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IN PROMISCUOUS COMPANY: FEMALE PUBLIC APPEARANCE IN ELIZABETH GASKELL'S *NORTH AND SOUTH*

IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND, FEMALE PUBLICITY SEEMS NEARLY ALWAYS TO have been bad publicity. Walking alone in the city streets, speaking before a mixed audience, appearing at a polling booth, engaging in the world of business or politics, even eating in a restaurant might compromise a woman's reputation. Richard Sennett has noted, for example, that "in the restaurants of the 19th Century, a lone, respectable woman dining with a group of men, even if her husband were present, would cause an overt sensation."[1] The men in whose company she appeared somehow cancelled out the protection her husband provided — as though their presence suggested not the safety, but rather the danger, of numbers. Sennett's comment also suggests the extent of the surprise Victorians felt when they saw a woman in a public place: to appear in public was to make a spectacle of oneself, openly to elicit notice, to create a stir.

The anxiety about female public appearance to which these remarks point expresses itself in a wide variety of contexts in the Victorian period — most insistently, of course, in debates about the position and status of women. Indeed, from mid-century onward, as women increasingly sought access to the public sphere — to education, to the professions, to the vote — the anxiety about female publicity escalated. In commentary on the reform of laws concerning women, in discussions about the expansion of female employment opportunities, and in debates about female suffrage, writers both defended and challenged the "sharply marked division" between private and

[1] Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), p. 23. Distinguishing male from female public experience, he indicates that "the dining out of a bourgeois man with a woman of lower station was tacitly but studiously avoided as a topic of conversation among any of those near to him" (p. 23). This statement is also a telling assertion about the divergent experiences of middle- and lower-class women. As Leonore Davidoff points out, when lower-class women enter the public sphere unprotected by families and servants, they are "open to labelling as prostitutes or at least 'fallen' women, no matter what their behavior [has] been"; see Davidoff, *The Best Circles: Women and Society in Victorian England* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973), p. 81.

public life, and revealed in the process the central, indeed critical, role it played in Victorian social and cultural experience. [2]

My purpose in this essay is to investigate, in the historical and in the literary record, the meaning of female public life when it begins to emerge in Victorian England as a dangerously real possibility. I shall start with Sarah Lewis's 1839 tract, *Woman's Mission*, and end with a letter of William Gladstone's written in 1892, in order to provide a sense of historical range and to indicate as well the persistence across time of some central features of the public/private debate. I shall take as my literary starting point Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854-55) because it is my view that this novel investigates both ends of the public/private spectrum: it explores the significance of female public appearance, and it examines at the same time the meanings associated with female privacy, secrecy, and concealment. In addition, Gaskell's complex portrayal of the shape, meaning, and consequence of female publicity reflects a sense both of its new and of its potentially explosive possibilities.

I

It was a commonplace of Victorian social and cultural experience that the public arena was characterized by strife, disorder, even chaos. It was a universe of constraint in which self-interest, passion, and prejudice regularly compromised moral principle. In the writings of mid-century domestic ideologists like Sarah Stickney Ellis (1810?-72), whose *Women of England, their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* (1838) extended itself into *Mothers* (1843), *Wives* (1843), and *Daughters of England* (1845), and in the work of Sarah Lewis, whose *Woman's Mission* (1839) was popular in both England and America, it was frequently argued that woman's sphere must be separated off from man's lest it be corrupted by the connection. Lewis wished to claim that access to the public sphere is necessarily contaminating: either it attaches one to the world and gives one interests and motives, or it somehow damages — perhaps even taints — one's character. In either case, participation in public life compromises the clarity of woman's position as neutral or disinterested analyst and observer, someone to whom man can turn when he seeks to be guided by "abstract principles of right and wrong." [3]

Of course the vision of woman as independent moral resource, a vision absolutely central to domestic apologists from Ellis to John Ruskin, was

[2] The phrase is Emily Davies's in *The Higher Education of Women* (London: Alexander Strahan, 1866), p. 18.

[3] Sarah Lewis, *Woman's Mission* (1839; rpt. Philadelphia: Willis P. Hazard, 1854), p. 53.

dramatically and decisively undermined by the null status under the law of women in Victorian England. The operative definition in the Victorian period remained that of William Blackstone, who described, in *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765-69), the legal situation of married women under the law of coverture: "By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover she performs everything; and is therefore called in our law-french a *feme-covert*."[4]

Blackstone's often cited — and frequently challenged — definition is interesting in a number of ways. First, in stark contrast to Lewis's representation of woman as a figure of moral neutrality and thus integrity, Blackstone implies that her neutrality is really ontological emptiness or nullity. This was certainly Caroline Norton's view of the effect of the law of coverture, which by vesting in her estranged husband the power to act on her behalf simultaneously eliminated her agency. As Norton would discover when she attempted to defend herself against a charge of adultery, to sue an editor for libel, to sign her own lease, and to bequeath property to her children, she was " 'non-existent,' except for the purpose of suffering." She complained of "A mock-trial, in which I do not 'exist' for defence; a gross libel, in which I do not 'exist' for prosecution; a disposition of property, in which I do not 'exist' either for my own rights or for those of my children. . . . *That*, is the negative and neutralizing law, for married women in England."[5]

Blackstone's definition is also interesting because it suggests that the nonexistence of women is tied to their lack of self-definition. Women are unable to act in their own right because they are unable to differentiate themselves from their spouses and thus to make their actions, and their selves, distinct and visible. Of course Blackstone's point is that the incorporated woman is a protected woman, but as Frances Power Cobbe (1822-1904), Chair of the London National Society for Women's Suffrage, would both humorously and grimly remark when she wrote in support of legal reform in the 1860s, the proper emblem of woman's "absolute . . . Union" with man is the "Tarantula Spider, [for] when one of these delightful creatures is placed under a glass with a companion of his own species a little smaller than himself, he forthwith gobbles him up. . . . The operation being completed, the victorious spider visibly acquires double bulk, and thenceforth may be understood to 'represent the family' in the most perfect manner conceivable."[6] In Cobbe's view, a

[4] William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 4 vols. (1765-69; rpt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), I, 430.

[5] Caroline Norton, *English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1854; rpt. Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, 1981), pp. 166-167.

[6] Frances Power Cobbe, "Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors," *Fraser's Magazine* 68 (1868), 789.

woman's union with her husband — which Blackstone first calls her "incorporation" and then her "consolidation" — is far from benign. To be incorporated is simply to be eaten alive, and to be represented in the flesh of the husband is merely to contribute to his increased power and size. A woman's husband did not incorporate her in order to represent her in the world; rather, he incorporated and thus finally eliminated his wife, improving his own self-representation at the cost of hers.

The union of husband and wife and the disappearance of the wife into the husband thus had important implications for female representation and, finally, for what I would like to call female public appearance. As one nineteenth-century jurist put it, clarifying the social implications of coverture in an 1840 case, the law "places the wife under the guardianship of the husband, and entitles him for the sake of both, to protect her from the danger of unrestrained intercourse with the world."[7] Here, the husband's protection or "cover" translates into the wife's isolation and disappearance from the public realm. In effect, his ability to "cover" is literalized: he obscures her from view and thus obliterates her public self. Indeed, until 1891 a husband could confine his wife to the home against her will, and at least one contemporary journal saw his ability to do so as a necessary condition of married life. When the law was finally eliminated, *Nineteenth Century* magazine declared: "One fine morning last month marriage in England was suddenly abolished" (May 1891; quoted in Graveson and Crane, p. 116).

