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NEGOTIATING "A WOMAN'S WORK": PHILANTHROPY TO SOCIAL SCIENCE IN GASKELL'S *NORTH AND SOUTH*

By Sarah Dredge

A REVIEW OF F. D. MAURICE'S *Lectures to Ladies on Practical Subjects* in 1856 considered the question of "female visiting" among the poor with reference to Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*. Though agreeing that it is "the subject of much anxiety," the reviewer illustrates the value of female philanthropic visiting with a reading of Gaskell's novel:

> Once in a while a visitor may mediate between the master and the man. So the circle widens and spreads, and who can tell the misery which that one kind woman's call may have averted? And here it is impossible not to allude to a work most fruitful in suggestion on this subject. We mean that part of Mrs. Gaskell's "North and South," which portrays the gradually acquired ascendancy of Margaret over the radical and infidel weaver, Nicholas Higgins. The more nearly it is examined, the more genuine and free from blemish does this picture appear. Humility and deep sympathy, on one side, meet in time with the due abatement of pride on the other: the whole coming quite within the range of possibility. (qtd. in Easson 370)

North and South, published in serial form in 1854–55, was written at a time of transition in notions of social care when the field of social science – now more associated with professional activity than amateur charity – was developing. In 1857 a group made up of lawyers, politicians, educators, medical professionals, penal reformers and women's movement campaigners established the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science (NAPSS) to research and lobby government for reform across the range of areas identified now as Social Science.[1] Women were key participants in NAPSS, reflecting the fact that much of this expertise had been associated with female philanthropy, like the visiting the reviewer speaks of so approvingly. But as this work became a professional concern, it drew women into areas more clearly beyond the domestic, and many took this opportunity to present their efforts as serious work, not amateur charity.[2] Penal reformer Mary Carpenter addressed the inaugural NAPSS convention, and "reputedly became the first woman of the middle or upper classes to speak in public in Britain" (qtd. in McGregor, Goldman, and White). Gaskell's novel traces this transition, as the naïve middle-class "visitor" Margaret

Hale threatens to become that fearful creature, the "strong-minded" woman (509; ch. 49) negotiating how far she can seek fulfilment through "freedom in working" (508).

The above review of Maurice's *Lectures* indicates the shifting and uncertain attitude towards women's social roles. While registering the danger to vulnerable middle-class women of leaving their domestic and class sphere to enter the homes of the poor, the reviewer emphasises instead the valuable social function these women can perform in assuaging class tension. Women's place in the domestic realm is both confirmed and undermined in acknowledging their value in this social sphere, which suggests that the development of this field served to unsettle the demarcations of public and private that shaped middle-class gender relations.[3] At the same time, the reviewer insists that this social role is properly concerned with spreading and widening middle-class ideology, with its gender and class relations: the role is that of "visitor" and it is in her capacity as non-professional domestic woman that she gains her entry to the worker's home and hence an opportunity to exert her beneficial middle-class influence. As an example of the good a "visitor" can do, the reviewer goes on to suggest that "a father is found to be out of work; sometimes he honestly owns, under the influence of gratitude . . . that he has been in fault: he has displeased his employer, and wishes to be reconciled" (370). The blame for the suffering of the poor is put firmly at their own door; the role of the visitor is to encourage recognition and repentance. The scenario he imagines thus employs middle-class women to consolidate the class and gender relations of patriarchal society ("the master and the man"). He identifies this process directly with *North and South*.

But this interpretation of *North and South*, which has been echoed by more recent critics, ignores the complexity of Gaskell's response to discourses on women's participation in the social sphere. Whereas the reviewer sees influence and power flowing in only one direction — from the middle-class man via the female visitor to the lower-class male worker – Gaskell insists that the exchange goes both ways. It is clear in the novel that Higgins also shows Margaret "[h]umility and deep sympathy" and that Margaret equally has "pride" to be abated. Also absent from the reviewer's reading of *North and South* is the impact that both Margaret and Higgins have on the industrialist "master" John Thornton. Whereas the reviewer identifies women's role in the social sphere as the simple transmission of values from middle-class "masters" to working men, I shall argue that Gaskell modifies this view to place women at the centre of a far wider unsettling of gender and class relations through the ambiguous category of philanthropy, which begins in this novel in the exercise of charity and ends in industrial relations.

In this debate on philanthropy and work, the existence of the novel itself must be taken into account. Some critics have speculated that Gaskell intended her novels as her own form of philanthropy, and Gaskell herself observed (as Barbara Leah Harman notes) that she found it easier to make her social statements in fiction rather than in person (54). While part of this transfer may be the fear of ridicule and abuse that Margaret Oliphant attributed to herself in "The Grievances of Women" (231), it also suggests that the novel allows for a fuller engagement than a personal statement or a political tract can achieve. The novel is also, of course, the product of a professional female writer. Thus while it discusses the changing social labour being performed by women, the novel offers itself as an example of the part women could play in social debate. As such, it has been judged along with the issues it addresses. An 1856 review in *The Leader* argued that the subject matter of the book – trade relations – was incompatible with the function of the novel as "delineator

of human life in a harmonious, interesting whole" (qtd. in Easson 335), a reading which reinstates the division between trade relations and a person's life that the novel seeks to challenge.

