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Margaret and the ideal woman: An analysis of the heroine of Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* in relation to the female ideal of the Victorian era

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Table of Contents

Abstract

In this paper, I will evaluate the actions of the heroine Margaret Hale in Elisabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, from the perspective of how her actions correspond to the female ideal of the time. When the novel was published, Gaskell had already received criticism for her earlier works in which the heroines act in improper ways according to the contemporary ideals, and the heroine in her new industrial novel is certainly not the passive nor obedient woman those ideals called for. As Gaskell was aware of the negative feelings her earlier publications had invoked, it appears as if Margaret Hale is constructed as a character who is constantly balancing on the edge of being deemed as improper while always having a good reason for her actions. In correspondence with both her friends and Dickens, Gaskell expressed anxiety due to her previous works being seen as immoral and therefore an analysis of how she chose to construct her next heroine will be interesting. To perform this analysis, I will identify what the female ideals of the Victorian era were, followed by a presentation of scenes from *North and South* in which Margaret Hale actions can be contrasted with these ideals, in order to discuss her behavior and her reasoning for acting in unconventional ways. In the end, I will try to answer the question if Margaret Hale is to be considered a proper woman according the ideals of 19th-century England.

Introduction

During the mid-nineteenth century, the Western society was in the process of reshaping itself from the bottom up as the industrialization was in full motion, removing several traditional occupations and creating new demands for urbanization and factory workers. During this period, political changes were seen on several fronts with the growing working class clamoring for higher wages and better living conditions, and a few people had even started to voice the opinion that women should gain rights equal to those of men. In the rapidly changing society of 1855, Elisabeth Gaskell published her fourth novel, *North and South,* which takes place in the middle of the contemporary political struggle of the Victorian era. By her depiction of a young confident woman, Gaskell's work manages to touch upon ideas about women which would be carried further by the suffragettes about fifty years after the release of the novel. Gaskell had by the time of the publication already managed to stir up feelings with her earlier novels, especially *Mary Barton* and *Ruth,* in which the female heroines act in ways certainly not in line with the ideals of the 19th century, and the new novel followed the same pattern. While the woman question is never explicitly discussed in *North and South,* the presence of a strong female heroine in an era where passivity was a desired characteristic in women certainly allowed Gaskell to discuss its implications.

In *North and South,* the reader gets to follow Margaret Hale, a young woman in the southern English countryside whose family is forced to move up North after her father starts having doubts in the church of England and therefore resigns from his position as vicar in their parish. They instead settle down in Milton in northern England, an industrialized town where the factory workers are in the middle of a strike in which they demand higher salaries and better working conditions from the harsh factory owner John Thornton. Despite Margaret not belonging to either side of the conflict, she engages in conversations with both the factory owner and the union leader about their views, and in the end her efforts lead to the two parties reconciling. Margaret is not only actively involved in the local business politics of Milton, but her behavior is characterized by decisiveness, independence, and strength, which regularly makes her actions conflict with the ideals of the 19th century. Margaret is not only a clergyman's daughter from the countryside, but through most of her life she has been raised by her aunt in an elegant upper-class apartment in London and she is well versed in the conduct of the higher social circles through her extensive experience of attending fancy dinners and trying on

expensive dresses. Her background, combined with the cultural and moral teachings a woman in her position surely received from her father (Brown 3) establishes Margaret as a cultivated woman during the Victorian era. While she is initially unfamiliar with the attitudes of a working-class town, Margaret's experience combined with her thirst for knowledge makes her eager to learn about the practices of both the factory owners and the struggle of the workers.

In this paper, I will examine how Margaret's actions in *North and South* correspond to the contemporary ideal for English, middle-class women during the mid-19th century. The question that will guide this inquiry is: According to the female ideals of 19th-century England, is Margaret Hale to be considered as an improper woman or not? To answer this question, I will first present an overview of the female ideals which were prominent during the Victorian era and provide a background to why some of these ideals came to gain a foothold during the 19th century. Secondly, I will present scenes from *North and South* where these ideals are noticeable, and to limit the scope of this paper the scenes chosen will be connected either to women in the public sphere or women's behavior in relation to the male gender. To complement the discussion regarding the impropriety of Margaret's conduct, I will also discuss the motives behind her actions.

