

“PRESENT ALL IN ALL”: MULTIPLICITY AND SELF-CONSTRUCTION IN ELIZABETH
GASKELL’S *NORTH AND SOUTH*

BY

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ABSTRACT

Critical attention to Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *North and South* (1854-55), and to nineteenth-century British women's writing as a whole, has tended to reduce its tensions into polarized conflicts: the "public sphere" versus the "private sphere," the working class versus the middle class, and so forth. This project argues that instead of attempting to resolve what are seen to be the core binary oppositions that make up personal identity, *North and South*, in fact, points toward embracing the series of "selves" defined through identification with others on a multitude of spectra. Gaskell ultimately suggests that personal identity is multitudinously constructed, with each subject concurrently embodying and performing the different significations of *several* unique axes rather than merely swinging back and forth between two opposing points. The two protagonists of *North and South*, Margaret Hale and John Thornton, move through these various dimensions sequentially at first, this movement facilitating their growing awareness of the breakdown of their previously-held beliefs in their own binarily-constructed identities, and then finally they inhabit or embody them simultaneously. In other words, Margaret and Thornton begin their respective journeys with firmly-held conceptions of their own identities based on a contrast between themselves and what they perceive to be their polar opposites. Ultimately, the narrative of *North and South* makes it clear that it is not enough for these characters merely to transgress or blend the supposedly opposing, dichotomous spheres between which they are said to move. Rather, Gaskell develops both Margaret's and Thornton's self-conceptions from an inadequate and inaccurate attitude of binary contrast into the acknowledgement and acceptance of identity based around multiplicity and the embodiment of what they had previously believed to be separate from and threatening to their subjectivity. This shift in personal self-conception is the core of Gaskell's solution to the wider social conflicts she presents, what enables the

workplace reform found in the narrative, and it is reflected in the general structure of multiplicity found throughout the novel.

I

The tenacious preoccupation in Victorian studies with “the public sphere” and “the private sphere” and the relationship between them reveals the degree to which criticism seems stuck within binaries even as critics attempt to demonstrate how texts expose their fictiveness or complicate their construction. Texts in general invite this kind of reading, since, of course, binary ordering is such a hegemonic way of perceiving reality, but perhaps Victorian texts, being products of a particularly stratified social era, invite this to an even greater degree. It is easy to see how the title of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1854-1855) opens the doorway to an apparently self-asserting series of polar contrasts within the novel itself. These opposing dualities, man and woman, middle class and lower class, eventually learn to live in harmony in their respective roles, each side a little more solicitous toward the other but still firmly situated within their original places. The personal identity of the two protagonists of *North and South*, therefore, is understood as a negotiation between these binaries; Margaret Hale, for instance, must negotiate between her ties to the pastoral English South and her new living situation in the industrial North. John Thornton, in turn, must negotiate between his emotional, vulnerable role as a man in love and his implacable, dominant role as the master of a mill.

When we look closer, however, at these supposedly obvious dichotomies, what has been taken to be the very structural foundation of *North and South* and the organizing principle of subjectivity for the characters within it, we will actually see them spiraling out into multifaceted webs. It seems that the enduring critical compulsion surrounding this novel is to subordinate some other, equally important oppositional strata to a series of ultimate binaries, but this has a limiting effect, I believe, on our analytical scope of the novel. I argue that multiplicity, not dichotomy, is the operational structure in *North and South*, and that this fact supports what

Gaskell ultimately suggests about subjectivity: personal identity is multitudinously constructed, with each subject concurrently embodying and performing the different significations of *several* unique axes rather than merely swinging back and forth between two opposing points. The two protagonists of *North and South* move through these various dimensions sequentially at first, this movement facilitating their growing awareness of the breakdown of their previously-held beliefs in their own binarily-constructed identities, and then finally they inhabit or embody them simultaneously. In other words, Margaret and Thornton begin their respective journeys with firmly-held conceptions of their own identities based on a contrast between themselves and what they perceive to be their polar opposites. Margaret's initial binary self-conception is based around location, with her sense of self rooted firmly in her hometown of Helstone and all it represents: a pre-industrial rural economy, the Southern code of gentility regarding manner and social rank, an evangelical brand of paternalism toward the working class, and so forth. At first, all locations which she encounters that are *not* Helstone serve as contrasts against which she defines herself. Her anxiety is based around what she sees as the loss or damage of that identity as a result of her displacement in Milton-Northern.

Thornton's initial binary self-conception, on the other hand, deals with an intermixing of gender and class; his anxiety is also based around self-loss, but in his case he fears that empathizing and thereby identifying with his employees will strip him of his authoritative power and thus destroy his socioeconomic identity as a master, a role that is inextricably tied into his identity as a *man*. Unique in Victorian fiction, Thornton does *not* fear damage to his masculinity as the result of empathizing with women because he relies upon bodily difference—biological/sexual difference—to insist upon his separateness from them. With his workers, on the other hand, whom the novel characterizes as overwhelmingly *male*, he has no such “natural,”

observable difference. The boundaries he erects between himself and his workers, therefore, are psychological and linguistic. His irascible and often self-contradicting class-warfare mentality and business practices are compensation for the threat of self-loss he feels from the bodily sameness he shares with the male working class, a sameness which suggests co-identification rather than contrast. Thornton wishes to preserve that contrast between himself and his workers in order to support the privileges and power that come with his role as a master.

Ultimately, the narrative of *North and South* makes it clear that it is not enough for these characters merely to transgress or blend the supposedly opposing, dichotomous spheres between which they are said move. Rather, Gaskell develops both Margaret's and Thornton's self-conceptions from an inadequate and inaccurate attitude of binary contrast into the acknowledgement and acceptance of identity based around multiplicity and the embodiment of what they had previously believed to be separate from and threatening to their subjectivity. This shift in personal self-conception is the core of Gaskell's solution to the wider social conflicts she presents, what enables the workplace reform found in the narrative, and it is reflected in the general structure of multiplicity found throughout the novel; every contrasting pair opens itself up to a multitude of affected and further effecting points. The supposedly insurmountable conceptual distance between the two poles of the various dichotomies of class, gender, and location popularly seen in *North and South* is a projection onto the novel; the novel itself portrays the *illusion* of separation and distance, revealing its socially constructed nature. This, of course, has implications not only for the class boundaries in the novel, which have been widely addressed, but also the gender boundaries. The fear behind the loss or, at least, the interpenetration of these constructed boundaries is, essentially, a fear of the loss of an individual

identity and that identity's inherent power. Gaskell is careful slowly and subtly to substitute models of inclusion for models of delineation, subordination, or hierarchy.

The scholarship surrounding *North and South* is an especially salient example of the treacherous critical trap which impels us to discuss literature in terms of the very dichotomies we, as socially-conscious scholars, now seek to deconstruct: the north of England versus the south of England, mill-owner versus mill-worker, free-market capitalism versus socialism or paternalism, man versus woman, and so forth. Indeed, many critics who explore the novel include in their writing some version of the sentence, "*North and South* is a series of contrasts." Carolyn Lesjak has remarked on how "the critical history of the reception of her [Gaskell's] novels... from the very beginning— literally days after her death—has tended to divide her work along private/public, domestic/industrial lines. While the division, to be sure, is constructed, it has nevertheless proven fairly intractable" (259). Even the most groundbreaking criticism becomes trapped. For instance, Catherine Gallagher's highly influential 1985 monograph *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction* claims that *North and South* is unable to overcome the distance between the warring classes with a marital solution. Since the publication of Gallagher's work, many critics have reacted against this notion of the novel's "failure," but they continue to do so within the rather rigid structure of opposition between two forces.

More recently, Susan Johnston has actually confronted "separate spheres"-centric criticism. "[L]iberalism," she argues, "identifies the *household* as the primary space in which the political rights-bearer... comes into being," and "because the intimate space of the household is constitutive in this sense, it does not exist separately from or in opposition to the public, political, and economic domains, but rather is the foundation on which liberalism conceives them" (4). Furthermore, she puts forth "a way of thinking about nineteenth-century middle-class society

that need not depend on a conception of the private and the political as separate spheres... I take seriously," she goes on to say, "... that *connection* between the public language of social and political relations, and the domestic idiom of the private individual" (7). But ultimately Johnston does not merely explicate a *connection* between the "separate spheres." Rather, she privileges one: the domestic, since she argues that the domestic is the foundation upon which all other "spheres" are constituted. With reference to *North and South*, Johnston sees Gaskell's boundary-blurring occurring through "the colonization of economic space by the concerns and affective relations of the household" (105). But *colonization* is not blurring. It is domination of one sphere by another, a dynamic which, firstly, argues for the separation of those spheres in order to be understood; in order to colonize the economic/public, the domestic/private must be understood to be distinct from it. Secondly, Johnston hopes to bridge the boundary between the "separate spheres" by privileging one of two spheres, but the notion of *one* dominating the *other* upholds the binary and its boundaries rather than collapsing them. However, as Gaskell shows in *North and South*, any conception of subjectivity based on a negotiation or struggle between two poles, such as the public and the private, is inadequate for any mission which seeks to do away with the warlike nature of discourse between groups. This is why Thornton's beginning philosophy is so flawed and why the labor strike fails, since both insist on ordering life according to a zero-sum situation; even cooperation, according to such a model, would still preserve a harmful and fictive separation between supposedly disparate groups and individuals whose interests are actually the same. As long as Thornton, for instance, still sees his workers as inherently different from himself in terms of moral character and insists on preserving his own powerful role as master via his distinction from them, he will continue to damage his own business. After all, the strike, though it fails, bankrupts him. Gaskell shows that social success

is the result of subjects being willing to embrace a multitude of different identifying factors, including ones that initially seem to threaten self-loss or its concomitant loss of power, and adjusting their behavior according to their present circumstances. As such, identity is composed of a multitude of attributes and/or actions that are thought to “belong” to a multitude of different spheres, and the successful subject operates upon a sort of code-switching¹ or selective performativity.²

It naturally follows, then, that the two most popular theoretical approaches critics have used when examining *North and South* fall short of capturing its complex drama of identity: Marxist, beginning in the mid-twentieth century, and feminist, a few decades later. When adopting either of these approaches, which characterize the objective of *North and South* as social change, critics have tended to be dissatisfied with the novel. In general, Sally Minogue points out, Marxist and feminist critics attack “the dependence of the realist novel on some notion of universal truth,” and they see the universalizing resolution of *North and South* as a sort of retreat or concession; Marxists see the “dominance” of the marriage plot as a deliberate bourgeois diversion, and feminists note the limits placed upon a woman’s power as only the mere influence of powerful men (71).³ As Minogue attests, however, “an analysis of a novel mounted in terms of a single oppressed group will fall short, both in terms of our understanding

¹ I borrow “code-switching” from sociolinguistic study. It has been applied to contemporary discourse of language and power, particularly with reference to critical race study, but it is useful for this examination of self-construction and what I have called selective performativity, which is being imagined in this novel. For more on code-switching, see Monica Heller’s *Codeswitching: Anthropological and Sociolinguistic Perspectives* (1988).

² This term, of course, may remind readers of Judith Butler’s poststructuralist theories of gender performance, but Butler’s theory is limited in terms of its application to *North and South*. Whereas Butler dissociates gender from the body, Gaskell and, by proxy, her characters, being products of their time, associate biological sex/the body with gender. Gaskell *does* question the validity of biological/sexual difference understood as the means of preserving socioeconomic boundaries, as I will more thoroughly demonstrate below.