Modern critics have also tended to criticise the novel for its human and trade strands but focus on its relocating of problems associated with economic relations to the private sphere of personal relationships, where its problems can be imaginatively resolved.[4] It is my contention, however, that such readings do not give sufficient credit to Gaskell's shift away from this simple binary division of public and private, so that the critique is framed in terms that the novel is trying to overcome. Instead I argue that Gaskell's work can be centrally located in the contemporary women's movement, specifically in the debates on recognised positions for educated women in the field of social labour, as it shifted from a feminised charitable realm towards a recognised form of civil agency. *North and South* suggests both the pitfalls and the critical importance of philanthropy in marking out this territory as available to women.

At first sight, and as perhaps its title suggests, *North and South* appears to conform to binary thinking, being divided between two spheres and two plots. At the outset, we are presented with the private realm of southerner Margaret Hale, with her philanthropic interest in the poor in her father's rural parish, and the public working realm of northerner John Thornton, for whom interactions with others are mediated always through the working relationship of utility, supply and demand. Paralleling this division, two plot movements work themselves out: a romance plot involving Margaret and John, and the social problem plot of workers and employers. Whether discussing *North and South* as a social problem novel, an industrial novel, or a feminist text, some critics have objected to the way these strands seem to mutually resolve each other. In this view, the social issues raised by the industrial plot and the feminist challenges posed by the apparent questioning of domestic ideology are solved and contained by the marriage of John and Margaret. But Gaskell is precisely concerned with exploring the relationship between women's lives and their social environment, what she terms in the novel "that most difficult problem for women, how much was to be utterly merged in obedience to authority, and how much might be set apart for freedom in working" (508; ch. 49). The relationship between Margaret Hale and John Thornton becomes the site where paired differences – masculine/feminine, north/south, masters/men, philanthropy/work – are debated and revised. This resolution does not represent the avoidance of social issues through the marriage plot; rather, in questioning the distinction between male and female work, the novel undermines the binary division of gender that holds these concepts in positions of opposition. In the northern manufacturing city of Milton, Margaret realises that the public and private spheres that seemed so clear cut in her southern life, with their demarcation of gendered behaviour and the class divide it implicitly supports, cannot be sustained. Whether for man or woman or for middle class or poor, the world of work cannot be held apart from the domestic home in Milton. Mrs. Thornton works as part of her son's business, and Bessie Higgins and her sister work. Fanny Thornton, who tries to emulate a London leisured lady, is seen here as weak and deficient rather than proper. And it is through Margaret's experiences here that she realises how her more conventionally domestic life in the south kept up an illusion of separateness.[5] Her philanthropy reveals the merging of realms presented as separate. Margaret's interest in the welfare of her poor neighbours, an approved object of female philanthropy in the south, involves her in a labour dispute in the industrial north. The conventionally feminine pursuit of charitable interest runs seamlessly into the

masculine territory of industry, challenging not only the legitimacy of separate spheres, but also the concept of gender difference that the division sustains.

Yet Margaret does not see herself as transgressing her gendered sphere, suggesting that this is a category that cannot be cohesively sustained. The point at which this is most dramatically shown is in the famous riot scene. In stepping physically and vocally in between the rioters and Thornton, Margaret's motives are of charitable (and specifically gendered) concern, both for the workers threatened by the imminent arrival of the soldiers, and for Thornton at the mercy of a volatile mob. She sees her role as a woman as that of social mediator (like the visitor role), standing between harsh justice and the violent, lawless reaction to it:

> "It was not fair," said she, vehemently, "that he should stand there – sheltered, awaiting the soldiers, who might catch those poor creatures as in a trap – without an effort on his part, to bring them to reason. And it was worse than unfair for them to set on him as they threatened. I would do it again, let who will say what they like of me. If I saved one blow, one cruel, angry action that might otherwise have been committed, I did a woman's work." (247; ch. 23)

The mediator's stand is a role approved by the reviewer cited previously, but it leads her far beyond the expected parameters of the domestic homes of the poor. As Rosemarie Bodenheimer notes, Gaskell "deliberately overruns the separation between men's and women's spheres while at the same time showing how domestic ideology molds her characters' responses" (63). Margaret perceives her actions as legitimate "woman's work"; after all, she has sought to bring about social understanding with her womanly sympathy and "reverenced helplessness," as she puts it to Thornton the next day (253; ch. 24). In this, her intention does not significantly depart from the evangelical view of women's philanthropic function; indeed as Sarah Ellis was to write in *Education of the Heart: Women's Best Work*: "a lady may do almost anything from motives of charity or zeal" (14). So although Margaret is placing herself between combatants in a labour dispute, with her high regard for her "maiden pride" (247; ch. 23) and her "chivalric" (378; ch. 37) ideal of class-based social intercourse, her views on the functions of gender and class at this stage in the novel can be easily traced to bourgeois domestic ideology.