Throughout this essay, I will present evidence for three claims regarding Margret's behavior in *North and South*. First, Margaret never acts against the ideals with a rebellious intent but instead she is often forced to act improper by different circumstances, and there are generally very good motives for her conduct. Secondly, Margaret possesses many of the virtuous characteristics that were praised in women during the 19th century, and she tries to act according to them when the circumstances allow her. Lastly, I will argue that Gaskell has knowingly depicted Margaret so that her actions often balance on the verge of being improper but without it being a clear case. These claims are based on Gaskell's own reflections in letters to family and friends after the release of *Ruth* in 1853, in which she expressed uneasiness by the notion that several readers have found her novel to be indecent, as it tells the story of a pregnant, unmarried woman (Michie 82; Epstein Nord 159). Therefore, how well Gaskell succeeds in having her character on the brink of impropriety without classifying her as such will also make out an aspect of this paper.

Ideal females and the public space in 19th-Century England

During the Victorian era the concept of separate spheres got a foothold. The idea is based on the belief that women and men are different by nature and thereby society should assign the sexes two different areas of responsibilities. The men became responsible for everything in the public sphere whereas the women were supposed to take care of the household and moral education of the family. Davidoff and Hall assert that the idea of separate spheres had become integrated in the minds of the English middle class during the 1830s and 1840s, from formerly being associated with the Evangelic faith (149). They claim that one of the reasons for this development was King George IV's attempt to divorce his wife Caroline in 1820, which meant putting her on trial to expose her supposed infidelities and the public court case became a widely discussed topic among the middle-class (150). Some of the female ideals of the time were seen in the king's critique towards his wife, with Caroline being denounced for "… her lack of control, her verbal indiscretions, her openness as to her feelings. These were characteristics far removed from the fragile, dependent, passive virtues increasingly associated with femininity" (152). While the critique in itself was in line with the ideals of the time, many citizens were upset to see their queen being publicly attacked which made the attempt unfruitful. Nevertheless, it ultimately strengthened the sentiment that women needed to be protected and as the public sphere was seen as a tainted place, women were to remain in their homes to avoid being corrupted by it.

The view that the public sphere was corrupted stemmed partly from the urbanization process, which had brought large numbers of laborers into the industrialized cities and while the workers successively moved into slums, the wealthy inhabitants relocated to the suburbs. The industrialized city itself came to be seen as "physically and morally dangerous" (Gunn 61), an indecent place which became even worse in the night when the factories had closed and the 'uncivilized' workers roamed free in the streets. These factory workers were not the only concern, but many cities also noticed an increased number of prostitutes wandering around in the center, which further reinforced the cities association with decayed morals. While middle-class men walked freely on these immoral streets, middle-class women could not for fear that men would mistake them for prostitutes (Ingham 68), that they would be assaulted by working-class drunkards, or simply that they would be corrupted by the environment. Consequently, women became increasingly barred from the city streets (Gunn 65). In an article dealing with female public appearances in *North and South*, Barbara Harman goes as far as claiming that

any type of public appearance could be damaging for women's reputation and especially if they were accompanied by unknown men. Harman outlines the Victorian society's view on the public sphere as characterized by "strife, disorder and even chaos" (Harman 352).

The Victorian woman was not only constricted by society's fears, but in a more real sense she had very few options when it came to either education or independence. Some voices had been raised during the mid-19th century to give women access to both property and the universities (Harman 351; Shanley 17) but the question would not gain enough traction until about 50 years later. The fact is that, when *North and South* was published women were not free individuals in the eyes of the law but instead they were seen as property belonging to their father, brother, or mother respectively until they were given away in marriage through which the guardianship was transferred to their husbands. The husband had full control of the household's assets and could beat her without much risk for consequences since the guardianship was equal to a parental relationship with him as the father (Shanley 3). The only way for women to gain independence was to marry and manage to outlive their husbands, for as widows they could control their family's assets until their sons became old enough to inherit it all.

Women's exclusion from the public sphere did not relieve them from being responsible for what occurred there. Quite the contrary, they were most responsible of all for upholding the morals that the contemporary society saw as decaying. Women's duties in the domestic sphere consisted to a large extent of raising children, and during that process they were supposed to transfer moral values onto them so that their offspring would grow up into decent citizens. Their daughters were to be good wives and mothers, their sons to be proper and honest in order to eventually venture out in the public life to be educated and seek employment, and even their husbands were to be taught moral lessons in order to improve conduct in the public space. It was said that women were the "most essential member of domestic society" and moreover that "it depends upon woman whether man shall enter upon duties of life, as man, duly prepared both in capacity and in habits of them" (Fraser, Johnston and Green 104). Thus, while women were barred from actually taking part in the public life, they were nonetheless the ones responsible for its wellbeing. The public sphere was the men's domain, whereas the domestic sphere was not exclusively women's but instead it made out a shared space where the spouses could interact, and it was through these interactions that the women were supposed to influence the outside world by teaching their husbands morals (Huang 160). These interactions were not supposed to touch on male subjects such as politics and business, and Fraser, Johnston and

