefly alluded to in a conversation between Margaret and her cousin but in the context of the very restrictive social codes governing the behavior of leisure class women. While charity work at mid-century was an avenue upper-class women could pursue to give their lives some sense of purpose,⁷ Gaskell is careful to suggest how little actual autonomy her London gentry family would permit Margaret. In fact, Gaskell chooses to show her heroine not

actively pursuing social work but rather existing passively in a state of suspension until her legacy comes through and Thornton comes back into her life to propose marriage for the second time. Before that second proposal, Margaret spends a vacation sitting alone on the beach, trying, the narrator intones, to settle the most difficult problem for women — “how much was to be utterly merged in obedience to authority, and how much might be set apart for freedom in working” (508; ch. 49). But this usually articulate woman of strong opinions is strangely silent on the subject of the direction her life might take. Perhaps, as has been suggested, her silence reflects Gaskell's own ideological struggle around the issue of women and work (Stevenson 67–81). Gaskell might also have intended irony by employing the narrative strategies conventionally used to settle the future of the heroine in a romantic plot — the legacy and marriage. Here, Adam Bell's money and Thornton's second marriage proposal come to re-affirm Margaret's dependency before she must independently formulate plans for her future.

One might conclude that, as a middle class author writing for a middle class audience, Gaskell is simply making an obvious distinction between the nineteenth-century expectations for working class women as opposed to those for middle class women in her depiction of her two heroines, Mary Barton and Margaret Hale. Whatever position the middle-class might take on women and work, there was the assumption that working class women would work outside of the home at some point in their lives. Yet, in her second novel, Gaskell chooses to introduce working class women who lack the resilience and strength to engage the larger world, qualities so evident in Mary Barton and her friend Margaret Legh, the professional singer. Though Bessy Higgins has been described as angry and rebellious, the mouthpiece for Gaskell's most devastating criticism of nineteenth-century factory work (Stevenson 70–71), her role as social critic is limited both by her isolation in the home and by her escapist obsession with apocalyptic prophesy. Since neither Bessy nor her sister Mary is employed outside the home, a reader might assume that Gaskell is using the two to express nineteenth-century ambivalence around the issue of working class women and factory work. Indeed, Bessy believes her health was undermined by factory work, and she clearly does not want her younger sister to follow in her footsteps. Still, except for her reference to her father's not wanting her to seek work in an unfamiliar environment, much of her critical commentary on mill work applies equally to men and women. It is such monotonous, deadening work she tells Margaret, that it is no wonder workers seek relief wherever they can.

It does not seem to be so much ambivalence around women and work that Gaskell is expressing in this double perspective on gender and class but rather a sense of how much more difficult female empowerment had become by mid-century, how little women could accomplish outside the home and independent of a man, regardless of class. Margaret's counterpart in *Mary Barton* is not only more independent-minded in her career choices but also much more in a decision-making position in her relationship to men in her life, either her father, or the family friend Job Legh, or her two suitors, or even the lawyer employed in Jem Wilson's defense — all of whom attempt to determine what course of action she should take at various points. But, at the conclusion of *North and South*, three men, not Margaret herself, determine her future. Her guardian, Adam Bell, provides the legacy and attempts to determine where she will live and how she will pay for her keep; one suitor, Henry Lennox, makes the appropriate legal arrangements to invest some of her inheritance in a third man's enterprise, and the third man, her other suitor, John

Thornton, not only profits from her inheritance but settles her future with the second proposal of marriage. Henry Lennox oversees the legal arrangements which will rescue the bankrupt Thornton and which lay the foundation for the mill owner's second proposal. And Thornton's second proposal is influenced in part by the same conditions that inspired the first one — that she comes to his assistance primarily because she is in love with him not as a result of a thoughtful decision. After her marriage to Thornton, her inheritance will be his under the law; and, since she has been careful not to devalue herself as a woman by using her investment in his mill to her advantage, her involvement in Thornton's world will be restricted to that of moral arbiter in the home. Indeed, a nineteenth-century working class woman was likely to find more freedom and independence in marriage in rural Canada where Mary and her husband Jem resettle than a middle-class married woman in Milton Northern.