However, as was the case with many female philanthropists who attempted to exploit this discourse of domestic ideology to argue for their right to work, Margaret is blind to the penalties that accompany calling upon such gendered understanding of behaviour.[6] The title of Sarah Ellis's book makes clear that women's work is read in terms of sentiment and affect rather than principle. When it is taken onto the public stage in the masculine sphere of industry (almost literally a stage, on the steps of Mr. Thornton's house, emphasising Margaret's visibility), this sentiment is seen in its excessive and transgressive manifestation of sexuality. Stretching approved gendered roles to breaking point leads to a sexual interpretation: Margaret has become a spectacle, a "public woman." As the Thorntons' servants saw it, she had "her arms about the master's neck, hugging him before all the people" (239; ch. 22). Mrs. Thornton reads Margaret's "woman's work" as "allowing her feelings to overcome her" (245; ch. 23), and she believes Margaret has compelled her son to propose to her. Margaret wants her actions to be justified with reference to dominant, so-called natural, ideas of gender ("It was only a natural instinct; any woman would have done just the same. We all feel the sanctity of our sex as a high privilege when we see danger" [252; ch. 24]) and yet also

be understood according to a common, ungendered, sense of abstract justice ("It was not fair"). But such notions of abstract disinterested action were incompatible with conceptions of female behaviour, as was reinforced by many female philanthropists who focused on love rather than principle or politics. This disjunction is apparent when Mr. Thornton subsequently proposes to Margaret on the strength of her defence of him. Her actions will never be seen as disinterested as her father's and brother's can be; therefore she objects in vain that "You seem to fancy that my conduct of yesterday was a personal act between you and me" (253; ch. 24).

Both Margaret's expectations and the actual events point up the discrepancies between the rhetoric and practice of domestic ideology and the contradictions this led to in definitions of appropriate female philanthropy. While women were told it was their role to purify society, their actions were always under sexual scrutiny and suspect to sexual interpretations. Far from enjoying sanctity due to her sex, Margaret's motives are scrutinised under a different, lower and narrower frame of reference than her own motives anticipate, and different from that applying to men. What is disinterested philanthropic concern to Margaret is seen by all around her as the revelation of personal feeling. This awareness motivated many female philanthropists to emphasise the private nature of their good works. In her essay "Women as Philanthropists," Henrietta Barnett terms the Metropolitan Association for Befriending Young Servants "an army of kindly ladies fighting sin and sadness, their chief weapon being friendship" (130).[7]

By accepting her essential difference from the masculine sphere of work as proposed by gender ideology, Margaret seeks in the mob scene to exercise the moral power this supposedly gives her. Her philanthropic intervention depends upon exploiting her gender difference to interrupt masculine relations of power, following the evangelical notion of women's civilising influence; but as the narration baldly states: "If she thought her sex would be a protection, . . . she was wrong" (234; ch. 22). Having allowed the patriarchal designations by which gender was to be understood, it was impossible then to act publicly without either being dismissed or judged by these gendered terms. An 1841 commentator put this situation more pithily, saying: "Women, as a class, cannot enjoy, at the same time, the immunities of weakness and the advantages of power."[8] When she tries to plead with the mob, exercising her female moral authority, Margaret is struck by a stone, suggesting Biblical references to the stoning of prostitutes.

The mob's reaction demonstrates that in this masculine sphere, Margaret's actions can be seen in this context only by pushing the idea of feminine philanthropic moral influence well beyond its evangelical usage. In "Relationship Remembered against Relationship Forgot," Catherine Gallagher usefully devotes much attention to the degree to which Margaret's influence works as a social force. In this case, however, it is hard to distinguish between influence and individual action. If women are to have influence rather than agency, the implication must be that influence is a passive quality; women act upon others rather than acting for themselves. On one level, Margaret is attempting by her almost silent feminine self-sacrifice (her voice fails her: it is described as a "hoarse whisper" and "like a cry" [235; ch. 22]) to inspire both the rioters and Thornton into reason and mutual understanding. At the same time, in running out of the home into the full glare of an industrial disturbance and placing herself physically between the combatants, she has surely progressed into active agency. She is punished as a female agent: the mob's reaction to Margaret fits her transgression. The stoning (with its implication of sexual crime) both physically and symbolically puts a stop

to her agency and returns her to passive object. It is not her moral judgement but "the thread of dark-red blood which wakened them up from their trance of passion" (235). As Gallagher points out, since Margaret is understood to be acting purely out of love for Thornton (rather than Christian love), "in Milton it might be impossible for Margaret or any other woman to exert her moral influence for the common good" (173). Once influence and action become impossible to distinguish, then it is more difficult both to exclude women from political life (shown by the fears of some NAPSS speakers: in the 1863 example quoted below) and for women to avoid sexualised interpretations of their behaviour. The difference between appropriate and transgressive social actions could not be made firm and depended less on the act itself than on the context – conscience or motive was not enough. Margaret's political intervention in the riot is prefigured shortly before at a dinner party at the Thorntons' home, where the men avidly discuss the coming strike while the women talk about their homes, dresses and servants. Margaret, listening attentively to the men's conversation, "silently took a very decided part in the question they were discussing" (216; ch. 20). Thornton recognises and responds to her engagement, saying "I could see you were on our side in our discussion at dinner – were you not, Miss Hale?" But when her participation shifts taking part vocally and physically, he, like everyone else, judges her behaviour on a different basis; her actions have now become sexualised.

