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**DEPARTAMENT DE FILOLOGIA ANGLESA I DE GERMANÍSTICA**

**Gender Norms in War: Masculine and Feminine  
identities in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers***

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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June 2023

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Napoleonic wars had a devastating effect on Britain on a political and social level. In *Sylvia's Lovers*, Elizabeth Gaskell portrays how the private sphere was affected by the public political decisions and how common people were concerned with the new situation which directly impacted their lives. Political decisions affect the population's private lives, both women and men, but in different ways. Men's new position in society included them having liberal professions that give them access to more wealth and subsequently to climbing to a higher class. Conversely, most women did not have the same financial independence as men had and had to rely on the patriarchal figure of the family. By taking a closer look at the old and new models of masculinity in the novel, the power dynamics between genders, the public and domestic spheres and concepts of heroism and war I aim to explore the different levels of patriarchal oppression both genders suffered in the public and private spheres.

**Keywords:** gender, masculinity, Napoleonic wars, love, historic novel, *Sylvia's Lovers*.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Sylvia's Lovers* is a historical novel that shows how gender roles interplay in the warfare context and focuses on how historical events impact the lives of individuals, with a specific focus on women and families. Prominent historical novels in the 19<sup>th</sup> century such as *Ivanhoe* (1819) or *Waverley* (1814) focused mainly on battles and heroes like the knight Wilfred of Ivanhoe in the battles between Saxons and Normans or Edward Waverley in the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745 in Scotland. However, Elizabeth Gaskell takes another perspective to historical novels and focuses her plot on the extent to which international affairs and historical events affect everyday people.

In the bigger picture, neither men nor women have agency during political turmoil, but at least men could access the public sphere where political debates were held. And while Habermas states that the public sphere's debates should focus on universality (Landes 96), the false premise of universality is the middle class white bourgeois man. Therefore, the interests defended and debated are only one of many perspectives since the concerns of women, black people and lower classes get ignored. Essentially, the struggles of minorities were not considered paramount so as to be given a platform in the public sphere.

Due to this lack of means to show the standpoint of minorities, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers* gives voice to the experience women went through during the Napoleonic Wars. By doing so, she shows how the domestic sphere also belongs to an aspect of politics and how the public sphere should thus be reconsidered to include women.

## 1.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Elizabeth Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863) was written and published in a post-war context, seven years after the end of the Crimean War in 1856. The Crimean War was a conflict between the Russian empire and an alliance of countries including France, Britain, Sardinia, and the Ottoman empire over the territorial expansion of Russia in the Holy Land. Britain participated in this war because of colonial interests and to ensure the safety their position as a global power. Russian expansionism was seen as a potential threat for British interests as a world power having colonies in the Middle East and India.

During the Crimean War, the Gaskells got involved in public opinion about issues such as peace and war. Through his Unitarian sermons and through her novels, William and Elizabeth Gaskell discuss ideas of masculinity, of what constitutes a nation, war and peace. In fact, for the Gaskells, the strict gender norms that did not allow women to interact in public affairs were an obstacle to social progress. William Gaskell related war to masculinity by stating that war is an “earthly condition” that must be accepted “as men and at all times to bear our part in it manfully” (Hanson 5), so it is a part of what constitutes manliness in a man. Thus, to William, people who oppose the war are emasculated and not taking active part in what they are expected to perform socially. In a sermon in 1856 after the Crimean War ended, William Gaskell defends how peace is “an essential condition of the well-being of nations” (Hanson 3) and how countries engaging in warfare was a “disgrace to modern civilisation” (Hanson, 2). On another note, Elizabeth Gaskell includes the ideas of war and nation in her novels, as is the case for *North and South* and *Sylvia's Lovers*. In fact, an organization by the name of the Peace Society was created in 1816 which later on became a main opposition to the Crimean War. This organization was, as Hanson defends “well-known enough to



Gaskell's readers at this time to be part of everyday conversation and at the same time susceptible of different interpretations." (Hanson 2) Gaskell uses this common reference explicitly in *North and South*, which reveals the relevance it had in her contemporary society. Mr Bell makes a joke to Mr Hale mentioning the Peace Society: "She's a democrat, a red republican, a member of the Peace Society, a socialist" (Gaskell, 2012: 399). From this mention, for Elizabeth Gaskell, being a member of the Peace Society meant not positioning in the war and supporting the oppressor.

However, *Sylvia's Lovers* is set in an earlier period and in a seaside town called Monkshaven during the Revolutionary wars and the Napoleonic wars, which frame and drive the plot in Gaskell's novel. The Revolutionary wars took place between 1792 and 1802 after overthrowing the absolutist monarchy in the French Revolution. The aim of the revolutionists was to spread revolutionary ideals and establish other republics in Europe. There were two coalitions of countries opposing the French revolutionaries, mostly including monarchic countries like Britain, Austria, Spain, Portugal, Prussia, Russia and other smaller states. Napoleon Bonaparte won several battles and expanded the territorial power of France but also failed in his expedition to Egypt. The Revolutionary wars ended with the Treaty of Amiens in 1802, however, the peace did not last long as the Napoleonic wars followed months after.

