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Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*: Mediation
between "Master and Men" through the
intersecting axes of class and gender.

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1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) has regained importance in the sphere of Victorian literary studies. Gaskell's established position in the literary world today is due to a process of "restoration rather than a continuity of her reputation in her own day" (Matus 1). During the Victorian period, Elizabeth Gaskell was a popular and well-acclaimed author. Over a twenty-year period, she produced many works that reflected upon a variety of topics which were at the core of the Victorian period. During her prolific career, she wrote novels such as *Mary Barton* (1848), *Ruth* (1853) and *North and South* (1855); novellas, the most popular one being *Cranford* (1853), non-fiction, among which the biography *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) is included, and short stories. Her letters, containing her thoughts and worries on the pieces she was working on at the time, have also been published and give a new insight and dimension to the analysis of her life and works. Despite her successful career, after her death in 1865, and as often occurred with many women writers of the time, her popularity decreased and her novels were relegated to a lower status compared to other Victorian male authors, namely Charles Dickens. However, Gaskell's reputation was re-established in the 1930s when Lord David Cecil in his book *Victorian Novelists* (1934), saw her as a quintessential Victorian female writer: "she was all a woman was expected to be; gentle, domestic, tactful, unintellectual, prone to tears, easily shocked" (Cecil 197-8). Although it is true that Elizabeth Gaskell dealt with recurrent Victorian themes, it is not possible to pigeonhole her works as pertaining only to the sphere of female Victorian fiction. Besides, Gaskell was an intelligent and strong-minded woman raised in a Unitarian background, which provided her with humanitarian values and the ability to write about a variety of topics from multiple perspectives.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, Marxist and sociological criticism have analyzed Gaskell's views on the working-class life of the North of England and her solutions to class differences — regarded as personal rather than systematic (Matus 2). Therefore, literary criticism on her works has been dominated by two ideologies: those who see her as a respectable Victorian writer dealing with prototypical Victorian themes, and those who extract a Marxist reading out of her “industrial novels.” Recently, new interpretations on Gaskell's works have been observed in the field of feminism (Stoneman 1987, 2007). Previous to this, her works were seen as irrelevant and not as promising for feminist criticism compared to the works of Charlotte Brontë or George Elliot, for example. However, Gaskell was not as conservative as first impressions may suggest, as she questioned, among other themes, domestic ideology, gender relationships and traditional family structures. On the whole, she has been criticized for studying many disparate topics and not reaching a unified conclusion in her works but “her apparently inconsistent attitudes reveal, on closer inspection, a grasp of the complexities of any situation rather than confusion about the issues involved” (Matus 8).

North and South (1855) is one of those works considered to cover many subject matters without much intricacy. Dickens, as the editor of “Household Words”, where the novel was published in serial form, thought *North and South* to be annoyingly diffuse and exhausting (Flint 36). This sensation of unconnected ideas may be because Gaskell found the serial form restrictive, as she mentioned in one of her letters: “if the story had been poured just warm out of the mind, it would have taken a much larger mould” (qtd. in Flint 36). Gaskell's struggle to mold all her ideas into the confined serial form is noticeable at the end of the novel, as Rosemarie Bondenheimer states: “[If] *North and South* ends with too much haste and inattention, it is perhaps because its

author had dared to venture so much that did not lend itself to the demands of resolution in the conventions of serialized fiction” (Bondenheimer 301). Being one of Gaskell’s main works, it is no surprise that *North and South* comprises the main themes of analysis mentioned above. Firstly, the novel contains a quintessential Victorian love story between the protagonists, Margaret Hale and John Thornton. Secondly, it explores the condition of the working-classes and the relationship between classes which was a topic thoroughly studied by Marxist criticism. Lastly, Margaret, alongside other female characters, the different family structures and a representation of domestic life, offers a strongly visible gender perspective. In this book, class and gender axes intersect rather than coincide (Stoneman *Gender* 119).