Green present an extract from an article which states that women had prevented revolutions which had been "produced by our domestic, and not by our political attachments" (107), a statement which the authors claim puts an unusual emphasis on women's involvement in politics. More than it was a division of the sexes, the separate spheres were limitations placed on women's opportunities as men who took great interest in the domestic sphere and their children were seen as good husbands. As a result of that, it was possible for the men to do everything that women could, while the women were limited to the domestic sphere (Davidoff and Hall 169).

For middle- and upper-class women, there was an instance where they could venture out in the public life to work, and that was through church-related or charitable work (Brown 4). The work consisted of visiting the poor and sick in order to supply them with food and comfort in their time of need, which was carried out in a manner similar to that of a mother, which of course was the most important one for the Victorian woman. These duties were closely connected to the Christian, spiritual mission for women and while there were some discussions regarding exactly how these missions should be carried out, "No serious Christian would have disputed the need for women's charitable endeavors" (Davidoff and Hall 429).

To conclude this section, women during the 19th century were to be passive, obedient and confined to the home. Their duties consisted in caring for the domestic sphere, while raising children and influencing positive morals on their family and other members of the public sphere. With reference to morality, they were viewed as somewhat superior to men, but in all other regards they were seen as inferior, and since they were such moral beings it was important that they did not become corrupted which is one of the reasons that the public space was closed off from them.

Margaret Hale and the separate spheres

In *North and South,* the idea of separated spheres is touched upon already in the first chapter which takes off inside the lavish London apartment of Margaret's aunt, who has partly raised her and made her accustomed to all the habits of the upper class. Together with a couple of ladies from their social circle, Margaret is trying on expensive Indian shawls and showing them off to the little audience when Mr. Henry Lennox enters. Mr. Lennox is Margaret's cousin Edith's soon-to-be brother-in-law, a lawyer and certainly a well-versed man who chooses to comment on the ridiculous practice that he has found the ladies taking part in: "Well, I suppose you are all in the depths of business – ladies' business, I mean. Very different from my business, which is the real true law business. Playing with shawls is very different work to drawing up settlements" (10). When dissecting Mr. Lennox comment, one can uncover several interesting points regarding the Victorian society's view on women. Firstly, he compares his job in the public sphere which demands both education and employment barred from women, with what he considers to be ladies' business. Secondly, by referring to it as business he is implicating that the women are doing exactly what ladies can amount to in life while at the same time ridiculing it, and thereby diminishing them as a group. Lastly, as a man he has the advantage of being able to step right in to the room and stating that what goes on in this private sphere is silly, while the women have neither the freedom nor the knowledge to enter the public sphere and ridicule the practices that the men take part in.

While Mr. Lennox's comment on the ladies' business is scornful, the division of the sexes that it alludes to is the reality of how the interactions between men and women were carried out in the Victorian era, and in *North and South*. This is exemplified later on in the novel, when Margaret is living with her aunt in London again and describes the dinners held there which truly shows how the women are constricted on such occasions:

> The elements of the dinner-parties which [Edith] gave, were these; her friends contributed the beauty, Captain Lennox the easy knowledge of the subject of the day; and Mr. Henry Lennox, and the sprinkling of rising men who were received as his friends, brought the wit, the cleverness, the keen and extensive knowledge. (377)

The only function that the women fulfill on these occasions is that of an object, something beautiful for the men to rest their eyes on while they reserve the conversation for themselves.

Even if women wished to participate, which of course was against the conduct on such occasions, their limited knowledge in many matters discussed around the upper-class dinner table excluded them in any case**.** Margaret does not participate in the discussions held by the men either, but her time in Milton has given her enough perspective on their social codes that she now finds the upper-class way of speaking on certain matters very shallow. Her discontent with the debate is obvious enough for Henry Lennox to inquire about the faces he has seen her make while observing the men, and they engage in a private conversation about the propriety of it all. While Margaret has been passive during the dinner, her wish to participate in the men's discussion is evident enough for other to notice and as a woman she has no right to do so. Still, she keeps it to herself until explicitly asked about it and ventilates her irritation regarding one of the guest's "…way of advocating what he knew was wrong" (377), but as this is in a private conversation and not announced to any others, it might be regarded as her teaching morality to Mr. Lennox by indicating that is in an improper way of behaving. By both being passive and trying to influence men with good morals, Margaret seems to be adhering to the Victorian ideals in this scene.