As the above remarks suggest, the laws concerning married women — which were defended and challenged with great intensity in the second half of the nineteenth century — governed not only their ability to own property but also, more generally, their ability to appear in their own unincorporated persons, to move freely, and to have unmediated and unrestricted "intercourse with the world." Moreover, these laws had social, cultural, and psychological implications for unmarried women as well. Despite the so-called "superfluous" population of women, the majority of single Englishwomen expected to be married one day, and they thus felt the existing law's (prospective) power to constrain them.[8]

Indeed, when those who opposed reform considered the implications of revising the law concerning married women's property, they saw that if women had property they would gain a freedom of movement in the world that some considered worrisome. In an 1868 parliamentary debate Gabriel Goldney argued that passage of the Married Women's Property Bill "would

[7] John Taylor Coleridge, quoted in D. Mendes da Costa, "Criminal Law," in *A Century of Family Law, 1857-1957*, eds. R. H. Graveson and F. R. Crane (London: Sweet and Maxwell, 1957), p. 178.

[8] Barbara Leigh Smith (later Bodichon; 1827-91) established the committee to reform the married women's property laws and published "Brief Summary, in Plain Language, of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women, Together with a Few Observations Thereon" in 1854, when she was herself an unmarried woman for whom the laws presumably had no meaning.

introduce the elements of discord into domestic circles, and lead to a great deal of immorality, because it would so free a woman from restraint that in any quarrel she might have with her husband she would be enabled to say, 'I have my own property, and if you don't like me I can go and live with somebody who does.' "[9]

In a startling critique of the bill, Anthony Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury asked, "Would she hold [property] with all the usual rights, privileges, and profits? For instance, could she quarrel with her husband and eject him, or refuse him admission to her house; and, while keeping him out of it, might she admit everyone else?" (*3 Hansard*, CCII [1870], 611). His remarks make clear that the right to own property would free a woman from her husband's home and give her the power to control access to her domain (a power hitherto possessed by him). A woman thus liberated, Shaftesbury contends, might convert a traditionally private place into a public space (a brothel), by admitting not "anyone" but rather "everyone" into her home. The consequence of the wife's ability to own property is thus her right to control access to her home and her body — in other words, the consequence is her sexual freedom. In Shaftesbury's view, of course, sexual freedom is really sexual permissiveness whose further consequence is that it deprives the husband of exactly that access which is suddenly made available to so many others: "If she could act in that manner, he wanted to know how the conjugal rights of the husband were to be asserted" (611). The wife who becomes a property owner deprives her husband of his property in her and simultaneously declares herself publically held.

A similar anxiety also appears in the writing of those who consider the consequences of women entering the professions. As the anonymous author of "The Rights of Woman," William E. Aytoun explored in 1862 the implications of training women for careers, and immediately imagined the impropriety of men and women working in close quarters together. In the case of the female lawyer he argued that "It is all very well to talk of professional honour; but we swear by the Knave of Clubs that if we found the wife of our bosom, whatever kind of gown she might be wearing, closeted with a rascally lawyer, we should force open the door with a poker, hit Mr. Sargeant Doublefee a pitiless pelt upon the numskull, and fetch madam home to expiate her offences by a week's solitary confinement."[10] And in the case of the female doctor, Aytoun pointed out:

> A married female M.D. must of course be prepared to sally forth at any hour of the night, if summoned by a patient. What husband would submit to such a gross infringement of

[9] Great Britain, *Hansard, Parliamentary Debates*, 3d series (henceforth cited as *3 Hansard*), CXCII (1868), 1360 . See also Lee Holcombe, *Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), p. 153.

[10] [William E. Aytoun], "The Rights of Woman," *Blackwood's Magazine* 92 (1862), 194.

> the connubial contract? Nay it may be questioned whether he would feel gratified by the information that his wife had been selected by some notorious debauchee as his confidential medical adviser. If a maiden, the case is even worse. No daughter of Esculapius would be safe for a moment if, under professional pretexts, she might be decoyed into any den of infamy. Nor would the public sympathy be largely lavished upon the victim of such an outrage.
>
> (p. 197).

In Aytoun's view, the real risk of women entering the professions is the danger — indeed the inevitability — of seduction and betrayal. In his first example, the wife's law robes cannot quite be distinguished from more intimate garments, and the husband's only recourse in the presence of his wife's infidelity is violently to substitute his poker for someone else's and to punish his wife for venturing out into the world by confining her to home. In Aytoun's second example the husband's loss of connubial rights is only part of the problem. When his wife "sall[ies] forth" it is only to be seduced by her patients. Indeed, the powerlessness of the wife — or the maiden — is here imagined as a kind of antidote to her adventurousness, as her rape is a kind of punishment. The cruelty of the final assertion that a violated woman would win no sympathy for her plight reveals, especially in the midst of Dickensian efforts at humor, the author's hostile and punitive intentions. [11]

The association between access to public life, freedom of movement, and sexual impropriety appears insistently in the documentary material on the suffrage movement as well. In response to John Stuart Mill's proposal to amend the 1867 Reform Bill so that it would extend the vote to unmarried women (including widows), John Burgess Karslake remarks in parliamentary debate that Mill's arguments "all pointed to the admission of married women" and that

> the law of the land of the present day had deliberately settled that the wife should be absolutely and entirely under the control of the husband, not only in respect of her property, but of her personal movements. For example, a married woman might not "gad about," and if she did her husband was entitled to lock her up . . . [for] undoubtedly the husband had entire dominion over the person and property of his wife. He thought, then, it was clear that votes could not be given to married women consistently with the rules of law as regarded property and the husband's dominion over the wife's movements.
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> (*3 Hansard*, CLXXXVII [1867], 831).

Karslake's remarks are interesting because he identifies voting with having the right to move freely, to "gad about" in the world. And he identifies the husband's "entire dominion" over the wife's movements with the impossibility of extending her the vote. In another response to Mill's speech,

[11] Carol Bauer and Lawrence Ritt correctly point out that Aytoun "employ[s] a prose style that seems to owe a good deal to Dickens"; see Bauer and Ritt, eds., *Free and Ennobled: Source Readings in the Development of Victorian Feminism* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1979), p. 253.

Samuel Laing observes, in Ruskinian language, that "the contests of political life, and the rude and rough work which men had so often to go through, were not . . . suited to the nature of woman" (p. 840). Even George Bowyer, who did not oppose Mill's amendment, presumed that Mill would recommend that women "use voting papers [absentee ballots], for it would be manifestly indecorous for them to attend the hustings or the polling-booth" (p. 841). And other politicians "envisioned respectable widows assaulted at the polls, while their colleagues declared that only slatterns would dare appear at the hustings."[12] Female participation in public life, and female public appearance itself, would so compromise a woman's virtue that the only way even a proponent of the vote like Bowyer could imagine its success would be to convert a public into a private act — to make women vote in absentia, in the privacy of their own homes.