The Napoleonic wars were a series of conflicts following the Revolutionary wars between 1803 and 1815 including France, Britain, Russia, Austria, Prussia, Spain, Portugal and Sweden. They were caused by Napoleon's ambitious goal of French expansion throughout Europe and his interest in accumulating influence and power over other European countries, as well as his interest in spreading the revolutionary ideas to combat the despotism of absolutist monarchies around European countries. Napoleon's attempt to invade Britain in 1805 failed thanks to the British Royal Navy's defence at

the battle of Trafalgar. It was in the Battle of Trafalgar that the British navy showed its dominance over the French navy. However, the conflict with Britain further increased in 1806 after Napoleon implemented the Continental System, which tried to block British trade and weaken the country they had just lost against, but due to smuggling and the difficulty in stopping the British royal navy the plan failed. These series of wars ended in the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, with Napoleon's defeat and the European coalition's victory. Britain's victory meant a new balance of power in Europe, with France losing part of its influence and privileged position, and crowning Britain as the new major global power in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## **1.2 THE HISTORICAL NOVEL IN THE MID NINETEENTH CENTURY**

At first, social novels were the main focus of Gaskell's literary production with novels such as *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855) as standouts. The former one focuses on the lives of working class people in Industrial Manchester and the latter takes a closer look at the difference between the industrial North of England and the rural idealistic South. Through the character of the countryside young woman Margaret Hale, Elizabeth Gaskell explores the role of women in class tensions between the wealthy factory owners and the exploited working class. However, in her later fiction, she switched to writing historical novels. In O'Frank's words: "Gaskell's interest in social change carried over from the so-called social novels, with their contemporary focus, into her later, historical works" (O'Frank 434). In contrast, her earlier novels focused on present societal elements worth discussing like *North and South's* (1854) class struggle between factory owners and workers.

Moreover, her new interest in this genre can be attributed to the historical novel's popularity: "The serious historical novel flourished in the middle decades of the nineteenth century" (Shaw 76). One of the main reasons accounting for the general popularity of novels is the expansion of the publishing industry and technological advances. For instance, the creation of steam-powered presses improved the speed and lowered the cost of printing longer books, which made literature accessible to the broader public. Another factor was the decrease in illiteracy in England and Wales during the rise of novels. Throughout the nineteenth century, the illiteracy rates were dropping and thus, the demand for books increased. According to Lloyd, in 1800 "around 40% of males and 60% of females in England and Wales were illiterate. By 1840, this had decreased to 33% of men and 50% of women, and by 1870, these rates had dropped further still to 20% of men and 25% of women" (Lloyd 5). Furthermore, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the context of the Crimean War, the subgenre of historical novels gave readers books to be able to understand the present political and social changes. One explanation accounting for the popularity of the historical novel is that it "displace(s) contemporary concerns about modes of change onto a past that has been contained by acts of historicization and can be re-deployed as object lessons" (O'Frank 438). It is an object lesson but from a previous time, so it allows readers to learn about possible ways to find change with the perspective that the historicization gives it.

Due to the historical novel's popularity, Elizabeth Gaskell was not the only writer who turned to them during times of political turmoil. Marion Shaw also exemplifies other authors who joined Gaskell in the production of historical novels, such as Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) or Charles Reade's *The Cloister and the Hearth* (1861) (Shaw 76). Dickens' historical novel was "an extraordinary success here, and (...) the end of it is certain to make a still greater sensation" (Collins

336) as Dickens wrote to a French friend through a letter. On the other hand, Charles Reade's *The Cloister and the Hearth* was a success in both England and the United States, it "struck the reading public as well as the American and English press like a tidal wave" (Spencer 69). It was so well-received that in the span of the first few weeks after publication, it had eight editions.

But the pioneer and main face of the historical novel genre is Sir Walter Scott, whose literary works helped popularise this genre. His historical novels in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century include titles such as *Waverley* (1814), *Ivanhoe* (1819) and *Bob Roy* (1817). Such was his international success that he finished writing *Waverley* in July of 1814 and by November of the same year, the book was in its fourth printing. Apart from Elizabeth Gaskell, another woman writer who included historical events to her fiction was George Eliot, also known as Mary Anne Evans. Her novel *Middlemarch, A Study of Provincial Life* (1871-1872) takes place in a fictional town from 1829 to 1832 and included the 1832 Reform Act that enfranchised small landowners, shopkeepers and tenant farmers as well as including the ascension of King William IV to the throne. The reception of this serialised novel was mixed but for instance, Emily Dickinson praised it stating "'What do I think of Middlemarch? What do I think of glory.'" (Heginbotham 20) Scott, Dickens and Eliot's successful historical novels, and given the historical context of the Crimean War could have been motivating factors in Gaskell's decision to switch from the social novel to the historical novel.

Elizabeth Gaskell's contribution to the historical novel is remarkable since she intersects public political affairs and how those affect the individual, while focusing on an often disregarded topic: how war and international affairs affect women like Sylvia. The purpose of the historical novel genre is to show that history is the accumulation of stories of common people: "These novels and their focus on common people make it

clear that ‘history’ is more than biographies of great men” (Lowe 149). In fact, Gaskell differs from Walter Scott’s historical novel model by focusing the plot on the effects political events had on common people. So, in *Sylvia’s Lovers*, the Napoleonic Wars are part of the setting and drive the plot to a certain extent, but it is not the main action of the novel itself because readers wouldn’t find it as relatable: “Gaskell challenges Scott’s genre of historical fiction by ‘writing of a period of upheaval and great event’ but making that action ‘peripheral’ since most people are ‘not excitingly involved in history’s great events’” (Easson 160). Instead of focusing on the war, Gaskell takes a gendered approach and centres the narrative on how external factors like war impact the character's lives, specifically the female characters.

### **1.3 STATE OF THE ART**

Watson et al. (2004) published an academic article focusing on the heroes and heroines of Elizabeth Gaskell while also mentioning those specific to *Sylvia’s Lovers*. It focused on what constitutes a hero or heroine in Gaskell’s novels and concluded that the underrated Hester was in reality the heroine of the story, due to her forgiving and selfless nature typical of a heroine. As Watson defends, the fact that Hester tries to reconcile Sylvia and Philip despite the damage it caused her, shows her ability to meddle between two different sets of beliefs in the hopes of achieving peace for everyone.

Cathrine O’Frank (2012) researched Gaskell’s social novel *North and South* compared to later historical novels by Gaskell such as *Sylvia’s Lovers*. The goal of the article is to account for the change from social novels to historical novels and how both subgenres are a way of reflecting the social and historical changes through fiction.