A while after the Hales have moved to Milton, Margaret's mother falls ill and remains bedridden up until her death and thus a funeral must be arranged. This should be taken care of by the men in the family, but Margaret's brother and father are so struck with grief that they spend the days afterwards unable to do anything, and instead Margaret is forced to temporarily act as head of her family (233). What is even more significant is what happens when the funeral is planned, as Margaret's father is surprised to hear that she wishes to attend it and he states that women usually do not go to funerals. The reason for this is explained by Margaret herself, who states that she is aware that women from her class usually do not attend as they are afraid of making a spectacle of themselves by not controlling their emotions and bawling. The act is considered shameful amongst women from the middle-class, and it is not until she makes several promises to behave well that Margaret can attend her mother's funeral which she herself has arranged (246-247).

Women's exclusion from funerals was a new concept in the mid-19th century, as it was common for the whole family to attend them in the 18th century, but one hundred years later few women did, and especially widows and daughter were forbidden (Davidoff and Hall 408). The reasons for prohibiting women from funerals are similar to the ones brought up against Queen Caroline by George IV at court, with those being "her lack of control, her verbal indiscretions and, her

openness to her feelings…" (152), and while being fragile was a positive characteristic in the Victorian woman that fragility was not meant for the public eye. Margaret's father and brother on the other hand, relinquish their duties towards the family when Mrs. Hale dies, and her father's fear that Margaret will act in the same way is what nearly excludes her from being present despite her acting most proper of them all. That is debatable though, as men could cry publicly during the Victorian era when it was deemed as necessary and the act could even be considered as manly as it showed that they were close to their emotions (169). Meanwhile, Margaret breaks against several Victorian ideals by assuming responsibilities closely connected to the male sphere, by arguing against her father's instructions when told she is not to attend, and lastly by attending a funeral where she is not supposed to be. Here, I would like to argue that Gaskell is making Margaret walk the edge of impropriety without falling into the category, for all her actions are reasonably explainable in this instance. She only assumes responsibility for the funeral when it is surrendered by the men in her family, and for a daughter to yearn to be present at her mother's funeral is certainly not improper even by Victorian standards. As an addition to this, Margaret does not draw any attention to herself during the funeral but instead she comforts her father during the process by holding his hand and citing passages from the Bible (248), embodying the female virtues of caring for those in need.

The real stigma connected to women being out in public becomes apparent before the funeral, when Margaret is walking her brother back towards the train station to send him off. Margaret's brother is wanted for mutiny and is sought after across the country for crimes against the crown which makes it crucial that his identity remains concealed. When they arrive, Margaret runs into Mr. Thornton, who is in love with her and finds it horrifying that Margaret is walking arm in arm with an unknown man "at that late hour, so far from home" (249), and the lack of explanation from Margaret only adds to his grim feeling that the virtuous lady has a rather tainted character. While Margaret is saddened by the fact that "in Mr. Thornton's eyes, she was degraded" (262), her brother's identity makes it impossible for her to confess to the truth of the matter and she chooses to appear as an indecent woman rather than risking his exposure. There is a subject that is not touched upon at all in the novel, but which comes to mind when talking about a young, unmarried woman walking arm-in-arm with a young man after dark through the city, namely prostitution. Mr. Thornton does not believe that Margaret is anything remotely close to a prostitute, but the time and place certainly makes his mind go through many stages of justification to explain her behavior. His mother also receives news about the conducts of

young miss Hale, and as she is aware of her son's feeling for Margaret, she inquires how he would have felt of his own sister had "being seen out, after dark, in a rather lonely place, walking about with a young man" (289). The thoughts voiced by Mr. Thornton and his mother align with the fears expressed about females walking around in the industrialized city, since Margaret is out after sunset when the factory workers have finished their shifts and might threaten her or assume her to be a lady of the night. She is also far from home which indicates that she has probably walked through the city in order to reach the station and thereby potentially exposed herself to indecency, but most importantly she has been walking around with an unknown man. In the eyes of any middle-class Victorian unaware of the man's identity, this would be a clear-cut case of impropriety, but the fact is that Margaret choses to sacrifice her own dignity in order to protect her brother from potential harm. The time of the day is one of the few aspects that makes the stroll truly unfit for Margaret according to Victorian standards, for simply being out on a walk accompanied by your brother is not improper, and while she lies to Mr. Thornton she does so motivated by the need to protect her family. Meanwhile, Mr. Thornton being out on his horse at the same time and place is not questioned in any way as men did not have those restraints on their movements.