II

What all of this evidence suggests is that in the 1850s, when Elizabeth Gaskell was writing *North and South*, and later in the 1860s, when she was writing *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863) and *Wives and Daughters* (1866), reformers were seeking to redefine female identity and to gain for women access to the public sphere, while opponents continued to define public life as a realm prohibited to women, inevitably associated with indecorous self-display and frequently with illicit sexuality and infidelity. Even as late as 1892, when the liberal reformer William Gladstone considered in a letter to Samuel Smith the consequences of extending the vote to women, he claimed to fear "lest we should invite [the female voter] unwittingly to trespass upon the delicacy, the purity, the refinement, the elevation of her own nature, which are the present sources of its power." Gladstone admits that "in the Universities, in the professions," in what he calls "the secondary circles of public action," women already study and labor and act, but he argues that "we have . . . done nothing that plunges the woman as such into the turmoil of masculine life."[13]

And yet Gladstone's letter is important not so much for its reiteration of the familiar position (public life is chaotic and tumultuous; women who enter it will violate their purity and damage their delicacy) but rather for its revelation about the relationship of private to public experience. Gladstone

[12] Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets, and William Veeder, *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837-1883*, 3 vols. (New York: Garland, 1983), II, 48.

[13] William Gladstone, "Female Suffrage: A Letter from the Right Honourable W. E. Gladstone to Samuel Smith, M. P. April 11, 1892" (London: John Murray, 1892), quoted in Patricia Hollis, ed., *Women in Public: The Women's Movement 1850-1900* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1979), p. 320.

writes, "I am not without the fear lest beginning with the State, we should eventually be found to have intruded into what is yet more fundamental and more sacred, the precinct of the family, and should dislocate, or injuriously modify, the relations of domestic life" (p. 320). In the midst of an insistence that private life must assiduously be distinguished from public life, Gladstone's letter makes it perfectly apparent that the two are intimately connected and that their separation is impossible to maintain. As Gladstone himself understands, to legislate one is automatically to legislate the other, to decide on a public matter is to influence — to intrude upon, to dislocate, to modify — a private one, because the two spheres are entirely dependent on each other for their mutual distinction and definition. Indeed, if the material we have looked at suggests the odd way in which Victorians sexualize the public realm and thus make it the scene and setting of private matters, what Gladstone's letter points to is the inevitably political character — in certain ways the manifestly public character — of private life. His statement, then, is really an admission of the deeply political meaning of domesticity and privacy and an acknowledgment that female private life cannot escape the "turmoil of masculine life" because it is, in fact, already defined and even governed by it. Gladstone appears to invoke here the familiar liberal principle that the "right to privacy," the "right to be left alone" in one's intimate relations, should always be protected by law. But this right is here invoked to protect — indeed to legislate by not legislating — that particular version of domestic relations usually known as the status quo.

The point I am trying to establish here, and that I hope to make again in turning to Gaskell's *North and South*, is that it is not always easy to separate private from public meanings in Victorian texts, even when the distinctions between them seem clear on the surface. Gladstone's letter teaches us that the private domain is less a realm of freedom than a realm of constraint, a legislated condition proscribed by those who control the public sphere. And Gaskell's novel, like the material we have just examined, suggests that the public realm for women is associated not merely with political action but with self-manifestation and self-display — and thus, at the same time, with the intimacy and illicit sexuality which might otherwise be thought properties of the private realm.

The argument I am making is thus related to, though not identical with, the one proposed by Catherine Gallagher in *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*. Gallagher is at pains to reveal the complex interrelations of family life and social life in the texts she analyzes and to demonstrate the "interpenetration of the private and public spheres."[14] But Gallagher also

[14] Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form 1832-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 177.

finds Gaskell's solution an "unstable" and "ambiguous" one (pp. 149, 172), and she argues that the novel "strains against its own narrative mode," questioning "the ethical connection . . . between the public and private realms" and remaining "skeptical" about the possibility of their connection (pp. 183-184). Gaskell's ostensible project may be to reveal the private realm's "metonymic link" to the public, to see "the moral influence women indirectly exert on men" as the source of the public realm's regeneration (pp. 179, 168). Gallagher points out, however, that Margaret's compromised moral position (the result of lying to protect her brother) inevitably undermines this project and disturbs the metonymic relation between public and private that the novel appears to affirm. Gallagher's desire to expose what she calls "the structural tension between impulses to associate and to dissociate public and private realms of experience" leads, in fact, to the reemergence of the private/public split: she declares that while trying to "obliterate the separation," the novels she studies actually "reinforce" it (p. 113).

A different version of the private/public disjunction manifests itself in Deirdre David's stimulating reading of *North and South*. David has maintained that what Gaskell really does in her novel is to convert a public into a private problem — to transform an explosive political situation into a romantic one by diverting attention from the crisis of class relations to the romantic marriage plot with which the novel concludes: "Gaskell symbolically displaces political incursion into sexual violation, and also begins the process of converting the relationship of political opposition between her lovers into one of their conscious recognition of the sexual feelings which they have for each other."[15] Similarly, Ruth Bernard Yeazell has recently asked about a related group of novels, "why should a *Sybil*, *Mary Barton* or *Felix Holt* subordinate its social and political story to a 'love interest'? What sort of 'cover' — to ask a more tendentious question — does the innocent heroine provide?"[16] Yeazell contends that "to substitute the narrative of the conventional heroine for one of political violence is . . . to engage in a double maneuver of containment — to shift from the public history of class conflict to the private story of an individual courtship, and from the representation of dangerous aggression to that of modest evasion and restraint" (p. 143). David and Yeazell both perceive the crucial association between politics and sexuality in the nineteenth-century novel, but neither sees the public realm of politics as inevitably connected to the private realm of sexuality, nor recognizes the political importance of representing female sexuality and giving it a public incarnation.

[15] Deirdre David, *Fictions of Resolution in Three Victorian Novels: "North and South," "Our Mutual Friend," "Daniel Deronda"* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p. 41.

[16] Ruth Bernard Yeazell, "Why Political Novels Have Heroines: *Sybil*, *Mary Barton*, and *Felix Holt*," *Novel* 18 (1985), 126.

I have concentrated here on recent criticism of *North and South*, but it is also true of earlier criticism of the novel that it reproduces the public/private split in impressive ways. To begin with, Gaskell is identified as a novelist interested in public issues — that is, as a "social-problem" novelist — by Louis Cazamian, Kathleen Tillotson, Raymond Williams, and others.[17] But at the same time, Gaskell's investigation of social problems is usually seen as marginal or subordinate to her "real" — that is, personal — concerns. Williams, though interested in and sympathetic to her project, comments that in the novel's conclusion Gaskell "once again . . . works out her reaction to the insupportable [social] situation by going — in part adventitiously — outside it" (p. 104).