³ For a more thorough review of the disappointed feminist and Marxist readings of *North and South*, see Minogue, “Gender and Class in *Villette* and *North and South*” in *Problems for Feminist Criticism*, p. 75-76.

of the novel and in terms of our understanding of the real relations (of gender or of class) of the world,” since both Marxist and feminist criticism “find duality attractive”:

The analysis in terms of class tends to set up a productive conflict; the feminist analysis tends to deconstruction, inserting itself in the gap between what is ‘there’ and what is ‘not.’ In either case the result often is to simplify into opposition elements which actually have a much more complex, shifting and fruitful relationship” (72, 75).⁴

North and South provides us with an opportunity to move beyond the structural underpinnings of Marxist and feminist criticism, both of which base themselves upon conflict between poles: woman versus man, proletariat versus bourgeoisie. These theoretical lenses are only useful insofar as they do not narrow our focus to the exclusion of more nuanced possibilities. When we break our analysis free of the dualistic visions provided by Marxist and feminist criticism of the novel, we can see Gaskell’s narrative creating an inter-constitutive system of class, gender, and location which much more accurately reflects contemporary societal conflicts and the nature of personal identity in her historical moment, brought about by industrialism’s unsettling effect of empowering the previously disempowered and bringing into intimacy groups which had previously experienced little contact.

Margaret and Thornton’s marriage, taken to be the symbolic unification and resolution of the class and gender conflicts at play in the novel, is often held up as the example of Gaskell’s shrinking away from the complexity of those conflicts, a collapse of the world’s problems into the happy ending of two feisty people who learn to love each other. But the romance/marriage plot actually *expands* rather than shrinks the novel’s scope, shown by the fact that Margaret and Thornton’s relationship is far from a two-person affair. Frederick Hale enters into the romance

⁴ Minogue makes this excellent point, but though she addresses this problem in *North and South* with a brief challenge to the common points of inquiry in the novel, her primary focus is on Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*.

when Thornton mistakes him for Margaret's secret lover, thus inspiring Thornton's ardor to strengthen due to jealousy: "It was not merely that Margaret was known to Mr. Thornton to have spoken falsely... but that this falsehood of hers bore a distinct reference in his mind to some other lover" (Gaskell *North and South* 282).⁵ More obviously, Henry Lennox plays a role in triggering Margaret's recognition of her own sexuality and desirability; others have pointed out the "shame" Margaret feels at warranting Henry's marriage proposal. Her experience rejecting Henry not only awakens Margaret to her sexuality, but it also directly colors her mirror interaction with Thornton, since she (maladroitly) uses her limited experience with marriage proposals to excuse her uncivil behavior toward Thornton, which informs Thornton of a heretofore unknown rival's existence and enrages him.

Thornton's mother (whose role I will discuss in greater detail later) is also inextricably tangled into the romance, often acting in the role of a jealous rival. With a mother participating on one side and a brother on the other, the quasi-incestuous nature of Thornton and Margaret's relationship, with its inescapable consequences and entanglements with both family and community members, shows just how interconnected and inclusive these supposed structural dyads truly are. Gaskell reminds us of the far-reaching effects of Thornton and Margaret's relationship in the very last lines of the novel when the two protagonists, in the very act of proposing marriage, are preoccupied with how their relatives will be affected by their engagement. They even give voice to these relatives by expressing their anticipated reactions, drawing them into the most intimate scene in the novel: "'That man!' ... 'That woman!'" (NS 395) In this way, the romance in *North and South* is not merely metaphorical or allegorical. Their marriage is not presented as a metonymic solution to economic problems, as so many have argued, but rather as a final emblem of interconnectedness and multiplicity.

⁵ Hereafter, quotes from the novel are cited as "NS."

Reexamining the novel's title now reveals its meaning opening up beyond the reductive understanding of "North versus South." Rather, *North and South* indicates, in addition to the conflict between these two locations, ways of life, and perspectives, their inter-definition and coexistence. As Raffaella Antinucci has recently pointed out, the "and" in *North and South* means both "versus" and "with" (133). Indeed, Gaskell is not the one who conceived of the title *North and South*, which supposedly epitomizes the dualistic nature of the story. Charles Dickens, the editor of *Household Words*, where *North and South* first appeared in serial form, was the one who came up with the title we know today. Gaskell herself originally called the book *Margaret Hale* and, perhaps jokingly, considered *Death, with Variations*. Neither of these working titles suggests a binary conflict. Rather, they both address one subject and, in the latter case, the *variations* that occur *within* that subject.

The two class-based perspectives said to be represented by "North" and "South," rather than only grappling with each other, must be defined by numerous other perspectives. Thornton's middle-class manufacturer's philosophy clashes with Margaret's gentry prejudice against "shoppy people," but neither of these attitudes can take full shape without being refined through the incorporation of others (NS 19). Margaret's status takes shape through the consideration of another upper-class character's status; Margaret plays the role of the patron lady bountiful in the Helstone community, whereas Mr. Bell can truly be said to be among the property-owning idle rich. Henry Lennox represents a middle class quite different from Thornton's middle class, with its "gentlemanly" professions (Henry is a lawyer) and its pretensions toward genteel manners. Furthermore, the picture of the Milton working class's lives is not completed merely through its contrast with the masters' lives; it must also be defined by its counterpart in the South. As Margaret points out, farm laborers, though free of the so-

called tyranny of masters and the health hazards of factory life, are subject to the vicissitudes of crop growth and supply and demand. Furthermore, Johnston points out the acknowledged invisibility of the lower classes, the “toilers and moilers” unseen in the novel’s portrayal of London, which acts as a demonstration of the enforced and artificial gap between “spheres” (121). While the Northern millworkers are exploited, they at least are visible and can effect change upon their environment, even if the change is short-lived or unsuccessful. In sum, the construction of any axis of identity, such as class, is not a matter of a choice between *X* or *Y* (which is defined, therefore, as *not-X*) but rather a matter of *X*, which itself subsists of *Y*, *Z*, and so forth, because *X* is meaningless *without Y* and *Z*.⁶ Put in more poignant terms for this novel, “upper-class” is not simply defined by its polar opposite, “not-upper-class” (in a choice between middle-class or lower-class as the opposite end of the scale), but also through the variations within itself: gentry without land, landed gentry, the urban rich (like the Shaws), etc.

These various subjects and the subdivisions within them give each other meaning through their association. The novel, in showing how reliant upon each other they are for contextualization and proper understanding, demonstrates the harmfulness of enforced separations between them. Margaret, for instance, is poorer than Thornton, and her supercilious behavior toward him on the basis of her class is rendered absurd, as Bessy Higgins is quick to point out, in the Milton class hierarchy which values money above all (*NS* 135). In another vein, Nicholas Higgins can only truly appreciate his own power and potential when Margaret helps

⁶ Stephen Clingman, in his exploration of “transnational fiction,” uses a similar mathematical structure to illustrate the notion of identity predicated around combination instead of exclusion. While his formulation asserts, in the same way I do, that “any version of identity, ‘I am *x*,’ where ‘*x*’ equals the sole and total definition of the ‘I’, is inimical to transition, possibility, change,” he uses this formulation to come to the conclusion that *spacially*-defined selfhood is “where the protocols and problems... of identity are enacted” (15). While space and place are particularly important to Margaret’s identity, I argue that these negotiations of a combined or multiple identity are crucially enacted in such other dimensions as class and gender. Furthermore, I argue that what is being asserted about identity in *North and South* involves the necessary step of consciously rejecting previously-held binary structures of such dimensions as place (here *or* there, etc.) in order to transform this more accurate awareness of the constructions of self into a serviceable and successful social reformation.

him to compare it to the situation of a Southern laborer. The rigorous enforcement of these separations, not any sort of necessary and irreconcilable gap between categories, is the ultimate source of contention in the novel. Class warfare and personal emotional suffering are the dire consequences of the characters' compulsion to stratify based on class, gender, and location. Although Margaret already possesses the cross-class empathy required for social reformation, she must learn to eschew her binarily-envisioned notions of location-based personal identity, since they prevent her from being truly effective in her new community. Thornton, meanwhile, must learn to empathize and identify with his workers in the same way he does with the women in his life as opposed to conceiving of his identity as a man and as a master in terms of contention with that othered group. These two characters' developmental processes in the novel, therefore, although they take a different form for each of them, amount to the same thing: they move sequentially (Margaret through her literal movement from place to place and Thornton through his psychological adjustments regarding his willingness to empathize with others) through the multitude of axes and points that make up their identities but which they at first refuse to recognize as equally constitutive, instead favoring those easy binary oppositions. Each movement, literal or psychological, with its concomitant infusion of meaning, shows the inaccuracy or inadequacy of those binary conceptions until the characters are able at last to recognize and embrace their simultaneous embodiment of the multitude of behaviors and significations of a multifaceted identity. The result, as the novel's happy but cautiously realistic ending shows, is personal fulfillment and societal progress.

When we actually confront what has been taken to be the ultimate signification of *North and South*'s supposedly dualistic nature, the title, we can see that the "North versus South" dichotomy doesn't hold up. *Several* other loci come meaningfully into play whilst the narrator and characters overtly compare the two titular regions, particularly when it comes to Margaret's already-mentioned conception of her own place-based identity. Stephen Clingman, in his wide-reaching and important study of "transnational fiction," posits a spacially-defined "transitive version of identity" in which there exists an indelible "correlation between how the self is put together and how we navigate ourselves through space and time"⁷ (15, 11). In this way, Margaret's understanding of place as a defining aspect of her identity is constituted not only by her movement through and conceptions of Helstone and Milton-Northern but, just as importantly, other places such as London, Oxford, Spain, Frederick Hale's naval ship, and the liminal seaside towns of Heston and Cromer. Clingman focuses upon literal movement or "navigation," but I argue that Margaret's travel from literal place to literal place forms only part of her place-based identity. Spaces which Margaret will never see or physically occupy, such as Spain and Frederick's ship, are vital as well. Furthermore, the progress of Margaret's place-based identity relies upon her eventual, cognizant recognition of the influence of these places and how they combine and change her subjectivity; she must come to accept that Helstone (which, again, she constructs in terms of binary contrast, first with London and then with Milton) does not define her in a way that is more important, meaningful, or privileged than these other locales. Margaret begins her development with a narrow, place-of-origin-based definition of herself, her role, and her destiny, but as she moves through these other places *and* as the other places come to

⁷ Clingman does not address *North and South*, but he does offer interpretations of the "transnational" at play in other nineteenth-century novels: three works by Joseph Conrad and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.

bear in indirect ways upon the narrative, ways which do not involve her literal inhabitation, she expands her sense of self to include them and their significations.

Franco Moretti, in his seminal examination of place in literature, “claims that the influence of the nineteenth-century city life shifts the novel [in general] away from dualistic, melodramatic structures to more complex triangulations” (Zemka 794). Although Moretti focuses on urban space, he sees a general “rise of the Third” as *the* organizing societal mode, with the city being the location where “the indirect—triangular—nature of social relations becomes unmistakable and unavoidable” (Moretti 109). This notion might point us toward a triangular view of Margaret’s definitive places in *North and South*, with Milton, Helstone, and London at the three different points of the triangle, a position Daniel Brass takes in his exploration of the pastoral in the novel.⁸ But such a viewpoint shuts out the other influential spaces I have mentioned above. And in shutting out those locations, we are tempted to return to the familiar conclusion about Gaskell’s work—that she maladroitly collapses and reduces complex conflicts—and Victorian social-problem novels in general—that “novels seem destined by the nature of textual narrative to a pattern of expansion (out into the many) followed by a reduction (back into the few)” (Zemka 794).