The indecency linked with these public appearances returns yet again towards the end of the novel, when Margaret wishes to pay a visit to Mr. Bell. Since both of her parents are now deceased, she resides in London and her godfather Mr. Bell is a close friend, so when Margaret is informed that he lies in bed mortally sick she instantly decides to get on the next train to Oxford to say her final goodbye. Before she leaves, Margaret informs her cousin Edith of her plans and for the first time throughout the novel Edith takes an interest in something non-superficial and pleads with Margaret not to go alone. She is instead urged to ask her aunt for permission, and her aunt's reaction to the suggestion of Margaret traveling to Oxford alone falls well in line with the Victorian era's outlook on women being alone in public: "Mrs. Shaw became bewildered and hysterical, […] and after various discussions on propriety and impropriety, it was decided that Captain Lennox should accompany Margaret" (380). For Margaret to get on the train from London to Oxford on her own is out of the question, and instead it is demanded that her cousin's husband is to accompany her on the journey in order for the ordeal to be proper. In this instance, the public sphere where Margaret would supposedly travel alone is not in the form of an industrialized city, but the proposed journey is between London and Oxford which still seems filled with immorality enough to hinder her from going.

In fact, the only reason that Margaret is allowed to travel to Oxford at all, despite being accompanied by Captain Lennox, is her decisiveness to go regardless of who might join her, and "…she was surprised herself at the firmness with which she asserted something of her right to independence action" (380).

Just as with the funeral, this obstacle to women's ability to move freely became more strongly enforced during the 19th century with the introduction of separated spheres, as compared to the 18th century (Davidoff and Hall 285-286). In an article which compares *North and South* with Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, Brown suggests these restrictions on women's freedom of movement are noticeable even in the short period between the two publications, claiming that the women in *North and South* are more dependent on their men and that "the private sphere is becoming more constricted and women becoming more isolated in their domestic enclaves and within their social classes" (353). Margaret's assertiveness in this case is due to the notion that Mr. Bell will die within the oncoming days which is a reasonable motive, but for her to assert her own right to independent actions in the public sphere during the Victorian era is beyond what could be deemed as proper behavior. As a 19th-century woman, Margaret does not have any rights of that sort and the claim combined with her disregard for her aunt's commands classifies her actions as improper in this instance.

Margaret and behavior connected to the male gender

As stated in my introduction, Margaret does not intend to challenge norms but instead she often acts out of necessity when certain roles are forced upon her. An example of this have already been presented above when she is forced to arrange the funeral, but the first instance of this occurs already in the second chapter. Her father has just lost his faith in the English church and decided to give up his position as clergyman, which means that they must move from their home as it comes with the occupation. Instead of informing the family about the decision that he as the father has made, Margaret is told of his intentions in a private conversation and is given the responsibility to break the news to her mother as Mr. Hale cannot bear to tell her himself (31). The daughter of the family, who is supposed to be raised into a passive and moral woman, is suddenly forced to assume the responsibility for informing her mother of the decision to resettle, a task demanding firm actions which certainly should be carried out by her father. Mr. Hale's tendency to shy away from his obligations as head of the family often leads to

Margaret being forced to step into roles that the men of the family should assume, as I will show in show in later examples. Overall, other character's failure to perform their duties is a returning theme in *North and South* and it often compels Margaret to go against the female ideals of the 19th century.

After the Hale's arrival in Milton, Margaret's father yet again relinquishes his responsibilities when it is time for him to meet their new landlord, the factory owner Mr. Thornton, as he is not around when Thornton arrives to meet with the new tenants. Instead, Margaret is once again forced to temporarily act as the head of the family, and Mr. Thornton is certainly surprised not only by being greeted by a woman but also by Margaret's demeanor which is quite different from what he is accustomed to:

Mr. Thornton was a good deal more surprised and discomfited than she. Instead of a quiet, middle-age clergyman, a young lady came forward with frank dignity, -- a young lady of a different type to most of those he was in the habit of seeing. […] Mr. Thornton was in habits of authority himself, but she seemed to assume some kind of rule over him at once. (58)

While the act of simply greeting a guest arriving to their home is not improper, Margaret's confident way of carrying herself does not show a trace of the obedience and passivity that is intimately connected with female ideals, which Mr. Thornton notices in an instant. As a young, middle-class woman marriage should be a high priority for Margaret and in this instance she is meeting with a well-off young man who might be a potential suitor. Because of this, the ideal female characteristics should be on display in front their guest, which is what Thornton seems to expect on this occasion. While Margaret actions are not explicitly improper, she does not align with the contemporary codes of conduct either which states that she should not take on these responsibilities nor emit a sense authority. The fact that she does not treat Mr. Thornton as a possible marriage prospect is surprising for a woman in her position, but not improper behavior per se.