Arthur Pollard begins by arguing that Gaskell's is "a more complex achievement than it is often thought to be" and by claiming that *North and South* achieves a "coalescence of personal and public stories in the relations of the two major characters."[18] But in his final estimate, the coalescence of public and private inevitably means the disappearance of the public into the personal story: "Before this novel, Gaskell had been interested mainly in individuals as they were affected by social and economic forces. This interest is still important, but she has now found that what one person means to another is the novel's supreme concern" (p. 138). Edgar Wright takes a similar tack, arguing that Gaskell is a serious "social novelist" only in that she is a keen observer of "the individual and his relationships." "If there is a tug between theme and characters," he contends, "it will be the characters who win."[19] Martin Dodsworth echoes this view: "Critics have spoken of the great sympathy and insight with which Mrs. Gaskell handles the whole business of industrial conflict in *North and South*, and they are right to do so." But it is "a human understanding, rather than a political or economic understanding, that informs the whole novel."[20] Indeed, as Barbara Hardy puts it, summarizing in my view the essential thrust of Gaskell criticism, "Mrs. Gaskell is never a propagandist; or if she is, she is only a propagandist for sympathy."[21]

[17] Louis Cazamian, *The Social Novel in England, 1830-1850*, trans. Martin Fido (1903; rpt. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973); Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen Forties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954); Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958; rpt. New York: Penguin, 1976).

[18] Arthur Pollard, *Mrs. Gaskell: Novelist and Biographer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 10.

[19] Edgar Wright, *Mrs. Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 10, 14, 132.

[20] Martin Dodsworth, "Introduction" to Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (New York: Penguin, 1970), p. 20.

[21] Barbara Hardy, "Mrs. Gaskell and George Eliot," in *The Victorians*, ed. Arthur Pollard, vol. 6 of *A History of Literature in the English Language*, 10 vols. (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1970), 170. One recent dissenting voice is that of Joseph Kestner, who suggests that "Gaskell integrates the industrial and female issues of the novel because the exploration is as much about the condition of women as the condition of workers" (*Protest and Reform: The British Social Narrative by Women 1827-1867* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985], p. 164).

In the pages that follow, however, I shall argue that in merging private with public matters — displaying the private body on a public stage (in the strike scene) and internalizing the taint of a public shame (in Margaret's "lie") — Gaskell both challenges the conventional boundaries between private and public and legitimizes public action for women. Her novel indeed diverts attention from a narrative of class conflict, but does so only to treat instead a narrative of gender conflict, and to resolve it by refashioning its most central terms. This strategy does not, I would argue, substitute private concerns for more important public and political ones, but rather acknowledges that the debate about private and public life is deeply political itself.

III

In the first chapter of *North and South*, as her cousin Edith lies sleeping on the sofa — an example of femininity and unconsciousness combined — Margaret complies with her aunt's request and stands as a "lay figure" on which to display some exotic Indian shawls. [22] The scene is a suggestive one, at least in part because Margaret already seems acutely conscious and thus more appropriately an agent than a mere body emptied of power, a "block" or inert mold (p. 35). Yet Gaskell stations her between Edith (dead to the world in the back parlor) and Henry Lennox (who enters rather suddenly from without) and intimates, in the language of lay figures and blocks, the transitional and even hypothetical character of Margaret's condition. Margaret is not a woman like Edith — not sleeping, not dressed in "white muslin and blue ribbons" (p. 40), not about to be married, not the owner of the Indian shawls — and yet at the same time she stands in the position of such a woman. Not coming in from the outside like Henry Lennox, she is associated, if not precisely in her own person, with what Lennox calls "ladies' business. . . . Very different to my business, which is the real true law business. Playing with shawls is very different work to drawing up settlements" (p. 41).

Gaskell's point in this opening scene, however, is that Margaret's position is not as clearly established as Lennox would like to think. Margaret stands in for Edith, but she is not Edith. She participates in "ladies' business" only as her cousin's substitute or proxy. At the same time, it is not at all clear what Margaret will be and do in her own right: she has no "real true" business of her own. To be not-Edith, or to be between Edith and Henry — between the back parlor and the out-of-doors, between private and public life — is to be insufficiently defined. Even Henry, not always particularly perceptive

[22] Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (1855; rpt. New York: Penguin, 1970), p. 39.

about interpersonal matters, notes that whenever he sees Margaret she seems "carried away by a whirlwind of some other person's making" (p. 41).

In many respects the conditional and hypothetical nature of Margaret's situation in the world repeats itself in the Helstone episode, as Margaret returns to her home only to discover that she and her family must leave it. But Helstone is also significant because it represents to Margaret everything that she values in home as a place — even though, as her responses to Henry Lennox's questions suggest, she is unable to generate any language about it. "Oh, I can't describe my home," she declares; "It is home, and I can't put its charm into words" (p. 43). And Lennox himself comments, as he gives up questioning her, "I see, you won't tell me anything. You will only tell me that you are not going to do this and that" (p. 43). What Margaret's refusal and Henry's response both suggest is the nonverbal, Edenic character of Helstone, which reveals itself again when Henry comes south to pay Margaret a visit. Like Adam and Eve in Milton's garden, who eat their melons and use the rinds to scoop water from a stream, Margaret and Henry eat pears on a plate made "out of a beet-root leaf," and they wander in a garden shut in, like Milton's Paradise, by "great forest trees . . . as if it were a nest" (pp. 59-60; see *Paradise Lost*, IV, ll. 335-336, 135-142).

In Margaret's view "home" is "paradise," by definition a protected place of harmonious relations. As Gallagher has recently suggested, Helstone "represents not only the rural south, with its mixture of quaintness and poverty, but also an enclave where all social relations are personal: a large, isolated family" (p. 178). It is also, not surprisingly, associated with a rigid vision of class relations, as Margaret first reveals in a conversation with her mother. When Mrs. Hale complains about Helstone's isolation from other parishes, Margaret remarks that she has no wish to see the tradesmen her mother would like to visit: "I don't like shoppy people. . . . I'm sure you don't want me to admire butchers and bakers, and candlestick-makers, do you, mamma?" (p. 50). What Margaret wishes not to know about is the world of trade in "made" things. Cottagers and laborers, in Margaret's sentimental view, need not leave home — Helstone, the family — in order to work, and they do not trade away the products they have produced. In Margaret's view this distinguishes them from the "vulgarity and commonness" of those who "have something tangible to sell," who have concrete dealings with goods, money, and the marketplace (p. 102). Margaret's unwillingness to associate with "shoppy people" distances her from what Ruskin would call "man's rough work in [the] open world" and what Friedrich Engels would later describe as the universe of "public industry."[23]

[23] John Ruskin, "Of Queens' Gardens," *Sesame and Lilies* (1865; rpt. New York: Merrill and Daner, 1888), p. 101; Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1888; ed. Eleanor Burke Leacock, New York: International Publishers, 1972), p. 138.

Helstone is also, and most crucially, bound up with Margaret's maiden innocence. This becomes clear when Henry Lennox proposes to her and is rejected — not entirely because he is an inappropriate mate (though he does propose "almost in spite of himself"), but really because, as Margaret says, "I don't like to be spoken to as you have been doing" (p. 61). If home excludes the disorder and chaos of the fallen world and the class strife and coarse commercialism of the marketplace, it also, quite simply, excludes sexuality. Listening to Henry's proposal Margaret "wishe[s] herself back with her mother — her father — anywhere away from him" (p. 60). And though she realizes that "it was poor and despicable of her to shrink from hearing any speech, as if she had not power to put an end to it with her high maidenly dignity," she continues to feel "guilty and ashamed of having grown so much into a woman as to be thought of in marriage" (pp. 60-61, 65).