The tendency of philanthropy to collapse any satisfactory distinction between action and influence, public and private, underscores what was at stake in the gendering of the language of social participation. The importance of this type of influence as a concept within domestic ideology was its ability to mask the powerlessness of women, serving at once to elevate and disable female agency. With civil power withheld on a gendered basis, women's "moral influence" provided an alternative. Indeed, such influence was dependent on women's distance from civil structures – it was perceived to derive from women's domestic freedom from the corrupting concerns of the public world. As Frances Power Cobbe notes in "Social Science Congresses, and Women's Part in Them," "the acquirement of knowledge . . . was *not* 'woman's mission,' and . . . would infallibly distract her from it" (89). It was on these terms that female philanthropy was acceptable; if it was restricted to personal visiting and moral exhortation of the poor, it happily reflected this model of influence. But as Cobbe also observed, women could have no influence without agency, no real effect if their theoretical moral qualities were never to be put into action,[9] and once female philanthropy started to question civil or industrial organisation, as in Margaret's case during the riot, or in the growing female presence in NAPSS, it was swiftly found to violate the boundaries of "natural" or "proper" female behaviour. In the *Transactions* of the 1863 NAPSS convention, a report concludes:

> After some remarks on the inequality of the sexes, and on the position of women as decreed by nature, and accorded by society, the conclusion arrived at was – that to admit women into the learned professions was to make women do the work of men, and the result was to leave us without women, and to leave women's work undone. (355)

Where this comment recognises the blurring of gendered roles, it seeks to fix distinctions, to separate "women's work" from "professions," but the novel, like the experience of women like Frances Power Cobbe, showed this fixing could not be done. Women's work either ran seamlessly into professional work, or it was distinguishable only via the gender of

the agent.[10] In Helstone, Margaret performs many of the same charitable tasks as her professional minister father, and in Milton those same tasks enmesh her in a strike and its consequence.

In contrast to this confusion of gendered space and function in Milton, in the domestic environment of Margaret's London aunt and cousin, Gaskell offers a vision of what was popularly conceived to be more appropriately her place. This is the setting in which the novel begins, and to which after her time in Milton Margaret returns, thus providing a frame to the scenes of industrial life. This representation appears to endorse the view subsequently argued by John Stuart Mill in *The Subjection of Women* that the home is not necessarily the seat of moral generation (566). While Aunt Shaw and Edith are by no means morally corrupt, in restricting their interests purely to the feminine concerns of marriage, dress, and entertaining, they develop no qualities that could support a socially benevolent influence. Indeed, they seek to prevent Margaret from fulfilling the philanthropic work she takes as her social duty by worrying about propriety and dress. Edith frets that Margaret's efforts will make her "strong minded," but in embodying the opposite of the strong minded woman, Edith herself demonstrates the pitfalls of encouraging female weakness of mind. Both she and her mother are seen to be wanting in the very characteristics that domestic seclusion was meant to enhance – Aunt Shaw lacks sympathy with others, as shown when she rushes Margaret away from Milton after her father dies, and Edith is incapable of managing her children. Margaret refuses to see strong-mindedness in its intended negative light, joking with Edith that: "I'll faint on your hands at the servant's dinner-time, the very first opportunity; and then, what with Sholto playing with the fire, and baby crying, you'll begin to wish you had a strong-minded woman, equal to any emergency" (509; ch. 49). Moreover, even in this domestic sphere, Margaret is seen in exclusively sexualised terms; Edith sees her as an attraction to bring young men to her dinner table. Far from being a space apart from social concerns and sexual dangers, Gaskell shows the domestic sphere to be part of the same processes and susceptible to equal corruptions as the rest of society.

Throughout the novel, the issue of women's philanthropic work allows Gaskell to examine the way in which behaviour is gendered, and she complicates received categories with conflicting differences and associations. This is again apparent in Margaret's intervention in the mob scene. Among the striking workers in the mob scene, Margaret is not solely seen as a sexualised woman, but also as a member of the employer class. She is assumed by some to be Thornton's sister, thus emphasising her class allegiance to him. Neither Margaret nor Mr. Thornton, who abuses the workers for showing violence towards a woman, can control the way in which her identity is constructed by the community. Whereas in moral questions, and by middle-class society, she is seen resolutely as a woman, in this industrial environment and before the mill workers, her middle-class identity equally defines her, and her class outweighs her gender. Domestic ideology, though posing as a comprehensive constellation of fixed natural characteristics, could not contain the multiple differences and allegiances that identify a subject at any given time. In this context, it proves misleading. In positing gender difference as a fixed identity, it fails to take into account other factors which may at different times assume more relevance. Margaret attempts to be the visitor/mediator, and the rioters brutally expose the gender and class implications of this role.