When Margaret and her father attend a dinner at the Thorntons, the separation between the men and women once again becomes obvious with "a very animated conversation going on among the gentlemen; the ladies, for the most part, were silent, employing themselves in taking notes of the dinner and criticizing each other's dresses" (156). The women present seem aware of their role in the context of a dinner held in an upper middle-class household, as they are

obedient, passive and are employing themselves with the ladies' business of discussion fabrics and food. Margaret choses not to partake in their discussion, as she finds the men's conversation regarding trade and manufacturing more appealing since she wishes to learn more about both their businesses and the local practices. Although, she does not actively participate in their conversation but instead she "silently [takes] a very decided part in the question they [are] discussing" until she is more or less forcibly removed from the table by Mr. Thornton's sister who is under the impression that Margaret finds it uncomfortable sitting amongst the men. The other women have already left the table as the dinner is finished and the men have started discussing matters reserved for their sex, but Margaret's curiosity makes her unaware of the fact. Afterwards, she contemplates on her own behavior but does not seem to find it improper that she sat with the men: "I had never thought about it, I was so busy listening; and the ladies were so dull" (161). In this instance, Margaret walks a fine line between behaving as a lady should and stepping into the male sphere, for while she "silently participates" in a conversation meant for men only she does so passively without speaking her mind. Her choice to stay at the table after the other ladies have left is not improper, but her taking an interest in matters suited for the opposite sex is as Margaret "liked the exultation in the sense of power which these Milton men had" (153. With her experience of the upper-class society of London, she should be aware that partaking in these conversations in not suitable for women but her own thirst for knowledge takes the upper hand in this scene which in itself is an improper desire.

The outspoken fears of the industrialized city during the Victorian era were to a large extent based on the view of factory workers as beastly people whose lack of morals made them violent, and these fears come in fruition in *North and South.* While Margaret is visiting the Thorntons, an angry mob gather outside willing to lynch Mr. Thornton due to him bringing in hands from Ireland to keep his factory running during the strike. Instead of staying hidden inside, Margaret suggests that the right thing for Mr. Thornton to do is walking out the door to try to calm down the crowd, which turns out to have the exact opposite effect and the furious laborers seem ready to have him executed on the spot. When Margaret grasps the severity of the situation, she instantly rushes outside to shield Mr. Thornton from the horde of angry workers. While standing in front of Mr. Thornton, Margaret is knocked out by a stone aimed at him and the strikers quickly disperse after seeing the bleeding woman on the doorstep. Margaret breaks several rules of conduct by her actions, most importantly by venturing out in the public sphere to interfere

with a man's business and protecting him from the violence of the masses, which is the kind of violence that her contemporary society feared women would fall victim to if they were to be out alone. Ingham claims that: "By becoming agent in the public sphere and the centre of all eyes she has turned herself into a public woman, an actress not an angel, potentially a fallen woman" (Ingham 67). The term 'fallen woman' is far more severe than 'improper', as it refers to a woman who has fallen from the grace of God. The term was often used to describe prostitutes or women of a similar social standing, but as seen in the quote above Margaret runs the risk of potentially being marked as a fallen woman by merely being noticed by several individuals out in the public space. Just as it was improper for Margaret to cry during a funeral, almost every instance of women drawing attention to themselves outside of the home has a negative connotation in the public eye.

There is nothing passive or fragile about Margaret's behavior, but what is even more surprising is her justification for her conduct when questioned by Mr. Thornton: "It was only a natural instinct; any woman would have done the same. We all feel the sanctity of our sex as a high privilege when we see danger" (187). She continues by retorting his inquiry that it might have been due to her having feelings for him, claiming that "that any woman, worthy of the name of woman, would come forward to shield, with her reverenced helplessness, a man in danger from the violence of numbers." (188). The motives for her actions are nowhere to be found in the female ideals of the Victorian era, and in fact they stand in direct opposition to them as women were supposed to be protected from violence at all costs, and it was the duty of decent men to make it so. Margaret's suggestion that Mr. Thornton should face the crowd is also on the verge of an improper proposal, as it regards how he should handle his business and therefore it lands outside the scope of what a woman should teach a man about. While her motive is pure, as it is her love for Mr. Thornton that is responsible for her actions, her behavior cannot be excused in the eyes of the Victorian public.