Therefore, the main aim of this essay is to analyze how the relationship between Nicholas Higgins, the leading figure among the working-class men and John Thornton, the owner of a factory in Milton, evolves from disagreement to a harmonious collaboration. For such a purpose, the analysis of the interdependence of proletarians and masters will be framed within some of the most relevant theorists of the 19th century; that is, Frederick Engels’s *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844* (1845). Furthermore, the heroine plays a key role in unifying both men: Margaret acts as a mediator between Higgins and Thornton, every problem that rises between both men is resolved through Margaret’s intervention. Thus, an analysis of the heroine can be carried out from a gender viewpoint. At first sight, the feelings, social class and behaviour that shape her character make Margaret come across as the perfect embodiment of the Victorian woman. However, she also has an independent, strong-willed and brave side to her. Margaret’s character is in a process of uninterrupted development throughout the plot and contributes enormously to both the resolution of the novel and making her an interesting subject of analysis. Hence, this dissertation will

also highlight her role as an active and emphatic mediator, handling the misunderstandings between both men and drawing the line that joins the worker and the master.

2. “Masters and Men”: the condition of the working-class in England.

As Henry points out, “the nineteenth-century social transformation known as ‘industrialization’ raised questions about what constituted progress” (157). The positive side to industrialization was that technology improved. Consequently, productivity increased, new markets appeared to sell the goods and many people grew rich. However, the working-class had to deal with the most damaging effects of industrialization. With the introduction of machinery, workers saw how their labour was eclipsed by this new and more effective equipment which led to their loss of jobs. During the first decades of the nineteenth-century, the Luddite movement, one of the workers’ answers to this threat, promoted the destruction of all equipment that eliminated their jobs. Luddites were not against the advancement of technology but protested against machinery taking up the basic jobs that workers had dedicated time to learning the skills. On the other hand, Thomas Carlyle, a Scottish writer and essayist who was concerned with the so-called “Condition of England”, wrote an essay titled “Signs of the Times” (1829) in which he stated that the “Mechanical Age” or the “Age of Machinery” (34) is a threat both *external* and *physical* because it is leaving the working-class jobless and increasing the wealth distance between the rich and the poor; and *internal* and *spiritual* because even the ideology of the time has been mechanized or, in other words, everything had to be explained rationally.

After the Luddite movement came to an end with the intervention of the military forces, the Chartist movement appeared in the 1830s pursuing parliamentary

representation for workers. Its name derives from the People's Charter, which contained six points, the most important of which was universal suffrage for every man of age. As Engels points out, the original ethos of this movement was that "it is the whole working class which arises against the bourgeoisie, and attacks, first of all the political power, the legislative rampart with which the bourgeoisie has surrounded itself" (Engels 188). Despite their initial plans, the Chartist movements did not succeed. Remarkably, "the repeated failures of national petitions, mass demonstrations and general conventions" (Eptein 77), together with the separation of the elemental components fundamental to Chartism and Britain's social and economic changes in the mid 1840s, weakened the political movement. Nonetheless, Chartism did succeed in raising the social awareness of the industrial classes. Thomas Carlyle, in his essay "Chartism" (1840) expressed his sympathy for the working-class and urged for a much-needed political reform. It was in this essay that he first exposed the "Condition of England Question", which "significantly contributed to the emergence of a series of debates about the spiritual and material foundations of England and had a great effect on a number of writers of fiction in the Victorian period and after" (qtd. in Diniejko n.p.). These authors, which include Disraeli, Dickens and Gaskell among others, wrote many novels belonging to the subgenre of "industrial fiction", and meaningfully focus on Disraeli's "two nations" theme, the wide gap dividing the rich and the poor.