Johnston has said that Margaret “moves between two major and three minor *topoi*” (105), the two major, of course, being Helstone and Milton and the three minor, Oxford, London, and Heston. Johnston is clearly correct in showing how these “minor *topoi*” play into the “major” ones, but this ranking of influence, and the limitation to only three outside Helstone and Milton,

⁸ Brass goes on to assert that “the novel’s larger concerns, particularly its treatment of education and social relationships, suggest a much more complex geography than... [an] identification of London and Oxford in a neutral position between the extremes of Helstone and Milton” (75), but he insists that “Margaret’s perception of Helstone is at the heart of *North and South*” (76) even after her tenure in Milton and her disillusionment with her childhood home, a schematic of place with which I disagree (see below).

is reductive.⁹ It is true that Margaret and the other main characters spend most of their time in Milton, but London gets almost as much page space as Helstone and is verbally compared with Milton just as much. Milton, I argue, operates as the center, or perhaps more appropriately the locus of this *cluster* of definitive spaces, to which I would add Spain and Frederick Hale's naval ship.

These various spaces clustering around Milton rely on each other for meaning. Through her movements back and forth and between Milton, the hub, and these other locations, Margaret progresses from a static, rigid conception of identity based on her (and others') place-of-origin into a more inclusive sense of collecting and embodying qualities she finds at various places into one many-sided existence. She begins the novel conceiving of her situation in terms of exclusionary binaries; she longs for Helstone, which is first *not*-London and then *not*-Milton. In the first two moves Margaret makes, the primary construction of her home, which she holds essential and central to her identity, depends upon a location that she constructs as its opposite.

In the first instance of this type of location-binary thinking, only Margaret's experiences in London give her childhood home Helstone meaning. Throughout the first chapters of the narrative, Margaret constantly uses her London surroundings to construct Helstone, most explicitly in her conversation with Henry Lennox, in which she derides London as "so hard and prosaic-looking, after the New Forest" (NS 13). Then, of course, the constant contrasts Margaret forms between Milton and Helstone, which need not be rehearsed here, present an even bleaker, heaven-versus-hell setup.

Margaret does, however, begin to undo her binary understanding of place fairly soon.

First, she encounters the liminal seaside town of Heston. Heston, at which the Hales break their

⁹ I differ, here, from Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's notion that "all *sites* of discursive practice are themselves ranked and valued" (49). Milton's centrality does not necessitate that it is ranked more highly over the other sites in *North and South*, since Milton itself can only be constructed with reference to other sites.

journey from Helstone to Milton, is particularly interesting, and hardly any critical attention has been given to it. Johnston argues that the brief Heston episode shows Margaret acting as a “tourist,” enacting a class-separating compulsion which begins with her separation from the lower class people of Helstone and must be overcome by the end of the novel (109, 111). To add to this, I would argue that Heston is not only a place to showcase the class-prejudice defects of Margaret’s character which must be rectified, but also functions as an allegorical digression for her place-based prejudices; the name “Heston” is Helstone and Milton pushed together, Helstone-plus-Milton, and the town operates as a metaphor for the overall combination and inclusion that must occur as part of Margaret’s personal evolution. The town and the townspeople evoke a combination of what the novel paints as “Northern” and “Southern” characteristics, particularly industry and leisure, respectively: “the people in the streets, although on pleasure bent, had yet a busy mind” (NS 54). When she first encounters this balanced combination, she is not yet ready, and so is disoriented by it, with “all these differences [striking] upon her mind” to no constructive effect (NS 55). The liminal quality of Heston is further emphasized in Margaret’s dreamy pull there between past and future: “it seemed as if she could dream her life away in such luxury of pensiveness, in which she made her present all in all, from not daring to think of the past, or wishing to contemplate the future” (NS 55). This interesting location-embodied liminality will be mirrored later, after she leaves Milton, in *another* seaside town (notable due to the seaside’s general liminality as a space between sea and land), Cromer, which acts as a means for Margaret to combine past, present, and future in an all-inclusive few hours where the various aspects of her life come together to make sense: “But all this time for thought enabled Margaret to put events in their right places, as to origin and significance, both as regarded her past life and her future. Those hours by the sea-side were not lost” (NS 376). Once

again, inhabiting an in-between place allows Margaret to visualize herself in her in-between state, though this time leading to further confidence rather than confusion. The literal and figurative “better place” in which Margaret finds herself is reflected in the fact that Cromer, unlike Heston, is a real-world location and not a fictional one. Thus, the obscuring haziness surrounding the *truly* dreamlike (because fictional) Heston gives way to the complete clarity and concreteness of Cromer.

The narrative itself shows us the errors of Margaret’s narrow conceptions of place-based identity by bringing to bear other locations in ways that Margaret will only later learn to adopt herself. Even though Oxford itself is not visited until the very end of the novel, its influence is felt very early on. The scruples instilled in Mr. Hale by his Oxford education have such an effect on him that they force the Hales’ move from Helstone to Milton. The touch of Oxford on the Hales’ situation is felt in Mr. Bell’s aid and, we understand from Mr. Hale, his endorsement of, or, at least, complacency toward the latter’s decision: “But I felt sure of sympathy from Mr. Bell. I don’t know that he gave me much strength. He has lived an easy life in his college all his days. But he has been as kind as he can be. And it is owing to him we are going to Milton” (NS 37). These Oxford scruples, which both allow Mr. Hale’s questioning and facilitate Mr. Bell’s complacent enablement, in and of themselves are not vilified by the narrative, but their abstraction from Mr. Hale’s and his family’s real-world situation *are*. In much the same way as Oxford itself is removed from the immediate narrative, functioning for the most part as an off-page referent, Mr. Hale’s religious doubts are never explicitly outlined and do not take into account the needs of his family. Margaret is quite correct in her immediate invective, “What in the world do manufacturers want with the classics, or literature, or the accomplishments of a gentleman?” (37) Thornton is the only exception.

Later, Oxford serves not only as an extension of Helstone's "Southern" languid lifestyle with its emphasis on self-reflection, leisure, and education, but also as a portrait of investment that helps clarify for Margaret the nature of the Milton manufacturers' livelihood of production. In a conversation with Margaret and Mr. Hale, Mr. Bell remarks to Thornton that, "All your lives seem to be spent in gathering together the materials for life" rather than actually *living* life, implying that investment of time and energy is best used as the "machinery" for Arnoldian self-perfection via the life of the mind rather than as means to acquire ever more wealth for its own sake (NS 303). Thornton counters with an all-but-overt reassertion of "Hebraism" over "Hellenism" when he claims, "We are of a different race from the Greeks... I belong to Teutonic blood; it is little mingled in this part of England to what it is in others" (NS 304). Once again, we find Gaskell double-tying different philosophies to particular places, not only contrasting Milton with Oxford but "Greece" with "Teutonic" England with the clear implication that neither of these dualistic paradigms adequately provides an ideal lifestyle or an accurate portrayal of reality; Mr. Hale didactically observes that, "It would be a very good thing if they [Milton people and Oxford men] mixed a little more" (NS 301). Margaret's modified behavior toward Thornton during the remainder of this scene, her endurance of his bluntness that is unlike her intolerance of "former days," shows her now-progressing allowance of Milton's influence over her; she does not merely *switch* to Thornton's view of things, but rather she has now assimilated the customs and values of Milton into her viewpoint alongside Mr. Bell's Oxford principles and her father's Helstone evangelicalism (as he constantly importunes the masters to be "Christian") (NS 305). Importantly, she does not take a "side" in this discussion, as she undoubtedly would have in "former days" by allying herself with Mr. Bell's opinion, but instead brings in *two other* places

of commerce when she remarks, in an attempt to change the subject, “Edith says she finds the printed calicoes in Corfu better and cheaper than in London” (NS 305).

Furthermore, Frederick Hale’s deceptively small role in the narrative opens up a new world of geographic connections that shape Margaret’s identity and the conflicts she must encounter. Julia Sun-Joo Lee’s incisive examination of the transnational politics at play in *North and South* centers on Frederick’s subtle impact on the horizontal interplay in a novel whose conflicts seem at first glance to be purely vertical. Lee focuses on the “shadow of America in Gaskell’s depiction of northern England” upon which other critics have commented (454). “As a mariner,” Lee contends,

Frederick is the novel’s most direct link between the cotton-producing American South and the cotton-manufacturing British North. This alternate ‘North and South’ resituates Gaskell’s Condition-of-England novel in transatlantic terms and offers a new, racialized prism through which to view the narrative’s conflict between master and man (454).

The American cotton industry has explicit effects on Thornton’s business (NS 379, 383), and indeed, the North-South tension portrayed in Gaskell’s England mirrors the North-South tension taking place at the same time in the United States, with both countries’ North representing industry and both countries’ South representing gentility.¹⁰ Less obviously, Frederick’s position as a sailor and his role in a mutiny against an abusive authority figure enable him to act as “the ‘middleman’ or lateral mediator between cotton-picking slave and cotton-weaving worker, revealing a transatlantic brotherhood that transcends racial and national boundaries” (Lee 461). More generally, the ship as a narrative space operates as “a microcosm of national and racial

¹⁰ Stefanie Markovits has made links to the transposition in *North and South* of a different war: the Crimean War, noting how contemporary journalists in *Household Words* contrasted the Crimean War with the homeland “battles” of poverty and disease with which *North and South* is concerned (471). Thus, global politics from the East as well as the West are shown to impact the story.

tensions, as well as a vehicle of their circulation” (Lee 457). Unlike the other indirect locales in *North and South*, all the action that takes place on Frederick’s ship and comes to bear upon the immediate story is done “offstage,” and the characters and reader receive the knowledge of its goings-on secondhand and after the fact.

But this space and the consequences of the mutiny enacted within it resound throughout the novel. Elizabeth Bridgham suggests that the ambiguity surrounding Frederick’s moral character, manifested in his hotheadedness, acts as a subtle, allegorical critique of all badly-thought-out forms of resistance that may do more harm than good, which would have clear implications for the Milton workers’ strike. The narrative’s several allusions to “the violence” of Frederick’s “rather too passionate” and “impulsive nature” (*NS* 227, 99) in addition to “the level-headed Margaret’s doubts” about Frederick’s justification for mutiny “suggest that the rebellions against authority of the Hale men,” and, indeed, all the rebellion we find in the novel, “may not be as justified as they believe them to be—and that the pain they cause outweighs that which they save” (Bridgham 76). The conflict which takes place in Frederick’s off-page location not only sheds light on the novel’s central action but also characterizes Margaret. Deborah Denenholz Morse points to Felicia Bonaparte’s argument that Gaskell creates in her fiction “male daemons” to act out her female characters’ (and Gaskell’s own) resistant fantasies.¹¹ Morse contends, however, that Margaret comes out better by comparison: “While Frederick must perpetuate violence in an armed insurrection in order to halt what seems to be brutal tyranny, Margaret is able to embody Christ’s self-sacrifice; she averts violence aimed at others by taking a blow upon herself” (124). As Lee points out, for a minor character, Frederick occupies a great

¹¹ Barbara Leah Harman argues something similar: “Frederick is Margaret’s alter ego, not a madwoman in the attic but a mad brother in the wings whose story, and then whose physical presence, are concealed from sight for the better part of the novel. When Frederick goes back into exile, his criminality gets transferred to Margaret, who then spends the second half of the novel guiltily repenting her own violation of the (moral) law” (70).

deal of “character space,” and both his actions and his specter (in the case of Thornton’s mistaking him for Margaret’s lover) have a remarkable ripple effect. Once again, a peripheral space in *North and South* comes essentially to bear on the novel’s driving action.