According to O'Frank, Gaskell compassionated the discontent that leads to revolution and her fiction allowed for a political debate with diverse insights to take place.

Meghan Lowe (2020) focused on the idea of masculine identities in *Sylvia's Lovers*. Through a close reading of selected passages, Lowe establishes the dichotomy between the old model of masculinity that Kinraid represents of the brave and heroic sailor versus the new model of the self-made educated capitalist that Hepburn represents. However, her research and conclusions account for the new models of masculinity compared to the old ones.

Finally, Ingrid Hanson (2021) researched William and Elizabeth Gaskell's view on peace and war, by compiling sermons by William and relevant passages by Elizabeth Gaskell, to show the opinions people had on the Crimean War and which ones the Gaskell matrimony shared. Essentially, the Gaskell matrimony took a conservative view and did not fully support reckless revolution, but still showed sympathy for the discontent people showed. According to them, inactive peace is detrimental and imperfect action in wars is necessary to not side with the oppressor but not all wars are done for the greater good of society.

#### **1.4 TFG OUTLINE**

With this dissertation, I aim to defend that Elizabeth Gaskell's narrative shifts from the focus on men with the goal of describing problematic patriarchal behaviours and the effect war had on women and families. As well as exploring the generational change between old models of masculinity and femininity and the new ones to show the changing Victorian society. I will study the different levels of gender oppression in

warfare through a feminist approach. My methodology will consist of a close reading of relevant passages.

In this dissertation, I will first contextualise Elizabeth Gaskell's historical novel written at the time of the Crimean War and account for the popularity of the historical novel subgenre. In my second section I will engage in a close reading of the novel and discuss the relation of heroism to the old model of masculinity and the new emerging self-made model of masculinity. In the subsection of masculine identities, I will also focus on the quarrelling for Sylvia's love, as it shows competition between the two types of men belonging to different social classes and educational backgrounds.

In the second section, I will then turn to analyse the feminine identities and how different Victorian models of what constitutes a perfect Victorian woman interplay between the main female characters. In the conclusion, I will lastly focus on the effects warfare had on women and I will delve into the need to make the public sphere available to women as well, since their domestic life is also political.

## **2. MASCULINITY IN *SYLVIA'S LOVERS***

The focus that historical fiction has on the individual experience in a warfare context is what allows Elizabeth Gaskell to delve into the social changes relating to gender norms. By focusing more on characters and their lives, instead of the historical events themselves, Gaskell shows two models of masculinity. The first one is the old model of masculinity based on heroic and adventurous figures shown by Daniel Robson and Charley Kinraid, Sylvia's romantic interest. But Gaskell also explores the new model of masculinity, based on the capitalist self-made man, portrayed by Sylvia's cousin, the Quaker shopkeeper Philip Hepburn. Even though these three characters are the

prominent figures in Sylvia's life, the novel's types of masculinity regarding military heroes are what unites the two models of masculinity. After his rival for Sylvia's love gets involuntarily taken by the pressgang to fight the war against the French, Hepburn decides to not let Sylvia know the truth of what happened to Kinraid and his possible comeback. He does so to have a chance with Sylvia but by betraying her trust. Thus, enrolling in military service is his first step towards redeeming himself to Sylvia and Kinraid, by acquiring the old model of masculinity of the brave soldier and hero that saves a fellow soldier in the midst of war and a child from drowning.

The opposition of the two types of masculinity is established from the title itself, as Lowe suggests: "From the title alone, Gaskell sets up *Sylvia's Lovers* as a tale of multiple masculinities" (Lowe 153). Essentially, Elizabeth Gaskell is concerned with issues of social change and the different cultural masculinities mainly represented by Hepburn and Kinraid. While Kinraid is in line with the old model of masculinity based on heroism and adventures, Hepburn represents the emerging model of masculinity that I will later develop in more detail.

What divides both men is their level of education, occupation and their ideals. While Kinraid is not a learned man, Hepburn is influenced by Quakerism and knows how to read and write. In fact, the new model of masculinity that Hepburn represents is representative of Gaskell's time, as literacy rates kept increasing throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Secondly, their occupation distinguishes the heroic harpooner who captures Sylvia's heart with his storytelling abilities from the shopkeeper who attempts to teach Sylvia how to read with no success. Lowe describes this as Gaskell being interested in the social changes of masculinity in warfare and its counterpart of men who work in a shop, but who are literate and with good economic prospects: "By putting a harpooner against a man selling ribbons and by exploring heroism and generational gender



differences, Gaskell makes it clear that she is still vested in notions of manly work and manliness” (Lowe 153). The fact that Philip sells ribbons is mentioned throughout the novel as a sign of femininity, according to Daniel Robson, distinguishing him from Kinraid’s manly model of masculinity. In fact, even for Hepburn, whose occupation is perceived as less adventurous and interesting by other characters like Sylvia and her dad “thou’rt little better nor a woman, for sure, bein’ mainly acquaint wi’ ribbons” (Gaskell 192), his job as a shopkeeper around ribbons is thought of as less masculine because it is associated with feminine clothing. This is a generational gender difference, given that Daniel Robson belongs to a previous generation and Kinraid's job aligns with Daniel’s former, while the self-made man is a recent concept.

Moreover, in this collision of opposite characters, there are also two sets of beliefs compared. Whereas Philip Hepburn is representative of a masculinity associated with trade, religion and education, Kinraid is the fearless hero who acts on impulse, like when he confronts the press-gangs at the beginning of the novel. To push the political implications of both, they show the passionate individual perspectives and the prudent social ones. This political rivalry is mainly depicted through the two lovers. In terms of ideology, while Kinraid and Daniel represent a “primitive kind of populism” (Lowe 164) and both fight the press-gangs to protest against forceful imprisonment, Hepburn is a self-made capitalist with his Quaker morality, refusing to engage in impulsive acts, and rather a defendant of following laws.