The guilt that Lennox's proposal both uncovers and produces is reiterated in and confirmed by Mr. Hale's confession that, because he cannot make a "fresh declaration of conformity to the Liturgy," he is "going to leave Helstone!" (pp. 68, 65). The penetration into Eden of sexual love and religious dissent (and, in the persons of Margaret's parents, of marital discord as well) puts an end to Margaret's vision of home as paradise. It is thus no accident that on the eve of her family's departure from Helstone Margaret finds herself thinking about Henry Lennox and recalling, in particular, his descriptions of walking in the city at the end of a busy day's work, "freshening himself up, as he had told her he often did, by a run in the Temple gardens, taking in the while the grand inarticulate mighty roar of tens of thousands of busy men, nigh at hand, but not seen, and catching ever, at his quick turns, glimpses of the lights of the city coming up out of the depths of the river" (p. 90). Standing in her own garden, Margaret imagines Henry's physical freedom as he runs at night, and she relates it both to the world of work and to the powerful, impressive, impersonal life of the city — its "mighty roar" and its weirdly disembodied lights rising from the river. Helstone, by contrast, seems quiet, human, and knowable, at least until Margaret hears a "stealthy, creeping, crunching sound," which she identifies with poachers. In the past, Margaret remembers, the "wild adventurous freedom of their life had taken her fancy; she felt inclined to wish them success; she had no fear of them. But to-night she was afraid, she knew not why" (p. 90).

Margaret fails to make the association between Henry Lennox — the real poacher in her garden — and the sense of danger she suddenly feels, but her invocation of Lennox is unsettling and disturbing precisely because it does remind Margaret that she has "grown so much into a woman as to be thought of in marriage." That being the case, adventurous violators of the law and of others' property seem more frightening now than they might once

have. Still, what is remarkable about this scene is the way it ties Margaret's sense of herself as a woman (however dimly conceived) to Lennox's physical freedom in the city. Dreaming about his participation in the world of work and his access to "mighty" London somehow makes Margaret feel at risk herself — as though the physical freedom she here imagines combines with her sense of his interest in her to render Margaret fearful of penetration from without. A sudden sense that her garden is not safe sets Margaret rapping at the window, begging to be admitted to her own home. She does not feel calm again until she is "safe in the drawing-room, with the windows fastened and bolted, and the familiar walls hemming her round, and shutting her in" (pp. 90-91). The sense of harmony and familiarity that has hitherto characterized Helstone disappears in this scene because the safety of the world outside can no longer be assumed. Margaret closes herself into the drawing room as protection against the dangers of the public realm and of the sexual intrusion with which it is here associated.

The separation of inside from outside for which the final scene in Helstone prepares us reappears in Margaret's early encounters with John Thornton as an opposition between domestic gentlewoman and public manufacturer. Margaret's haughtiness and distance are a function of her sense of superior rank, but they also separate her from a man whose "rough encounter with Milton streets and crowds" is a literal sign of his participation in public industry (p. 100). In addition, Margaret generates distance from Thornton by addressing him with the blend of sexual reserve and sexual defiance that characterized her dealings with Henry Lennox and that here and elsewhere will go by the name of "maiden freedom" (p. 100) — a consciousness of herself as a woman free of compromising dealings with men. Maidenly freedom gives Margaret a power to defy which no married woman would be free to assert, and yet acts as a shield to prevent (or so she thinks) incursions from without.

What is noteworthy about Margaret's dealings both with Thornton and with the town of Milton, however, is that she is remarkably unsuccessful in keeping them at bay. Thornton's earnest descriptions of the "birth" of industry, of the "grandeur of [its] conception," of the "adventure" of development in Milton, are compelling to Margaret (pp. 122, 124). While the ladies at the Thornton party are busy "employing themselves in taking notes of the dinner and criticizing each other's dresses" (p. 215), Margaret enjoys listening to the men's conversation: "She liked the exaltation in the sense of power which these Milton men had. It might be rather rampant in its display, and savour of boasting; but still they seemed to defy the old limits of possibility. . . . there was much to admire in their forgetfulness of themselves and the present, in their anticipated triumphs over all inanimate matter at some future time which none of them should live to see" (p. 217). Margaret's interest

in this historic venture larger than the men themselves, her pleasure in their "sense of power," is suprising for its own defiance of limits. Though interest and participation are surely not identical, Gaskell clearly means to demonstrate here Margaret's unusual curiosity about, admiration for, and desire to engage in a universe conventionally understood to be without interest for women and in any case unavailable to them.

Margaret's walks through the town are equally suggestive of the difficulty she has in maintaining the separation of private from public life. She is regularly disturbed by the factory people, whose "ingress and egress" at first upset her:

> They came rushing along, with bold, fearless faces, and loud laughs and jests, particularly aimed at all those who appeared to be above them in rank or station. The tones of their unrestrained voices, and their carelessness of all common rules of street politeness, frightened Margaret a little at first. The girls, with their rough, but not unfriendly freedom, would comment on her dress, even touch her shawl or gown. . . . But she alternately dreaded and fired up against the workmen, who commented not on her dress, but on her looks, in the same open, fearless manner. She, who had hitherto felt that even the most refined remark on her personal appearance was an impertinence, had to endure undisguised admiration from these out-spoken men.
>
> (p. 110).

Walking unaccompanied and unprotected in the streets of Milton, Margaret finds herself vulnerable to what feels like excessive notice and excessive violation. She recalls her Aunt Shaw's idea of propriety which had made her send a footman to accompany Margaret and Edith on their walks, an insistence which had "circumscribed Margaret's independence" and against which she had "silently rebelled" (p. 109). Now, walking alone in the city streets, Margaret finds herself subjected to indiscriminate notice, unable to guard herself against women who would touch her clothing and men who would comment on her appearance, unable in general to manage or control her intercourse with others.

Indeed, Gaskell's vision of public life on the busy streets of the city is an alarming one: those who travel there do not walk but rather "rush along"; their expressions, gestures, modes of speech, and patterns of behavior are aggressive and even intrusive (bold, fearless, loud, unrestrained, and careless), and there is no way of maintaining either one's physical boundaries or one's sense of privacy in their midst. It is interesting to note, too, that the rough ways of the street are made particularly so for a woman above the factory workers in station. Verbal and physical invasions are meant to disrupt the very sense of class distinction that Margaret, for one, has been so eager in the past to maintain, and that Gaskell has associated both with Margaret's maiden innocence and with her wish to preserve home as Eden. But her ability here to be "amused" as well as "irritated" (p. 111), and eventually to

strike up an acquaintance with one of the men, is a sign of Margaret's increasing willingness to mix with the world and to accommodate herself to the complicated class relations that, at least in Gaskell's vision, life in the public realm seems to entail.