Elizabeth Gaskell wrote two major "industrial" novels: *Mary Barton* was her first and was criticized for representing "but one side of the question" and neglecting the other (qtd. in Flint 37). As Flint includes in her book, W.R. Greg, a good friend of the writer, suggested that the masters "do suffer, and suffer most painfully" (37). Therefore, *North and South* can be interpreted as "a true and earnest representation" of the masters' perspective (37). However, Stoneman believes that the reason why *North*

and South focuses on masters is because Elizabeth Gaskell “has recognized the workers’ impotence to control the terms of the class struggle” and that they have no other option “but to adopt the aggressive, confrontational position forced on them by the dominant class” (Stoneman *Gaskell* 126). Although the novel does revolve around the figure of Thornton, in several occasions, attention is paid to Nicholas Higgins. This creates a tension between both characters that mirrors the strain between the dominant class and the powerless industrial class.

In order to understand this conflict, it will be useful to take *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844* as a basis for my analysis. Thus, unquestionably, *North and South* is a good example of Disraeli’s concept of the two nations: Gaskell offers a view of the differences between the South and North of England but also, within the North, the differences between the working class and mill owners or, as Gaskell puts it, the differences between “masters and men” (109). In the introduction of his book about the English working-class, Frederick Engels expresses almost an idealized vision of the worker before the introduction of machinery:

True, he was a bad farmer and managed his land inefficiently, often obtaining but poor crops; nevertheless, he was no proletarian, he had a stake in the country, he was permanently settled, and stood one step higher than the English workman of to-day. (14)

This peaceful life soon began to change with the introduction of the spinning jenny, an invention that facilitated the production of yarn. With the demand of woven goods increasing, more weavers were needed. Consequently, the weavers’ wages increased and gradually, the workers left farming and dedicated their whole time to weaving. When the industrial workers withdrew from agriculture, a large area of land became unexploited where large tenants established themselves and began farming on a large

scale. From this moment on, the industrial revolution made workers into machines “taking from them the last trace of independent activity” (Engels 16). In accordance with this idea, Carlyle regarded the “Age of Machinery” as a threat to the workers’ freedom, since it made them more enslaved than “their counterparts had been and the mechanization of society threatened the human ability to think and act creatively” (Diniejkó n.p.).

As the 19th century advanced, the production of goods and population became centralized creating bigger cities and towns. Most of *North and South*’s action takes place in one of these big towns. Although the book begins in the beautiful and picturesque countryside of the South of England, the action soon moves to Milton-Northern — a fictitious name given to Manchester. The atmosphere of the North is set in the chapter “New Scenes and Faces”, in contrast to the Southern landscape, “its colours looked greyer —more enduring, not so gay and pretty” (Gaskell 57). The landscape becomes more industrial; the fragrances, the pollution and the materials become harsher, uninviting and charmless: the air is described as tasting and smelling of smoke (58), and “for several miles before they reached Milton, they saw a deep lead-coloured cloud hanging over the horizon” (58). In *The Condition of the Working Class*, Engels pays special attention to the description of life in Manchester, the biggest, most industrial city of the North. He states that Manchester is constructed in such a way that “the working-people’s quarters are sharply separated from the sections of the city reserved for the middle-class” (49). The workers’ “long, straight, hopeless streets of regularly-built houses, all small and of brick” (58) are tiny, badly built and set in the worst conditions, surrounded by dirt and polluted air by the neighbouring factories. In Gaskell’s novel, the factory is presented as “a hen among her chickens, puffing out black ‘unparliamentary’ smoke” (Gaskell 58).

As has been mentioned, the center of the great towns was almost exclusively inhabited by workers, as the bourgeois prefers to live in the suburbs to remain at a distance from the working class. However, Thornton, the mill owner in the novel, seems to be one of the few bourgeois that live on a busy street next to his mill, surrounded by workers' residences. Margaret does not understand why Thornton lives in this area and she wonders why Thornton "did not prefer a much smaller dwelling in the country, or even some suburb; not in the continental whirl and din of the factory" (110). Critics argue that *North and South's* point of view remains chiefly that of the middle-class mill owner in order to clear the bias workers' perspective in *Mary Barton*. Thus, the author may set Thornton's house in the middle of the town to bring to the fore the idea that he is a new type of master. Thornton still defends the social transformation taking place under capitalist ideology but offers a compassionate and humanitarian side, willing to improve the condition of the working-class. As he states in chapter ten, "Wrought Iron and Gold", manufacturers at the beginning of the century, such as Sir Richard Arkwright, a well-known manufacturer, had unlimited power and were lacking in humanitarian values. Thornton uses the proverb "set a beggar on horseback, and he'll ride to the devil," (82) to describe these masters of the past who crushed "human bone and flesh under their horses' hoofs without remorse" (82).