Commentary on the two novels typically praises the greater coherence of the later novel over the earlier one — the more careful integration of the heroine's story into the larger narrative on class conflict. Catherine Gallagher, for example, sees Gaskell as "following the recipe for social reform suggested by such domestic ideologues as Sarah Ellis" (168) in attempting to use Margaret to illustrate "that a single standard of conduct" in both the public and private spheres "will guarantee the exemplary action upon which woman's influence rests" (172). However, Gallagher observes that the "meaning of the episodes" in which Margaret attempts to act on her beliefs in the public sphere remains ambiguous because she is repeatedly misunderstood by others (172). Thus, when she faces the rioters to protect Thornton, "she acts out of an abstract sense of justice" (172), but Thornton concludes she is acting out of love. Gallagher concludes that the novel ultimately "questions the ethical connection that Margaret believes in between the public and private realms" (184).⁸ Gaskell would seem to be doing more in these episodes than merely questioning her heroine's belief that the public and the private spheres can be integrated through the equal application in both worlds of the female moral principles of domestic ideology. As the embodiment of all of the so-called virtues of the feminine moral ideal, Margaret, through her actions and words, repeatedly reveals how very problematical such a female construct really is. Indeed, what seems more evident is that the heroine emerges as Gaskell's own critique of the notion that women can exercise a moral influence on men and the public world while remaining separate from that world. It is Margaret's naive confidence in her moral superiority, as she confronts a world she does not understand, that is the problem, not the misunderstanding of her actions and words by others. Ignorant about the public world of men, of capital and labor, she nevertheless continues to offer advice that repeatedly proves to be wrongheaded.

First, she shames the proud Thornton into going down before the rioters to speak to them without understanding how dangerous that action is in such a volatile situation. Then she races down to protect Thornton from the mob his presence has incited, not so much out of a sense of abstract justice and fair play as Gallagher suggests, but more out of a sense of guilt, her realization that it was her naive counsel that goaded him to confront the rioters in the first place. Rather than giving any credence to the beliefs encoded in domestic ideology, Gaskell seems more intent on illustrating the ways in which her heroine's ignorance of the world undermines her attempts to intercede in public affairs. In a second critical episode, she agrees to send for her outlawed brother Frederick so he can see his dying mother one more time without understanding the dangers he will face as

a sailor who has been accused of leading a mutiny at sea. In fact, she has less understanding of maritime law than her clergyman father. Arguing from her own limited understanding of moral justice in this case, she concludes that Frederick had right on his side in leading the mutiny and that a son has the moral right to be with his dying mother. It is only later, when she lies to the police, denying she was at the train station the night her brother left Milton Northern for London, that she understands intuitively the real danger he faced coming home and the further dangers he very likely will face if he follows her advice and goes to London to seek legal assistance to clear his name. In addition, she fears losing Thornton's respect more than she regrets failing as female arbiter of morality. This fear is the real cause of her agony over lying to the police. The lie would weigh less heavily on her mind if Thornton were ignorant of it. Such ignorance and self-deception have far-reaching consequences.⁹ It is true that Margaret changes as she learns more about the marketplace — unions and strikes and economic realities of mill owners and workers — but Gaskell does want her readers to see how flawed the domestic ideology is and how difficult it is for women to exercise any moral influence when their domestic world is so isolated from the public world of men.

At the conclusion of the novel, Margaret's choice of Thornton and Milton Northern speaks volumes about limited options for even the exceptional woman at mid-century. Angus Easson is correct in his comment that Thornton and his mother are nothing like Bounderby and Mrs. Sparsit in Dickens's *Hard Times* (87) and Milton Northern is no Coketown, but there are certain disturbing similarities. Though Thornton is humanized in a way that Bounderby never could be and Mrs. Thornton, unlike Mrs. Sparsit in her malicious treatment of Louisa, will try to make Margaret happy for her son's sake, Milton manufacturers and their families will continue to value material success and to see possessions as symbols of their social status. Margaret has been assimilated somewhat into this aggressively pragmatic and material world, but there is no indication she could ever accept their profit motive ethos. Further, even with the changes in Thornton, it is difficult to see how much more freedom and independence to pursue her own interests Margaret will have as his wife than she would have had as an unmarried woman in genteel London. Margaret's future mother-in-law, preoccupied with the reputation of the family and insecure about how to preserve its good name and status, has an understanding of female propriety and behavior that is certainly no less rigid than Margaret's Aunt Shaw's. Christine Krueger is certainly justified in her conclusion that the marriage signals Margaret's resignation to a woman's traditional role "as the incomplete half of a whole," accepting her duties as angel of mercy and wife and mother (218).