IV

Revealing as these scenes are, the central event for my purposes is Margaret's emergence into the public arena during the strike at Thornton's mill. When she arrives, she is asked to help secure the house against rioters — to "shut down the windows" and stay inside — as the bolted gates are repeatedly attacked. This time, it seems, the intruders will not be kept out, and the language of sexual violation in the scene is almost egregiously clear: "they could all hear the one great straining breath; the creak of wood slowly yielding; the wrench of iron; the mighty fall of the ponderous gates."[24] But instead of defending herself further against what amounts to a serious threat of incursion, Margaret first challenges Thornton to face the angry rioters and then, fearful of the consequences of her challenge, moves to face them herself. In a scene that first revises and then reverses Margaret's panicky self-enclosure in the Helstone drawing room, she "threw the window wide open," then "tore her bonnet off; and bent forwards to hear," and finally "rushed out of the room, downstairs, — she had lifted the great iron bar of the door with an imperious force — had thrown the door open wide — and was there, in face of that angry sea of men, her eyes smiting them with flaming arrows of reproach" (p. 233). John Pikoulis has justly described this scene as "one of the most thrilling moments in Victorian literature, representing as it does the first time that a woman has convincingly established herself on the public stage in her own right."[25]

I would say, even more emphatically, that Margaret's appearance before the angry crowd in *North and South* is central to an understanding of the whole problem of female public appearance in the Victorian period. To begin with, Gaskell highlights Margaret's extraordinary physical conspicuousness and surprising bodily openness in this scene. The strikers themselves are stopped in their tracks, "arrested" by her appearance (p. 233). At first, she is unable to speak and can only stand and "[hold] out her arms towards them." But perhaps most significantly, Margaret stations herself "between [the strik-

[24] *North and South*, p. 231. Numerous critics — including David (pp. 41-43) and Dodsworth (pp. 18-21) — have commented on the sexual connotations of Gaskell's language in the scene preceding the strike and in the strike scene itself.

[25] John Pikoulis, "*North and South*: Varieties of Love and Power," *Yearbook of English Studies* 6 (1976), 119.

ers] and their enemy," covering Thornton, at least partially, with her own body. Thornton moves "a little on one side . . . away from behind her," not wanting her protection and seeking to recover his own proper place, "jealous of anything that should come between him and danger" (p. 234). The movement is a slight one, but it suggests the rivalry between Thornton and Margaret: Who shall occupy the public stage? Who shall take command? Who shall protect whom? Who shall speak? Who shall act? Who shall really "appear"?

It is Margaret, whose voice had earlier lacked "tone," who speaks first. Her voice rings out, though her assurances to the crowd are empty ones ("you shall have relief from your complaints, whatever they are") and in that sense only incite the strikers. But when the crowd erupts and Margaret sees a group of young men about to take aim at Thornton, "whom she had urged and goaded to come to this perilous place," she acts again: "She only thought how she could save him. She threw her arms around him; she made her body into a shield from the fierce people beyond. Still, with his arms folded, he shook her off. 'Go away,' said he, in his deep voice. 'This is no place for you.' 'It is!' said she" (p. 234).

Gaskell returns here to Margaret's conspicuous presence, to her willingness to use her body, and to her sense of its powerful instrumentality. When Margaret makes "her body into a shield" to protect Thornton, her action suggests that she is willing to risk exposure because she believes she can manage and control her intercourse with others — even in the public realm. It suggests, in other words, that she is willing to risk unwanted intrusion even while she feels she can deflect it. That she should associate this power with her body seems especially intriguing, since it confirms the physical and even sexual significance of female public appearance to which Margaret's earlier responses to life out-of-doors (at Helstone) and life in the city streets (of Milton) have already pointed.

As it turns out, however, Margaret overestimates her power as maiden to deflect assault, for as Gaskell remarks, "if she thought her sex would be a protection . . . she was wrong"(p. 234). The insistently sexual language of the strike scene persists in the following passage as Margaret suffers her first actual injury: "A sharp pebble flew by her, grazing forehead and cheek, and drawing a blinding sheet of light before her eyes. . . . [The strikers] were watching, open-eyed, and open-mouthed, the thread of dark-red blood which wakened them up from their trance of passion. Those nearest the gate stole out ashamed" (p. 235). The language of this passage makes clear that the real risk of public exposure is sexual violation, and even though Margaret is only "symbolically deflowered" (David, p. 43), the complications that attend her public appearance all serve to intensify its sexual meanings. As Margaret remembers her action in its aftermath, she thinks both of the shame associ-

ated with involving herself in a public disturbance — "I, who hate scenes . . . I went down and must needs throw myself into the mêlée, like a romantic fool!" (p. 247) — and the shame associated with courting a man in public, as others think she has done.

The difficulty of distinguishing the meaning of Margaret's act is particularly acute in light of the fact that on one reading she reverses the conventional understanding of gender relations (in which men take public stands on behalf of women, not women on behalf of men) and on the other she reinstates it (women convert even political events into romantic ones, public events into private ones). But the fact that everyone describes Margaret's act as sexual — including, however unconsciously, Margaret herself, whose own language illustrates how difficult it is to keep sexual innuendo out of an account of the strike scene — is really a sign not of the way women contain or are used to contain politically explosive scenes by reducing them to romantic encounters, but rather of the fact that female participation in public life, and female public appearance itself, are both politically and sexually explosive.

This is true, I would argue, despite the fact that Margaret's interpretation of the strike scene is an attempt to refute its sexual meaning by claiming its collective and thoroughly conventional character. Hers was not "a personal act between you and me," she tells Thornton, but rather an act consistent with her membership in the female sex as a whole and thus, in some sense, an impersonal class action (p. 253). "We all feel the sanctity of our sex as a high privilege when we see danger," she declares, and "any woman, worthy of the name of woman, would come forward to shield, with her reverenced helplessness, a man in danger from the violence of numbers" (pp. 252, 253). Margaret suggests that the helplessness of women is so revered by men that it literally suppresses men's desire to injure and calls up, instead, their wish to conserve and protect. Margaret should, in other words, be able to shield Thornton from the rioters precisely because she is unable to shield herself. Her extreme vulnerability should arrest the violent activity that threatens them both, as the strikers join with her to confirm the vision of womanhood to which everyone collectively subscribes.

What Margaret fails to appreciate, however, is the way in which her appearance on a public stage revokes the very protection that she wishes to engage. For as T. H. Lister commented in an 1841 review article:

> Women, as a class, cannot enjoy, at the same time, the immunities of weakness and the advantages of power. . . . The deference, the tenderness, the courtesy of man towards the other sex, are founded principally on the feeling that they need his protection, and can never question his power. But let women be made ostensibly powerful; let a sense of competition be introduced; let man be made to feel that he must stand on the defensive — and the spirit of chivalry . . . will speedily cease; and it will be useless to expect a con-

> tinuance of that feeling, to which women can now appeal with confidence, and which lends most essential charms to the ordinary intercourse of civilized society. [26]

What Margaret does not fully realize is that she has been made "ostensibly" and conspicuously powerful, and that she has thus lost the "immunity" she might otherwise enjoy.

Rosemarie Bodenheimer has also argued, correctly I believe, that Margaret's stance is a defensive one and that it takes on "its full strength of defensive meaning in relation to the shame" she feels about "having left the protected woman's place for one of unwomanly publicity." [27] But Margaret's defense is also interesting for the insistent conservatism of its assumptions — especially in the face of what is clearly an unconventional act on her part. No one, it seems, reveres her helplessness. Everyone is astounded by the presumptuousness of her act; Thornton himself is jealous of the way she appropriates his role as protector, and Margaret's own insistence on her purity is given the lie both by her symbolic defloration and by the "deep sense of shame" she feels whenever she contemplates her own actions (p. 249).