John Thornton is portrayed in a rather more positive light than his previous counterparts. To begin with, the description the heterodiegetic narrator gives of him finds Thornton as an idealized, and almost mysterious character:

The lines in his face were few but firm, as if they were carved in marble, and lay principally about the lips, which were slightly compressed over a set of teeth so faultless and beautiful as to give the effect of sudden sunlight when the rare bright smile, coming in an instant and shining out of the eyes, changed the whole look from the severe and resolved expression of a man ready to do and dare everything. (79)

This romantic description, comparing Thornton to rough and beautiful natural elements, is useful to introduce the romantic plot of the novel but it also manifests the master's power and authority. Authority, in *North and South*, is questioned and "perceived as stifling intelligence in workers, soldiers and subjects to the law" (Stoneman *Gaskell* 124). In chapter 15, "Masters and Men", Margaret suggests that masters prefer their "hands to be merely tall, large children — living in the present moment — with a blind unreasoning kind of obedience" (Gaskell 118). Thornton agrees with this statement as he considers "our people in the condition of children" and maintains that "despotism is the best kind of government for them; so that in the hours in which I come in contact with them I must necessarily be an autocrat" (119). This despotism that Thornton mentions can be linked to Engels' vision of the factory owners. In the chapter titled "Competition", Thornton argues that the factory owners have "gained a monopoly of all means of existence in the broadest sense of the word. What the proletariat needs, he can obtain only from this bourgeoisie" (73). According to Engels, workers either accept the wage that is offered to them or starve and freeze to death (Engels 73). Therefore, workers are dependent on their masters just as children are dependent on their parents. Nonetheless, Mr. Hale suggests that "a wise parent humours the desire of independent action" for his children (Gaskell 119). Thornton, though, believes that "the time is not for the hands should have any independent action during business hours" (120) and that he does not have the duty to "impose leading-strings upon them" (120) when their working shift comes to an end. Margaret disagrees with Thornton, she believes that he is responsible for the life of the workers outside the mill, not because of the "labour and capital positions" but because he is a man with great power over other men and "because your lives and your welfare are so constantly and intimately interwoven" (121).

At this point, Thornton's view on the labouring world is somewhat misleading. First, he presents himself as a master that is interested in humanitarian values and concerned with the welfare of his workers. In theory, he believes that the power between masters and men is more evenly balanced (82) and that workers and owners interests are identical (118). In practice, he states that despotism is the best way to control the working-people, leaving the unity of interest between masters and men for a utopian time. Thus, the reader is confused with Thornton's ambiguous ideology just as Margaret is when she is "trying to reconcile your admiration [Thornton's] of despotism with [his] respect for other men's independence of character" (122). Margaret, though questioning Thornton's ideas, enlightens him to embark on a process of transformation. In addition, and arguably the most important step for his transformation, he is to come into direct, verbal contact with the working-people, doing away with individualities and putting the "utopian" mutual interest of both sides into practice. John Thornton is the agent that triggers the merging of the master and working-people's interests because he has the authority and commanding position to do so. However, the working-class is surely willing to contribute to this shared welfare but, before the agreement is reached between both sides, they show some opposition to seek for respect and dignity.