Nevertheless, for the main character Sylvia, her first known model of masculinity is her father Daniel Robson. Daniel Robson is the head of the house and as early as in chapter four, his childish nature is shown “Daniel resented being treated like a child, and yet turned his back on Philip with all the wilfulness of one (...) Daniel pretended not to listen at first and made ostentatious noises with his spoon and glass”

(Gaskell 40). The fact that he makes noises with the tableware like a child would, contrasts with his role as the head of the family and the farm. This contrasts with his wife Bell, who presents herself as less smart to respect the gender roles of the housewife while the head of the house, Daniel, throws tantrums and acts like a child yet exerts all the power in the domestic sphere. Thus, inevitably, any other masculinity is compared to him as well as needing his approval.

Similarly to Kinraid, Daniel is impulsive in his decisions, which is the reason for his fatal execution for instigating the riot against the press-gangs. As a sort of foreshadowing at the possibility of his behaviour becoming a problem later on, the reader is provided with this information early on. Although, by Victorian gender roles, the man is expected to rule the house, the narrator states how his wife is far wiser in her decisions, yet Daniel thinks he rules. The fact that the patriarch is compared to a child in his behaviour brings into question the gender roles in the domestic sphere and shows the fault in letting reckless men having all the power in the house. Bell Robson being wiser and described as “superior to him” questions the status quo that women had, since socially they were relegated to the private sphere and not well regarded when participating in public discussions and affairs:

Daniel was very like a child in all the parts of his character. He was strongly affected by whatever was present and apt to forget the absent. He acted on impulse, and too often had reason to be sorry for it (...) and the wife, who was in fact superior to him, but whom he imagined that he ruled with a wise and absolute sway (Gaskell 228)

In this fragment, the narrator states that Daniel “often had reason to be sorry for it” (Gaskell 228), which foreshadows next chapter’s incident in the riot. Daniel’s execution is a warning about acting foolishly and impulsively when it comes to resistance and opposition. Although war is necessary to defend the nation and act when unfair

circumstances are unfolding, thoughtless rebellion only creates disruption with no positive outcome.

## **2.1 HEROISM AND WAR**

The figure of the hero in warfare is a way of displaying the old model of masculinity, which as Meghan Lowe claims about Gaskell's depictions of masculinity: "Gaskell suggests that understanding masculinity is vital to national concerns" (Lowe 62). Not only is the soldier a patriotic figure whose function is to protect their country and its citizens, but they are also doing an active job, which is perceived as manly and respected in society.

In the context of the Crimean war, the author Elizabeth Gaskell does not "oppose the war in print or in person, she complicates the dominant pro-war narrative of virtuous, manly heroism versus degrading commitment to peace-oriented trade" (Hanson 4). However, a completely peace stance to war is, as Hanson argues, "destructive of manly action and heroism" (Hanson 5). Manliness and heroism are related to war and the idea of defending your nation when there is danger, which is why no-action destroys the concept of the hero and the old model of masculinity attached to it. Moreover, William Gaskell defended that in the event of war "our inaction, it seems to me, makes us, in some degree, accomplices' in oppression" (Hanson 8). Essentially, sometimes war is necessary as a way to fight oppression because inaction implies agreement with what the oppressor is doing. This same belief was held by the revolutionaries in their attempt to spread their ideas to overthrow the despotic monarchies. War was seen as a necessary evil to fight monarchical oppression.

Even though William Gaskell defended trade, Daniel's view of trade as the feminisation of men was an opinion also held by those who argued trade was "emasculating and unheroic" (Hanson 10). In comparison, Sylvia's dad "liked Kinraid and had strong sympathy not merely with what he knew of the young sailor's character, but with the life he led, and the business he followed" (Gaskell 183). Mr. Robson likes Kinraid because they both share values of fighting press-gangs, living adventures at sea and they try to act heroically.

In the context of the novel, the three masculinities that Daniel, Kinraid and Hepburn represent are intertwined with the ideas of heroism and war. Facing the unjust situation in Monkshaven, Daniel impulsively riots, which is a radical approach punished by law with execution. Therefore, it is fair to infer that Gaskell is condemning this behaviour in the story, and only the two moderate alternatives can be considered: Philip and Kinraid.

The ideas of masculinity are not only a topic concerning individuals, but also their implications in a socio-political context. The stances taken about war during Gaskell's context, are reflected in Philip and Kinraid. Philip Hepburn takes a pacific stance, similarly to the one the Peace Society took against the Crimean War, and defends that: "Women is so fond o' bloodshed (...) who'd ha' thought you'd just come fra' crying ower the grave of a man who was killed by violence? I should ha' thought you'd seen enough of what sorrow comes o' fighting" (Gaskell 71). In few words, he condemns war and violent acts for they bring sorrow and do not solve problems. However, he also acknowledges the power that the soldier figure has, so his enlistment is a way to also regain that manliness. The reason behind women being fond of bloodshed is the idea of the hero, the sense of protection it gives them, and the masculinity attached to the glory of war. Particularly for Sylvia, she is attracted and

fascinated by heroes. At the beginning of the novel, she is interested in Kinraid because he defied the pressgangs.

Nevertheless, the fact that in the previous fragment he mentions women crying over a dead man has two implications. On the one hand, he is belittling Sylvia for crying, since expressing emotions was something regarded as exclusively feminine and considered weak. On the other hand, he mentions women are fond of bloodshed, so of war and the old model of masculinity that he does not fit in and causes him insecurity since he compares himself to Kinraid from the moment he appears.

Despite Philip being a shopkeeper in favour of peace at the beginning of the novel, after Sylvia discovers he knew the truth of the Kinraid being unwillingly taken to fight the war, Hepburn enrolls himself in the Royal Army voluntarily. By this point, both masculine identities come together, as both are now in warfare. Philip Hepburn redeems his wrongdoing to Kinraid by saving his life during combat, and thus Philip is now a hero.