But more influential to Margaret’s identity—and even less often discussed than Frederick Hale’s naval space—is Spain, the place of Frederick’s legal sanctuary and exile from England. At its surface, of course, Spain represents the foreign, the alien, what is seen as separate from England. Thus, upholding her limited binary conception of place and the way it defines the individual, Margaret feels her division from Frederick; she is in England, which is *not*-Spain, where her brother lives, and they are leading what she believes are totally different lives, *English* and *Spanish*, respectively. Later, however, as her binarily-organized psychological hierarchy of place breaks down, she learns to see the connections between Frederick’s life in Spain and her own life in England. He, like Margaret’s future husband Thornton, will make his living through trade, and the prestige of his position in “one of the most expensive Spanish houses” makes Margaret proud in the same instant that it makes her ashamed of “her old tirades against trade.” She then has a moment of internal protest straight out of her “former days,” clinging one final time to her old binary system by objecting to any “confusion implied between a Spanish merchant and a Milton mill owner.” But in the next instant, she once again associates the two figures in her mind under the all-inclusive term “trade” and concludes, “trade or no trade, Frederick was very, very happy” (NS 313). Frederick, the Englishman, has essentially become an “unnative” who cannot be defined adequately by either his birth country nor his adopted country, and Margaret sees this in the style of his letters; she notes “little turns and inversions of words” imitating Spanish syntax in his letters, showing how “the idioms of his bride’s country were infecting him” (NS 312). Instead of finding this to be troublesome, however, Margaret now

regards Frederick's exile with "patience" and finds his Spanish wife, Dolores, to be "charming" (NS 312, 313).

In fact, just as Frederick's role in the Spanish Barbour and Co. reveals a connection to Thornton, Dolores, Frederick's wife, thereby presents a connection to Margaret herself. As such, what was once alien and hostile—Spain, which was *not*-England—resembles England more and more. In that vein, most important when it comes to the effect of Spain on Margaret's identity, is that Spain's Catholic religion allows Margaret to envision alternate options for herself and enables her more objectively to examine her own situation. She, like other heroines of Victorian literature, half-seriously considers the life of a Catholic nun as an escape from worldly shallowness and the pressure to marry.¹² After the deaths of both her parents, Margaret longs to relieve herself from her responsibilities and the outside pressures placed upon her as a woman. She has received two distasteful marriage proposals and feels persecuted by her Northern neighbors' judgments of her as a Southern outsider: "I seek heavenly steadfastness in earthly monotony," she laments. "If I were a Roman Catholic and could deaden my heart, stun it with some great blow, I might become a nun" (NS 363). The role of a nun (suggested by Margaret's preoccupation with Frederick living in a Catholic nation), cloistered and free from the pressures of the outside world (specifically marital, sexual pressures), is initially an attraction for Margaret, but is ultimately rejected because she perceives it as a "deadening of the heart" in its *isolation* from other people. The figurative space of Spain acts as Margaret's envisioning of an alternative life for herself, one which she uses to examine and define her own present situation.

¹² For instance, Dorothea Brooke of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is constantly compared to St. Theresa, but the narrator laments that "these later-born Theresas (*sic*) were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul" (Eliot 3). The eponymous *Jane Eyre* (1847) is said to have "lived the life of a nun," but when Rochester teases that she must have "worshipped" the Rev. Brocklehurst like a novice worshipping her priest, Jane expresses revulsion at the idea (125).

Finally, after leaving Milton for London newly-orphaned, Margaret uses the latter locale to construct the former, coming full circle to bust open the London-Helstone contrast with which she understood her own position at the novel's beginning. She experiences the "ladies' business" of London social life as stagnant compared to Milton's exertions (*NS* 12). Its "eventless ease in which no struggle or endeavour was required" leads her to feel that she will become "sleepily deadened" (*NS* 339). Other characteristics of London, particularly the invisibility of its working class, also come into play in the construction of Milton's conflicts. We see, therefore, that at this point in the novel Margaret has substituted her limited system of binaries (London versus Helstone, Helstone versus Milton) for a continuum of comparisons and contrasts that cannot be accurately expressed in a vertical plane but instead more closely resembles a web.

Although other characters are prone to place-based prejudices and categorizations, it is clear that Margaret is most guilty of associating hard-and-fast characteristics with location. As a result of her initial propensity to understand places in terms of binary contrasts, instead of viewing her identity as continuous when moving from place to place, she at first repeatedly separates her tenure at these locations into different "lives." "Mr. Henry Lennox's visit—his offer—was like a dream, a thing beside her actual life," Margaret thinks after Lennox intrudes his London sensibilities, which lead him to misinterpret her behavior and feelings, on her straightforward Helstone existence. She has also just been rocked by the impending move away from Helstone brought on by her father's religious doubts. The "dream" of Henry's proposal, the "thing beside her actual life" contrasts sharply with "the hard reality" that Margaret sees in her future uprooting to Milton (*NS* 40). Sue Zemka has pointed to the following passage in noting how her mother's grave illness brings out this isolating compulsion in Margaret:

Far away in time, far away in space, seemed all the interests of past days. Not more than thirty-six hours ago, she cared for Bessy Higgins and her father, and her heart was wrung for Boucher; now, that all seemed like a dreaming memory of some former life; everything that had passed out of doors seemed dissevered from her mother, and therefore unreal (*NS* 155).

In this moment, Zemka observes, “[r]ather than past and present coming together in a moment of time, Margaret’s anxiety for her mother expands the distance between past and present” (806-807).¹³ The next time Margaret attempts to separate out a different “life” for herself is following Thornton’s marriage proposal, in the wake of the riot in which she physically and verbally defies Thornton’s insistence that the fray “is no *place* for [her]” (*NS* 163, emphasis mine). In the jumble of confused thoughts and feelings after her rejection of Thornton, Margaret brings to mind Henry Lennox’s Helstone proposal and deals with the pain brought about by this new proposal in this new location in the same way as she did with the old, by attempting to cut herself off from her past, shrinking in repugnance “to her whole previous life” (*NS* 179). At this point in her development, however, Margaret has adapted to the merger of her former way of life with the Milton way of life. This is demonstrated by her adoption of the combined role, induced by necessity, of the lady-servant in Milton, which leads her to call herself “Peggy the laundry-maid” (*NS* 70). “Although physical labor is not entirely unheard of among Victorian heroines,” Hilary M. Schor notes, “no other heroine comes to mind who names (or, rather, renames) herself as a

¹³ Zemka, in her essay on “Gaskell’s urban chronotopes,” in *North and South* pursues a line of thought similar to mine but focuses on the “street scene,” in which, Zemka argues, Gaskell “place[s] her readers in moments of time that are freighted with the task of an all-inclusive intimacy” (799). In these street encounters, however, Zemka sees an eventual narrowing of Gaskell’s vision instead of further expansion: “Margaret Hale receives innuendoes from the working men and women she passes, but this flâneuristic social imaginary capitulates to social reality as sexual energy consolidates Margaret and Thornton’s marriage. Sexuality briefly and erratically overcomes class boundaries in public spaces, but it generates new boundaries when attraction becomes a habit” (813). I will address what Zemka sees as the closing out of the workers/lower class from the sexual drama between Thornton and Margaret later.

laborer, who proudly wears the lower-class nickname” (148).¹⁴ Mary Elizabeth Hotz adds, “The experience with her dying mother forces Margaret to become ‘a hand’ herself as she must stand in the kitchen and do the ironing, and provides the opportunity for her to wake up to the working world of Milton and move outside of herself” (171). Margaret’s adoption of facets of Milton ways into her personal identity is further demonstrated by her ability to code-switch in her speech from “proper” English to factory slang, attesting, “[i]f I live in a factory town, I must speak factory language when I want it” (*NS* 218). She has already begun to create an inclusive identity amalgamated from things she has picked up in London, Helstone, and Milton.

Therefore, unlike her ability to make a clean break from the other “life” where Henry Lennox proposed to her, Margaret cannot escape Thornton’s proposal. On the very next line after Margaret shrinks away from “her whole previous life,” the narrative informs us that “it was of no use” (*NS* 179). Margaret continues to deny her own many-sidedness even as Thornton muses on how much he admires it: “At one time she was so brave, and at another so timid; now so tender, and then so haughty and regal-proud... He saw her in every dress, in every mood, and did not know which became her best” (*NS* 192).

Margaret’s acceptance of her own multifaceted nature, informed by the numerous locations among which she moves (her movement only increases as the novel progresses) and which come to bear upon her frame of reference, finds its completion in her final visit to Helstone, the site which she formerly and erroneously believed was her ultimate definer.¹⁵

¹⁴ Julie Nash, in her exploration of servants and labor relations in *Mary Barton* and *North and South* argues that Gaskell portrays the relationships between employers and household servants in the latter novel, particularly between the Hales and their housekeeper Dixon, as a model of the “potential benefits and pitfalls of having close contact between the classes” (33). Margaret herself embodies these benefits and pitfalls when she adopts the dual role of mistress and servant, which further breaks down the class binary by uniting it in one subject.

¹⁵ Margaret also expresses erroneous place-based notions of character when she attributes the lack of “granite” in the Boucher family’s constitution to what she guesses to be their “Irish blood” (*NS* 281). Though this is perhaps less deliberately illustrated by the author, who herself might have been subject to the common Victorian anti-Irish sentiment, it is nonetheless demonstrative.

Noting with some pain the changes that Helstone has gone through, Margaret now says to herself, “And I too change perpetually—now this, now that—now disappointed and peevish because all is not exactly as I had pictured it, and now suddenly discovering that the reality is far more beautiful than I had imagined it” (*NS* 364). At the end of her visit, she remarks, “Oh, Helstone! I shall never love any place like you,” but the narrative is quick to inform us that Margaret has truly moved beyond her romantic idealization of her birthplace:

A few days afterwards, she had found her level, and decided that she was very glad to have been there, and that she had seen it again, and that to her it would always be the prettiest spot in the world, but that... if it were all to come over again, she should shrink back from such another visit (*NS* 364, 364-365).

The ultimate valuation of one’s place-of-origin does not only bespeak Margaret’s youthful romanticism. It also mimics a conservative social structure which values patrilineage and a long-established, estate-based gentry. One’s origins constitute one’s power and agency in the world. Margaret’s willing shift, therefore, from the pastoral, old-fashioned Helstone to the industrial, high-tech Milton represents her ultimate rejection of the very basis of English hierarchical society, embracing a horizontal identity-plane rather than a vertical one. Rather than ranking her Helstone birthplace, and the class and power it represents, as the ur-definitive place in her life, Margaret comes to view the myriad of different places as equally constitutive of her sense of self. “After all it is right,” she says to herself near the novel’s conclusion. “If the world stood still, it would retrograde and become corrupt... Looking out of myself, and my own painful sense of change, the progress all around me is right and necessary” (*NS* 364). Henry Lennox opines that she is “like the Margaret Hale of Helstone” “and yet *more*” (*NS* 376, emphasis mine).

Schor has noted Margaret's unique lack of fixedness in her examination of the "creation of a common language" in *North and South*, suggesting that through these transformations Gaskell undercuts "our notion of a heroine, for the untraditional, questioning Margaret is equally hard to 'fix' in the plot. The novel's constant motion suggests the generic nature of the bundle of characteristics we call a character. The novel moves Margaret from situation to situation—literally from place to place" (125). But, Schor argues, this is done "in order, specifically, to move her to Manchester, the 'Milton-Northern' of the novel, and within these chapters all other fictional possibilities are closed off as well" (125-126). Schor's narrowing conclusion, then, finds its echo in Zemka's, quoted above (794). But if we feel tempted to view these shiftings' ultimate end as merely an exchange of Helstone for Milton as the ur-definitive place for Margaret, we should remember that even though she comes to settle in Milton, the narrative ends in London, where Margaret, though she dislikes the society, has finally hit her stride as a woman of means. In order to facilitate that coming-of-age change, she must have experienced the fast-paced business of Milton life *and* be removed from it so that she can rise above the deaths of her parents. London provides access to Henry Lennox, who represents the different style of business (that is, speculative investment rather than manufacturing) that allows Margaret to turn her inheritance from Mr. Bell into lucrative investments which will save Thornton's mill. This final fusion of the experiences of Milton and London, helped along by the disillusioning visit to Helstone, enables Margaret's full growth. By ending the novel in London instead of Milton, Gaskell avoids the trap of merely substituting *one* definitive place in Margaret's life for another.