The event that possibly plays the greatest part in unifying both sides is the strike. In chapter 15, it is through the conversation about strikes that the first connection between Thornton and the leader of a trade union, Nicholas Higgins, takes place. Nicholas Higgins is the character that represents the working-class and together with Thornton, both will embody the reconciliation between master and men. The first impression Margaret has of Higgins is that of a poorly-dressed, careworn worker, but despite these appearances he is a kind-hearted and very intelligent working-class man. Usually, the working-class community is endowed with typically feminine traits: they

are caring for their community and function as an extended family. Higgins “is a sensitive, articulate, and deeply conscientious figure, whose primary motivation is a concern for the starving families that surround him” (Shuttleworth xviii). He is caring, he is a widower that looks after Bessy, his dying daughter, and he also takes full responsibility for Boucher’s family, after he commits suicide. It is these traits that make Margaret sympathize with the working-class, since they have similar concerns. Moreover, working-class men are frequently pictured as being vulnerable to strong feelings, but it is in fact Nicholas Higgins who is “ashamed of his suffering” (Gaskell 122) and “shakes off the emotions after Bessy’s death” (Matus 37).

This blend of a caring nature and an iron-willed personality, make him lead the working-class to aspire for better working conditions. As mentioned before, authority is challenged in the novel and so is exposed the “fallible nature of authority” (Stoneman *Gaskell* 123). If Thornton embodies the power of trade and law when he helps Margaret’s brother escape a police investigation, Higgins stands for the authority of trade unions. As Engels put it:

In all branches of industry Trades Unions were formed with the outspoken intention of protecting the single working-man against the tyranny and neglect of the bourgeoisie. Their objects were to deal, en masse, as a power, with the employers; to regulate the rate of wages according to the profit of the latter, to raise it when opportunity offered, and to keep it uniform in each trade throughout the country. (178)

According to Engels, the Trade Unions fought against the oppressive measures imposed by the masters. In accordance to this idea, Higgins regards the confrontation to the despotism of the masters the main purpose of the Unions. He believes that organized and non-violent strikes are a necessity to the “withstanding of injustice, past, present, or

to come” (Gaskell 228). Despite his ideals, the strike turns violent when Boucher and a group of workers riot against Thornton’s house. On the one hand, this violence can be motivated by Higgins’ metaphorical words in the chapter titled “Comfort in Sorrow,” when he talks about the conflict between workers and owners being “like war; along with it comes crimes, but I think it were a greater crime to let it alone” (228). On the other hand, in relation to Gaskell’s challenging of authority throughout the novel, Boucher’s rebellious action could have been triggered by the oppressive forms of the Union. Boucher cannot afford to strike because the wages offered by the masters are very low and he needs the money to maintain his family. He is treated as a *knobstick*, a worker who does not strike, and that “are usually threatened, insulted, beaten, or otherwise maltreated by the members of the Union; intimidated, in short, in every way” (Engels 179). Higgins is aware of these oppressive actions, as he explains the “ways and means” of the Union to Margaret, but maintains that they are necessary to preserve decent wages. She is horrified by Higgins’ words and states that she has never read “of a more slow, lingering torture than this [...] And you talk about the tyranny of the masters!” (Gaskell 228).

3. “Making Friends”: Margaret Hale’s mediation through class and gender.

After the analysis of Thornton and Higgins, there appears to be no viable solution to the discrepancies between both characters. The ideas they defend are in complete opposition: Thornton believes in autocratic leadership and Higgins considers striking and trade unionism to be the answer to fighting tyrannical manufacturers. As Ben Moore expresses, “Engels’s aim was to produce a work that formed the foundations for future socialist theories. Therefore, any type of sentiment was rejected and focused primarily on official data to analyze the condition of the working-class” (6). By

contrast, Elizabeth Gaskell offers a very personal approach to class relationships. For this reason, Thornton and Higgins's relationship starts to flourish through personal experiences with different characters that make them dwell on their theoretical views (Bodenheimer 291). Margaret is obviously the most important character in this coming together of master and man, and her role as mediator stands of utmost importance for the outcome of the novel. It is mainly through her communication, questioning and advice that these characters take a step towards improving the relationship between employer and employee. In the chapter "Union not Always Strength", we learn that Higgins has been blacklisted from the factories because of his leading role in the Trade Union organizing strikes and supporting the workers' rights. Although Higgins still defends the importance of the Union since "it's the only thing to do the workman any good" (Gaskell 286), his main concern now is he "dunnot see where I'm to get a shilling." (286). Later on, Margaret suggests that he should ask Thornton to hire him in his mill. Despite initial reluctance, – "it would tax my pride above a bit" (301) –, he decides to speak to Thornton.