This sense of shame is linked with what Margaret calls "be[ing] the object of universal regard" (p. 249) — a phrase which itself suggests the identification between publicity and sexuality to which opponents of legal reform, the expansion of female employment opportunities, and female suffrage regularly referred. To be universally regarded is to be seen by anyone — to have no control over those who do the looking, over the mere fact that they look, or over the kind of looking they might do. Margaret's painful self-consciousness is a response to indiscriminate or, to use a loaded term, promiscuous regard, and also to the very fact of regard pure and simple. As Victorians were only too aware, when a middle-class woman took to the public stage she brought her body, ordinarily confined to the drawing room, before the eyes of others. This meant that her appearance virtually always had sexual implications unless special steps were taken to "cover" and thus block her from regard. In Gaskell's novel no such steps are taken. It is Margaret who covers Thornton, not the other way around, and the idea of sexual tainting, which gets bonded to her act by the language and plot of *North and South*, is a persistent feature of female public appearance both here and elsewhere in Victorian writing.

Complex sexual significance arises, for example, when a woman testifies in court in Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), takes the stage in Henry James's *The Tragic Muse* (1890), or makes a public debut as a musician in George Gissing's *The Whirlpool* (1897). Though it is sometimes the case that women

[26] T. H. Lister, "Rights and Conditions of Women," *Edinburgh Review* 73 (1841), 204. Lister favorably reviews Lewis's *Woman's Mission*, Sarah Ellis's *The Women of England*, and several other texts.

[27] Rosemarie Bodenheimer, "*North and South*: A Permanent State of Change," *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 34 (1979), 299.

who associate themselves with public causes — the plight of the poor in Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850) and the struggle for universal male suffrage in Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845) — do so at the cost of sexual life, this only makes the point in reverse: sometimes a woman must be purified almost out of existence if she is to be saved from the taint of publicity. As one might expect, the sexual meanings of female public appearance arise with particular urgency in novels like James's *The Bostonians* (1886), Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893), and Elizabeth Robins's *The Convert* (1907), where women identify themselves with the dangerous cause of female emancipation.

V

Sexual tainting is also, I would like to suggest, the theme of the second half of *North and South*, though here, interestingly enough, it is associated not with publicity but rather with secrecy, concealment, and lying. Virtually everyone in the second half of *North and South* practices concealment of some sort: the Hales and even the Higginses, it seems, all cover for Frederick during his secret return to England; Margaret lies about her presence at the scene of the scuffle with Leonards; Frederick travels to London under cover; and Thornton himself, without Margaret's knowledge, both supresses the information he has about her presence at the train station and protects her from exposure when he decides not to hold an inquest into Leonards's death.

Yet the focus of attention is really on Margaret herself — on the particular nature of what she hides and on the guilt attached to its concealment. In Margaret's view she protects an innocent brother from discovery, but Frederick is affiliated throughout the novel with reckless, traitorous, and illegal activity — a mutiny, a secret visit, accidental involvement in a death, and even, finally, exile to Spain and marriage to a Spanish Catholic. By protecting Frederick, Margaret traffics with what is dangerous, illicit, even violent, and this fact is reemphasized when she herself commits a "crime" in order to protect what she knows. Indeed it is hard to avoid thinking about Frederick as Margaret's alter ego, not a madwoman in the attic but a sort of mad brother in the wings whose story and then whose physical presence are concealed for the better part of the novel. When Frederick goes back into exile his criminality gets transferred to Margaret, who then spends the remainder of the novel guiltily repenting her own violation of the (moral) law.

All of this is even further complicated by the fact that Thornton's reading of her actions implicates Margaret not merely in the crime of lying, but also in the more serious crime of adulterous sexuality (in Victorian terms, sexuality unsanctioned by marriage). Thornton believes that Margaret's lie

hides a guilty secret, that it suggests "some terrible shame in the background, to be kept from the light in which I thought she lived perpetually" (p. 391). And his suspicions derive both from the compromising situation in which he sees her, "at such an hour — in such a place" (p. 351), and then from the fact that she lies about where she has been. The notion that Margaret's lie is somehow connected to a sexual taint is certainly on Thornton's mind when he says that it "showed a fatal consciousness of something wrong, and to be concealed" (p. 386), and when he refers to the way she has "stained her whiteness by a falsehood" (p. 351; see also p. 386).

Indeed, Margaret's lie is fascinating precisely because it seems to be just another name for illicit sexuality itself, as her language implies when she realizes that "she stood as a liar in his eyes. She was a liar. But she had no thought of penitence before God: nothing but chaos and night surrounded the one lurid fact that, in Mr. Thornton's eyes, she was degraded. . . . 'Oh, Frederick! Frederick!' she cried, 'what have I not sacrificed for you!' " (p. 355). The "lurid" fact to which Margaret ostensibly refers is the loss of moral purity, which Thornton regards as a loss of sexual purity. Although Margaret remains mysteriously unaware of his assumption, the language she uses affirms the very connection she denies. This is also true later on when Margaret remembers an earlier conversation with Thornton: "Her cheeks burnt as she recollected how proudly she had implied an objection to trade (in the early days of their acquaintance), because it too often led to the deceit of passing off inferior for superior goods, in the one branch; of assuming credit for wealth and resources not possessed, in the other. . . . No more contempt for her! . . . Henceforward she must feel humiliated and disgraced in his sight" (p. 378). Margaret's view of herself as damaged goods is so powerful here that what really seems to be at issue is not her moral transgression but rather the sexual transgression of which Thornton (incorrectly) assumes Margaret is guilty. [28]

And yet just as secrecy and lying are alternative names for illicit sexuality — for sex unprotected by marriage and ungoverned by the constraints of domestic life — illicit sexuality in *North and South* is just another name for female publicity. We have already seen in Margaret's emergence onto the public stage that female public appearance intimates sexual promiscuity: the willingness or even the wish to appear unscreened, to circulate freely, to be the object of indiscriminate regard, to engage with others in "mixed" company (what Victorians more meaningfully called "promiscuous" company). But in

[28] Keith Thomas argues that, historically, "female chastity has been seen as a matter of property . . . the property of men in women," and a wife's adultery "immeasurably diminishe[s]" its value. He also points out that virginity is often described in terms of "the commercial market," where "girls who have lost their 'honor' have also lost their saleability" ("The Double Standard," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 20 [1959], 210). Thomas's argument sheds an interesting light on Margaret's self-condemnation: speaking of herself as damaged property is another way of registering her sexual taint.

