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**The Question of Obedience and Rebellion in
Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South***

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Abstract

The concept of obedience and, subsequently, of disobedience has been a common attraction for the human being throughout the centuries. Whereas the first concept has been always related to order and progress, the latter has been usually associated to chaos. Yet, without rebellion, the world we live in nowadays would not exist. In the Victorian Period, this topic was not at all ignored: writers, painters, philosophers and politicians worked on such a human matter, attracted by all the questions and contradictions it posed. In this paper, I will focus on how Elizabeth Gaskell explores the politics of obedience and disobedience in *North and South* (1855), one of her best known works, in terms of gender and class. To do this, the novel's historical context regarding women, the working class and also her religion, which is basic in order to understand her writing, will be taken very much into account as well.

Keywords: Victorian Period, Gaskell, obedience, gender, class

Resum

El concepte d'obediència i, conseqüentment, de desobediència ha estat sovint una atracció pel ser humà a través dels segles. Mentre que el primer concepte sempre ha estat relacionat amb l'ordre i el progrés, l'últim s'ha associat més aviat amb el caos. D'altra banda, sense rebel·lió, el món que coneixem avui no existiria. Durant l'època victoriana, aquest tema tampoc no va ser passat per alt: pintors, escriptors, filòsofs i polítics van examinar aquest afer tant humà, atrets per totes les preguntes i contradiccions que ofereix. En aquest treball, el principal objectiu és veure com l'Elizabeth Gaskell explora la qüestió de l'obediència i desobediència en una de les seves novel·les més reconegudes, *North and South* (1855), especialment en termes de gènere i classe. Per fer-ho, el context històric de la novel·la pel que fa a la situació de les dones, la classe treballadora i la religió de la mateixa Gaskell, bàsica per entendre la seva producció literària, també es tindran en compte.

Paraules clau: Època victoriana, Gaskell, obediència, gènere, classe

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1. INTRODUCTION

Should you ever look for the definition of “obedience” in the dictionary, this would be one of the possible results: “Compliance with an order or law or submission to another’s authority.”¹ It is understood, so, that obedience relies on the capacity of people to set aside their own ideas, judgements and conscience for the sake of order, progress and civility. This idea of obedience was very much so in the Victorian Period, an era in which progress and order were the ultimate goals for the highest strata in the social hierarchy of the time: the high and middle class. Nevertheless, the budding of the concept of the Self and of individuality took place at the same time as well, thanks to, for example, the popularisation of liberalism, industrialization or the rationalism left from the last century. This inspection of one’s own persona and role in society could have conveyed the disagreement with the general way of thinking in various aspects – religion, gender issues, politics, philosophy–, thus it could lead to rebellion. For that, it could be said that obedience and rebellion are the two sides of the same coin: if you are obedient, you cannot be rebellious and vice versa. This duality has dominated human life since the beginning of time: there have always been figures of authority, institutions, ideas to be blindly obedient to as well as people who have decided not to comply with the imposed rules, laws, orders or believes. And that is, indeed, what has made the world advance: rebellion to obedience, not obedience itself.

Writers, painters, philosophers, theologians and politicians, to make a short list, have been interested in this never-ending struggle between compliance and disobedience for centuries; Victorians were no exception and so was not Elizabeth Gaskell. Elizabeth Cleghorn was born in 1810 in Chelsea, even though she spent most of her life in Manchester due to her marriage to William Gaskell, a Unitarian minister². Her works –*Mary Barton* (1848), *Ruth* (1853), *North and South* (1855) and *Wives and Daughters* (1866) among others– have been categorised as “social novels” because they focus on the blooming of industrialization that took place during her time in England and the consequences this life-changing event had on English people. I could not agree more; yet, they are much more than that. She described society as a whole, its lacks and

¹ Obedience. (1911). In *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (12th Edition). New York: Oxford University Press

² Christ, Carol T. & Robson, Catherine (Eds.) (2012) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Vol. E. The Victorian Age* (9th Edition). (Stephen Greenblatt, General Ed.) New York: W. W. Norton & Company. (Original version published in 1962)

its virtues, specially looking at the role women were supposed to have in Victorian England and what happened when this was not so; in a way, she posed a veiled, subtle critique towards the society she was part of through her characters. Also, she was utterly interested in the working class and its part in Victorian society; she explored, or wanted to explore, the worker's feelings and motives to unionise, for instance, even though she was from the middle class.

North and South is a great example of Gaskell's ability to describe English industrial society faithfully as well as challenging the established Victorian social conventions at the same time by presenting characters that will disobey the rules society imposes them. Even though most of the times this disruption ends up in nothing, the mere fact that they do try to challenge the oppressive roles they are been put in just because of gender or social class is remarkable enough. *North and South* indeed explores the question of obedience in the 19th century England as much as it depicts the possible consequences of rebelling against the system and the social repressive means Victorian society held against the ones who did.

2. CLASS, GENDER AND RELIGION: A CONTEXT FOR *NORTH AND SOUTH*

North and South was published in 1855, right in the heart of the Victorian Era, a period in which the British way of life changed inexorably and a new set of values became predominant among English society; values that can even be tracked down to present day British culture.

The Victorian Era starts in 1837, when Victoria becomes Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and finished in 1901, when the monarch died. This period of time in English history will become one of the most important for this country's national development: it represented the establishment of the United Kingdom as one of the greatest super powers in the Western world mainly due to the Industrial Revolution and, by extension, the process of industrialization the country went through, and the expansion of the British Empire. Victorian society experimented a constant transformation: throughout these years, the United Kingdom went through a process of progress and economic growth never seen before. Furthermore, thanks to the increase in population, the newly discovered technological advances and the appearance of the bourgeoisie and the working class due to industrialization –to state some key facts that can illustrate the kind of change England underwent– this meant that a series of new challenges were posed affecting from class mobility to the women question, passing

through education, the relationship between the different social classes, or the expansion of the Empire, to name but a few.

In this case, as this essay will focus on how the politics of obedience work in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* in terms of gender and class, it is necessary to dive into the historical context both of the novel and its author in order to be able to understand the idea of obedience in English society at that time. Taking into account the approaches that will be taken when analysing one of the most famous novels by Elizabeth Gaskell, and also having in mind the years in which this writer lived (1810-1865), the social scenario and class issues of the moment will be paid especial attention –more concretely the working class and its development as a social movement– as well as to the question of women during the Early Victorian Era (1837-1848). Also, I believe it is necessary to take a look at some religious and philosophical movements from this period, which might have had an influence on Gaskell and on how she understood obedience and rebellion.

2.1 The Outbreak of Unionism and The Chartist Movement

Firstly, the question of the working class during the first half of the 19th century has to be studied –particularly in terms of the construction of a working class conscience among the British lower classes and the movements and events that made this possible. It is obviously known that the birth of the working class as a concept, as we nowadays understand it, is due to industrialization: the fast development of urban areas implied a growth of population, and the majority of it being workers. The first quarter of the 19th century (1800-1825) was a period in which this industrial society was at a substantial initial stage, when the working class conscience of the English workers begins to take shape. One remarkable event that helped with creating this sense of class, basically since it meant a significant oppression on the working class organisations of the moment – minimal and not the kind of organizations that come to mind when talking about trade unions today, but existing anyways– was the passing of the Combination Laws in 1799, as an attempt from the government to stop the flourishing of unionism in certain trades at the end of the 18th century. The Combination Laws, in essence, banned the organisation of trade unions, and although their effect was not as harsh as expected regarding direct action against workers, it cannot be underestimated, because some workers suffered the consequences this law established for the ones

participating in trade unions³. Nevertheless and in general terms, it has to be understood as a symbol of oppression, as a statement of the highest strata of the society against the lowest rather than as an actual tool of repression towards the working class (Rule, 1986, p. 390). Also, it has to be enhanced that all the oppressive actions taken against unions up to this moment had as a consequence an incipient consolidation of a net of aid between different trades at a local level. Finally, in 1824 the Combination Laws were repealed and a new law was passed in 1825 recognizing the worker's right to association and collective negotiation in terms of wages and workday. Nevertheless, the unions were still subject to the common law of conspiracy and detention and prosecution of workers who abandoned their workplace was still legal (Rule, p. 412).