From this moment on, Thornton understands Higgins's compassionate, generous nature and begins to take into consideration the conditions of the workmen. The meeting between Thornton and Higgins can be seen as each side acknowledging, coming to understand "the differing, yet equally valid perspective of the other" (Flint 43). Finally, in chapter 42 "Alone!, Alone!", Thornton invites his workers to eat with him in his factory and, as Bodenheimer states, this invitation "is a symbol of his willingness to obliterate his earlier distinction between the men's lives as workers and as human beings" (292). According to Thornton, there is "nothing like the act of eating for equalizing men [...] all eat after the same fashion" (Gaskell 355).

Unlike Charlotte Brontë or George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell is not considered to be a proto-feminist, but she is concerned with gender issues which are central to the social environment of her novels. In *North and South*, Margaret is “forced by circumstances to take responsibilities not only for [herself] but also for the lives of others” (Stoneman *Gender* 145). Thornton, through personal contact, becomes conscious of the generous hearts and necessities of the working-class. When he sees Higgins, who has decided to adopt and look after Boucher’s children, Thornton says: “I could not have taken care of another man’s children myself, if he had acted towards me as I hear Boucher did towards you. But I know now that you spoke the truth” (Gaskell 319). This scene motivates the mill owner to regard the workers in a more humane way: as independent, generous, and responsible people.

Significantly, Margaret plays a vital role in this *rapprochement* as the linkage between master and men, which “needs the intervention of a woman who, belonging to a class which aligns her with neither masters nor men, could urge their contact from a position which was simply ‘feminine’” (Stoneman *Gender* 138). It is this class misalignment together with her particular “feminine” role that place Margaret in the perfect position to achieve the reconciliation of Thornton and Higgins. Margaret is a woman educated in the sphere of the Victorian middle-upper class; therefore, she embodies typical Victorian values: she is graceful, devout, sympathetic and pure. Essentially, Margaret is, “the Angel in the House.”¹ Throughout the novel, Margaret offers her care to many characters that surround her. When Mrs. Hale falls ill, Margaret is in charge of the household and serves as a nurse to her mother. Her dedication to

¹ “The Angel in the House” (1854) was a poem written by Coventry Patmore. The title has become the epitome of female Victorian values. As Patmore put it: “She leans and weeps against his breast, / And seems to think the sin was hers; / Or any eye to see her charms, / At any time, she’s still his wife, / Dearly devoted to his arms; / She loves with love that cannot tire; / And when, ah woe, she loves alone, / Through passionate duty love springs higher, / As grass grows taller round a stone.”

others is clearly exemplified with Bessy Higgins, Nicholas Higgins's daughter. Margaret and Bessy are the same age but because of their upbringing in different environments, their lives have become polar opposite. Bessy represents the innocent child who has suffered from the dreadful working conditions in the north. She is dying from the "fluff" that flies off the spinning jennies and that is "filling my lungs, until I thirst to death for one long deep breath o'clear air yo' speak on" (Gaskell 100). With the creation of Bessy's character, Gaskell examines and exposes the suffering and illnesses of the female workers who, more often than not, were exposed to such toxic substance in their handling of spinning jennies. More importantly, Margaret and Bessy's friendship enhances the different mentalities between North and South.