Margaret's acceptance of a multifaceted identity is reminiscent of Gaskell's own conception of her many selves or "mes." Deirdre D'Albertis has remarked on Gaskell's written

expression in a letter of her own multiplicity and her struggle with reconciling the different aspects of her identity:

One of my mes (*sic*) is, I do believe, a true Christian—(only people call her a socialist and a communist), another of my mes is a wife and mother, and highly delighted at the delight of everyone else in the house... Now that's my 'social' self I suppose. Then again I've another self with a full taste for beauty and convenience whh [*sic*] is pleased on its own account. How am I to reconcile all these warring members? I try to drown myself (my *first* self,) by saying it's Wm who is to decide on all these things, and his feeling it right ought to be my rule. And so it is—only that does not quite do (quoted in Matus 14).

“Here,” D’Albertis remarks, “Gaskell hypothesizes a sense of self that is shifting, subject to external pressures, and always responsive to circumstance” (14). In making note of Gaskell biographers’ or biographical critics’ tendency to “enforce a distinction between two incompatible selves [for the author], one public and the other private,” D’Albertis goes on to say that “[s]tories about Gaskell’s ‘essential’ character often founder on the difficulty of reconciling what she openly recognized as irreconcilable imperatives” (14,15). In writing the above letter in 1850, some four years before the first appearance of *North and South*, Gaskell viewed the many aspects of her identity “warring” with each other, and D’Albertis suggests that Gaskell is unable to “reconcile” them with each other but is still able to assume “different identities without clearly privileging one over the others” (16). In other words, D’Albertis sees in Gaskell’s biography a writer who reconciles irreconcilable identities by switching back and forth between them. In *North and South*, however, the acceptance of a multifaceted identity doesn’t involve *merely* switching between a series of selves which are unable to be owned simultaneously—like the

donning of several different masks, one by one— but rather *encompassing* that multitude. Margaret *does* first move sequentially through them (as does Thornton, in his own way), but that sequential movement allows the simultaneous embodiment at the story’s end. A letter written in 1850 may show Gaskell expressing bafflement at reconciling “warring members,” but in 1854-55 we see Gaskell reconciling members by showing that they are not at war.

This is not to say that Gaskell *solves* the societal problems brought about by the pervasive zero-sum, binary mentality she undertakes to showcase in *North and South*. Rather, by pointing out the source of these problems—the imposition of harmful separation within a unified but varying body (of people, of land, etc.), which leads to the imposition of an oppressive value hierarchy—she manages to show the fabricated basis on which they are founded.

III

One of the most significant examples of Gaskell’s revision of binarily-understood personal identity is also one of the most frequently oversimplified threads of *North and South*: the development of the male lead, John Thornton. Thornton’s development is not merely, as others have argued, a refining of the term “gentleman” to include business acumen and moral fortitude; there is more going on here than a simple reflection of the rise of the middle class. In the same process through which Margaret moves from her privileging of her hometown to a place-based subjectivity that includes the several other places of influence in her life, Thornton undergoes a reconceptualization of empathy and identity that centers on a fraught interplay between gender and class. Thornton begins the novel with a self-defined gender and class identity based around his association with the women in his life. His bodily difference from women allows him safely to empathize with them since that visible gender difference preserves

boundaries and prevents any feared loss of self (the social power endowed to him by his masculine gender). His bodily *sameness* with his workers, meanwhile, leads him, at first, to perpetuate class boundaries in order to prevent himself from identifying with what he perceives as the powerlessness of the working class and thus experiencing that powerlessness himself.

Thornton's primary site of "safe" empathy with women, the point at which he begins his development in the novel, is his relationship with his mother. Patsy Stoneman has preceded me in her important work on mothers and mothering in Gaskell's writing, but she has given surprisingly little attention to *North and South's* Mrs. Thornton. Stoneman's operating thesis, which stretches across the different critical pieces she has authored, is that the task of mothering softens characters and becomes the gateway to empathy. I argue something rather different concerning the mother-son relationship in *North and South*. Although empathy in general works to deconstruct the oppositions that structure the novel, I do not believe that learning to be a mother, learning to care for others, is the essence of Thornton's transformation. Thornton already cares for others at the story's opening—but he cares for very *specific* others, which is the nature of his failing.

In the novel's backstory, Mrs. Thornton imbues her son, who grows up to be one of the wealthiest manufacturers in Milton, with all the "manly" virtues, especially self-discipline. She is "a woman of strong power, and firm resolve" who teaches Thornton, at the age of fifteen, to "become a man" after his father's suicide (*NS* 78). Even though Mrs. Thornton also has a female child, Fanny, the mother-child identification clearly occurs between Mrs. Thornton and John: "The very daringness with which mother and son spoke out unpalatable truths, the one to the other, showed a reliance on the firm centre of each other's souls" (*NS* 87). Gaskell undermines the notion that male gender identity consists of adamant separation from the mother, as Nancy

Chodorow's groundbreaking psychological theory posits: John and Mrs. Thornton's "souls" are intertwined well into the son's adulthood.

This characterization is in defiance of what John Tosh identifies as the Victorian masculine crisis. Tosh classifies this crisis as a "twofold trauma," combining the trauma of reaching adulthood (and subsequent separation from the mother) with the realization within each individual man that what he knew of adult roles was filtered through a woman, his mother (*Masculinities* 48-49). There is no "crisis of manhood" for Thornton, who experiences neither resentment nor horror that his lessons in "manliness" came from a woman. Instead, he "thank[s] her silently... for the early training..." (*NS* 78) For Thornton, the fact that information, even gendered information, is filtered through a woman is not problematic, or at least not obviously so, and he publicly credits his mother for her exclusive part in shaping his identity. Gaskell, however, ensures that the reader sees how untouched Thornton's physical "manhood" is by his mother's sole parenthood, as we see from the descriptions of Thornton's body and behavior: Thornton is "a great, rough fellow," (*NS* 59) a "tall, broad-shouldered man" with "such an expression of resolution and power" (*NS* 60). Margaret explicitly says he is "not a ladies' man" after first meeting him, in the sense meaning *effeminate*, a dandy or fop, and this assertion seems important to make very early after Thornton's appearance, since Thornton does surround himself with ladies (*NS* 76).

His acknowledged former dependence upon and co-identification with his mother enables him to acknowledge his dependence upon and connections with other women, particularly Margaret. Thornton feels no conflict about acknowledging Margaret's role as, quite literally, his savior. After his striking workers attempt to attack him and she intervenes, Thornton says, "I don't know where I should have been but for her," and, later, he says to Margaret, "I owe my

very life to you,” mirroring his accolades of his mother (*NS* 169, 176). He even sensationalizes/sexualizes his indebtedness to Margaret: “[I]t sharpens the sense of existence till I hardly know if it is pain or pleasure, to think that I owe it to one... whom I love” (*NS* 177).

The dearth of other men in Thornton’s life reinforces the influence that his connections with women have upon his identity. His family, for the majority of his life, consists solely of two women, his mother and sister. His business colleagues are *mere* colleagues, collaborators at times, but mostly kept at arm’s length as competitors upon whose business practices Thornton often frowns. Mr. Hale, who, if developed differently, could have proved a surrogate father for Thornton, comes up short due to Hale’s lack of business understanding. Mrs. Thornton calls him “rather too simple for trade,” while Margaret conversely proves her aptitude for it by the end of the novel, and even prior to that, makes intelligent though controversial observations about the strike where Mr. Hale can only offer moral platitudes (*NS* 130). The initial owner of Marlborough Mills, Mr. Bell, despite being a clever investor, is too scholarly and sardonic for a straightforward man like Thornton. The obvious choices for male companionship within Thornton’s social circle are all deliberately eliminated. Finally, Nicolas Higgins, the most similar to Thornton in temperament, cannot be an appropriate male companion due to his being an underling, Thornton’s employee, with a rather socialist work philosophy that is irreconcilable with Thornton’s free-enterprise capitalism. At the novel’s end, they are not exactly friends, but strictly master and man, though in a better position to understand each other. As Catherine Barnes Stevenson points out, “Higgins’s manly virtues are initially qualified by agnosticism, ferocious anger, a potential for violence against women, and a penchant for going ‘spreeing’” (13). The apparently insurmountable difference between Thornton’s and Higgins’ “manhood” is the class divide.

This isolation from men in favor of women is in notable contrast to the idea, found both in Chodorow's theory about mother-child identification and Victorian social study at large, that, for a young male, achieving manhood involved "leaving women behind" and that masculinity was understood as "only secondarily relational" to women (Tosh, *A Man's Place* 112, *Manliness* 5). Thornton does *not* leave these women behind, and he does not experience the typical stage of independence during the in-between time after the achievement of adulthood and prior to taking a wife, a stage which was not only common but seen as essential for young middle-class men of this time, cultivating that much-desired self-reliance (Tosh *Manliness* 34). It is also in notable contrast to the way male characters are portrayed by such writers as Charles Kingsley, in whose fiction we see "a world with no female mentors to teach men how to relate to women, or women how to relate to men" (Markwick 58). The very structure of Thornton's living situation (self-contradictorily, at first) attests to his refusal to self-identify in terms of separation from women: his house (where he lives with his mother and sister) is next door to his mill, something unheard of. Through Thornton, Gaskell demonstrates that a man can have women as the only moral and intellectual equals within his sphere, can identify himself in relation to them as opposed to in distinction from them, without his "manhood" suffering.¹⁶

Prior to the gender studies boom in the late twentieth century, critics commonly restricted their analysis of *North and South* to the class conflict between "masters and men," the industrial

¹⁶ The frequent isolation from men of the male lead in Victorian women's novels is remarkable and ripe for further study. In *Jane Eyre*, for instance, Rochester is surrounded by women while at Thornfield—Jane, Mrs. Fairfax, Adèle, even the insane Bertha Mason and the ominous Grace Poole—with nary a man except a nearly nameless servant. When men of equal status with Rochester do appear within his vicinity, it is in a threatening capacity: Richard Mason arrives only to be attacked by Bertha, which nearly leads to Jane's discovery of Rochester's secret marriage. Perhaps both Brontë and Gaskell are suggesting that men can only recognize moral and intellectual equals in women when denied the apparently preferable company of other men in a culture that privileges the homosocial "Clubland." Even more tellingly, perhaps this isolation is meant to strip these realist-fictional men of their inherent group power to disregard or oppress women. By isolating her leading man, Gaskell deprives him of his "exclusionary power... which is fundamental to masculine privilege" (Tosh *Manliness* 38). Unlike Brontë's male leads, however, Gaskell's Thornton does not need to be forced into this beneficial isolation, since he grows up with it and voluntarily preserves it.

mill-owners and the laborers. More recently, critics have asserted that Gaskell's juxtaposition of class conflict with romance creates an analogy for gender relations. This reconciliation is the novel's task for Margaret Hale, with her influence catalyzing good faith between "masters and men." Her method consists in making the disparate parties realize their dependence upon each other. Within this economic narrative, it is necessary for Thornton to be able to acknowledge dependence, something very much at odds with the notion of masculinity defined as separation and independence. Thornton's inherent respect for womanhood and its capabilities, rooted in his identification with his mother, enables him to empathize with Margaret's paternalistic politics, which, in turn, leads him to empathize with his workers and take steps toward closer relations with them and heightened sensitivity to their needs; this does not solve the class/gender conflict altogether, but, as Stoneman observes, it "minimizes... casualties" ("Elizabeth Gaskell..." 90). In exploring Margaret's role as mediator, however, previous readings of *North and South* have assumed that empathy must be instilled *into* Thornton *by* Margaret, but Thornton's evolution is more complex. Since Thornton is *already* empathetic toward and identifies with women, his initial lack of empathy towards and failure to identify with his workers is the outcome of the complex interplay of gender and class relations I have introduced above.