In this first quarter of the 19th century, several strikes took place and they have to be taken into account when talking about the building of a working class conscience in the early Victorian Period. These strikes were followed from different trades and they were of different natures. One example of these which has to be remarked as it was one of the major confrontations that took place within the Combination Laws period, is the case of the mule spinners in Manchester that went on strike in the summer of 1818, when there was a strike wave in the English cotton district. Although at the beginning masters did not make use of legislation to stop it –they were waiting for the funds of the union to run out–, by the end of August the tension among the strikers significantly raised due to several arrests and sanctions and by the beginning of September, the strike ended with a rather negative outcome for workers: their wages remained the same and, moreover, they had to sign a document stating their will not to engage in any future action of that kind. So, this is a clear example of how masters used the law in order to accelerate the ending of strikes and, at the same time, prevent possible reappearances of similar actions (Rule, p392-394.)

Although during the last years of the 1820s a more federalist-like type appears in unionism –at a vertical level that is within trades, as well as at a more horizontal level, implying the creation of trade unions containing more than one trade, a quite remarkable event for the birth and consolidation of a conscience of class amid the English working classes–, from 1825 to 1828 there is a decrease of unionist action. However, the period from 1825 to 1834 has not to be underestimated, as it was not revolutionary action speaking but it was crucial in the developing of the 19th century

³ Rule, John. (1986) *The Labouring Classes in Early Industrial England, 1750-1850*. London: Longman Group Ltd.

English working class due to the fact that workers and their leaders began to perceive and express about labour, economy and politics in a way they had not done before. Even though a solid, strong conscience of class was still not present as it is, a new language was born to give voice to the working class feelings and complaints, mainly used by the radical press of the time. So, it could be said that this period was indeed not revolutionary but it set the stage for the years to come regarding working class struggle (Rule, 1986, p443-444.).

From 1834, things start to change. A key event that shaped the future of the working class as a consolidated social status and its organisation was the passing of the Reform Bill in 1832, which permitted men with over than 10 pounds a year in property to vote. Though this could be seen as a previous step towards universal suffrage, still it was a quite disappointment for workers, as it was another oppression statement coming from Parliament: if you did not have a certain social relevance in terms of money, your opinion was null. Depriving the working class –and, moreover, all the oppressed groups of society– from having a voice was (and is) the most common device of oppression used by the privileged, oppressor groups, in this case, the high and middle class: if you do not have a voice and, consequently, no one can listen to you, you do not exist. Human beings are social beings; they need the recognition of others in order to exist. If this recognition does not take place, you are not acknowledged and thus not existing. This “strategy” will be used alongside physical and judicial punishment in order to try to repress working class endeavours to see their rights recognized.

In 1834, a variety of working class movements and actions take place in Victorian England; but, as this paper deals with the politics of obedience in *North and South* by Elizabeth Gaskell, it is certainly pertinent to highlight the Chartist movement, as it greatly concerned and affected the author who even wrote a novel –*Mary Barton* (1848)– which dealt with Chartism and presented chartists as its main characters. Chartism was born in 1838, when the ‘People’s Charter’ was published. In it, six points were stated and demanded: manhood universal suffrage, vote by ballot, equal electoral districts, annual elections for Parliament, abolition of property qualifications for MPs and payment of MPs. Saunders explains that mass petitioning was the usual way of action of chartists: there were three great petitions in 1839, 1842 and 1848, with this last being the most famous and significant. Chartism took advantage of the regular rhetoric of Parliament, as the “people” and their desires were, supposedly, always what MPs

cared about.⁴ We have to have in mind that this was a moment of great social change in Europe: various revolutions triggered by the working class were taking place or were to be soon, especially when the 1848 chartist petition –the last due to its failure– was presented. This last petition was fearfully seen by the highest strata of English society as a menace in the sense that it could turn out to be another turbulent working class revolution, despite the fact that chartist leaders had always highlighted their will to protest peacefully.⁵ The petition of 1848 was said to have been signed by millions of people and had to be followed by a huge demonstration, which, eventually, did not take place, as the government decided to ban it and Feargus O’Connor, the chartist leader of the moment, complied with it because he was fearful of the possible confrontation between people and the soldiers. Thus the petition and the demonstration were seen as a total failure and the movement ended (Stephen, 2011). Anyway, in spite of not having meant any actual change in the legislation of the movement, Chartism was a movement which mobilized thousands of working class people in favour of a more visible social position for them and their conditions. It was a political complement to trade unionism: whereas union actions had to do with economic, labour issues, Chartism dealt with the political concerns of the working class.⁶

What is also quite meaningful when talking about Chartism is how the movement was seen by the high and middle class hence the oppressors. As Saunders states, many well-known figures of the time such as Carlyle, Dickens and Gaskell pronounced themselves in relation to Chartism and what it represented, in what may seem as an attempt to give voice to the opinion of the working classes (Saunders, 2008, pp. 466-467) Nevertheless, this also can be interpreted as a quite oppressing assumption: the attempt of speaking for the labouring classes conveyed the idea that the working class mass was not capable of doing so. Thomas Carlyle stated that Chartists were “wild inarticulate souls... unable to speak what is in them” and he described the chartists petitions as “inarticulate cries as of a dumb creature in rage and pain”⁷ Saunders goes beyond that and states: “Carlyle’s likening of the Chartist to a ‘dumb creature in rage and pain’ was typical, invoking a class that was not merely inarticulate

⁴ Saunders, Robert. (2008) Chartism from above: British elites and the interpretation of Chartism. *Historical Research* 81, n°213, 464

⁵ Roberts, Stephen. (2011) The Chartist Movement, 1838-1848. *BBC History*. Retrieved from: http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/chartist_01.shtml

⁶ Briggs, Asa. (1962) as cited in Rule. (1986) (p. 475-476)

⁷ Carlyle, Thomas (1840) as cited in Saunders. (2008) (p. 467)

but in some way dehumanized” (Saunders, 2008, p. 467) Elizabeth Gaskell also pronounced herself likewise about Chartists: she claimed that her novel *Mary Barton* had the purpose of giving “some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people.”⁸ Again, another middle class member speaking for the working class, interpreting their reasons and needs without understanding (or trying to understand) what they really demanded, infantilizing them in the most imperialist way possible. Moreover, in this case, it came from a woman, another oppressed group in Victorian society, which was treated with the same paternalist, dehumanizing attitude. As it can be seen throughout Saunder’s article, the high and middle class –politicians, writers, MPs and others– took a rather paternalist attitude towards Chartism and its endeavours, treating the working class people participating in the movement as if they were children, lost and illiterate, without the ability to express themselves or know what was beneficial for them. This paternalist view on Chartism led to a misinterpretation of what it represented: the high positioned people only saw a menace in it, as they only took into account how these working class people felt about the higher social classes – obviously, with great contempt, as the living conditions of ones and the others were significantly different– and not their petitions regarding taxes, politics and social equality. Again, their social and political aspirations were ignored, thus their voice was muted and their existence as individuals denied.