The settings in the novel serve as a reflection of the characters' feelings. Hence, Helstone "serves as an extension of [Margaret's] nature [...] Helstone represents the south of England, the place where Margaret was educated with the Victorian morale" (Craik 114). The South is presented as a place where the most highly regarded values are found. Margaret believes, through the education that she has received, that individuals in the South are above the people in the North. The South is still idealized, it is romantically presented as beautiful and picturesque: "Oh, Bessy, I loved the home we have left so dearly! I wish you could see it. I cannot tell you half its beauty. There are great trees standing all about it, with their branches stretching long and level, and making a deep shade of rest even at noonday" (Gaskell 199). However, when Margaret begins to build a strong relationship with northerners, her vision of Helston changes. It is no longer idealized as she becomes aware of the values Milton inhabitants embody. Particularly, after talking to Nicholas and Bessy Higgins, "from that day on Milton became a brighter place for her. It was not the long, bleak sunny days of spring, nor yet was it that time was reconciling her to the town of her habitation. It was that in it she

had found a human interest” (73). Milton is “the catalyst for the working-out of the personal and spiritual progress of Margaret” (Craik 116). Under this lens, the novel can be interpreted as a *bildungsroman*, as the growth of Margaret into womanhood. Nevertheless, Margaret’s development is not from immaturity to maturity as she is presented from the very beginning as a strong character. Nonetheless, it is in Milton where major events occur that mark a large change in her character and Margaret has to respond to unfortunate events such as the death of her parents and Bessy. Previous to these events, she had already shown personality in Helston when Henry Lennox intends to marry her and she refuses to do so. Yet, the tragic episodes in Milton require a further strengthening in her character. She shows honesty and braveness, she is responsible, straight-looking and straight-speaking, all of which prepares Margaret to challenge Thornton and Higgins from the axis of gender and to encourage communication between master and men (Stoneman *Gaskell* 126-128).

While it has been argued that Margaret has quintessential Victorian values, she also shows great character and strength in delicate situations. These sets of values can be associated with what is known as the “separate spheres” for men and women. John Stuart Mill, in *The Subjection of Women* (1865) stated that:

All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal character is very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others. All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of them-selves, and to have no life but in their affections. (9)

In this essay from 1865, Mill thought that the social relations between men and women, the division into “public” and “private” spheres respectively, ought to be replaced “by a principle of perfect equality” (Mill 1). Sarah Lewis, in her 1839 work *Woman’s*

Mission, argues that the “woman’s mission” is at home where mothers instill in their children values of “mutual respect, responsibility and compassion before they pass beyond their mothers’ influence into the public world” (qtd. in Stoneman *Gender* 131). Elizabeth Gaskell formed her own opinion on the role of women based on the many debates and positions that appeared during her lifetime and, accordingly, aligned Margaret with an unusual combination of female and male traits. In the Victorian era, women had little freedom in the public realm since their world was confined to social and cultural deprivation.

However, the private sphere for Elizabeth Gaskell, as a Unitarian, had a different importance. As Carol Lansbury wrote, “to be born a woman and a Unitarian was to be released from much of the prejudice and oppression enjoined upon other women” (qtd. in Stoneman *Gender* 134). Unitarians firmly believed in a good education for men as well as for women. Thus, the private sphere and the role of mothers were of great importance because the household is the area where children are shaped into social beings (Stoneman *Gender* 134). In *North and South*, we have access to several private spheres: the Thorntons, the Higgins and the Hales are the most important households. Mrs Thornton is very fond and supportive of her son though she is strict and serious towards other characters. Nevertheless, she shows dedication and generosity when Mrs. Hale, on her death bed, asks her to look after Margaret: “I will be a true friend if circumstances require it [...] It is not in my nature to show affection even where I feel it, nor do I volunteer advice in general. Still, at your request [...] I will promise you” (Gaskell 236). The distinctive feature in the Higgins household, a working-class family, is that there is no mother figure. Nicholas Higgins and the working-class men in Gaskell’s industrial novels are depicted as emotional, maternal and nurturing, feminizing men “who work together with their womenfolk rather than seeing the care of

children as a “separate sphere” (Stoneman *Gender* 138). Higgins, therefore, personifies the compassionate and generous values of the working class and assumes the responsibility of the mother role. In the Hales, Mrs. Hale is not a strong character. She does care for her family but due to her delicate health, she does not seem to interact much with Margaret. At Helstone, Mr. Hale is more involved with Margaret’s education than Mrs. Hale is. The move to Milton and Mrs. Hale’s docility and weak health forces Margaret to step up as the active agent of the private sphere to control the upheavals in her family. Besides, it also grants her the opportunity to become more independent and interact with new faces in the public sphere. As we have seen, it is precisely Margaret’s active participation in the public sphere, reconciling Thornton and Higgins that endows her character with a distinct aura of challenge and bravery.