Nonetheless, this status of hero does not last as long, since after the boat accident where he burns part of his face, he is no longer eligible to be a soldier. Similarly, Daniel “disqualifies himself from the pursuit of daring, heroic manhood” (Lowe 162) by having two amputated fingers. However, even if Daniel could not become a hero in his youth, he does so by fronting the press-gang in the riot. His resistance to authority, although ending with imprisonment and hanging, allows him to become an ever-lasting hero in Monkshaven: “her father had lost life in a popular cause, and ignominious as the manner of his death might be, he was looked upon as a martyr to his zeal in avenging the wrongs of his townsmen” (Gaskell 369). He is well-remembered among his townsmen for fighting against press-gangs, but Daniel Robson is too radical to belong in his society. Daniel’s model of masculinity is discarded since

his way of fighting against oppression is reckless and with no forethought of the consequences of his actions. Such a radical model contradicts the conservative vision Elizabeth Gaskell and her husband had on war and peace concerns. By choosing to portray Daniel Robson, Gaskell is showing that thoughtless and careless rebellion is an impediment to a nation's improvement and while war might be necessary to defend the nation, rebellion with no purpose is detrimental and cannot have a place in society.

As it has been previously mentioned, the ideas of masculinity are built around heroism and war. *Sylvia's Lovers* is set during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars: "I'm for fair play wi' the French as much as any man, as long as we can be sure o' beating them" (Gaskell 41) and explores the ideas of nationalism and political issues. In fact, Daniel Robson and Philip Hepburn have a political and ideological discussion. On the one hand, Philip defends that laws are meant to ensure the well-being of citizens: "But, asking pardon, laws is made for the good of the nation, not for your good or mine" (Gaskell 42). Considering that Philip is literate, belongs to the middle class and has an urban job, he defends the ideas of the nation's well-being. He has acquired concepts like nationalism and morality through the Bible and books from the Enlightenment. Thus, literacy makes up an important component to this ideological discussion. Moreover, he also explains to Sylvia that law is to be obeyed and nothing can be done against it, showing his dislike for rioting and his respect for authority: "Sylvie! You must not. Don't be silly; it's the law, and no one can do aught against it, least of all women and lasses" (Gaskell 31). Philip not only rejects the idea of rebelling against the law, but he also specifies that women and girls cannot do anything against it. This stance shows the limitations of what women and girls could do to be a part of the public sphere. Moreover, his rejection of women in public affairs shows that Philip fits

Habermas' model of the bourgeois who participates in the public sphere with the aim of universality and not diversity.

On the other hand, however, Daniel is sceptical about the idea of the nation compared to the individual good: “Nation here! Nation there! I’m a man and yo’re another, but nation’s nowhere” (Gaskell 42). In the view of an illiterate farmer, concepts like nation are too abstract for his reality. What Daniel Robson cares about is his rural life, his family and what to him feels is right or wrong. Therefore, for him the nation is just a concept, and fighting wars to defend their nation just kills men. Both men have different perspectives on nationalism and political issues depending on their upbringing, their literacy, their background and how it affects them.

## **2.2 QUARREL FOR LOVE**

Elizabeth Gaskell’s love plot is another element which allows her to discuss gender dynamics when it comes to courting and marriage. Edgar Wright claims that *Sylvia’s Lovers* “was the first time that (Gaskell) made love the central issue of a major novel” (Wright 184) and this is what allows the reader to get an insight of the vulnerability women suffered due to men’s choices and external agents like the war.

In fact, the narrator describes how the setting in a town rather than an urban area has an effect on men who are likely to feel wild passion: “among a primitive set of country-folk, who recognize the wild passion in love, as it exists untamed by the trammels of reason and self-restraint, any story of baulked affections, or treachery in such matters, spreads like wildfire” (Gaskell 350). In the case of Philip, his refusal to accept Sylvia’s rejection and give up is the dangerous love that drives Philip in an obsessive and self-destructive spiral to try to get his cousin’s love. The fact that Sylvia’s

uninterest was not enough for Hepburn to desist was the first warning sign for this toxic love. Nevertheless, Philip continues his pursuit for Sylvia's affection after seeing Kinraid as his rival and competitor. He displays no regard for what Sylvia wants and disrespects her established boundaries since her consent is irrelevant to him. He does so to the point that he seems to forget his Quaker moral values and hides the truth about Kinraid's disappearance, as he sees it as an opportunity to get Sylvia. The key word is "get", since both Kinraid and Hepburn see Sylvia as someone to "win", as a prize rather than a person whose opinions and interests matter. The two male characters objectify Sylvia and overlook her wishes. In terms of gender roles, women were expected to abide by a passive stance and considered as a reward, while men quarrelled over their love.

An instance of this type of possessiveness is shown in chapter XVI, with Gaskell's language choice in describing Sylvia and Kinraid's romantic encounter. Moreover, Sylvia's body language seems to be evasive and uncomfortable throughout this scene "she lifted up her head, and all but looking at him — while she wrenched her hand out of his" (Gaskell 181). In this scene, Sylvia is evading his eyes and his touch and Gaskell's choice of using "wrenching" rather than just letting go, indicates her uncomfortableness in the situation. In reaction to that, Kinraid "made no effort to repossess himself of her hand" (Gaskell 181). Even though this is supposed to be a romantic encounter where Kinraid is showing his love for Sylvia, the author's choice of words is a significant depiction of possessiveness, thinking of Sylvia's hand as a property to be reclaimed rather than the expected caresses or reassuring words in such a situation. This fragment exemplifies the possessive dynamic in the relationship between Kinraid and Sylvia, where Kinraid tries to assert his dominance over Sylvia by trying to grab her hand despite her resistance and uncomfortableness.