In *North and South* the broader class perspective allows Gaskell to depict middle and upper middle class women in a variety of different social and domestic contexts — from the Shaws' London parlor, to the Hales' little parsonage in Helstone, to their modest apartment in Milton Northern to the ostentatious home of the Thorntons. The effect is a depressing commentary on their isolated lives and their misguided aspirations and meaningless goals in this new social order. In her treatment of women in the manufacturing class, Gaskell typically satirizes their aspiring to advance socially by mimicking the manners and dress of women of the gentlewomen. The Carson daughters in the first novel and Thornton's sister Fanny in the second imitate the manners and taste of leisure class women. For their part, the women of the gentry, like the Shaws, mother and daughter, cling to the old manners and mores of an earlier age. Mrs. Hale, who has married down

rather than up and has had to endure a life of genteel poverty as a vicar's wife in rural Helstone, spends her days longing nostalgically for her maiden years when she was Lady Bereston's ward on the country estate. Though her life as a vicar's wife certainly is a more meaningful one than the self-indulgent life of socials and fashions of her London relatives, she still envies them. In Milton Northern, Thornton's sister Fanny shares with Margaret's London cousin Edith a pre-occupation with socials and fashions that define the life of a gentlewoman at mid-century. And she has added the other requisite quality — passivity to the point of illness. While Edith is frequently depicted as in a half asleep state, Fanny is almost an invalid.

What further distinguishes the quality of the lives of women in these two novels is the sense of rootedness in a community in the earlier work in contrast to the sense of rootlessness in the later one. In *Mary Barton* much of this rootedness resides in the working class female culture. Mary Barton and her working class women friends still have a sense of rootedness in their culture and heritage in the 1830's and early 40's, but this sense of cultural continuity and class identity seems to be disappearing with the changes the new economy had wrought. Wendy Craik, in her article on education and the working class in these two novels, points to references to the Bible, popular songs, and folklore in *Mary Barton* as evidence that Gaskell wanted to illustrate that there were still "strong links with a pre-industrial past, oral tradition, and a way of life" (21). In *North and South*, except for Bessy Higgins's evangelicalism, there is little sense of the importance of working class traditions as a cohesive force in the lives of women. In the earlier novel, Mary Barton's friend Margaret entertains her friends singing old ballads and songs and uses these to establish herself as a professional singer. Alice Wilson passes on to the two young girls her knowledge of herbs and serves as a good role model for female self-reliance. But in the second novel there is little sense of a female community and a folk tradition lending support to either Bessy or her sister Mary or for the working class in general.

Of course, Gaskell's first novel does reflect the economic and social disruptions of the day and their impact on the lives of people regardless of class or gender. Uprootedness in the working class is represented in the character of Alice Wilson whose past mirrors the dislocation caused by the migration of rural workers to urban centers in search of better economic opportunities. Within the manufacturing class, Carson is isolated from his working class roots and his wife even more so, hidden behind the walls of her home, the symbol of their new found wealth. But the sense of isolation and rootlessness in the working class is more pervasive in *North and South*. That impression is best captured by contrasting the use of indoor and outdoor settings in the two novels. In *North and South*, the workers are more likely to be seen on the streets rushing about. The interior of the Higgins's house is described much less extensively than that of the Bartons or of Alice Wilson, for example. In *Mary Barton*, the houses become homes. Gaskell invites the reader into these dwellings, observing "the smallest details of household decoration and routine and the texture of daily life" before moving "outward into the contended area of 'social problems'" (Gilmour 49). There is a sense of cohesiveness generated not only by family life but by the extended family of friends and relations. The detailed description of homes suggests a vibrant social life and a family tradition that working women in particular can turn to for support.

Also, though there is some solidarity among workers suggested in the second novel, it is less likely to show the female community as a part of that solidarity. In the second

novel Gaskell dwells more extensively on the division within the union and within the working class community. In *Mary Barton*, individual members of the working class community, men and women alike, come to Barton's house to give voice to their grievances before union representatives go to London to present their Chartist petitions. It is only after these petitioners are denied a hearing that this solidarity is shaken and the men react violently to the younger Carson's attempts to satirize them. In contrast, in *North and South* the individual worker is stripped of his identity in the beast-like mob preparing to attack Thornton in front of his mill. And, naturally, in that kind of public action, there is no role for women.