While Thornton's identification with his mother enables him to accept dependence upon her, he refuses, at first, to accept dependence on anyone *but* her. "[T]he marketplace" in general, as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have influentially observed, "gives the illusion of independent identity, of being a self-sustaining totality, and this illusion is one of separateness and enclosure" (27-28). Furthermore, for the Victorians the notion of dignified and manly work relied on a rejection of servility or patronage (Tosh *Manliness* 37), and thus Thornton denies any reliance upon his workers. In the same breath that he praises his mother for imbuing him with

the capacity to rise in the world, he condemns his poverty-stricken workers for being unable to achieve the same success:

My mother managed so that I put by three out of these fifteen shillings [of salary from work at a draper's shop] regularly... This taught me self-denial. Now... I thank [my mother] silently on each occasion for the early training she gave me. Now when I feel that in my own case it is no good luck, nor merit, nor talent,—but simply the habits of life which taught me to despise indulgences not thoroughly earned, — indeed, never to think twice about them, — I believe that this suffering, which Miss Hale says is impressed on the countenances of the people of Milton, is but the natural punishment of dishonestly-enjoyed pleasure... (NS 78)

The contradiction is obvious. Thornton does not even consider that his workers may not have had a mother as capable as his own, nor does he consider that the economic climate may have changed in the fifteen years since he was a draper's assistant. In one speech, Thornton both acknowledges and denies interdependence. Crucially, Gaskell attributes this harmful paradox in Thornton's belief structure to the exclusivity of his identification with his mother. Thornton's sister Fanny was too young to remember the Thorntons' poverty, and Mrs. Thornton allows her daughter to become an idle non-earner, which indirectly associates her with Thornton's scornful view of the working class.¹⁷ Like the mill workers, Fanny has not been brought up with the same values as Thornton, so although she has had his same advantages, she lives a life of “dishonestly-enjoyed pleasure” and is ridiculed for it by the narrative and by her own family. Mrs. Thornton

¹⁷ Barbara Z. Thaden notes that “Gaskell[’s]... mother/characters often resist the appropriation of their young sons by the patriarchy, because they realize that if they do not resist, their sons will become their oppressors and the oppressors of all women” (137). In Mrs. Thornton's case, she does this only to a certain extent; she raises a son who will not be the oppressor of *middle-class* women but of lower-class women. It seems that Mrs. Thornton is willing to work within patriarchy as long as her son is elevated to a position of power—and this is why Margaret must take Mrs. Thornton's place.

has raised her daughter with “a kind of pitying tenderness of manner” instead of the tough love that shaped Thornton, leading Fanny to be “weak in the very points in which her mother and brother were strong.” Although Mrs. Thornton feels a persistent sense of “shame” at having raised such a daughter, she is more given to “contempt” for its result (*NS* 87). In this way, Fanny becomes an interesting and subtle double for the working class in *North and South*, and Thornton cannot see the evidence of circumstances’ effect on individual strength of character and success within his own household.

Even though their double within the Thornton household is female, the working class portrayed in *North and South* is overwhelmingly male. Stoneman has argued that the working class, not only in this novel but elsewhere in Condition-of-England literature, is a feminized entity since even their men are portrayed as emotional and relational (*Elizabeth Gaskell* 3). While it is true that their economic status (in other words, their relative powerlessness) allows them, for instance, to show affection for their children without fear of damage to their masculine image, I argue that the working class’s overwhelming masculinity in *North and South* is a key to understanding Thornton’s evolution. From the time that Margaret arrives in Milton, it is clear that women as well as men work in the cotton factories. It is made explicit, in fact, that most working women prefer factory wages, making the search for a good servant intensely difficult (*NS* 63). One of Margaret’s first friends, Bessy Higgins, is a former working woman. Strangely, however, when taken as a whole, the members of the working class are seen as strictly *men*. The class conflict is referred to as the clashing of “masters and men,” and even when Thornton acquiesces to Margaret’s sensibilities and leaves off calling his workers “hands,” he refers to them as “men.” Bessy claims that in this particular strike, “[t]h’ women are as bad as th’ men,” yet in the riot scene, the culmination of the strike’s tensions, the workers are an “angry sea of

men,” “hundreds of infuriated men and reckless boys” with nary a working woman in sight (*NS* 137, 162).

This is quite a change from Gaskell’s earlier industrial novel *Mary Barton* (1848), in which a working woman is the titular character and one of the main conflicts between working class and upper class centers on male-female relationships across the class boundary by way of a seduction plot. Patricia E. Johnson has remarked on this erasure of working women in industrial literature, noting how political novels focus on women, but never *working* women, even though women composed 60-80% of the labor force for industries like cotton (*Hidden Hands* 1). She points out how Victorians, as the early part of the century progressed, vociferously separated class and gender, which not only disempowered the lower class by dividing it along gender lines, but also, conversely (and perhaps this latter effect made the former possible) benefited working class men by eliminating job competition from women by forcing working women back into the home (*Hidden Hands* 10-11). Johnson goes on to argue that “*North and South* is about unionization and negotiation between masters and men, and, as a part of the negotiation, the old image of the factory girl will die,” referring, of course, to Bessy Higgins: “The middle-class woman and the working-class man strike up an alliance literally over the corpse of the factory girl” (*Hidden Hands* 38, 39). While Johnson is right to point out the erasure in literature of working women in favor of working men as representatives of their class, I do not believe that the economic compromise between classes occurs necessarily because of Bessy’s death—that is, due to the elimination of the problem of the working woman as competition or the use of her corpse as the emotional catalyst for change. Rather, *North and South* has to ignore the female working majority in order to make its point about how gender-sameness prevents Thornton from allowing himself to identify with his workers.

Thornton can afford to identify with women, since their gender difference from him allows him easily to maintain his sense of male identity and power. Tosh notes the Victorian cultural narrative in the arts and sciences of the growing polarization of sexual difference which would enable this: “[I]f men were marked off by natural difference from women, it followed that their manliness was more secure” (*Manliness* 69). In examining Thornton’s development, many critics have seen what they call a “feminization” of the traditionally ultra-masculine hero, an individual softening which will pave the way for better class relations. Stoneman, for instance, argues that “*North and South* anticipates that strand of modern feminist theory which ‘stresses the need to transform society so that men as well as women attribute high value to nurturance’” (quoting Keohane et al. 75, *Elizabeth Gaskell* 90).¹⁸ The transformation of Thornton, according to this popular argument, amounts to a cultivation of empathy and care in a man who begins his story as a hardened capitalist. As John Kucich notes, however, this narrative of the “feminization” of the hardened man is not radical and, in fact, plays into the same Victorian cult of the domestic which identifies women or femininity as the ultimate source of moral regulation (188-189). Charlotte Brontë and Charles Dickens both use this trope of softening. “There is no denying that Gaskell wanted to ‘strengthen’ women and ‘soften’ men,” Kucich attests, but, he adds, “such a program of amelioration fits quite comfortably with traditional notions about the separation of spheres” (189). Kucich goes on to posit that Gaskell’s use of sexual inversion, when understood in this sense, is actually quite conservative in castigating “weak, indecisive, cowardly men and tyrannical, headstrong, indiscreet women” (189). He concludes that Gaskell’s aim in demonizing this kind of sexual inversion is to avoid resolving ideological contradictions within the middle class by creating “a muddled ideal that tries to synthesize” traditionally-

¹⁸ Keohane, Nannerl O., Rosaldo, Michelle Z., and Gelpi, Barbara C. (eds), 1982. *Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology* (Harvester Press, Sussex).

understood “masculine” and “feminine” strengths and weaknesses (195). That “muddle,” however, is exactly what I argue Gaskell is trying to achieve. Indeed, I believe that the idea that the synthesis of traditionally “masculine” and “feminine” attributes can only lead to a confusing or impossible “muddle” is precisely the misconception that Gaskell challenges in her construction of Thornton.

Thornton does not need to become “feminized” in the sense that he needs to have certain “feminine” attributes brought out in him, since, from the first, his inner tenderness is one of his most defining features. It is what makes him unique among leading male characters in other social problem novels of the time. Without a doubt, Gaskell’s oeuvre criticizes the middle-class ideology which “heightens differentiation, producing infantilised women and authoritarian men,” (Stoneman *Elizabeth Gaskell* 3), but Thornton’s punishment and repentance is not called for by any “lack of compassion for the women and the workers in [his life]” (Stevenson 12). Rather, the failure of the mill is a direct consequence of Thornton’s *concern* for the wellbeing of his workers; he refuses to gamble with his employees’ livelihoods by speculating. It is not accurate to say that Thornton shows “a lack of compassion for the women... in his life,” because the worst thing he is guilty of in that respect is disagreeing with Margaret’s social philosophy (Stevenson 12). Even in a time of financial emergency, “he was as calm and gentle to the women in his home as ever” (NS 381). The mill’s failure is not a punishment, but rather a circumstance which defies gender; at this point in the novel, he is “unmanned” *despite* his good behavior, not as a result of any vice or mistake.¹⁹ Such is the nature of the marketplace.

¹⁹ John Kucich sees the failure of the mill as a punishment for Thornton’s “excessive honesty,” a “social abnegation” that Kucich somewhat confusingly ties to gender since he paints honesty as the “masculine” trait of choice in Gaskell’s fiction (206). He ties Thornton’s loss to the failures of “weak men like Mr. Hale and Osborne Hamley,” but it seems clear to me that in all these cases, it is not the “excessive” honesty of the men, that is, their supposedly masculine traits brought out of proportion, which is castigated by Gaskell. I have argued for Thornton’s case above, but with Hale and Hamley, their lack of consideration for the effects of their scruples or their maladroit way of acting according to their consciences produces the trouble. Mr. Hale’s refusal to stifle his doubts and live as a

In other words, as I have said, Thornton does not need to *learn* to experience “female emotions.” Rather, he needs to learn to reconcile them with his socioeconomic role as a “master.” His mother endows him with the means to achieve, and his desire for Margaret leads him toward reconciling authority with empathy and communication with his employees. The misunderstanding of Thornton’s progression has led several critics to misinterpret the scene in which Thornton visits Nicholas Higgins at his home, which is now filled with Boucher’s orphaned children. Jill L. Matus, for instance, asserts that “only after the torment of love has opened Thornton up to his capacity to feel strongly is he capable of responding to Higgins” (40). But from his very first introduction, Thornton exhibits strong emotions. When we dig even further to Thornton’s backstory, we find that his powerful affection for and loyalty to his mother, as well as the tragic death of his father (which he communicates in terms of intense shame and obsession to restore the position of his family), make it clear that Thornton understands lack. Margaret doesn’t “awaken” him to emotion, generally—perhaps to sexuality, specifically.

Thornton, therefore, does not need “softening” in terms of “feminization.” Rather, he needs softening in terms of class, and his “great tender heart” simply needs to become more inclusive (NS 288). As Johnston points out, “By [Gaskell’s] account, unless we come to recognize the other as a man, and therefore as like us, those others are forever barred from their rightful status as persons in the juridical sense” (128). This is a useful clarification of my own argument about Thornton’s fear regarding identifying with his workers; it is not just class difference that must be overcome here but gender *sameness*. Thornton doesn’t fear the loss of his own identity when he empathizes with women and embraces “feminine emotions” because of women’s “natural,” observable difference from him, their differently-gendered bodies. While

hypocrite in and of itself is lauded in the narrative of *North and South*, just as Osborne Hamley’s refusal to abandon his wife is lauded in *Wives and Daughters*.

not frequently commented upon outside the riot scene, *North and South* is an intensely bodily novel, focusing sharply upon the two protagonists' physical experience of the world, experiences which are gendered in surprising ways. The differences between the bodies and physical experiences of the two main characters, Margaret and Thornton, are heavily explored and emphasized and work often to subvert the tendency to equate the gendered body with conservative ideals of masculinity or femininity.