Another topic worth discussing is the interaction between Daniel Robson and the two romantic interests. In order to marry a girl, the suitor had to first get the father's approval and since Sylvia's father had a similar occupation as Kinraid during his youth, he accepts him. However, his decision to accept Kinraid's engagement was taken unilaterally, in the absence of his wife, which he finds amusing: "He wound up with a chuckle, as the thought stuck him that this great piece of business, of disposing of their only child, had been concluded while his wife was away" (Gaskell 184). The fact that he thinks of his wife's reaction as chuckle-worthy is patronising and it comes from his perception of women as inferior and emotional. Once again, the vocabulary choice highlights the fact that marriages were usually a "business" to secure the future of girls and women. As it is described, for Daniel Robson, marrying Sylvia is a "great piece of business", which implies the "disposing of their only child" (Gaskell 184). Also, Sylvia's engagement is also referred to as a "bargain": "(Robson) turned and struck his broad horny palm into Kinraid's as if concluding a bargain, while he expressed in words his hearty consent to their engagement" (Gaskell 184). In this fragment, the vocabulary used to describe the engagement is related to the business lexicon, displaying how marriage was considered an economic transaction and the expected goal for girls and women.

This fragment shows the role that wives had in the making of important decisions that would impact their daughters' lives. The father's approval was needed but the mother's blessing was not necessary or as important. In fact, Sylvia's mom was not even present when the engagement happened, and her husband did not care to wait to give Kinraid an answer either. Kinraid's disappearance, Philip also seeks Mr. Robson's approval once he notices that the way into Sylvia's heart comes with Daniel liking him: "He seemed to find out that to please the women of the household he must pay all

possible attention to the man (...) he was continually thinking of how he could please him” (Gaskell, 2004: 228) and when he did anything to satisfy her father “Sylvia smiled and was kind” (Gaskell 228). As a matter of fact, Philip marrying Sylvia shows how the former patriarch in Sylvia’s life influences the choice of the successor of that power. Patriarchal power affects marriages and future generations, which in turn means it contributes to overall social change.

### **3. FEMININITY IN *SYLVIA’S LOVERS***

In *Sylvia’s Lovers*, femininity is constructed in opposition to masculinity based on the Victorian perspective of gender. By not adhering to the old model of masculinity, Philip's job is not manly enough to those standards, so Daniel calls him feminine. Moreover, not only is femininity dependent on what constitutes masculinity, but also described as either following the male gaze or disrupting it. For instance, Bell Robson and Hester Rose adhere to the ideal Victorian housewife ideology, but Sylvia disrupts it. She does so by facing Philip for his deceit, standing her ground and not forgiving him for the damage he caused her. However, this disruptive femininity is always opposed to her husband and in the domestic sphere.

In Elizabeth Gaskell’s historical context, the Victorian era, the concerns and questions regarding women's suffrage, rights, roles and social position were prevalent discussion topics. Gaskell’s *Sylvia’s Lovers* was published in 1863, and other contemporary thinkers and writers discussed the status quo of women. With thinkers such as John Stuart Mill publishing *The Subjection of Women* in 1869, the status of women in society was questioned under the term of the “Woman Question”. In fact,

John Stuart Mill defended that in order to achieve equality, the gender power dynamics would need to change with no sex subordination whatsoever:

The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes –the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power of privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other (Mill 91)

*Sylvia's Lovers* exemplifies this principle that Mill puts forward, that women are in a vulnerable position in society with their lack of means. Sylvia Robson is the prime example, since she is forced into the position of marriage to survive and to provide for her mother Bell. Throughout the Victorian era, women had the traditional role of “wives, mothers, and daughters” (Robson 653) and were confined to those roles exclusively. In fact, Elizabeth Gaskell delved into this topic in her novel *Wives and Daughters* published in 1866. According to the Victorian gender roles, virtuous women were those who had the sexual capital, which was the biggest asset for women to have. Being attractive and pure to the male gaze ensured a better life and more suitors for matrimony. Considering women had limited ways of earning income, becoming a housewife was the expected occupation for women and, thus, the importance of preserving sexual capital. In few words, sexual capital was how women could get a husband even if their economic capital would not legally belong to the wife. Firstly by being attractive to the male gaze and then by living a self-controlled life of sexual purity. As Robson phrases it, women were expected to have qualities such as “tenderness of understanding, unworldliness and innocence, domestic affection, and in various degrees, submissiveness” (Robson 654). A woman that ticked all these boxes was an ideal of the perfect Victorian woman, which Coventry Patmore entitled the

“Angel in the house” in one of his poems published from 1854 until 1862. Hester Rose exemplifies the model of the Angel in the house in *Sylvia’s Lovers* with her forgiveness, domestic skills and patience. While the Angel in the house is a mother and Hester is single, she fulfils the maternal role towards Philip Hepburn. Hester treats Philip as if he were not consequent of his own actions when he leaves Sylvia after she confronts him about lying about Kinraid’s disappearance. Hester defends him, looks after him and asks Sylvia to forgive him. By meddling in the fight between Sylvia and Philip, Hester is fulfilling a maternal role.

In Gaskell’s historical novel, the three main female characters are Sylvia Robson, Hester Rose and Bell Robson. The three characters show different versions of femininity, and their story development shows fundamental problems regarding marriage, women’s legal status and gender roles. The traditional and old model of femininity is displayed by Bell Robson, Sylvia’s mother. Mrs. Robson is an intelligent but traditional woman who fits the Victorian ideals by being a mother, a wife and a housekeeper. Even though she is described as wise, in order to appeal to the male gaze and fit in society, she conceals her intelligence in front of her husband: “Bell was a touch better educated than her husband, but he did not acknowledge this and made a particular point of differing from her whenever she used a word beyond his comprehension” (Gaskell 44). The way Daniel reacts when his wife uses words beyond his knowledge is by rejecting her point and differing from her because he cannot allow his wife to show her intellect to be superior to his. Women who were smart had to conceal it in order to fit in with societal expectations and male gaze.