Through the context of philanthropy and work, Gaskell frequently dissociates stereotypically gendered actions from biological sex in order to question the veracity of these naturalised attributions. Conduct deemed "feminine," either positively or negatively, is

exhibited by both women and men – Mr. Hale is said by Higgins to have a "woman's heart" (513; ch. 50) in speaking of his compassion, while Higgins himself performs mothering functions toward the Boucher children. As a scholar and minister, Mr. Hale is as removed from the industrial activity of Milton as Margaret; they could both be seen to be leaving the feminised sphere of home and compassion for the masculine realm of work and competitive enterprise. This blurring of gender distinctions is further emphasised by the figure of Mr. Bell. As an Oxford scholar, he presents himself as detached from the business world of Milton (though of course this division too is illusory) and is far less adaptable to it than Margaret. With its emphasis on beauty and distance from material production, Oxford itself is discussed as a sphere far more "separate" from this working environment than Margaret. When Margaret and her father argue that Oxford and Milton need to mix more in order to learn from each other and reduce the polarisation that leads to misunderstanding, the manner in which these places have been presented in gender and class terms brings the discussion back to the question of the false ideological construction of society on binary differences, whether of class and occupation (professional or industrialist/worker, which earlier correlated to man/gentleman), location or gender (409–10; ch. 40).

In Milton, many of Margaret's concepts of social interaction based on these fixed differences are challenged, and this is articulated again primarily through the issue of philanthropy. When she first meets Nicholas Higgins, Margaret attempts to exercise the same form of philanthropic benevolence towards him as she did as the minister's daughter in Helstone. But she discovers that there is a vast difference between expectations in the south and in the north, suggesting that such concepts as class and gender difference are not universally stable in meaning. She is subsequently forced to question the implications and consequences of the kind of philanthropy she has always performed. After meeting and conversing with Higgins and his daughter Bessy, Margaret is surprised that they do not immediately comprehend her charitable intentions, "for at Helstone it would have been an understood thing, after the inquiries she had made, that she intended to come and call upon any poor neighbour whose name and habitation she had asked for." Where Margaret intends her visit to be understood as an act of patronage, the recognition of responsibility of a higher class for a lower, Higgins takes this as presumption. He replies "I'm none so fond of having strange folk in my house," refusing to endorse this version of their relationship or the behaviour it entails (113; ch. 8). He acquiesces to Margaret's offer more as a favour than in gratitude, as one equal to another; by allowing her to visit, he reverses the direction of the patronage: "Yo're a foreigner, as one may say, and maybe don't know many folk here, and yo've given my wench flowers out of yo'r own hand; – yo' may come if yo' like" (113). Margaret's early intention to act as a "lady visitor" (whose visit confirms class and gender positions) is thus explicitly rejected. The independence of the Milton poor is something that disconcerts Margaret and threatens the conception of fixed and identifiable class difference and inequality upon which her philanthropy depends; she is taken aback by the "hail-fellow accost" of equals given her by the Milton girls (109; ch. 9). While Higgins and Bessy recognise Margaret's difference, they do not understand this to imply their own inequality — they refuse to act as passive objects of philanthropy. When Bessy meets Margaret again, she reinforces her father's rejection of patronage: "'Yo' offered it [to visit]; we asked none of it"' (132; ch. 11). The primary difference they identify is not gentility but geography — at the start of their conversation Higgins observes "Yo're not of this country, I reckon?" (111; ch. 8). By displacing the expected difference onto physical location, Higgins and Bessy

challenge Margaret's preconceptions about the meaning of class and her role in society. In calling attention to geographical difference, Gaskell denaturalises the assumptions carried by the other differences the novel treats, such as gender and class. Rather than being essential and fixed, these differences are local, temporal, and contextual, indicating the importance of Margaret's position as "foreigner." She is different wherever she goes whether this be as the poor country relation in London, the sophisticated urbanite in Helstone, the "strong minded" cousin of Edith, the southerner in the north, the north-sympathiser in the south, or the woman interested in the industrial dispute. Thus Margaret continually presents a challenge to essential identifications. Her proliferating differences and associations resist categorisation as at the same time her social actions become harder to label. In the process she has to shake her own ideas about the gendered and class-based nature of her actions.