The over-all effect of the second novel is an increased sense of alienation and isolation spawned by a militant industrialism and a laissez-faire culture that inspires neither solidarity within a class, cooperation between classes, nor interaction between the domestic and the public worlds. In the public world of men, although friendships are established between the Oxford-educated Hale and the manufacturer Thornton and between Hale and the mill worker Higgins, the isolation of mill workers from manufacturers, of men in the professions from men in the gentry, and of the university educated from those educated by experience is clearly delineated. Hale's scholar friend, Bell, owns property in Milton and was born there but hates the town and spends most of his time at Oxford. Henry Lennox, aspiring to advance in law in this age of professionalism and pragmatic values, is alienated from his gentry family, whose values seem to him out of touch with the times. And, even within a class, one is alone. When Thornton faces the strikers, he does so as an isolated mill owner. When he is at the point of bankruptcy, he foresees his having to struggle back up again, alone. His competitive pride and philosophy of self-help will accept no other alternative. By increasing the class and regional perspective in *North and South*, Gaskell has provided a more comprehensive view of the disconnection the new age has wrought between men's upbringing and their work.

This sense of disconnection in *North and South* is then expanded to include the isolated lives of the women dependent on their men. Thus, while the public sphere is expanding in an effort to meet the demands of "industrialism's international and imperial role" (Perera 47), the private sphere is becoming more constricted and women are becoming more isolated in their domestic enclaves and within their social classes. Rosemarie Bodenheimer has argued that in this novel Gaskell's creation of a heroine involved in the male world of industrial politics serves to undercut not only the theory of paternalism but also the ideology of the separate spheres (54–55). However, an examination of the various domestic enclaves associated with Margaret would seem to cast doubt on that conclusion. In the South, the Shaws and Lennoxes of the landed gentry, a dying breed, exist in a stratified world — employers and employees separated into different spaces of the mansion and men and women separated by their roles and concerns — the parlor for women and the workplace and club for men. The stagnancy of women's lives and their disconnection to the public world are underscored by the new opportunities for the men in the family who have the option to try out one or the other of the new professions increasingly acceptable to gentlemen, law and the navy. There are no such parallel opportunities for gentlewomen. Hale's ties with the scholarly life of contemplation at Oxford are affected both by his religious doubts and his move to an industrial society that is antagonistic to humanistic traditions. Still, he is shown making an adjustment to the pragmatism of Milton Northern by tutoring in the classics. His wife is much more isolated by his decisions than

he is and much less in control of her fate. Her marriage to him has already separated her from her gentry background with which she identifies. She has never been happy at Helstone and is even less happy in dirty, noisy Milton Northern. She was not consulted about the move or even apprised of her husband's religious doubts which precipitated the move. Even less useful in Milton Northern than she was in Helstone as a clergyman's wife, she withdraws more and more until her decline becomes physical as well as mental. Mr. Hale may not be too far wrong in his guilty feelings that he may have hastened his wife's death.

In the manufacturing class, Mrs. Thornton, in her museum-like home, serves as Gaskell's consummate example of a woman whose limited role in life does not match up with her enormous energy and her resolute will. In some respects she is an older, northern version of Margaret Hale, her nemesis. To be sure, Mrs. Thornton in the industrial north has not had the cultural or religious education of the younger woman reared in London and nurtured by her clergyman father. And Margaret has had an unusually wide range of experiences for a young middle class woman, having known first hand the genteel wealth of London society, the rural poverty at Helstone, and both urban poverty and affluence in Milton Northern. Yet similarities come to mind. They are courageous, energetic, strong willed, outspoken women who are devoted to family and loyal to those they love. Even so, for all of her strength and indomitable will, Mrs. Thornton has little to give her life purpose beyond living vicariously through her son and jealously reacting to any hint of his interest in another woman. Will Margaret also live vicariously through her children, particularly her sons? An adoring but poorly educated mother, the current Mrs. Thornton offers advice based on ignorance, prejudice, and blind love, supporting her son unconditionally in just those policies where he should not be supported. Should he hire Irish workers to replace his striking workers? Should he use the full force of the police to squash the riot and punish union leaders? Should he attempt to present to his workers his case for lowering wages? For none of these questions does she have an intelligent, well reasoned response. Her education and experiences have been too limited by her domestic world. Her character serves as a paradigm for the misuse of those female strengths that abide in exceptional women regardless of class or age. It is indeed difficult to agree with Judith Newton that in this novel Gaskell "celebrates the ideology of woman's sphere" (164).