The young Quaker Hester Rose is slightly less-conforming to the original model of femininity since she works at the shop along with Philip and is independent enough to not marry someone she does not love. This independence of Hester is partly related to

her Quakerism since the Quaker religion defends that everyone should have a direct and equal experience with God regardless of gender. She also has financial independence because of her job. However, she is still traditional and uniquely fits in the idea of the Angel in the House even if she is not a mother. Hester is religious, forgiving, sweet and selfless to the point that even after Sylvia and Philip get married, she supports him. She is capable to look past her own romantic interest in Philip and cares about his happiness and well-being before her own: “Hester, too, had her own private rebellion — hushed into submission by her gentle piety. If Sylvia had been able to make Philip happy, Hester would have felt lovingly and almost gratefully towards her; but Sylvia had failed in this” (Gaskell 378). Nevertheless, according to Hester, Sylvia should be the ever-forgiving angel of the house that Philip Hepburn deserves: “put away the memory of past injury, and forgive it all, and be, what yo’ can be, Sylvia, if you’ve a mind to, just the kind, good wife he ought to have” (Gaskell 403). Hester is also a literate and smart woman who has read the Bible, like most women of her time. In her reading of the Bible, forgiveness is necessary to have a close connection to God. However, Sylvia cannot read and is not religious like Hester is, which makes both take different stances to forgiving and moving on from past injury. Sylvia’s inability to forgive Philip for lying to her and putting her in the position where she was cornered into marrying him make her not eligible as a “good wife he ought to have”. By not forgiving Philip, Sylvia is defying the expectations put on women and specifically on wives. She looks after her own good and this is contrary to the basis of the Angel in the House, who does everything for her husband and her loved ones. Following Hester’s reasoning of Victorian gender roles and religion within marriage, he is entitled as a husband to have a submissive wife that will forgive him for anything.

Despite all, the female character with the most development is Sylvia Robson, the protagonist. Sylvia is a pretty farmer who is unable to read and write, which makes her extremely attractive to the Victorian male gaze. She is an ignorant and vulnerable rural girl who attracts the interest of Philip Hepburn and Charley Kinraid. The attractiveness of ignorance and innocence relies on ensuring that patriarchal power can control and manipulate women to keep them subdued. In the Victorian era, women's access to education and knowledge was limited to the domestic sphere and consequently, looked down on when compared to the knowledge belonging to men and to the public sphere. At the beginning of the novel, Sylvia is a happy and innocent girl only preoccupied with trivial affairs like the colour of the cloak she wants to buy. Contrary to the Quaker's rejection of superficiality, and by extension also to Hester's beliefs, Sylvia is frivolous: "And I chose the red; it's so much gayer, and folk can see me farther off" (Gaskell 44). Frivolity has been typically associated with women and heavily criticised, even to this day. The imposition of gender expectations on women resulted in their capital depending on their appearance and adherence to the male gaze. Moreover, because of their limited opportunities and access to power, appearance was women's only means to a better life. Consequently, women cared a lot about their appearance and got criticised for being frivolous. In this part of the novel, Philip tries to convince her to buy the grey cloak to stand out less in an attempt to change her to fit in and control what he wants her to wear. While red is a bright and attention-drawing colour, grey is a colour to melt with the crowd. Philip's insistence on Sylvia buying a grey cloak derives from his interest in Sylvia being modest and not attracting interest of other men: "Not that (...) It's the gray you want, is it not, Sylvie?" to what Sylvia answers "Please, miss, it is the scarlet duffle I want, don't let him take it away" (Gaskell 29). From this, Sylvia's personality is that of a decided young girl that does what she

wants without letting external opinions matter. A feminist reading of Sylvia Robson shows how she questions and goes against imposed gender roles that promote self-control and submissiveness and just does what is best for her. Instead of letting Philip control what she wears or does, she is: “ready to smile or pout, or to show her feelings in any way, with a character as underdeveloped as a child’s, affectionate, wilful, naughty, tiresome, charming” (Gaskell 28). Sylvia Robson differs behaviour-wise from the expectations imposed on women by choosing a red cloak and being vain about her looks, compared to the modest Quaker femininity.

Within society, she is also perceived with good eyes and well-received when she goes to the party where she starts getting close to Kinraid. She is described as “young, and pretty, and bright, and brought a fresh breeze of pleasant air about her as her appropriate atmosphere” (Gaskell 57). This description makes the reader aware of the desirable qualities for women in Victorian society, which have to do with appearance and youth. Nonetheless, this childish and innocent view of the world is disrupted by the beginning of the press-gang action in Monkshaven. Her happiness goes on decline as war takes her loved ones away which shows how war affects women as well. Firstly, when Kinraid is forcedly taken by the press-gangs to participate in the Napoleonic wars. Then with her father being executed for rioting against press-gangs and finally with her vulnerable position where she decides to marry Philip to ensure a good position for her mother. The position that forces Sylvia to marry Philip is due to the limited options women had to be independent, with no economic stability or resources to take care of her mom, she is pressured into marriage. As she explains to Kester: “Tell me t’ chances. Tell me quick! Philip’s very good, and kind, and he says he shall die if I will not marry him, and there’s no home for mother and me, — no home for her, for as for me I dunnot care what becomes on me” (Gaskell 296). The need to protect her mother drives Sylvia

to the desperate choice of marrying Philip, disregarding her wishes for her future. As Sylvia says in the former fragment, there are no other options when the patriarch dies. They cannot keep the farm or the house, and thus the requirement to have a man who can provide for her and her mother.