Becoming more aware of the class dynamic her philanthropy has fostered, Margaret's notions of philanthropy and women's work also begin to change. Soon after first visiting Higgins, Margaret refutes the parent-child metaphor for class relations being discussed by her father and Thornton. She relates the tale of a man in Nuremberg who brought up his son in perpetual childhood innocence until, on the father's death, the son ran wild and was taken advantage of, then finally institutionalised (168; ch. 15). She makes the point that those not brought up to take responsibility for themselves (as in a paternalistic society) become a danger to themselves and their community (a similar argument to that made by John Stuart Mill in favour of the female franchise). When Margaret subsequently returns to visit Helstone, she is made aware of the difference between treating the poor as equivalent subjects (as Higgins demands) and as objects of charity. Margaret and Mr. Bell visit a former parishioner of Mr. Hale's and hear of a local woman having burned a cat alive in order to have a wish granted. The poor of Helstone are in the thrall of superstition, blindly following traditional authority (whether this be represented by church, higher classes or superstition) and unable to reason for themselves. While Pamela Corpron Parker claims that Margaret's "philanthropic relationship with the Higginses is necessary to bolster her own sense of class superiority" (329), I suggest rather that this friendship unsettles Margaret's early patrician attitudes. Though in her disputes with Thornton, Margaret criticises his autocratic authority over his workers, her own earlier attitudes towards the poor as a class needing to be guided are only a softened version of the same basic assumptions. Talking to Higgins changes her view of good social relationships, from a philanthropic relation of patronage to a model based on dialogue and interchange between like subjects.

Margaret develops her ideas at the point where she becomes the primary social agent in her family. The retirement of Mr. Hale from the clergy indicates the shift in social thinking away from a paternal and authoritarian model (reinforced by the fact that he is literally Margaret's father as well as having been the representative of the authorised church). As several critics have noted, this leaves the field open for Margaret's social labour; but I would go further to suggest it also represents a change of system, away from the paternalistic model. Reflecting the wider shift from private philanthropy toward ordered social science, Margaret's philanthropy when she returns to London is far different from her naive patronage in Helstone or Milton; her labour is serious, organised, and identified by the narrator as "working." This work is pointedly contrasted with her cousin Edith's "domestic quality" (508; ch. 49).

If Margaret has represented the problems inherent in a philanthropic approach, where an emphasis on affective relations and benevolent influence masks class and gender ideology, Thornton stands for the abstract, systemic approach, of social relations solely conceived

through the formulations of political economy. This approach cannot see people at all, but only units operating in fixed positions. Thornton operates on strict, general rules; he objects to explaining his actions to his workers as an infringement on his right to do what he likes with his own property, saying: "We, the owners of capital, have a right to choose what we will do with it" (164; ch. 15). He echoes here some commentators on the Preston strike of 1853–54 inspired parts of the novel. In his report on this strike, Henry Ashworth similarly claimed:

> The right of the master . . . rests upon the principle that he may do as he likes with his own money; it is, in fact, a necessary consequence of the rights of property. If any body of workpeople may justly dictate the limits within which this right shall be exercised, property at once virtually ceases to be private, all private rights are overthrown, and we are in the high road to communism. (15–16)

Thornton insists on this abstract right of property and ownership, in denial of any personal claims his workforce may have to participate in the decisions being made the consequences of which will be shared by both worker and employer. Margaret responds with an appeal to a different ethical standard than abstract economic laws: "there seemed to be no reason but religious ones, why you should not do what you want with your own" (164; ch. 15). Abstract economic laws also provide Thornton with a rationale for the existence of an economic underclass:

> as trade was conducted, there must always be a waxing and waning of commercial prosperity; and that in the waning a certain number of masters, as well as of men, must go down into ruin, and be no more seen among the ranks of the happy and prosperous. He spoke as if the consequence were so entirely logical, that neither employers nor employed had any right to complain if it became their fate. (204; ch. 19)

Such economic laws merely concealed the terms of class and gender inequality behind another abstract impersonal discourse of discrimination. In contrast to this dispassionate account of social relations, Margaret's response is visceral: "Margaret's whole soul rose up against him while he reasoned this way – as if commerce were everything and humanity nothing" (204). Her language again is that of Christian charity while his is of logic.

The novel sets these poles against each other: while Margaret objects to Thornton seeing his employees solely as workers, bound by the abstract laws of political economy, he objects to her insistence that his relation to them should be primarily one of philanthropy (as Higgins objected to her attempt to base a relationship with his family on charity). Both Thornton's and Margaret's early opinions remove any agency from the worker; whether fixed in poverty by divine ordinance or by the vicissitudes of the market, the workers are left alienated from the power bases of society that decide their fate. Higgins's position lies between Thornton's abstract and Margaret's personal responses; he justifies his industrial actions (his support of the strike) with reference to personal responsibilities. Comparing the striker's honour to that of a soldier, he argues:

> Dun yo' think it's for mysel' I'm striking work at this time? It's just as much in the cause of others as yon soldier – only, m'appen, the cause he dies for it's just that of somebody he never clapt eyes on, nor heerd on all his born days, while I take up John Boucher's cause . . . ; and I don't take up his

> cause only, though he's a poor good-for-nought, as can only manage two looms at a time, but I take up th' cause o' justice. (183; ch. 17)