All those paternalist comments and statements about Chartism (and other working class movement of the period) as well as the ignorance to their real demands were the fuel necessary to bring about more radical working class movements breaking out; these, consequently, found thousands of adepts not only among the English workers, but among a vast number of European ones as well –the culmination of this being the publication of *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx in 1867 and the birth of Marxism and Communism. As we will see, this way of perceiving the working class will also be present in *North and South*, as Margaret poses herself as a mediator and spokesperson of the mill workers of Milton, preventing the workers from having their own voice to defend their rights.

⁸ Gaskell, Elizabeth. (1996) *Mary Barton: a Tale of Manchester Life* (MacDonald Daly, Ed.) London: Penguin. (Original version published in 1848)

2.2 *The Victorian Woman*

As well as the working class situation during Elizabeth Gaskell's time and its development as a new, to-be-organised social class, we also have to take a look at the situation of women during the Early and Middle Victorian Period in order to contextualise the thesis of this essay, as Gaskell was a woman writer and her main characters tended to be females, either middle class (just like herself) or working class women. So, it would be mandatory to consider women's legal situation in that period of time as well as the Victorian idea of woman and the prejudices and consequences that revolve around it. The first thing we have to have in mind is that, even though the Victorian Era can be considered an age of improvement when it comes to the participation of a larger part of England's population in democracy –the Reform Bill of 1832, for example, was a first step towards universal census–, women couldn't vote till the beginning of the 20th century. Nonetheless, since the 1840's a number of people advocated for it in Parliament, amongst them, John Stuart Mill; women's political participation already generated debate in the Early Victorian Period and that induces us to consider this period of time as a stage of gestation. Obviously, these debates about the inequalities of women and their role in Victorian society were only thought for the middle class woman and conducted by middle class men, so the right of working class women were still quite neglected.

During these years, some legal measures were taken in favour of the rights of women, especially in terms of marriage and motherhood, and eventually, in terms of property⁹. For instance, The Custody Act, passed in 1839, recognized the right of mothers to petition access to their under-aged children and custody of children under seven years of age, and The Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act, passed in 1857, that enabled the possibility of having a civil divorce court (not religious) and also gave the chance for women to apply for a protection order over her property. Finally, The Married Women's Property Act was passed in 1870; this law gave married women the right to own some kinds of personal property.¹⁰ Nevertheless, middle class women's lives were still quite oppressed by marriage, as they were regarded more as an object of

⁹ The whole fragment about women in the Early Victorian Period is extracted from Christ, Carol T. & Robson, Catherine (Eds.) (1962) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Vol. E. The Victorian Age* (9th edition) (pp. 1031-1034 and pp. 1607-1610). (Stephen Greenblatt, General Ed.) New York: W. W. Norton & Company. (Original version published in 1962).

¹⁰ Combs, Mary Beth. (2005). "A Measure of Legal Independence": The 1870 Married Women's Property Act and the Portfolio Allocations of British Wives. *The Journal of Economic History*, 65(4), 1028-1057.

an economic transaction rather than a person; their value was that of an economic deal between male figures to whom their obedience was bound –their fathers and their husbands. Furthermore, women’s right to education was another debate that started to take place in the Victorian era. In the 1830’s, women had their access to university denied; at the end of the century, women had succeeded in having the possibility of studying in some British universities –although they could not earn a degree in Oxford or Cambridge for example.

Women’s opportunities towards employment, on the other hand, affected both middle class and working class woman. There were several points of view when discussing female employment; depending on the social class these belonged to. In the case of the middle class woman, it was said that they were bound to perform what where seen as rather banal, non-important tasks such as learning to play the piano or sewing. Clearly, all these tasks were enclosed in the home space, and they were related to the Victorian idea of what a middle class woman had to be like: perfect, pure, skilled mothers and wives. The possibility for them to have a job outside their family space was very little, minimal if they were married. If they were unmarried, the perspectives were not very optimistic either; they could become governesses, usually a not very well paid job that conveyed a certain ambiguity about their reputation. On the other hand, industrialisation brought with it the rise of female employment out of the home space for some working-class women; some of them abandoned their “servant” jobs to work in factories or mines. Several Factory Acts were passed between 1802 and 1878 regulating women’s labour conditions in these environments; for instance, the sixteen-hour day was reduced and women were eventually banned from mine work. Even so, women’s labour conditions remained extremely hard, which, sometimes, led working class women to turn to prostitution, an issue that was of great concern in Victorian Britain and the focus of many public debates. Prostitution was a trade considered to belong to the working class; a trade that was regarded as one of the worst statuses for women, as it totally challenged and went against the ideal of femininity middle class people had about the female figure. Many middle class men were greatly concerned about the idea of middle class unmarried women ending working on the streets, due to a lack of employment opportunities. That is one of the main reasons why prostitution attracted so much attention for the Victorians; they would protect the idea of the perfect daughter, wife and mother at all costs, and prostitution, and middle class women being

part of this trade, was quite a challenge. This is where the idea of the Fallen Woman – the Angel in the House’s antithesis– comes from; but this will be discussed later.

In a way, it could be thought that working class women in the Victorian era emancipated as they became part of the labouring world as well as men; industrialisation broke the working class family scheme, and the wife and mother had the possibility of working outside the home space. (Rule, 258.) But Rule suggests that this statement is not as clear as it seems. The majority of girls who worked in factories were young maidens, thus not married and subordinated to their fathers; when they got married, it was their husbands’ will if they worked or not.¹¹ Apart from that, the inequalities of women in the workspace were considerable in many aspects; from gender pay gap to having to deal with their double role of worker and daughter or wife. They had to work in the factory but they also had to take care of their father or husband or children, hence their duties were doubled as well as the intensity of the oppression upon them: they were to obey the master in the workplace as well as their father or husband, depending of their age and civil status, in the home space.

The idea of Woman during the Victorian era is as important as the legal situation of women in the 19th century: we can only understand the concept of Victorian female obedience by knowing which roles were imposed on them by society itself. One of the most important concepts in this matter would be “The Angel in the House”; it is on what the ideal of femininity was based on. It defined the Victorian thought of women as essentially the perfect mother; hence the domestic space was their natural place to be. Victorians conceived the perfect woman as pure, motherly, selfless and perfect; her life was to be devoted to others (obviously, to male others), without expecting anything in return. They had to be willing to sacrifice in favour of male authorities in their life and pay blind obedience to them: they were to be enduring, renouncing figures. The home space was considered to be their natural space, an almost sacred space that protected them –but it confined them as well. If these qualities are closely examined, it can be noted that they define not a human but a divine being, a Virgin Mary-like image that was supposed to be portrayed by Victorian women. That is why the concept of the Angel in the House is one of the main weapons of oppression Victorian society held against women: it put an immense pressure on them, it imprisoned them inside their home walls and they had to struggle against a constant, never-ending subjugation to

¹¹ Rule, John. (1986). *The Labouring Classes in Early Industrial England, 1750-1850*. London: Longman Group Ltd.