Another case of Margaret acting overly confident for a Victorian woman is when Mrs. Hale's condition is taking a turn for the worse, and a doctor is called to their home to examine her. Due to her mother's instructions, Margaret is excluded from the room and the doctor is told not to share his diagnosis with her as to not upset her. Going against her mother's wish, Margaret stops the doctor on his way out and invites him to a private conversation in her father's office to discuss her mother's health, contemplating that "She saw, and triumphed over all the

obstacles which Dixon threw in her way; assuming her rightful position as daughter of the house in something of the spirit of the Elder brother" (117). In this scene, Margaret is obviously aware that her conduct is not in line with the female ideals by commenting that it is done in the spirit of the elder brother, although she still justifies it by referring to it as "her rightful position". Another thing to emphasize is that she refers to it as "daughter of the house", pointing out the domestic sphere that she acts within to strengthen the pretext for her actions. Her actions may again be justified by the lack of the men fulfilling their roles in the household, as her brother is abroad, and her father is in denial regarding his wife's condition (132). Dr. Donaldson's own view of Margaret's manners is quite positive afterwards: "That's what I call a fine girl! […] What a queen she is! With her head thrown back at first, to force me into speaking the truth; and then bent so eagerly forward to listen." (119). Partly, he is impressed by her assertive manners, compared to Thornton who was intimidated by them, and he also expresses surprise due to the fact that she did not fall into despair when being informed that her mother is dying. As Margaret is motivated by her mother's wellbeing, the lack of other family members fulfilling their roles, and her actions being carried out within the confinements of the domestic sphere, she is not necessarily classified as improper in this scene despite acting in a masculine fashion.

Margaret's virtue and morality

So far, the discussion in this paper has concerned the ways in which Margaret Hale's actions conflict with the ideals of the Victorian era, but in this section I will discuss those of her characteristics that do align well with the 19th-century notion of how a proper woman should behave. Early in the novel Margaret has a suitor in the form of Henry Lennox, who travels out to her home in Helstone and accompanies her on a walk where they explore the surrounding nature and draw sketches together. Mr. Lennox gets a little bit annoyed by Margaret being oblivious to his attempts at expressing his interest in her, and as the days goes on he finally gathers the courage to ask for her hand in marriage (21). Margaret does not accept, which is strange by Victorian standards as he is an educated man who is expected to make a good amount of money in the future, and her position as a middle-class woman makes the match very advantageous for her. While Margaret takes it upon herself to turn down his hand in marriage, she feels guilty for not informing her father of the proposal since he might be displeased with her having "taken it upon herself to decline" (29) without his input in the matter. Before she has the chance to give the matter too much thought and tell her father, he informs Margaret of

his decision to resettle the family to Milton and it is all quickly forgotten. The fact that Margaret is so concerned with her father's potential reaction to her decision shows that she is very much in line with the patriarchal structure that made out family life during the 19th century, by which the father had a say if not the final decision in such affairs.

A returning aspect in this paper has been that Margaret fulfills the roles of her father and brother when they abandon their responsibilities, but in fact she regresses back to her role as the obedient daughter as soon as the position is filled once again. This is seen when her brother visits them in Milton after word has reached him about their mother's illness, and Margaret immediately transforms herself back into the devoted sister ready to serve her brother: "[Margaret] went in like a serving-maiden, with a heavy tray held in her extended arms. She was proud of serving Frederick… It was a relief to her to aid Dixon in all her preparations for 'Master Frederick'" (237-238). Meanwhile, Mr. Hale and Frederick are having a private conversation in his study, about what Margaret does not know and does not wish to know, as she is just glad to have her brother and family structure back while not having the shoulder any additional duties (238). During her brother's absence, she was her father's right hand, given the responsibility to inform her mother of the move to Milton and meeting with Mr. Thornton, but when Margaret's brother has returned, she is relieved that she can finally reassume her role as daughter once again. Moreover, the regression occurs naturally compared to how the other roles are often forced upon her.