One can imagine that Margaret Thornton as caretaker and moral arbiter in Thornton's house will be more effective and less frustrated than her mother-in-law has been. In fact, more than any other of Gaskell's heroines, Margaret represents the accommodations the author herself had to make. As Jennifer Uglow observes, Margaret's ambivalent reaction to Milton Northern can be seen as paralleling Gaskell's own ambivalence towards Manchester (369). As a minister's daughter, Margaret will call on the sickly and needy as she did with the Higginses and as Gaskell did as a minister's wife. Margaret certainly will advise her husband, who will be an even more enlightened mill owner under her influence, as Gaskell attempted to enlighten her middle class readers through her novels and, one assumes, in her social contacts with Manchester manufacturers. And Margaret will continue to adjust to the change from pastoral Helstone to Milton as Gaskell adjusted to her move from Knudson to Manchester after her marriage. But, unlike Gaskell, whose sense of self was fed by her successful career as a writer, Margaret will have no effective way to separate herself from her domestic roles and to create an independent life for herself. In

Mary Barton, Gaskell introduces a working class heroine who, before her marriage and emigration to Canada, created her own opportunities and achieved some economic and personal independence. And so did her friend Margaret, who pursued a successful career as a singer. But for a woman like Margaret Hale, caught between two levels of the middle class, an independent life is not an option.

Readers of *North and South* have argued that it is more successful than *Mary Barton* in its use of the heroine as a mediator to resolve conflict between classes and as a means of integrating the narratives of romance and of realism. Gaskell's purpose, however, includes critiquing the high price a middle class woman must pay to fulfill the roles of moral arbiter, class mediator, and assimilator. Indeed, the depiction of an exceptional woman subordinating her personal identity to the culturally acceptable feminine role of moral guide does more than question the belief that women in their private sphere can extend their moral influence to the public one. Barbara Harmon is correct to conclude that here Gaskell is attempting to legitimize public action for women (361). Even the less resilient, weaker women like Bessy Higgins, are possessed of qualities the public world desperately needs; yet across class, regional, and generational boundaries, increasingly, the opportunities do not exist for women to make a meaningful contribution outside the proscribed roles of domestic ideology. Could Bessy have become a union activist or even a religious leader or Margaret a social reformer or Mrs. Thornton an industrial leader? The potential for the exercise of such power in this new social order resides in these women. They possess the requisite qualities. What is needed, Gaskell implies, is a more enlightened society.

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NOTES

1. Schor provides an insightful analysis of the narrative complexity of *North and South* in her book on Gaskell, *Scheherzade in the Marketplace*. She argues that this novel undercuts a reader's narrative predictions at every turn, "altering plots by putting them in unexpected places" (125). She sees the novel as offering a series of oppositions as the heroine moves from one kind of setting to another and from one kind of plot and discourse to another. She concludes that what the narrative "suggests is, at best, a series of uneasy marriages and uncertain alliances, between fiction, romance and reform" (121).
2. Scholarship on Gaskell, including feminist scholarship, generally concludes that she supports the domestic ideology of her day. Schor, in her excellent overview of Gaskell scholarship in "Elizabeth Gaskell: A Critical History and a Critical Revision," is rightly troubled by the assumption of some feminist critics in particular that Gaskell endorses the notion of separate spheres for men and women. Schor observes, for example, that Newton in *Women, Power, and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction, 1778–1860* "always takes the darkest possible view of Gaskell's accommodation to the systems she depicts" (363–64) and that Stoneman in her book *Elizabeth Gaskell* sees progress in Gaskell primarily in terms of "a move from 'public to private themes . . .'" (364). In her book *Scheherzade in the Marketplace*, Schor analyzes the linkage between the romance and political plots in *Mary Barton* and comments on how that intersection of the double plot ("the doubled secret of Mary's lover and her father's act of murder") constitutes "at once a critique of the myth of a separate, domestic, private sphere . . . and an interesting examination of . . . the heroine's role within

that plot" (20–21). However, a central point in my reading of these two novels of social purpose is that a careful comparison of them reveals Gaskell's serious reservations about the separate spheres.