different authoritative figures in their life: fathers, husbands, masters, and the structure of the Victorian family itself. On the other hand, there's another important concept that appeared in the Victorian Period as well, which is the opposite of the Angel in the House: the Fallen Woman. It defined those women who went astray, according to the concept of this perfect, pure, divine ideal of the female figure at that time; women who were led by their sexual desires, that did not fit the scheme of immaculate daughter, wife and mother, prostitutes, rebels. Their sin was to fall from grace generally due to their sexual behaviour, which was seen as a challenge to the imposed role on the ones of their sex. They were vastly depicted –as the Fallen Women was one of the greatest themes in Victorian art– with a mixture of penance, because it was believed that the ultimate fate of the Fallen Woman was death, with no exception, and defiance, because they were regarded as dangerous creatures, sinful women that did as they pleased, and, worst of all, women that displayed themselves in the public eye, an almost prohibited thing to do if you were a woman in the Victorian Period.¹² The public sphere belonged to men, as it was where things happened, it represented action and freedom. Women were clearly banned from public life, because they belonged home, their sacred place – or their sacred prison, depending on which perspective you look at it from. That is why women who did not comply strictly with this took the risk of being catalogued as Fallen Women. This, obviously, was another way to oppress the Victorian female: if they intended to gain some kind of freedom in any sense, they were to be excluded from society and to be considered a public danger, a disgrace, a woman who had betrayed her own nature. This depraved, evil nature Victorians depicted when describing or painting the Fallen Woman was far from what it really was. The reality might have been that their economic situation was precarious, to say the least, and they needed to survive; also, that they were simply women of character, that wanted to act according to their own will. This is key to understand the Victorian female obedience politics: if they were in any sense disruptive, they were automatically expelled from society and their status was forever disgraced.

2.3 Unitarianism and The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill

Last but not least, it is relevant to pay attention to the most important religious and philosophical movements that could have had an influence on Elizabeth Gaskell in

¹² Auerbach, Nina. (1980). The Rise of the Fallen Woman. *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 35(1), 29-52. doi:10.2307/2933478

some way because the focus of this project is on the concept of obedience and rebellion in *North and South*; that can be considered not only a philosophical matter but also a religious one, as the Western concepts of obedience and rebellion have an undeniable Judaeo-Christian basis.

In order to understand the religious situation of Victorian England, we have to look back to the previous century.¹³ During the Age of Enlightenment, the English Church underwent various ramifications; the majority of these were the ones that went back to the dissenting Protestant churches or Puritanism and did not engage in pompous rituals. The Enlightenment also introduced rationalism to the church: it brought along a need for theological tolerance, an enhancing of ethics as well as a reduction of dogma. As a consequence, churches such as the Unitarian or the Methodist¹⁴ were born. Unitarianism, the church of Elizabeth Gaskell's family –her father and her husbands were Unitarian ministers–, rejected the doctrine of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ (although it professed his preaching due to its ethical background) as well as the concept of atonement, which is present in almost every church based on Judaeo-Christianity. It can be considered quite a liberal church, because, as Millard states referring to the Unitarianism ethos: “It said that every person should have liberty of conscience in matters of religion and should not be persecuted for his or her beliefs.”¹⁵ Unitarians were quite prone to act in favour of freedom of belief –Unitarian MPs fought for the repeal of the punitive laws affecting Roman Catholics– at the same time as they were concerned with the life conditions of the working class –the Anti Corn Law League¹⁶ was founded in 1839 by Unitarians (Millard, 2001, 6), for instance. But one of the main areas in which Unitarianism was focused was education: they strongly

¹³ Christ, Carol T. & Robson, Catherine (Eds.) (1962) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Vol. E. The Victorian Age* (9th edition) (pp. A45-A48). (Stephen Greenblatt, General Ed.) New York: W. W. Norton & Company. (Original version published in 1962).

¹⁴ John Wesley founded the Methodist Church in the 18th century, with the purpose of reforming the Church of England from within; nonetheless, in 1795, it excised from it. Methodism was born as a response to rationalism's influence in some religious branches of the moment. Some of its ethos were acceptance of the doctrine of historical Christianity, austerity of service, self-sacrifice and strictness, a personal relationship with God and that the power to transform believers resided in the Holy Spirit. Extracted from: Methodism. (2019). In *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Contributor: Rupert E. Davies). Retrieved from: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Methodism>

¹⁵ Millard, Kay. (2001). The Religion of Elizabeth Gaskell. *The Gaskell Society Journal*, 15, 1-13.

¹⁶ The Anti Corn Law League was an organization created in 1839. Its only goal was to achieve the repeal of the Corn Laws, which restricted the import and export of grain in the Great Britain. This organization, led by the middle class mobilized people against the Corn Laws policies, which were finally repealed in 1846. Extracted from: The Anti Corn Law League. (2018). In *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Contributors: The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica). Retrieved from: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Anti-Corn-Law-League#accordion-article-history>

believed in the personal interpretation of the Bible but that was not possible if people did not know how to read. Also, they wanted their own ministers to have an excellent education, not only regarding Theology but in other fields such as Science or English Literature as well (Millard, 7). Furthermore, Unitarian women received an education too, as Unitarians consider that everyone has to be able to reach his or her full potential as a human being, both men and women. Elizabeth Gaskell herself had a quite impressive education for a woman being born in 1810; she was well read and was able to participate in debates on different topics such as theology or politics, normally considered to be taken only by men, due to her education in a liberal Anglican school with Unitarian connections and her stay in Reverend William Turner of Newcastle's house, a Unitarian minister, a common practice for Unitarian young women as their last step in education (Millard, 8.) So, it could be said that Unitarianism was quite a humanist creed: it believed in individual capacities and the rationality of the human being when discerning good from evil and it enhanced education in order to find righteousness rather than fear or atonement. Your own conscience and knowledge will be your guide, was one of their mottos. It has to be said that during the 19th century the figure of the individual was strengthened; in this century, the nature of the human being as an individual and his/her relationship with the community will be quite explored by theologians, philosophers and artists. This stress on individuality is quite significant for the aim of this essay, as almost all the issues posed in *North and South* related to obedience and disobedience are bound to matters of individual conscience.

Moreover, it is quite necessary to mention John Stuart Mill, as one of the most important philosophical figures of the 19th century and as an influence on how Victorian thought is regarded nowadays. Mill is regarded as a quite liberal thinker, particularly bearing in mind that he was born in 1806: he was deeply concerned about many different matters such as democracy, and how people were more or less free to participate in it, the role of women in Victorian society and the inequalities they underwent just because of their gender –he wrote *The Subjection of Women* in 1869, and also how the institutions of the Church and the State could be oppressive weapons against mankind.¹⁷ Also, and most importantly for the purpose of this essay, he was really interested in the individual and how treating him/her as part of a mass could turn

¹⁷ Christ, Carol T. & Robson, Catherine (Eds.) (2012) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Vol. E. The Victorian Age* (9th edition) (pp. 1086-1088). (Stephen Greenblatt, General Ed.) New York: W. W. Norton & Company. (Original version published in 1962).

out in suppressing people's power to act the most beneficial way for society. In his famous essay *On Liberty* (1859) he stressed the idea of individual judgement; education and life experience were important to Mill, of course, but he encouraged people to come to conclusions through their own interpretation, if they felt so and thought it was the right way of acting. In chapter 3, he says:

[...] it would be absurd to pretend that people ought to live as if nothing whatever had been known in the world before they came to it; as if experience had as yet done nothing towards showing that one mode of existence, or conduct, is preferable to another. Nobody denies that people should be so taught and trained in youth, as to know and benefit of human experience. But it is the privilege and proper condition of a human being, arrived at the maturity of his faculties, to use and interpret experience in his own way. It is for him to find out what part of recorded experience is properly applicable to his own circumstances and character.¹⁸

Mill also claimed that:

At present individuals are lost in the crowd. [...] The only power deserving the name is that of the masses, and of governments while they make themselves the organ of the tendencies and instincts of masses. [...] Those whose opinions go by the name of public opinion, are not always the same sort of public: [...] in England, [it is] chiefly the middle class. But they are always a mass, that is to say, collective mediocrity. [...] the mass do not now take their opinion from dignitaries in Church or State, from ostensible leaders or from books. Their thinking is done for them by men much like themselves, addressing them or speaking in their name [...] through the newspapers. (Mill, 1859, as cited in Christ, Carol T. & Robson, Catherine, 2012, p. 1101)

It is important to have in mind that during the 19th century mass culture was being developed. Just to set a clear example, in this period of time the novel was at its full success: reading books was now a massive activity due to the rising and posterior hegemony of the middle class, that was educated and wealthy enough to buy books and read them. So, I think it is substantially important to take into consideration that the matter of the individual and his or her right to act according to his or her self conscience or judgement –and the consequences this might have implied– was considerably central to Victorian thought, and it was certainly reflected in the religion, philosophy, art,

¹⁸ Mill, John Stuart (1859) as cited in Christ & Robson (Eds.) (2012) (p. 1095)

literature as well as economy and politics of that time; as I said, in *North and South* this happens a number of times.