In the analysis of the society of her time, Gaskell maintained that boys and girls were inclined to different faults due to different educations: “boys have too much freedom, which leads to errors of judgment, aggression, and selfishness, while girls have too much protection, leading to ignorance, timidity, and abrogation of responsibility” (Stoneman *Gender* 140). In *North and South*, Gaskell intends to minimize these differences by manifesting traits of both sexes on the heroine. Margaret becomes more mature and independent in the North but also has significant responsibility for the union of Thornton and Higgins. And so, the heroine entrance to the public sphere conveys an abrupt twist to the calm flow of events. In chapter 22, “A Blow and its Consequences,” Thornton decides to come out of to speak to the riots that are surrounding his house. In a moment of angst, Margaret “risks social opprobrium by appearing in public in response to complex motivations which includes a desire to protect the man she is coming to love, and a desire to prevent the workers from committing violence they will regret” (Stoneman *Gender* 138-139). Thornton believes

that “this is no place” (Gaskell 176) for Margaret but, unlike “the women gathered round the windows, fascinated to look on the scene which terrified them” (172) she defies him and “a sharp pebble flew by her, grazing forehead and cheek [...]. She lay like one dead on Mr. Thornton’s shoulder” (177). Margaret’s irruption into the violent site can be useful to encapsulate her behaviour and deeds as protective not only towards her family and friends but also towards her acquaintances. Her impulsive and daring character allows the reader to conceive her as an ambivalent heroine who reconciles not only the relationship between master and worker but also blurs the traditional private and public spheres through which gender differences have been traditionally more adverse and visible in Victorian society.

4. Conclusion.

Arguably, *North and South* has been seen by some critics as a diffused and unconnected literary work. However, Elizabeth Gaskell’s novel is considered to be her first major narrative. As I have pointed out before, the weaknesses in the structure of the novel are only a sign of the author’s ambition to write a novel which encompasses much more than her previous works: “a wider range of action and more conflicting and varied themes, deeper emotions, and more subtle and mature characterization” (Craik 138). It is in this sense of openness and transformation that my dissertation has illustrated both the social upheavals of the times and Margaret’s role as an active participant in the resolution of the events. The novel not only focuses on the love story between Margaret and Thornton but, as an “industrial novel”, it explores the realm and conflicts of the working class, the conditions they lived in and the tensions between workers and masters. The role of Margaret is also of great importance for the flow of the novel. Through her character, Gaskell brings together the private and public sphere, which

were regarded as irreconcilable in the Victorian period. Nicholas Higgins and John Thornton's final bonding occurs as a result of Margaret's role as mediator and her urge for communication between both men. It is the experience and education that she receives in the private sphere that constructs the heroine as a social being able to enter, albeit in a rather abrupt way, and engage in the public sphere to mediate in Milton's disturbing class conflict events. Elizabeth Gaskell's greatest achievement in *North and South* is the acute description of the social atmosphere of the time. She provides each character, whether protagonists or minor ones, with a clearly defined personality and with deeper emotions. Thus, the reader is inevitably immersed in the social conflict and in the narrative plot as a whole. *North and South* is an exceptional example of how Elizabeth Gaskell's works are based on her own interpretations and reflections on the main topics of debate during her lifetime. As a result, the novel becomes a complex site for analysis and thought, gifting the readers with the opportunity and challenge to reach their own conclusions, in the same way as Gaskell did.

5. Works Cited

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