Throughout the novel, Margaret's cousin Edith seems to only care for superficial matters and while she is obedient towards her husband and limits her interests to upper-class subjects such as elegant dinners, she does not fulfill her most important role as the mother to her son. Edith enjoys her son's company when it is all fun and games, but as soon as he behaves badly she throws herself on the couch and exclaims that she does not know what to do with him. Edith is so distraught by her son simply being disobedient that she cannot even call for the governess, and instead she asks Margaret to ring the bell to call for help. Margaret chooses not to oblige, and instead she assumes the role of the educating mother herself: "She would carry him off into a room, where they two alone would battle it out; she with a firm power which subdued him into peace […] until he would rub his little hot and tear-smeared face all over hers, kissing and caressing till he often fell asleep in her arms or on her shoulder" (398). Again, Margaret undertakes a role, this time as mother which is the most important role for her sex, when others fail to uphold their responsibilities. With her actions, Margaret teaches Edith's son to subdue

his aggressive feelings and thereby she is inevitably coaching him for his entry in the public sphere, and with these actions she as a woman has her impact on the public realm through her moral and virtue, which is the correct way for her sex to affect such matters (Davidoff and Hall 281). Just as she regressed back to her role as daughter, Margaret assumes the responsibility automatically which is evidence of her possessing the most important virtue for women during the Victorian era, and by doing so she truly establishes herself as a virtuous woman of the Victorian Era.

The last area connected to virtue that Margaret takes part in is the charitable work towards the poor and needing, an activity which she starts with already in Helstone and carries on with after resettling in Milton. While the ideal called for women to assist those in need, Margaret goes a lot farther by not only assisting the cottagers around Helstone but also regarding them all as her true friends, being "continually tempted off to go and see some individual friend – man, woman, or child – in some cottage in the green shade of the forest." (12-13). After the Hale's arrival in Milton, Margaret yet again takes up the care of the poor who now goes from the cottagers to factory workers in the form of the Higgins and primarily the young, sick Bessy. Despite them both being the same age, Margaret's extensive experience of London, the English country side and the dinner held at the Thorntons makes her into a kind of motherly figure for the bedridden factory worker, who wishes to know everything about the world outside of the industrialized city (98). Margaret continually seeks out those in need, without neither encouragement nor insistence for other people, and it seems natural for her to assist those in dire need wherever they may be, which makes it into a truly virtuous trait. Through Margaret's interactions with Bessy, she also gains insight into about how rough the workers are treated inside the factories and how hard it is for them to get by during the strike. In her dissertation, Debra Threlkeld-Dent suggests that Gaskell connects the female emancipation process with the working-class movement's effort and by aligning the struggle of two groups who are different but share the roots of their oppression stemming from "Economic power, societal mores, and governmental system of rule" (Threlkeld-Dent 56), Gaskell may indirectly touch upon the women's question. As I have stated in the section concerning the Victorian ideals for women, pressure stemming from the local community, the rule of law, and ideals handed down from the highest instance in the country all played a part in the subjection of women, a problem which Margaret never tackles straight on throughout the novel. As women were not supposed to engage in politics but had a spiritual mission in assisting the poor, Margaret's insight into the workers struggle

indirectly exposes the limitations on her own sex, and thereby Gaskell might have found a way to circumvent one of the dilemmas which she tried to balance between in *North and South*.

Conclusion

At the start to my essay, I set out to find out if the heroine of *North and South* was to be considered an improper woman according to the female ideals of 19th-century England. I believe that the answer to this question is yes, despite there being evidence of Gaskell attempting to justify many of her actions by placing Margaret in situations where she must step outside of the framework constructed for her gender and providing her with good reasons based on moral and righteousness when she does act against these ideals. While not all the examples presented in the two first sections should be viewed as improper behavior, her choice to protect Mr. Thornton from the mob and her wishes to travel to Oxford alone cannot be disregarded even though she is acting in good faith.

As I have pointed out in this paper, the restrictions on women's rights and opportunities tightened severely during the first part of the 19th century compared to the ideals of the 18th century, and those changes made it hard for women to live up to the Victorian society's expectations if they wanted to be anything else than obedient housewives. Despite Gaskell providing Margaret with all the highest virtues of the 19th century and making them appear natural to her, merely walking alone in the street was enough evidence of a degraded character to deem a woman as improper in Victorian times. I believe that I have also supplied enough evidence for my claim that Gaskell has Margaret balancing on a knife's edge throughout the novel, and while this opens up several avenues for questioning the ideals of the era it still does not save Margaret from being labeled as improper. In the final section, I touched upon the argument that Gaskell might have used the struggle of the working class to highlight the women's own struggle but due to the limited space in this paper I will leave that question to someone else.

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