3. OBEDIENCE AND REBELLION IN *NORTH AND SOUTH*

Notwithstanding the fact that the majority of Elizabeth Gaskell's literary work could be approached from an obedience versus rebellion point of view, *North and South*, published in 1855 and maybe considered one of her best known works, presents various situations in which the notions of submission and defiance are quite remarkable, since these episodes have different main protagonists and are developed in different environments, either in terms of class, gender or religion. I will approach this subject by dividing these episodes of subversion into individual and collective disobediences –as it will be seen, it will make a clear distinction in terms of class–, and, within these categories, I will separate them according to religion, gender and class.

3.1 Mr Hale's Scepticism: A Unitarian Disobedience

First of all, I will begin by discussing Mr Hale's decision to resign his position in the Church of England, which takes place at the beginning of the novel and, most importantly, works as a plot device to send Margaret and her family to Milton. In my opinion, this episode is clearly an instance of individual disobedience, as he bases his decision to leave the Church on conscience matters and personal judgements, although he will never use the term "disobedience" itself, and even less the word "rebellion", to refer to his resigning though he expresses his "doubts" about the state of the Church in his current times: hence he is not doubtful about his faith (he still believes in God) but does not agree with the institution of the Church and how the State may have an influence on the English faith. Here is where the reader is able to identify the Unitarian nature of Mr Hale's disruptive decision: he leaves his position in the Church of England because of the State's interference with religion, as he does believe the State should not have the right to control people's faith or self-conscience.¹⁹ The Unitarian base of his scepticism is made clear through his words when he is discussing his decision with his daughter Margaret. As Easson states:

¹⁹ Easson, Angus. (1980). Mr Hale's Doubts in *North and South*. *The Review of English Studies*, 31(121), new series, 30-40.

“[...] Even more important is the particular example he cites amongst those two thousand ejected Presbyterians who followed conscience even in adversity and from whom in the eighteenth century the Unitarians evolved. He reads out as proof of how he must fight the good fight the soliloquy of Mr Oldfield, minister of Carsington, who having taken counsel with himself came out to be free.

Oldfield was deeply religious, a committed Christian and a convinced minister of the Lord, holding a living which he vacated, not because of doubts about the priestly stipend, but forced by the Government to conform or quit.” (Easson, 1980, p. 34)

So, it may be said that Mr Hale’s act of disobedience is clearly based on the Unitarian belief in the importance of personal conscience and judgement, even though it implies a complete change in one’s lifestyle, place of residence or wealth. This Unitarian concept of the conscience and the individual will be seen in other episodes of rebellion throughout the novel.

But let’s not change the subject yet; Mr Hale, even though he is not one of the main characters of the novel, is quite interesting to look at for there is another subversive element about his character worth discussing. Not only is the mere mention of these doubts about the interference of the State in religious affairs by a woman writer subversive –women were usually excluded from State affairs discussions and were not supposed to have an opinion about matters that were considered to be debated by men exclusively– but also the fact that the reader hears them from a quite feminised character such as Mr Hale is even more challenging. Elizabeth Gaskell depicts Mr Hale in rather feminine terms throughout the novel: he is described as frail, sensitive, and almost as a coward. He is not even capable of telling his wife about his resigning: he asks Margaret to do it. When he assigns the task of informing Mrs Hale about his life changing decision to Margaret, the reader begins to see how the daughter assumes a more masculine role within the family than the father figure itself –as the narrative advances, she will clearly become the head of the Hale family, providing unconditional support to their parents but also deciding, being the bearer of bad news, taking action whenever necessary, always stronger and more decisive than her father. Even the physical description of Mr Hale is gendered: his facial expression is described as soft and sentimental, not capable of hiding emotion and he has a tendency to cry.²⁰ As the reader may discover later, Mr Thornton will be posed as the complete opposite to Mr

²⁰ Shuttleworth, Sally. (1998). Introduction. In Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*. (Angus Easson, Ed.) (pp xiv-xvi). New York: Oxford University Press. (Original work published in 1855)

Hale because he will be described as strong, with angled, powerful traits, as a man of action and he will have a great strength of will and forceful determination: a depiction of pure Victorian masculinity (Shuttleworth, 1998, p.xv.) In this way, Elizabeth Gaskell directly challenges the Victorian idea of family and as well as 19th century gender roles: she disarmed the father figure by assigning it certain traits that were considered feminine in the 19th century, and, moreover, she gives all the power that was socially granted to the father to Margaret instead, the dutiful daughter who, according to the social rules of the time, was only to obey and not interfere in family affairs.

3.2 *Margaret Hale*

This daughter figure who supposedly should be obedient above all, Margaret Hale, will be the source of a good deal of defiant attitudes in the story indeed, rather interesting to look at taking into account her gender and status: she is a middle-class maiden, with a considerable strength of will and with a highly sense of moral. The author –a woman from the middle class and Unitarian above all– uses Margaret Hale as a representative of the Victorian middle class women and their handicaps in relation to the Victorian’s way of regarding women’s role within society; she will be present in the public sphere in several occasions –a space exclusively directed to men in the 19th century– and will try to act according to her own conscience as much as possible. On one hand, Mr Hale’s disobedience towards the institution of the Church of England was based on a matter of conscience and its consequences were merely material, as it were: his family and him must move to Milton and their wealth is quite affected. On the other, Margaret will be rebelling against 19th century society as a whole, rather than against institutions and, also, the consequences of her rebellious episodes, will not have to do with material matters but to shame. This is how society would punish women who did not comply with the virtues and characteristics of the Victorian idea of woman: they would feel ashamed of their own nature and would be rejected from society, which left them without the identity this same society gave them when they were born women. Victorian society’s idea of women was a construct that worked as an oppression strategy rooted in fear and shame of the consequences of one’s acts and Margaret Hale’s actions should be regarded having this in mind: the fact that she is a middle class woman should never be forgotten when reading *North and South*. So, as it will be seen through her most remarkable disobedient episodes, Margaret Hale is quite a challenging

character in terms of gender, notwithstanding some instances in which her acts or thoughts might be seen as not that subversive.