In Higgins's explanation of his moral and material actions, he inextricably links personal, community and abstract social concerns. Where Higgins is at fault is in his blind conviction (like Thornton) that no productive personal contact can be made between employers and employees, middle class and working class, and that the rules governing these relations are fixed and cannot equally be informed by individual, affective relationships. This is the dominant mode for social change imagined by the novel: the idea that through personal relationships greater understanding occurs that can inspire structural change. Josephine Guy's discussion of political economy in social problem novels makes the point that social change in early to mid-Victorian thinking meant change firstly and primarily on the individual level (78), which is reflected in the social reforms the novel seems to propose, which move outward from individual relations.[11] The views of the central characters require modification through wider experience, both of personal interaction and of wider social systems. This is the process the novel relates. As Margaret revises her form of social labour away from a paternalistic philanthropic framework – which is as damaging to her on gender terms as to the poor on class terms – so too does Thornton soften the impersonal individualism of his social interactions in the experiments in industrial organisation he undertakes at the end of the novel.

The dominant vehicle of both plot and theme in the novel is conversation, which is a key shift from the idea of the middle-class woman's "visit" where the power and influence is presumed to flow only one way. It is through lengthy debates and personal confrontations within the wider social environment that the central characters come to greater understanding, which culminates in the revision of industrial and social practices. What emerges is an awareness of the value of different perspectives in building understanding. Gaskell demonstrates that differences, of class, of gender, or of position – differences upon which a philanthropic relation implicitly depended – are neither essential nor prescriptive. Josephine Guy argues that the emphasis on individual change derives from a society conceived as the accumulation of individual actions expressing (an assumed) common human nature, and so the only form of contestation available to the novelist was to challenge the standard interpretation of human nature upon which conceptions of society depended (for political economists this was self-interested, profit seeking) (81). In her depiction of Thornton, Margaret, and Higgins as a social microcosm, Gaskell tries to imagine a society based on different relationships, which questions the common human nature utilised in the language of industrial relations and its female corollary of domestic ideology. This reconfigured society can only be attained in the novel both by allowing for personal experiences and interactions in the construction of wider social and economic policies and by informing private decisions with social awareness: in effect imagining a field of social science informed by both affective and systemic considerations. The novel form, with its many voices and models of conversation, can enable such an effect; at the same time, Gaskell's writing seeks to spread sympathy and understanding through the popularity and understandings of the novel genre. As Rachel Ablow notes, "the novel's ability to encourage sympathy was consistently identified as central to its effectiveness" (5). In *Mary Barton*, Gaskell had sought to make the middle classes sympathise with working-class desperation and anger; in *North and South* she stages conversations between the philanthropic woman, the male industrialist and the

working-class male worker in which readers could be brought to identify with all sides and see beyond their conventional roles.

This progression is reflected in the dual plot movement of the novel. The "public" plot concerning industrial relations cannot be separated from the "private" romance plot, demonstrated in the fact that the great crises in the one coincide with those in the other. Thornton first proposes following the mob scene, and he and Margaret finally come together when his business has been ruined and Margaret saves it. The resolution of both plots in marriage symbolises the integral nature of both affect and effect in a social whole, at the same time as Gaskell uses the familiar marriage plot to present a model of companionate relations between subjects in society. As Margaret and Thornton become engaged, the workers in Thornton's mill demonstrate their sense of allegiance to him through a letter expressing their desire to work for him again. While this is partly a liberal dream of class cooperation, it also represents a gesture of agency on the part of the workers, a statement of participation not conceived by the influence model of philanthropy, though still limited within the bourgeois capitalist society that Gaskell (like the contemporary middle-class feminists) seeks to modify, not overthrow. Of the resolution of the novel in marriage, Catherine Barnes Stevenson comments that "while it is clear at the novel's end that Margaret intends to use her money to improve industrial conditions and to stay actively interested in social causes, it is also clear that in the future she will be firmly entrenched in a domestic context" (80). But I would counter that throughout the novel, Gaskell has worked to erode the distinction between the domestic context and industrial conditions or social causes and in placing her married home within the gates of the mill, on her own property, Gaskell ensures that Margaret's marriage will symbolise rather than annul her reconception of women's work.

Though her plan for gender and class understanding in a social whole is incomplete (like Thornton, the novel does not claim to have final answers), and sometimes wishful, Gaskell's emphasis on productive difference and mutual active influence in a more inclusive field of social science presents a more progressive vision than either laissez-faire utilitarianism or protective paternalism of philanthropy. Josephine Guy argues that at the end of the novel "traditional opposition between private ethics (associated with female expertise) and public success (associated with male competence) is still firmly in place" and that ultimately moral action is incapable of altering economic activity (166–67). What I would contend is that through the course of the novel, the realms of female (philanthropic) expertise and male (professional) competence have both shifted away from these polarised private/public positions. Within this environment, it does appear that Gaskell shows a tempering of economic laws, not merely by "private ethics," but by a social sphere that acknowledges human as well as market imperatives. This tempering can be seen in Thornton's recognition of Higgins's (in George Eliot's words) "equivalent centre of self" (*Middlemarch* 243; ch. 21) expressed in his right to have a voice in the factory that provides for each. The experiment in industrial relations that Margaret and Thornton intend to pursue itself depends upon this notion that the individual actions of the master and the workers can indeed modify the harshness of the market. *North and South* traces a complicated shift from philanthropy, with all its troubled relations to gender and class assumptions, to a conception of work – including women's work – in a social sphere that can accommodate both personal compassion and political / economic authority: their reconceived work is neither private philanthropy nor abstract political economy.