3. An analysis of Gaskell's treatment of mothers and mothering is outside the scope of this article. See Davis's "Feminist Critics and Literary Mothers: Daughters Reading Elizabeth Gaskell" which offers an excellent analysis of feminist reaction to Gaskell's preoccupation with mothering and nurturance. In her overview of this subject, Davis cites both early feminist critics, such as Newton and Gilbert and Gubar who are dismissive of Gaskell as being too conventional, and more recent feminist critics such as Homans and Stoneman who attempt to rehabilitate her "as a new kind of mother" (518). As Davis observes, Homans sees the bonding between mother and daughter in Gaskell's fiction "as a positive alternative to the daughter's entrance into the symbolic order, the world of the father" (518) and Stoneman sees maternal instinct as a form of resistance to patriarchy (520). However, it is difficult to find in either of these novels of social purpose examples of mother-daughter bonding as a positive influence or maternal instinct as a form of resistance. The mothers are either deceased, sickly, living in the past, or otherwise ineffective. Schor, in *Scheherezade in the Marketplace*, discusses the several mother figures in *Mary Barton* and comments on Gaskell's focus on "faith in maternal power" (29) and maternal authority and wisdom in that novel. However, she too must concede that a reader might well ask how far the authority of these mothers extends, given that death has claimed them by the end of the novel. In any case, it is not at all clear that, alive, these mother figures had sufficient authority or power to provide strong guidance to the young Mary. And that assessment is even more applicable to mother-daughter relationships in *North and South*. Certainly, neither Edith Shaws' mother nor Margaret Hale's emerges as an emblem of maternal wisdom or power, and even less do they serve as a model of female resistance to the patriarchal order.
4. Yeazell has argued in "Why Political Novels Have Heroines: *Sybil*, *Mary Barton*, and *Felix Holt*" that in *Mary Barton* the heroine and her story provide a "cover" or a refuge from the dangerous aggression of the hero, John Barton, and the possibility of violence in his story. She argues that *Mary Barton*'s character is essentially static, that she is from beginning to end the innocent heroine who undergoes no change of heart. Yeazell's reading of the character of *Mary Barton* and her function in the novel would seem to dismiss this young woman's heroic struggle against the public world of men as she tries to achieve economic independence and personal autonomy and to solve a murder that implicates both her father and her lover. Such actions certainly suggest that her function in the narrative extends beyond serving as a cover or refuge. As Schor concludes in *Scheherezade in the Marketplace*, by the end of the novel *Mary* has moved beyond "normal spheres of action for a woman in a novel" (38).
5. See Yeazell's *Fictions of Modesty: Women and Courtship in the English Novel* for a comprehensive study of the language of modesty employed in nineteenth-century novels.
6. Stoneman in *Elizabeth Gaskell* observes that Margaret, a strong woman, is still "bound by the duplicitous ethic of the 'virtuous woman' who must avoid sexual shame, while not appearing to be aware of what it is she must avoid" in this very public display (128–29). However, when Margaret's reaction in this scene is coupled with her reaction to Henry Lennox's proposal, it is difficult not to conclude that Gaskell is deliberately undercutting the image of her heroine as a strong, independent-minded woman.
7. D'Alberty, in *Dissembling Fictions: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Social Text*, provides a commentary on mid-Victorian writing and philanthropy and discusses Gaskell's use of "new forms of urban mobility authorized by women's philanthropic discourse" in *North and South*. D'Alberty comments on the importance to her education in the public sphere of Margaret Hale's "streetwalking" and social visits in Milton Northern.

8. Gallagher, in her book *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, presents a lucid commentary on the two ways of viewing the ideal relationship between the domestic and the industrial worlds prevalent during Gaskell's time — social paternalism which advanced the idea that the relation between the master and the worker should duplicate the relationship of the wise father and the obedient child in the Victorian family and domestic ideology which saw “the industrial and domestic worlds as separate and the family as an enclave capable of spiritually regenerating men” (118). Gallagher notes the paradox of both systems, that society or the industrial world “can be made similar to the family only if the family is rigorously isolated from society” (120).
9. Krueger, in her chapter on Gaskell as the evangelist of reconciliation in *The Reader's Repentance*, argues convincingly that Margaret loses her voice and authority as a proper evangelist of reconciliation as she “discipline[s] and censor[s] her own transgressive behavior” (212).

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