Margaret's unconventional nature is depicted from the very beginning of the story. In the first chapter, she is already set up against Edith, her cousin, for the reader to understand that she is not the traditional Victorian lady. Edith is about to be married to Captain Lennox and from the moment she is introduced, she is described as an example of the Victorian ideal female figure: she is beautiful, delicate, and, most importantly, she has a very passive attitude. The first time she is mentioned, she is taking a nap, and, during the first chapters, the reader will not see her doing much more; she tends to be absent, present in physical terms but not intellectually. Women were often portrayed like this in Victorian times: sleeping, dozing, looking through the window with an absent-minded look in their eyes, never in action, always being a passive presence in a certain environment –the perfect instance of this being the Pre-Raphaelite's portraits, which, even though they were often focused on the Fallen woman theme, their main characters were never rendered as active entities but rather passive ones. So, Gaskell already gives a subversive nature to the main character by separating her from the stereotypical female role and appearance characteristic of the 19th century imagery from chapter one, when talking about Edith's wedding arrangements it is said: "[...] but, although she was a spoiled child, she was too careless and idle to have a very strong will of her own. [...] She contented herself by leaning back in her chair, merely playing with the food on her plate, and looking grave and absent." (6) Thus the author makes clear that her main character has a very strong will and it is a sign for the readers to be aware of the attitude Margaret will have throughout the story: she will try to have quite an active attitude towards others, rather than staying home just observing the world through a window, as a mere spectator. This rather "manly" attitude of Margaret is overall highlighted in the first part of *North and South*. For example, in the second chapter, the fact that she prefers being outside than inside the house is strongly remarked: "Her out-of-doors life was perfect. Her in-doors life had its drawbacks. With the healthy shame of a child, she blamed herself for her keenness of sight, in perceiving that all was not as it should be there" (17). From the very beginning shame plays its role when it comes to Margaret's attraction to the public sphere, which was reserved to men exclusively; women were not supposed to be outdoors, and, even less, enjoy being there. Nevertheless, despite her will to participate in the public sphere and act according to the "manly" characteristics she is given –here is where the

singularity of Margaret Hale lies in, at the end of the day—, sometimes her acts will not be understood or acknowledged by others, which will be her greatest setback, even though she will try to come up against them as best as she can.

All in all, the introduction to Margaret's unconventional nature regarding the 19th century concept of marriage and women is just a preamble for the first episode of disobedience on Margaret's behalf: her rejection to Henry Lennox marriage proposal in chapter three –which will not be the only marriage proposal she rejects, as in chapter twenty-four, she will turn down Mr Thornton's as well. One significant thing about the first proposal is that Henry Lennox asks Margaret to go out in the garden in order to have a talk; so, it is a man that drags Margaret outdoors, to the public, masculine space, where they can be all alone, without the presence of her father. He proposes, she rejects. In doing so, Margaret renounces marrying a middle-class man, which could have maintained, or even upgraded, her social status, as she would have become a married middle class woman like her cousin Edith: a quite challenging thing to do for a middle-class maiden of her age. Even so, with this first rejection we begin to see the complexity of Margaret's struggle with the values she has been brought up in: when she sees where her conversation with Mr Lennox is leading, her first desire is to go back inside the house; she feels uncomfortable, even unsafe, not wanting to be there. On one hand, this reaction could be interpreted as Margaret's naïve lack of thought on leaving her family and the security her role as the dutiful, obedient daughter meant to her hence as her lack of maturity, like Brown claims²¹; on the other, I believe she understands very well what being married means and, furthermore, she is truly aware of what rejecting a marriage proposal can imply. For that reason, she feels uneasy, awkward and even annoyed. Lennox puts her in a situation in which she does not want to be because she does not want to marry him and she feels unprotected, shameful and not worthy for she has been forced to go against all the values society has imposed her. Consequently, she wants to go back inside the house as it is thought to be sacred, pure, and, above all, passive, female-intended, so, a place where women were not to make decisions. First, she acts according to her own will, as an individual whose judgement is more important than established gender roles but, when she realises what she has gone up against and the consequences it may have, she wants to return to the “safety” of social convention.

²¹ Brown, Pearl L. (2000). From Elizabeth Gaskell's "Mary Barton" to Her "North and South": Progress or Decline for Women? *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 28(2), 345-358.

Anyway, despite all the ways the going back to the house might be interpreted, what remains is Margaret's courage when refusing a proposal such as this: she rejects a life, a social status, and, above all, a man, who was thought to be an authority over her just because of gender.

The second rejection is to be argued in very different terms, as the context, the causes and the consequences of it are nothing alike. First of all, the second refusal cannot be understood without discussing the "facing of the mob" episode, one, not to say the most significant passages of the novel regarding Margaret and her defiance to Victorian gender roles. This episode is found towards the end of the first volume of the novel, when the Hales have fully settled in Milton; even though at the beginning Margaret did not enjoy life in Milton, now she has become used to it and she has even established a friendly relationship with the Higgins, a working class family, specially with Bessy Higgins, a young girl who is ill due to her exposure to cotton. The novel, apart from following the romantic story line between Margaret and Mr Thornton, who, at this point of the narration tolerate each other despite their harsh relationship when they are introduced to each other, also focuses on the working class life and the beginnings of unionisation.

At this point of the narrative, the workers decide to riot in front of Thornton's house. Mr Thornton wants to send the soldiers to stop the mob; nevertheless, Margaret stops him and asks him to talk to them instead, which may seem out of pure woman-like compassion but, if Gaskell's words are read properly, the reader might see how Margaret challenges Thornton's masculinity directly: "'Mr Thornton,' said Margaret, shaking all over with her passion, 'go down this instant, if you are not a coward. Go down and face them like a man. [...] If you have any courage or noble quality in you, go out and speak to them, man to man'" (177). She is assuming, again, a rather masculine tone; she is an active element that tries to solve a problem whereas she would have been expected to wait for the end of the conflict upstairs with Mr Thornton's mother and sister. Thornton, visibly hurt because of Margaret's words, goes out and exposes himself in front of the mob and Margaret impulsively rushes out as well and puts herself between the workers and Thornton; she defends him physically, with her body. So Margaret displays herself in the public space, in front of a masculine mob, and tries to establish a conversation with it; she exposes herself completely just to defend Thornton's physical integrity assuming a protecting role while women were supposed to be the defended ones. Margaret's facing of the mob is the culmination of her exposure to the public sphere;

however, just when she becomes an active participant of the outside world, she is hit by a rock and loses her conscience. Margaret's voice is silenced and patriarchal order is restored, returning her to the passive position she was supposed to be in.

After this incident is when Thornton's proposal takes place, as he interprets Margaret's intervention like a declaration of love. At the very beginning of chapter twenty-four, Margaret already follows the same instinct as she followed when Mr Lennox proposed: when she is told that Mr Thornton wants to see her, she immediately asks where is her father and, being told he is out of the house, she lingers, delaying the encounter as much as she can; again, she knows she has acted against convention and she is afraid of the consequences it may ensue, especially on her reputation, as, with such display of passion in public, her emotions, and what is more, her sexual desire, might have been uncovered. Margaret's sexual attraction to Thornton is made evident through her body language during the proposal scene: "[...] thick blushes came all over her face, and burnt into her very eyes [...]" (194), "[...] and here, the passionate tears (kept down for long, struggled with vehemently) came up to her eyes, and choked her voice." (195) The language used in the descriptions of the conversation between Margaret and Thornton implies both her and his desire for one another notwithstanding their measured words. Even so, the entire proposal scene also makes visible how Margaret is struggling with the consequential shame women felt when acting inappropriately in Victorian society: "Altogether she looked like a prisoner, falsely accused of a crime that she loathed and despised, and from which she was too indignant to justify herself." (193) And yet, she justifies; precisely, she attributes her impulse to her femininity, ironic as it may be:

"“You seem to fancy that my conduct of yesterday’ –again the deep carnation blush, but this time with eyes kindling with indignation rather than shame–‘was a personal act between you and me; and that you may come and thank me for it, instead of perceiving, as a gentleman would [...] that any woman, worthy of the name of woman, would come forward to shield, with her reverend helplessness, a man in danger from the violence of numbers.” (195)