Gaskell's construction of Thornton's physical appearance is in faithful adherence to Victorian ideals of manhood: brute power manifested in broad shoulders, tall stature, strong physique and coded sexual potency. For such authors as Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes, writing in the "muscular Christian" vein that so influentially established a dominant model of masculinity in the mid-century, "manliness" is intensely physical, "a positive exhibition of robust energy, spirited courage, and physical vitality" (Markwick 35). Thornton describes himself (derisively, but there is a narrative coyness present here) as "a great powerful fellow" while Margaret notices that he is "massive" (*NS* 235, 74). Thornton's appearance is pointedly contrasted with that of another man in the novel, the "feminine" Mr. Hale. While Thornton's aspect looks as though it is "carved in marble," Mr. Hale's facial features are "soft and wavering, with a frequent undulating kind of trembling movement passing over them, showing every fluctuating emotion; the eyelids were large and arched, giving the eyes a peculiar languid beauty which was almost feminine" (*NS* 74). Mr. Hale also possesses a fretting "woman's heart" (*NS* 382).

It might be easy to read this contrast as Gaskell's condemnation of effeminacy in a man, since, although not openly negative, Mr. Hale's physical characterization appears at a disadvantage next to Thornton's. The latter's immovable and rock-hard physique suggests

strength and power while Mr. Hale's soft changeability of expression reminds the reader of his ill-handled departure from the Church of England and his continual shirking of paternal responsibility onto Margaret's shoulders.²⁰ However, it is necessary to acknowledge that the subversive tenderness at Thornton's core is most effectively portrayed when paired with an outward appearance that denotes, according to conservative Victorian gender ideology, the masculine ideals of stoicism and strength. The aspect of Mr. Hale's appearance that is most focused upon is its movement, its "trembling" which shows the passage of emotion. The man who trembles *most* in the novel, however, is, of course, Thornton. In almost every encounter he has with Margaret, he trembles or is wracked with emotional sensation in some way. To note only a few: "Strong man as he was, he trembled at the anticipation [of proposing marriage]"; "every nerve in his body thrilling at the thought of her" when he has to calm his imported Irish hands after Margaret is wounded; he "heaved with passion" at his mother's expressed dislike of Margaret; and in speaking of Frederick, whom he has mistaken for Margaret's lover, "he writhed himself about, like one in bodily pain" (*NS* 175, 165, 169, 285).

Matus, in her examination of *North and South*, explores affective experience in the novel's two leading characters, positing that the power which emotions have on Thornton and Margaret may give evidence for Gaskell's construction of "a self that is less unified and

²⁰ Bridgham's examination of Mr. Hale's "crisis of paternal authority" suggests further interesting parallels with Thornton's dilemma of autonomy: "Mr. Hale's decision to leave the clergy is... his attempt to exercise the manly autonomy of individual conscience, but he is both active and acted upon in his decision, which is alloyed by circumstance and external influence" (66). Like Mr. Hale, Thornton persists in making autonomous decisions based on his personal conscience: He refuses to brook dissent in the way he runs his mill and will not negotiate with his employees based on the principle that the mill is his to command. His persistence in this leads to the workers' strike, which, in turn, leads to Marlborough Mill's bankruptcy, the effects of which harm both the workers and Thornton's own family. In addition, Bridgham consistently points to Mr. Hale's "[failure] to explain himself" as one of the biggest contributing factors of his failure as both clergyman and father and even as man, from a Victorian standpoint (78). Thornton, too, refuses to explain himself and the reasons behind his business practices to his employees; in one scene, he tells Margaret that he cannot give the workers higher wages because cotton is not in demand at the moment, but when Margaret prompts him to explain this to his workers, he bluntly refuses, claiming that they ought simply to follow his orders on the basis of his authority as mill-owner (*NS* 111). Gaskell seems to be showing, with all the male authority figures, that this principle of staunch autonomy is damaging, even disastrous.

governable than one would like” (43). Matus shows that both Margaret and Thornton are susceptible to powerful emotions which have physical effects, but I contend that there is more going on here than equal-opportunity sensibility. Like Stevenson, Matus asserts that “only after the torment of love has opened Thornton up to his capacity to feel strongly is he capable of responding to Higgins” (40), but from his very first introduction, Thornton proves himself to be more susceptible to being overcome by powerful emotion even than Margaret. Margaret is often described as “cool” and queenly while Thornton is often uncomfortable or in pain. In their first meeting, Gaskell describes their contrasted states of composure, with Margaret immediately exhibiting the more “masculine” state of control and knowledge while Thornton’s state is continually-renewing discomfort and confusion:

She felt no awkwardness... Mr. Thornton was a good deal more surprised and discomfited than she... He did not understand who she was, as he caught a simple, straight, unabashed look, which showed that his being there was of no concern to the beautiful countenance, and called up no flush of surprise to the pale ivory of the complexion (*NS* 57-58).

In the rest of the scene, Thornton is “unready,” “impatient,” “ashamed,” “mortified,” “irritated,” and “more awkward and self-conscious in every limb than he had ever [been] in all his life before” (*NS* 58-59). This is quite the plethora of disturbing emotion for a man who must be “taught” to feel! Though Thornton of course is attracted to Margaret in their first meeting, his embarrassment has more to do with her obvious disdain for his class status, and her haughtiness touches his inherent sensitivity:

He almost said to himself that he did not like her, before their conversation ended; he tried so to compensate himself for the mortified feeling, that while he looked upon her

with an admiration he could not repress, she looked at him with proud indifference, taking him, he thought... for... a great rough fellow, with not a grace or a refinement about him (*NS 59*).

This scene sets the tone for most of their following encounters, with Thornton distinctly ruffled while harboring an overwhelming attraction to Margaret, and Margaret, if not totally indifferent to Thornton, then filled with disdain for his philosophy. She is taken completely by surprise when he proposes marriage, since his stoically “masculine” demeanor, “carved in marble,” has never indicated his inward struggle. Indeed, after their first meeting, in which, we have seen, Thornton is so very discomposed, Margaret remarks to her father that Thornton’s face possesses “such an expression of resolution and power... he looks very inflexible” (*NS 60*).

So the most important contrast represented between Thornton and Mr. Hale is not simply a celebration of the former’s masculinity and a condemnation of the latter’s effeminacy; rather, it is a contrast between men who both “tremble” and feel intense emotion, but Thornton’s “trembling” is more striking due to his physical characteristics. Thornton’s body is gendered as ultra-masculine, therefore, *not* in order to showcase brute power as desirable in and of itself. Instead, what we ultimately see from all of this is that Thornton’s unquestionably masculine body overcomes any threat that could be felt from empathy with or dependence upon women. This security in his own masculine identity prevents him from fearing any gender slippage when he identifies with the women in his life. His workers, however, are physically powerful and, as a whole, unequivocally gendered male (in spite of statistical reality). These same workers are the most significant masculine presence in his life because of his isolation from more obvious male connections like Mr. Hale, Mr. Bell, and his business colleagues. Thornton’s class and gender identity are concomitant and wrapped up in his enforcement of distance between himself and his

workers. His initial, problematic self-construction is shown to be incredibly tenuous, therefore, since each interaction with his workers threatens it. To complete his transformation, Thornton must allow himself to be defined through intimacy and connection with this threatening masculine force in the same way he has celebrated his definition via intimacy and connection with women.

For Thornton, the working class embodies *failed* manhood, the loss of masculine power which is so tied up in socioeconomic power, from which he must dissociate himself. This association is never directly stated, but Thornton's history itself makes the connection. In the working-class men, Thornton sees the specter of his own father's dishonor and suicide, and this point is driven home for the reader and, eventually, for Thornton, in Boucher's suicide. Nicholas Higgins is often seen as Thornton's working-class double, and indeed their similarities invite this view, but this easy connection also shuts out a much more subtle and powerful double for Thornton: Boucher. Although Higgins and Thornton learn to cooperate by the novel's end, their relationship remains cautious, and its function is essentially to show the reader how much Thornton has allowed Margaret to change him for the better. Indeed, it is implied that this is exactly what Thornton has in mind when he hires Higgins— to show Margaret how he has taken her criticism to heart. He “dreaded the admission of any thought of her, as a motive to what he was doing solely because it was right,” but when he reprimands Higgins for not telling him it was Margaret who was the woman who sent Higgins to him, Higgins mocks *en pointe*, “And then, maybe yo'd ha' spoken of her more civil than yo' did; yo'd gotten a mother who might ha' kept yo'r tongue in check when yo' were talking o' women being at the root o' all the plagues” (NS 295, 296). Thornton remains suspicious of Higgins' union loyalties to the very end, warning him to leave his “brains” at home before coming to work “if [he] use[s] them for meddling with

[Thornton's] business" (*NS* 297). Notably, their similarities of character, demonstrated in the "manly" virtues of physical toughness, ingenuity, vigor, and intractability, fail to bring about Thornton's identification with the working class, perhaps because it is facilitated by a woman. The pseudo-friendship between Thornton and Higgins is both made possible and defined by these men's individual associations with Margaret. Thornton's connection to Boucher, however, is strictly between themselves and thus much more powerful in terms of Thornton's self-identification; they become mirror images during the riot.

In this climactic scene, which is the most violent playing-out of the class conflict in the novel, only men and boys make up the crowd, as we have seen. When Margaret challenges Thornton to face them, it is in terms of enfranchised manhood meeting disenfranchised manhood: "If you have any courage or noble quality in you, go out and speak to them, man to man" (*NS* 161). Gaskell directly contrasts (at first) the figure of oppressed, violent "manhood" with controlled, unyielding "manhood" in the figures of Boucher and Thornton, the former being the only individual man identified in the crowd, further solidifying his symbolic role:

[Margaret] knew how it was; they were like Boucher,—with starving children at home... Margaret knew it all; she read it in Boucher's face, forlornly desperate and livid with rage. If Mr. Thornton would but say something to them—let them hear his voice only—it seemed as if it would be better than this wild beating and raging against the stony silence that vouchsafed them no word, even of anger of reproach (*NS* 162).

Of course, this scene is the novel's ultimate expression of disempowered want meeting empowered privilege, but the fact that this meeting is colored in such *male* terms is highly significant yet critically overlooked. Thornton is meeting a reflection, or, rather, an extension of himself, his degraded and denied other, embodied by Boucher, when Margaret challenges him to

confront his workers “man to man.” But even when face to face with his other, Thornton refuses to acknowledge it, inciting the workers to violence.

Here is where Margaret throws herself into the fray. Scholars have seen this act as an assertion of women’s place in the public sphere, the assertion of the middle-class woman’s ennobled role as mediator, but I argue that something much more fundamental is also taking place. Certainly, the act is a subtextually sexual one. It has been read as the working class sexually violating middle-class womanhood, or, alternately, Thornton and Margaret’s sexual consummation, which is followed by Thornton’s honor-saving marriage proposal. It is not my intention to contest this interpretation, for, indeed, the scene *is* sexual and is correctly interpreted as such by the novel’s characters. It is crucial, however, to understand the minute dynamics of what occurs in order to see how the gender/class interplay in this moment reveals Thornton’s subjectivity as defined through *inclusion* of the working class rather than exclusion and denial of it. Rather than a private act between Thornton and Margaret thrust into the public eye, and rather than a rape perpetuated by the working class upon the middle-class woman, Thornton and the working class men join together, for one moment, in Margaret’s violation.