In her 1848 preface to *Mary Barton*, Gaskell famously made the disclaimer: "I know nothing of Political Economy, or the theories of trade. I have tried to write truthfully; and if my accounts agree or clash with any system, the agreement or disagreement is unintentional" (38). Parker interprets this as a disavowal of "masculine" professional status in favour of the position of a feminised "sympathetic amateur" (323), thus affirming gendered spheres of action and the distinctions set out in the 1863 NAPSS discussion about "women's work" quoted above. I suggest, however, that Gaskell's words make a telling distinction between scientific theories and fictional truth that undermines this reading. Endorsing Higgins's refusal to believe that "truth can be shaped out in words, all neat and clean, as th' men at the foundry can cut out sheet iron" (293; ch. 28), Gaskell's fictional representation in *North and South* charts a progression away from abstract theories and proscriptive roles to a more malleable notion of social organisation.

Sheffield Hallam University

NOTES

1. Sociologist Ellen Jordan discusses the emergence of the new field of social science in the Victorian period, developing in some part out of what had been the philanthropic concerns associated with women. As Jordan observes, being a new social field, social science presented a "borderland" that had "not yet been firmly defined within the binary oppositions that structured contemporary thinking" and thus allowed opportunities for women to enter (89).
2. Ruth discusses the rise of the professional in the nineteenth century, and defines the term "profession" as disciplines which were "defining objective standards of knowledge, developing processes of evaluation and accreditation, and organizing into communities in the form of chapters, associations, and societies" (4). NAPSS could be seen as part of this process of seeking to professionalise what had been philanthropic work.
3. My approach to the idea of the middle-class female domestic sphere follows in the critical tradition of Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, which acknowledges the ideology of the home as a site of patriarchal control, but nevertheless recognises the emergence of new forms of identity and power through women's domestic practises. The idea of the social sphere could be seen as an example of this identity and power.
4. Among others mentioned below, are Kettle on the social problem novel, Williams's discussion of *North and South* as an "Industrial Novel," and David's feminist critique.
5. In this passage we see Margaret's awareness of how her life of leisured ease masked the relations between people and classes:

> She was getting surfeited of the eventless ease in which no struggle or endeavour was required. She was afraid lest she should even become sleepily deadened into forgetfulness of anything beyond the life which was lapping her round with luxury. There might be toilers and moilers there in London, but she never saw them; the very servants lived in an underground world of their own, of which she knew neither the hopes nor the fears; they only seemed to start into existence when some want or whim of their master and mistress needed them. There was a strange unsatisfied vacuum in Margaret's heart and mode of life. (423; ch. 41)

The implication, paradoxically, is that conventional ideology deemed that the life most appropriate for middle-class women depended upon ignorance, misunderstanding and complacency.

6. Jameson, for example, speaks of hospitals needing "the presence of the feminine nature to *minister* through love as well as the masculine intellect to *rule* through power" (84). While this conception works within conventional ideology to reduce the sense of threat posed by middle-class women's work, it also leaves in place the idea of a female nature that many saw as antithetical to the world of work (as in the case of the NAPSS speaker quoted above on pages 10–11).
7. In her own efforts, Barnett went a stage further, detailing how her contribution to social reform consisted of inviting poor neighbours for tea or musical entertainment in her home (120–30); she describes this as "women's love-inspired work" (124).
8. T. H. Lister in the *Edinburgh Review*, qtd. in Harman 66–67.
9. Cobbe observes that women "must (we are driven to conclude) nurse the sick without going into hospitals, and look after children without meddling in schools, and see evils but never publish them, and write (if they *must* write) papers about babies and girls, and then get some man to read the same (of course without the pith and point thereof) while they sit by, dumb and 'diffident,' rejoicing in the possession of tongues and voices which, of course, it cannot have been 'the intention of nature' should ever be heard appealing in their feminine softness for pity and help for the ignorant and suffering. Now, we confess, in all seriousness, to be rather tired of this sort of thing" (89).
10. Summers has called this the "virtual" separation of public and private spheres – where the work of men and women, even if the same, could be perceived and understood as different (11).
11. See also Ablow's discussion of sympathy in nineteenth century thinking and fiction. Defining her interest as "the wide variety of ways in which the encounter between minds . . . was imagined in the nineteenth century," she argues that "domestic ideologists, literary critics, and novelists were all centrally concerned with the consequences of such encounters: with their potential for altering how we think, feel, or perceive" (8).

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