Margaret wants to be considered again a pure, decent, angel-like woman, although her impulses have shown her true feelings, and she will say whatever she thinks is best in order to save her reputation and return to convention the sooner the better. Shuttleworth suggests: "Her impulsive act, which she would like to think of as noble, pure and self-

sacrificing, has been offered back to her as an expression of sexual desire. Whilst she would like to feel herself enrolled with the angelic band of womanhood, her inner demons whisper that she, like other women, is at the mercy of her reproductive system.” (Shuttleworth, p. xxx) That is why she speaks to Thornton in such a cold and haughty way; she tries to act as morally superior as possible and she refuses him: her rejection to the proposal –hence the denial of her feelings for him– is also her submission to Victorian gender roles, earlier challenged by herself. However, turning down a second marriage proposal is also a rather remarkable disruption in terms of gender: with this contradiction, of disrupting while wanting to return to women’s submissive role, Gaskell reflects how hard and complex struggling with gender issues was in the 19th century. The chapter ending is ambiguous regarding Margaret’s surrender to convention: “But how could I help it?” asked she of herself. “[...] But this is his fault, not mine. I would do it again, if need were, though it does lead me into all this shame and trouble.” (196)

What may be interpreted, then, from Margaret’s episodes of disobedience to the established Victorian gender roles in relation to her two suitors and the events that surround their corresponding proposals is that she portrays the inner struggle middle class women went through on a daily basis. She faces repression with her impulses, or simply, following her judgement, even though she always tries to go back to convention once having taken action; Margaret Hale should not be considered a coward or a naïve character that acts without understanding the world that surrounds her. On the contrary, she is fully aware about the possible outcome of her actions and that is why she ends surrendering to the social rules of her time. There lies the exceptionality of Margaret: she is a strong human being but frail at the same time. She is just a way for us to see how oppressive Victorian society was towards women: even the most courageous ones were subjected to these enormously punitive social rules, based on fear and shame. This is the reason why her challenge to gender roles and Victorian femininity, even though not totally accomplished, has not to be underestimated.

Furthermore, Gaskell herself challenges the Victorian way of conceiving women and their role in society through Margaret, especially when it comes to the public and private sphere subject. Margaret’s failed attempts to participate in the public world seem to be Gaskell’s own critique to the thought that women could morally influence or

support men, thus the public space, without being able to participate in it²². She tries to become part of the outside world but she is repeatedly rejected and silenced while she is also expected to be a moral influence on the male figures in her life such as her father, her brother or Thornton. But how can she be, if she is not permitted to participate, and thus understand, in the public space?

Yet, there is another instance in the novel which highlights Margaret's will to disobey when she considers it necessary: when she knows about his brother's situation as an outlaw, she does not doubt to lie to the police themselves in order to protect him. However futile this episode may seem, it is rather interesting regarding the Unitarian nature of the characters, which is brought up into light again as the members of the Hale family become the centre of attention once more, as well as gender issues. First of all, when Margaret is informed about Frederick's living situation, she automatically defends his rebellious acts: "Loyalty and obedience to wisdom and justice are fine; but it is still finer to defy arbitrary power, unjustly and cruelly used." (109) Margaret's Unitarianism is once again visible, as she bases her brother's defence on one's own discerning between good and evil, which is far more valuable than blinding fidelity to certain a cause. Frederick, like the other male figure of the family, Mr Hale, has betrayed his cause because of his sense of morality. Second of all, and I think most importantly, Frederick and his coming back to see his mother are surrounded by gender issues. Frederick will be another feminized male figure, just like Mr Hale, or, as it will be discussed later, Mr Higgins. Gaskell challenges Frederick's masculinity in different ways: firstly, through Frederick's descriptions. He is said to have "delicate features", to be the Hale's "poor, poor boy" and also to look helpless at times. He also arranges the table with Margaret, as equals. In the fifth chapter of the second volume, there is a description that is key to recognize the feminization and thus othering of Frederick:

"[...] at times they [his eyes] and his mouth so suddenly changed and gave her such the idea of latent passion, [...]; it was rather the instantaneous ferocity of expression that comes over the countenances of all natives of wild or southern countries – a ferocity which enhances the charm of a childlike softness into which such a look may melt away." (247)

²² Brown, Pearl L. (2000). From Elizabeth Gaskell's "Mary Barton" to Her "North and South": Progress or Decline for Women? *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 28(2), 345-358.

Clearly, he is portrayed as a passion-driven man, a quality which was usually assumed to be feminine in the 19th century and, what is more, he is infantilized, a very common way of oppressing women, as well as non-white people or the working class during the Victorian Period. By infantilizing the Other, the oppressive patriarchal system set in the 19th century automatically annulled the Other's agency as well as his or her capacity of deciding and acting for itself and turned women, non-whites, low class people into passive elements of society who were to be ordered what to do because of their own good.

Moreover, Shuttleworth claims that: "The return of Frederick allows Gaskell to emphasize once more the parallel story-lines of her plots, as they revolve around the central question of how far action in defiance of authority can be justified in the name of a higher cause." (Shuttleworth, p. xxx) Both of them have acted against authority based on their individual judgement and for that they are to be expelled from Victorian society and referred to as outlaw or criminal in the case of Frederick and as indecorous woman in the case of Margaret. The latter case is even more enhanced by the fact that Thornton sees Margaret talking to Frederick in the station at night and he directly assumes she is talking to her lover, which is to him far more worse than lying to the police. Once again, the politics of shame are playing their role in the story. Just with this episode, the fact that women's affective and sexual behaviour was far more judged than her actual acts, in this instance, lying to a figure of authority such as the police, highlights how punitive Victorian social rules in terms of gender were, as an actual crime is equalled to walking alone with a man during night.

3.3 Gendering The Working Class

Social-problem writers, whom Elizabeth Gaskell was part of, were considerably attentive to the development of the working class as a new social status in Victorian England, basically due to their context, as most of them lived in industrial cities in which the new working class conscience was being born and the outbreak of unionism was changing the way people regarded work life and their relationship with masters. As Elliott reflects on, the social panorama of the Early and Middle Victorian Period was ideal for these writers to revive the debate about class relationships and explore the

complexity of these²³. Nonetheless, the majority of these writers, not to say all of them, were not from the working but from the middle class, which ought to be taken into consideration: the working class' representation in these social-problem novels might be biased due to the difference in social class between the subject of description and the writer as much as the prejudices and assumptions the middle class made about the working classes.

In order to discuss the representation of the working class disobedience in *North and South*, a distinction has to be made in relation to the nature of such disobedience: it is no longer an individual but a collective rebellion. This is made clear throughout the novel, especially through characters such as Higgins or Mr Thornton himself. At one point in chapter fifteen from the first volume, the latter defends his harsh ways of treating his workers by invoking his freedom as an individual, which is given to him, and middle class businessmen by extension, thanks to capital (Shuttleworth, p. xix). Thus, this idea of relating money with individual freedom –hence agency and identity– is posed; and it will make the reader associate the middle class with individualism while the working class will be identified with the notion of community or collectivism. The clearest representation of this relationship between money and individual agency is the strike: the workers unite in order to make their living situation improve, at any cost, because acting as a collective is the only possibility for them to gain any kind of identity; if not, they are just passive entities which are to be given orders make a profit for their master, nothing else. Any sign of individual strife inside this community is depicted as unfavourable to the working class. In the novel, this is seen through the character of Boucher, who describes the union as a tyranny and confronts Higgins –the leader, sort to speak, of the workers in Milton–; he will be described in rather pejorative ways and, due to the ostracizing he suffers from his co-workers, quite induced by Higgins, he commits suicide. On account of that –without analysing the moral background of this episode– it is pretty clear that Gaskell identifies the working class as a community on the whole rather than a number of individuals fighting for the same cause.