Margaret's relationship to her brother Frederick, Gaskell imagines an alternative realm that is equally charged and dangerous — secretive, violent, devious in its actions, and unrestrained in its intimacy. In this realm — or so Thornton thinks, at any rate — the appearance of a woman before a man is unmediated, action is unguarded, intimacy is unprotected and ungovernable. Under the cover of secrecy, as in the glare of public life, women become the agents of unmanageable desire, so that either to have a secret life or to have a public life is to be sexually tainted — even though the sexual involvement may be purely by imputation and association. [29]

And so when Gaskell equates secrecy with publicity she confirms what Victorians always seem to fear — that the private/public distinction is insupportable and cannot be maintained. Unable to imagine a woman leaving her private self behind when she entered the public domain, Victorians generally imagined her bringing it inappropriately with her — imagined cradles in the House of Parliament and sexual self-display at the polls or on the city streets. But while Gaskell's repeated identification of private with public and political with intimate life seems to confirm the very fear that led Victorians strictly to separate the two and to punish transgressions between them, Gaskell's own response to the erosion of distinctions is not punitive but celebratory.

It is, for example, precisely the fact that Margaret does feel damaged — "degraded and abased in [his] sight" — that makes her come to the realization that she is in love with Thornton. "What strong feeling," she wonders, knowing the answer, "had overtaken her at last?" (p. 358). Indeed, by having Margaret perceive her love for Thornton just as she realizes that she is morally tainted, Gaskell seems to be saying that the experience of being tainted is oddly beneficial, that it is in fact positive and educative: it reduces Margaret's excessive sense of moral superiority, eradicates her snobbishness (class and otherwise), and makes her able truly to connect with others. Margaret may castigate herself for her moral failure, but she pays no real price for the adulterous aura that surrounds her actions. Quite the contrary, she reaps its rewards.

Gaskell's procedure looms all the more significantly if we compare her handling of Margaret's fate with, say, Dickens's handling of the fates of his female characters when they too are associated with, but do not actually commit, adultery. Louisa Gradgrind is rendered sterile merely for listening to Harthouse's advances; as Dickens puts it, "Herself a wife — a mother — lov-

[29] Secrecy cannot, of course, be identified absolutely with privacy, as Sissela Bok has pointed out, but the two are still significantly connected to each other. Bok argues that the "practice of secrecy" is frequently tied to "concepts of sacredness, intimacy, [and] privacy," as well as to "silence, prohibition, furtiveness and deception" (*Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* [New York: Vintage, 1984], p. 6). In *North and South* secrecy is a kind of deep privacy which intentionally conceals what privacy conceals anyway, namely intimacy.

ingly watchful of her children. . . . Did Louisa see this? Such a thing was never to be."[30] Edith Dombey remains the only unrecuperated figure at the end of the novel in which she appears, exiled from the very family to which Mr. Dombey has been readmitted, even though she merely engineers the appearance of adultery with Carker. As Robert Clarke has suggested in a stimulating essay on *Dombey and Son*, when "sexuality and death are bedfellows," as they clearly are in these novels, "the only way to have sex and survive is, in effect, to have it as Walter and Floy do, innocently and incestuously, as brother and sister."[31]

In Gaskell's novel, however, the terms "innocently" and "incestuously" are harder to combine. Margaret's relation to Frederick is seen by Thornton as an adulterous relation with another lover, and it contributes to his perception of the heroine's dangerous and indeed provocative sexuality. Furthermore, Margaret's own shame is transformed into an acknowledgment of her sexual maturity, as though Gaskell meant first to suggest the explosive nature of female sexuality and then to purge it of its taint. Gaskell explores the cultural association between female publicity and sexual tainting, but she ends by approving of, rather than condemning, the connection.[32]

Gaskell's representation of Margaret's dilemma reveals, then, her serious interest in refashioning the meaning of female publicity and reconceiving the relations between private and public life. Unlike the domestic ideologists upon whose thinking she surely draws, Gaskell does not finally portray her heroine as a woman who feminizes the public realm by extending domestic life outward, or who purifies public life of its taint by conserving her own private principles as a sustaining resource. Gaskell abandons this vision and considers instead what happens when a woman enters an unreconstructed and unpurifiable public realm: she is penetrated by it and initiated into it, where penetration consists in physical violation and initiation consists in enduring public exposure and in suffering the shame of an implied promiscuity. Public space is promiscuous space in Gaskell's novel, and entry into it is inevitably compromising.

[30] Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1961), III, chap. 9.

[31] Robert Clarke, "Riddling the Family Firm: The Sexual Economy in *Dombey and Son*," *ELH* 51 (1984), 69.

[32] For an opposing view, see Coral Lansbury, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1975). Lansbury affirms that Margaret is not a traditional Victorian heroine but rather a woman who "demands the right to be an active member of society, unconfined to any particular region or class" (p. 118). But Lansbury refuses to see the ways in which publicity and sexuality coincide; instead, she upholds Margaret's defensive and, in my view, mistaken belief that the sexual reading of her experience during the strike is an unfair one — a confusion of "social responsibility with personal infatuation" (p. 118). "Gaskell was aware," Lansbury claims, "that women, like men, shared common human responsibilities, and those responsibilities should not be made subject to passion" (p. 112).

Of course to say this might appear to suggest that Gaskell rejected one set of Victorian conventions (those identifying female domesticity with moral power) only to adopt another (those defining public life as inevitably compromising) — and in one sense this is indeed the case. But what makes her vision both interesting and surprising is that she neither saw the danger of public life as a reason to exclude women from it, nor sought to imagine their entry into that realm as an opportunity to domesticate it. In any case, the sexualization of public life can only be seen as an effort to imagine its domestication if femininity is really felt to be benign — if a woman's entrance onto the public stage might be seen, as Ruskin for example hoped it could, as an opportunity to neutralize a dangerous world. But Gaskell suggests both that female sexuality is almost unmanageably potent — affiliated with exposure, criminality, indiscretion, and immoral secrecy — and, at the same time, that this is emphatically not stigmatizing. She never reduces our sense that public life is dangerously thrilling, nor does she seek entirely to eliminate the sexual shame that gets attached first to Margaret's public appearance and later to her supposed relation with a secret lover. Instead, she converts public into private shame, and private shame into the acknowledgment of mature sexuality, thus affirming rather than condemning the inevitable connectedness of public and private life, and imagining a world in which their explosive union can actually be accommodated.

Critics have generally seen Gaskell's project of accommodation as a sign of her conservative spirit.[33] In my view, it is the opposite. *North and South* does indeed equate public with private life by equating female publicity with female sexuality, and it transforms private sexual shame into an opportunity for sexual self-recognition and public marriage. But its equations never appear in the service of exclusion, neutralization, containment, or even, I would argue, romantic reduction. Instead, the novel confirms what critics of female emancipation tended to fear — that access to public life means access to potentially dangerous kinds of sexual intimacy for women — and it does so while affirming, and thus finally legitimizing, female public action and sexuality. This double affirmation does not narrow, but rather expands, the range of possibilities. It does not convert and thus reduce the public into the private, but rather grants the private its disturbingly public dimension.

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[33] See for example Françoise Basch, *Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society and the Novel* (New York: Schocken, 1974), p. 250; Judith Lowder Newton, *Women, Power and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction, 1778-1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981), pp. 164, 168; and Patsy Stoneman, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 120. Rosemarie Bodenheimer offers a major, dissenting opinion, with which I agree: "Gaskell's *North and South* emerges as a dismantling of the paternalist assumptions that underlie the plots of her predecessors" (*The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, forthcoming], p. 9).