In meeting the rioting workers head-on, Thornton is meeting his own denied mirror image whose sameness with him is emphasized in their maleness and the fact that, heretofore, Thornton himself has referred to them as his “hands,” an extension of his own body. The powerful nature of Thornton’s hyper-masculine body, furthermore, does nothing if not denote *labor*; broad shoulders suggest ability to carry loads, massiveness suggests stamina and strength, and so forth. It is not merely that his body and the bodies of his workers are the same but that that sameness denotes class status: livelihood that must be earned via physical labor. Thornton is also responsible for goading the crowd by refusing when they ask him to send back his Irish

“knobsticks.” Thornton is, therefore, complicit in the crowd’s sexually-coded wounding of Margaret. In an instant, both Thornton and the crowd of men are brought to their senses by their shared gaze upon the woman’s body, their mutual acknowledgment of the sexual violation which has taken place by their “hands.” In a panic at the sight of Margaret’s wound, “absolutely trembl[ing]” at the sight of her blood which is the proof of his complicity and thus his sameness with his workers, Thornton verbally attempts to reassert his difference by accusing them with repeated injunctions of “you”: “You do well! ... You come to oust the innocent stranger. You fall—you hundreds—on one man; and when a woman comes before you, to ask you for your own sakes to be reasonable creatures, your cowardly wrath falls upon her! You do well!” (NS 165, 163) After the terrifying moment in which the boundary between himself and his workers has flickered and threatened to “fall,” Thornton once again reverts to his separating efforts which have been reinforced by the appearance of gender difference in Margaret. His sympathies cling to the female-gendered object, the safer object of empathy, while the workers retreat, a “retrograde movement” seemingly back into clear class delineations, but the moment’s revelation of connectedness is irreversible (NS 164).

Thornton’s repeated injunctions of “you” are merely the efforts of denial. He actually, ironically *maintains* his engagement with his workers, even while Margaret lies bleeding at his feet, the symbolic proof of what he wishes to deny: the very connection his fury preserves. “Now kill me, if that is your brutal will!” he says as he actually *leaves* Margaret on the doorstep and places himself “right into the middle of the crowd” of men (NS 163-164). “There is no woman to shield me here,” he continues, verbally removing Margaret from the confrontation. “You may beat me to death—you will never move me from what I have determined upon—not you!” (NS 164) His kneejerk rage, a manifestation of “masculine” chivalry and righteousness

and thus a reassertion of the gender he shares with his workers, prevents him from immediately tending to Margaret's injuries: "He could not sympathize with her. His anger had not abated; it was rather rising more as his sense of immediate danger was passing away" (NS 164).

Thornton's outrage at the workers' audacity, born out of his self-conception as the unquestioned master, hinders him from caring for Margaret, his true love.

In this moment, the reality of the situation overcomes Thornton's refusal to accept it. His very behavior gives him away. Earlier in the novel, in the famous "men and gentlemen" debate with Margaret, Thornton verbally maintains that a man is understood in terms of isolation, but then he is riled to prove his manhood to his workers during the riot scene. "Th' [thrown] stone were meant for thee," an unidentified worker cries out after Thornton's "you do well" speech, "but thou wert sheltered behind a woman!" This makes Thornton "[quiver] with rage" and compels him to leave Margaret and move into the crowd and call for their violence in order to prove his manhood, thus contradicting himself and *showing* that he knows that his identity is *not* understood in terms of isolation but rather through, at least partially, his connection with his employees (NS 163).

Although Gaskell shows this reality—that Thornton's identity is constituted not by situating himself as a master who is *not* a laborer—in this moment halfway through the novel, Thornton will not come to accept it until he acknowledges his connection with Boucher. Others have correctly identified Thornton's visit to the Higgins home as his transformative moment, though they have often misinterpreted the actual nature of the transformation. Critics tend either to deemphasize Margaret's role in bringing about this meeting or misidentify Thornton's motive for changing his mind about hiring Higgins. What is actually occurring here is a masterfully-orchestrated expansion of identification, based on inclusion and not binarily-organized exclusion,

on Thornton's part. His need to show Margaret how she has influenced him drives him to apologize to Higgins; the narrative makes it clear that this is his intention, *not* necessarily to hire Higgins, who, after all, has made a great deal of trouble from Thornton's point of view. The sight of the orphaned Boucher children does indeed change his mind, but not because it draws forth a repressed nurturing instinct (which already has been demonstrated by his care for the women in his life) nor because he recognizes Higgins's humanity in his self-sacrifice as surrogate father. Rather, in viewing the Boucher children, Thornton sees his own past. Out of the seven deaths described in the novel (counting Thornton's father's), only two are suicides. Boucher's suicide chillingly recalls Thornton's father's suicide, and both come about from the shame of their victims' inability to provide for their families, an essential component of nineteenth-century manhood. Thornton's acceptance of this relation between himself and the working class man, Boucher, transforms his viewpoint and expands his notion of self. Notably, although the impetus to visit Higgins comes from Margaret, in the tradition of female influence, the trigger for Thornton's expanded self-conception is defined by the social construction of manhood. In his inability to be a provider, the working-class man, personified in Boucher, continues to symbolize emasculation for Thornton, but the parallels between Boucher's fate and Thornton's father's allow Thornton to recognize himself in the scene before him, something he has not previously allowed himself to do. Boucher's only named child, a son, though younger than Thornton would have been at his father's death, is even called "Johnny" (NS 271).

Of course, it is quite telling that Thornton's transformation happens over the mutilated body of a workman. The same process that Johnson noted as the alliance between middle-class woman (Margaret) and working-class man (Nicholas Higgins), occurring "literally over the corpse of the factory girl," seems to take place over Boucher's body between Higgins and

Thornton, only in this instance the working-class corpse is male (*Hidden Hands* 39). This “grotesque body,” which “stands in opposition to the bourgeois individualist conception of the body” in its very grotesqueness and permeability via “openings and orifices,” decay and deterioration, emphasizes the self as “mobile, split, multiple” and prevents all those who gaze upon it from denying their own multiplicity (Stallybrass and White 22). Hotz points out that in *North and South* “the corpse [in general] draws a community of mourners from all ranks and provides an instance in which individuals may be transformed to act in the best interests of society” (168). Mike Sanders sees Boucher’s death as enacting “an ideological move from the real to the ideal” in that it supposedly “accuses a fellow workman rather than a master,” that worker being Nicholas Higgins, whose adoption of Boucher’s children, according to Sanders, amounts to an acceptance of responsibility for Boucher’s death (326). Therefore, Sanders argues, Gaskell’s aim is to remove blame from middle-class shoulders. But the several subtle but persistent links between Thornton and Boucher not only allow Thornton to identify at last with the working class but also, in that way, to accept some responsibility for its wellbeing—thus, his instigation of the whole-sale dining room at his mill and his interest in the Boucher children’s education (*NS* 309). Thornton is not present when Boucher’s mangled corpse is brought onto the stage, but the impression of the corpse is no less real for him.

It is interesting that in both cases the middle-class representative must witness the working-class corpse of his or her same gender in order to properly form his/her bond with the working class as a whole, represented by Higgins. Margaret, however, does not need to be taught to empathize with the working class. She merely needs to alter her activity in terms of a switch from the rural patron lady bountiful to the purportedly more-enlightened, urban charity visitor, as Dorice Williams Elliott has pointed out (25, 39), a transformation which clearly gives

with her shift toward inclusive place-based self-definition. Thus it makes sense that Bessy's death takes place nearer to the beginning of the novel, since it is not pivotal in changing the self-conception of one of the main characters as Boucher's is. As I have illustrated above, the heretofore unexplored gender dynamic operating between Thornton and his workers explains the extremely marginal role that working-class women play in *North and South* of which others have complained.²¹ Yet, the working-class woman is not completely erased by the end of *North and South*. Bessy's sister Mary is given an opportunity to flourish, with the unfortunate implication that this was impossible for her while her sister lived. Mary's role in the (somewhat) new order at Thornton's mill, significantly, is not as a factory worker but a cook in the wholesale dining room. In other words, Gaskell is careful that the factory workers, who are associated with the strike and the riot, remain exclusively masculine. This may be a fairly conservative move on Gaskell's part to relegate working-class women to more traditionally feminine work, but from a narrative standpoint it preserves the bridge of identification Thornton has allowed between himself and his workers.

Although "Thornton's development is an autonomous process, one in which he re-forms his own character" (Wainwright 8) by finally concluding his evolution by way of his acknowledgment of the connection he has with Boucher's orphaned children, he must first be inspired to visit the Higgins household; in other words, he must first be inspired *to* reform before he can do it, and this inspiration comes from Margaret. Rachel Ablow refers to the Victorian "social problem" novel as a tool whose objective was "to encourage sympathy," and this quality "was consistently identified as central to its effectiveness" (5). In a way, the novel could act as

²¹ Johnson first described this exclusion of the female working class as a "crucial flaw" in a concluding note to her article "*North and South*, a National Bildungsroman," in 1994, but did not attempt to account for it. Later, in her 2001 monograph, she laments that "as a part of the negotiation" in the novel, "the old image of the factory girl will die" (*Hidden Hands* 38).

the sympathetic agent that allowed the reader to enter into the thoughts and feelings of another. Ablow thus characterizes the novel's "job" as "an implicitly feminized set of responsibilities," since women themselves were often seen to act, like Margaret Hale does, as the intermediary agents between warring parties, particularly classes (5). Elliott considers the composition of this novel itself such an act of female social reorganization: "*North and South* represents the writing of a novel *as* a philanthropic act... Mediation, as conceived in *North and South*, involves using women to represent the potentially opposed interests or experiences of different groups to each other" (25, 39). If Margaret's function is essentially the function of *North and South* itself, then that leads to the tantalizing possibility that we, the readers, are Thornton's extra-textual double in that we are to be inspired to expand our identification with others as well.

This is the ultimate goal, then, behind Gaskell's structure of expanding the protagonists' individual, dichotomous conception of selfhood into one which is multifaceted and inclusive. The act of reading itself is an act of empathy, or, as Ablow deems it more appropriately for the time period, sympathy, which she defines as "the experience of entering into another's thoughts or feelings" (8). As readers, we are ready enough to sympathize with the characters to whose thoughts or feelings we are given access by the novel; what we may not be as ready to do is extend that willingness to others in real life. Our access to the protagonists' expanding processes of self-construction via a multitude of different axes—not simply in terms of one end of two opposing poles or the height upon a top-to-bottom value hierarchy—allows us, through our readerly sympathy, to conceive of and experience such a self-construction. Margaret's break away from the tenacious instinct to privilege her place of origin, Helstone, combined with the system of marketplace ethics her experiences in Milton allow her to form, the business savvy her London connections give her, the clarity afforded by her perceptions of Oxford and Spain, and

the liminal space for thought provided by Heston and Cromer, all enable her to coalesce into a successful and independent woman who is now free more wisely and capably to address the social injustices she sees. Furthermore, by experiencing Thornton's willingness to identify with others with whom he is accustomed to identify (women) transforming into a willingness to identify with others he has previously kept at a distance (workers) for fear of self-obliteration or the loss of his subjective boundaries and their power, Gaskell shows us that we can and must do the same. And rather than experience self-loss, as Thornton fears at first, we can see how Thornton is rewarded for his transformation by marriage to the woman he loves as well as success in business. His status as a man is reaffirmed through his paternal care toward the Boucher children *and* his employees and also his anticipated sexual relationship with Margaret. His status as a "master" is also reaffirmed with the reinstating of his mill.

It has not, therefore, been my intention to claim that Gaskell seeks to *erase* all boundaries of class, gender, etc. or to do away with difference or induce a kind of transformative anarchy, since, indeed, that would be counterproductive to the objective I have argued that Gaskell pursues in *North and South*. What Gaskell proposes is not a utopic dropping of boundaries and the free and chaotic intermingling of classes and genders without any difference whatsoever. Real differences exist; London is not Helstone, workers are not masters, and males are not females. Gaskell advocates a change of individual self-conception which leads to a more open, inclusive, and communal construction of self, one which isn't constructed via a system of binaries which will always fail to reflect reality accurately and whose purpose is only to hierarchize and oppress for personal gain at others' expense.

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