### 3.1 WARFARE'S EFFECT ON WOMEN

The position women had in Victorian society when it came to education and knowledge was limited to the domestic sphere, since “a woman who tried to cultivate her intellect beyond drawing-room accomplishments was violating the order of Nature and religious tradition” (Landes 654). The production of knowledge and public opinion was reserved for men only. The distinction between public sphere and private sphere was made by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962) almost one hundred years after the publication of *Sylvia's Lovers*. A feminist framework to his theory is a useful tool to explore the participation of the male and female characters of the novel in public and private affairs and how war affected women's lives.

The principle of critical public debate Habermas described supposedly aimed at publicity and universality. Meaning that the opinions discussed in public debate were from private people and open for “everyone (...) to participate” (Landes 96). However, owing to the fact that in the public sphere no private matters could be debated “it was ill equipped to consider in public fashion the political dimension of relations in the intimate sphere” (Landes 97) the bourgeois public sphere was restricted to men. Women were kept out of the public sphere because the public sphere was supposed to defend a false idea of universal interest and “when women during the French Revolution and the



nineteenth century attempted to organize in public on the basis of their interests, they risked violating the constitutive principles” (Landes 98) and furthermore, violating the gendered principles of the spheres. In fact, women’s exclusion was needed to ensure that their assigned places in the private and domestic domains were not questioned. In their sphere, women were in charge of taking care and nurturing the emotional development of children.

Considering the effect warfare had on the characters, it evidences that the discussion of public affairs also concerned women. The forced domesticity Bell and Sylvia face is what prevents them from engaging in public opinion and defending their interests. For instance, while Daniel Robson is able to rebel against the press-gangs and thus engage in the public sphere, his wife belongs to the domestic sphere “Bell Robson piqued herself on her house-keeping generally” (Gaskell 38). However, war and the consequent events related to it such as the riot, transform the lives of Bell and Sylvia. Since women, by the basic principles of public opinion, cannot engage in the public sphere, they find themselves in a position where decisions made by men leave them with no agency. Nevertheless, the decisions taken without women participating in public opinion still affect them. Contrary to Habermas’ theories, domestic affairs are also political and belong to the public sphere.

Furthermore, the principles of the public sphere claim universality and considering the common good to ensure the status quo in which women are subdued and to “conceal rather than expose forms of domination, suppress rather than release concrete differences among persons or groups” (Landes 99). The common belief that wars affect men conceals the other side of the argument, which is that war by extension also alters women’s lives and interests. And in order to achieve universality, the public sphere had to both include men and women.

In *Sylvia's Lovers*, the Napoleonic Wars greatly impact the lives of Sylvia and Bell Robson. Gaskell's novel shows the consequences of limiting the public sphere to men only and not taking into account domestic problems as political. Bell loses her husband, her farm and her sanity because of the war and its outcomes. In the case of Sylvia, she loses Kinraid, her dad, is forced into an unhappy marriage and is left by her husband. What happened in their private spheres had to do with war and politics. However, while men have the right to discuss politics in the public sphere, women could not. On the one hand, women encountered a glass ceiling not allowing them to access knowledge and education further from the domestic sphere and into the discussions of the public sphere. On the other hand, they were also overlooked from the sufferings of war, as if not being drafted implied living a normal life. *Sylvia's Lovers* takes a deeper look into how since political affairs impact both gender's lives, women should also be able to participate actively in the public sphere.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Overall, by taking a closer look at the historical novel *Sylvia's Lovers*, this thesis has shown the different models of masculinity and femininity and explored how gender norms determined the inclusion or exclusion of individuals in the public sphere. A close reading of the text with a feminist framework has revealed the old and new models of masculinity and femininity during Gaskell's time and has shed light on the problematic view of generalising universal participation, since it often reinforces power dynamics and suppresses differences among different groups.

The lack of agency that Sylvia had when it came to external political forces of the public sphere is also true for the men around her, which exerted the same effect of

powerlessness in her life. The male characters stripe her agency by making decisions for her, which eventually puts her in the position of her father dying, her marriage and her being a single parent without means to recover and live a happy life. Elizabeth Gaskell's approach to war through the lens of the domestic sphere allows her to shift the narrative focus from the historical novel which had been on the glorification of heroic figures and the main action to the forgotten narrative of the women, families and homes left behind. Gaskell gives a voice to an underrepresented reality and raises awareness about how the domestic sphere is also political.

*Sylvia's Lovers* read through a feminist framework unearths the core problems of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Victorian and the contemporary societies: the need to make the public sphere an intersectional sphere where concerns can be discussed freely without discriminating against anyone, how gender norms are ever-changing through generations but always remain as expectations imposed on women on behaviour and attractiveness. Also, this novel shows the problematic behind the power the patriarchal figure holds, leaving women vulnerable and economically dependent on them due to a lack of resources, education and equal opportunities.

## **FURTHER RESEARCH**

Further research is necessary to take a closer look at Elizabeth Gaskell's literary production to analyse gender roles and the socio-political implications of such in the bigger picture. Similarly, a comparative study between *Sylvia's Lovers* and *Wives and daughters* on the limited paths women could access would further develop our understanding of Gaskell's criticism of marriage and impositions put on women. Also, more investigation on the construction of feminine characters would be relevant since

current sources on this historical novel draw more attention to male characters than female ones. Other Victorian texts such as *The Odd Women* (1893) by George Gissing or *Middlemarch* by George Eliot (1871-1872) analysed through a feminist approach to Habermas' theory of the public and private domains would be enlightening. *The Odd Women* explores the limited occupations of unmarried Victorian women and the discrimination they faced socially for not conforming to the imposed standards, which I believe would give insight into how the public and private spheres apply to them. *Middlemarch* is another historical novel written by a woman that depicts the limitations women faced in their pursuit of professional occupations. A study of the previously mentioned novels would shed light on the social limitations of women in the public domain and apply Habermas' theory to non-conforming Victorian women.

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