Most importantly, Gaskell, once again, feminizes the working class: Milton workers are described as almost a familial community and, specifically Higgins, the representative of the working class in *North and South* is strongly gendered. He is a

²³ Elliott, Dorice Williams. (1994). The Female Visitor and the Marriage of Classes in Gaskell's *North and South*. *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 49(1), 21-49. doi:10.2307/2934043

motherly figure to his daughters, he takes care of them constantly and he is highly concerned about the care of other worker's families. Nevertheless, he will not be depicted as weak as Mr Hale, for instance; he is said to be intelligent, consequent, tenacious but sensitive at the same time. This could be interpreted as the author's statement of proving that feminine qualities are not at any rate incompatible with masculine traits; it could be understood as a demonstration that gender roles are fluid, while in the Victorian Period were thought to be absolutely fixed. This feminization of the working class and their disobediences –which, on the other hand, are linked to passion and irrationality throughout the whole text– are set up against the traders or manufacturers group, who are described purely in masculine terms. For instance, Mr Thornton is depicted as the ideal Victorian man from his physical appearance –his lines are firm and straight, his eyes are described as earnest and piercing– to his personality – he is self-controlled, serious, intelligent, and, above all, not willing to show emotion at any rate. Moreover, the feeling that Gaskell could be at some point paralleling the strike situation with Frederick's mutiny or her own defiant actions such as when she stands before the mob is certainly present in the text. Again, Margaret's words regarding Frederick's situation –“Loyalty and obedience to wisdom and justice are fine; but it is still finer to defy arbitrary power, unjustly and cruelly used.” (109)– could be applied in the Milton worker's will to strike and to riot in favour of better working conditions, because, in the text, it is actually described how harsh and tyrannical Mr Thornton's ways are.

Even though the treatment of the working class in the novel could be read as a quite disruptive statement towards the Victorian conventions in terms of gender, the fact that the working class is feminized is, at the same time, an evidence of the assumptions the middle class made about the working class, because, above all, Gaskell was a middle class woman, not a worker. In the text, several episodes and descriptions of workers, the union and the riot give off an paternalist tone which was, as said some paragraphs above, a rather oppressive way to devoid one's agency that was applied either to women or to the working class. The infantile representation of workers may be seen when Bessy Higgins talks to Margaret about her disease due to the ingestion of fluff. It is said that the master cannot buy a device to create currents of air inside the factory in order to carry off cotton fluff but it is also pointed out that some workers did not want it either, because they would starve without being able to ingest it. Such depiction of the working class may be interpreted as a veiled emphasizing of the

worker's dependence on their masters as well as of their need of guidance, because, like children, they need an adult to indicate what is good or bad for them (Shuttleworth, p. xxii). Also, Margaret refers to the mob as "poor creatures" that need to be soothed (177) and, when she is in front of them, she says: "For God's sake! Do not damage your cause by this violence. You do not know what you are doing" (179). Again, the condescending tone characteristic of the middle class makes its appearance assuming that workers are not intelligent or civil enough to decide what is right and wrong and to understand the consequences their acts might ensue, when, obviously, they certainly are conscious about their actions. Not only does Margaret treat the working class in a rather paternalist way when she addresses the workers directly, but also when she tries to speak for them to Mr Thornton. She indeed believes she is doing the right thing by defending what she thinks are the worker's rights and aspirations but, in reality, it is another instance that confirms the infantile treatment of the working classes in the novel: the workers are depicted with not agency enough to speak for themselves and a middle class member has to step out to "translate" what are their complaints. Clearly, this does not challenge any Victorian misconception of the working class but enhances the stereotypical treatment of working people in the 19th century even more: illiterate, infantile and to be guided by all means.

All in all, the worker's disobedience in *North and South*, which is, basically, the strike and the riot behind Mr Thornton's house, ends like the other instances of rebellion in the novel. The improvement of Higgin's relationship with the master, the establishment of a reciprocal nature on the master-worker relations as well as with Higgin's decision to adopt Boucher's offspring after his suicide as repent, patriarchal order is restored in Milton when it comes to the working class.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, the main goal was to confidently assert that one of the main themes in *North and South*, written by Elizabeth Gaskell and published in 1855, is the question of obedience and rebellion, especially in terms of gender and class and that, owing to the nature of this topic, the consequences of such (dis)obedience to the established social norms from the Victorian Period as well as the oppressive ways such society imposed on dissidents are also made visible in the text. Gaskell's exploration of the politics of (dis)obedience in the 19th century is seen through her main characters and their sometimes defiant attitude towards convention being the female protagonist of the

story, Margaret Hale, the clearest example. Because of the historic moment Elizabeth Gaskell lived in, the text focuses on two social groups, often oppressed by Victorian society: women and the working class.

The question of obedience and rebellion is, certainly, one of the main pillars of the story: it actually begins with an act of defiance towards the institution of the English Church by Mr Hale and the main characters interact and develop their story lines thanks to their (dis)obedience to various entities or ideas: the Church of England, Victorian gender roles, industrialization, class issues etc. However, how subversive can *North and South* be considered?

When it comes to gender, Margaret Hale poses several challenges throughout the novel: two marriage refusals, several incursions into the public sphere, which was solely reserved to men, and her impulsiveness in general are proof of the disruptiveness of this text. Nevertheless, the resolution of these rebellious acts against the system as well as the ending of the novel, in which she returns to Thornton, renouncing to her wealth and agency, can be read as a restoration of patriarchy and a return to convention. Elizabeth Gaskell does not completely challenge her society's preconceptions and ideas about women because her main protagonist always ends up coming back to the established Victorian gender roles. All in all, I believe that even though Gaskell does not resolve these defiant acts in a completely challenging way, this does not prevent the reader from recognising subversion in *North and South*. It is brave enough to try to defy the highly repressive social norms of Gaskell's times, even though patriarchy ends up restored, because this is what usually happened; after a lot of trying, finally, disruption will come.

When it comes to class, Gaskell uses feminization to depict the working class of Milton and its riots. The working class is given a collective tinge that, in a way, denies the worker's capability as individuals; there are some instances of paternalism in the text, too, referring to Milton's working people. Mainly, I believe this is due to the fact that Elizabeth Gaskell was a middle class woman who looked at the working class from a bourgeois point of view; her comments on the Chartist movement were not that different from her treatment of the Milton workers in the novel. Although she approaches the subject from a caring, Unitarian attitude, she does not take a subversive position towards the aspirations of the working class. Whereas the gender issue is more disruptively treated through the text due to the fact that she is a woman and is aware of

what the middle class women struggled with, the class question remains underestimated, basically because of her social background.

To conclude, *North and South* indeed focuses on the question of obeying and rebelling against the Victorian social system. Is *North and South* one of the most disruptive novels from the 19th century? Probably not. Almost all the rebellious acts in the novel ultimately end in a restoration of patriarchy, both in terms of gender and class. Nonetheless, it does not devoid the novel of subversion: the characters do try to challenge the authoritative forces put upon them as best as they can, even though they will fail. Remarkable enough is the fact that failing against such oppressive tools, as the ones Margaret or Higgins confront in the novel is the most common outcome this situation could have had in the 19th century. Overall, I believe importance relies on the act of trying, which for women and working class people in Victorian England was courageous enough.

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