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**Transgression and Tradition: Redefining Gender Roles in
Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South***

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Title Transgression and Tradition: Redefining Gender Roles in Elizabeth Gaskell's <i>North and South</i> Titel Överträdelser och tradition: Omdefiniering av genus i Elizabeth Gaskells <i>North and South</i> Författare Anna Algotsson
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Sammanfattning/abstract: <p>This essay argues that Elizabeth Gaskell challenges the limiting gender norms of the Victorian era through giving her heroine, Margaret Hale in <i>North and South</i>, both the traditionally female qualities of virtue and selflessness and the traditionally masculine qualities of independence and action. The essay also argues that Gaskell's heroine balances between the feminine and the masculine world as to not appear "unwomanly", but rather subtly influencing the readers and calls for changing gender norms. Concrete examples of the heroine's gender transgressions are put forward, but also her compliance to the traditional gender roles summed up in three roles or themes: the angel in the house, the female visitor and the refined lady.</p> <p>This essay also provides a didactic approach on working with <i>North and South</i> and the topic of Victorian gender norms in the upper secondary school. The relevance of and reasons for reading literature in school are also presented. The didactic chapter offers a concrete lesson plan on how to work with the theme of Victorian gender norms, which may develop students' empathic skills and also make them aware of ties between themselves and people that lived a long time ago.</p>
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Nyckelord <i>North and South</i> , Elizabeth Gaskell, Victorian women, gender norms, transgression, gender spheres.

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Introduction

They felt humiliated by the condescension of male critics and spoke intensely of their desire to avoid special treatment and achieve genuine excellence, but they were deeply anxious about the possibility of appearing unwomanly ... The novelists publicly proclaimed, and sincerely believed, their antifeminism. (Elaine Showalter, *Literature* 21)

This passage shows the struggle of nineteenth-century female writers against the prejudices and norms of patriarchal societies. The novelists had to develop strategies to avoid posing as threats to the order of this society and “atone for their own will to write”, something that even made them proclaim their “antifeminism” through constantly belittling themselves and “denouncing female-assertiveness” (Showalter 21). Even though they may have proclaimed their “antifeminism”, many of these female writers are known today for the early feminist agendas embedded in their works. Their works undoubtedly contributed to what was then referred to as “the woman question”, a movement that started in the mid-nineteenth century and gave rise to what we today call feminism. Before the late 20th century, Elizabeth Gaskell, one of Britain’s many great female writers of the nineteenth century, was not included in this group. Rather she was seen as a conservative woman even referred to as Mrs Gaskell, which emphasises her role as a married (i.e. submissive) woman. It is true that Gaskell never publically supported “the woman question”. Nevertheless, Aina Rubenius argues that her writing undoubtedly worked for the same cause through its strong heroines (14-15). Gaskell’s strong heroines and realistic descriptions of women’s situation such as for “fallen” women, who are outcasts of society, are reasons why her works are suitable for studying in the classroom. Another reason is her portrayal of the industrialisation and social issues of nineteenth-century Britain.

First published in 1837, Gaskell was a productive writer of novels as well as short stories. Like many contemporary female authors, she started off using a male pseudonym, but for the main part of her career she used her own name, perhaps protected by her status as a married woman. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explain that female writers often had to use male pseudonyms to avoid being viewed as sexually fallen and risk being ostracised (63-65). Gaskell is often compared with Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë. Although she was and is loved for her portrayal of poor people, her industrial novels and her ghost stories, Austen and Brontë are undoubtedly more renowned today. However, one might argue that Gaskell’s works provide a wider scope both in regards to themes and characters than the other two. She portrays characters from different social classes and provides her novels with themes and

motifs from love to social issues such as poverty, poor working conditions and even “fallen” women. Furthermore, Gaskell’s literary style is interesting since it often entails an ironic narrator and dialectal speech.

North and South was written in installments and published in Charles Dickens’ weekly journal *Household Words* in 1854 and 1855, and according to Jenny Uglow, bringing in the hefty sum of £250 to the Gaskell household (367). This tells us that Gaskell, unlike many contemporary writers, became both quite wealthy and renowned in her own lifetime. *North and South* was later rewritten slightly before its publication as a novel. The plot is set in the fictitious industrial town, Milton, in the north of England where the heroine, Margaret Hale, is forced to move together with her parents. Through her eyes, the reader is introduced to the working class and social issues brought on by industrialisation, even though the overall plot is that of a love story. *North and South* is one of Gaskell’s industrial novels for which she is renowned even today. Raymond Williams explains that Gaskell’s industrial novels are important since they have contributed largely to our understanding of industrialisation (142).

Most recent critics seem to have focused on how Gaskell challenges the gender norms in *North and South*, either through the transgression of spheres or through Gaskell’s portrayal of passive men and active women. However, this essay, which will focus on the portrayal of the heroine, Margaret Hale, argues that Gaskell steers a middle course between, on the one hand, the traditional Victorian woman and on the other hand, the extreme of the so called “fallen woman”. As we shall see, Gaskell’s heroine embodies both the traditional feminine virtues of nurturing and selflessness while transgressing the Victorian gender norms with her traditionally masculine qualities of independence and action. In this essay, I aim to show how the heroine both keeps within her gender role and breaks it, through which I argue that Gaskell challenges the current limiting gender norms for women and calls for change.

The essay is structured into three chapters. The first chapter discusses how Margaret breaks the current gender norms. The chapter is thematically structured in three general sections: responsibilities, interests and courage. The second chapter analyses Margaret in relation to her prescribed gender role, i.e. Gaskell’s concealment of her feminist agenda. This chapter is also divided into three roles for women in the Victorian era: the angel in the house, the so called “female visitor” and the refined lady. This chapter also discusses the balance women had to find between being keeping within and challenging the traditional gender roles. The third and final chapter discusses the didactic implications of the study. There is a general discussion on reading literature in school connected to critics and the Swedish curriculum. However, the main focus of the chapter is on a concrete suggestion for how teachers could

incorporate some of the findings of this essay into classroom practice.

As indicated before, many critics have studied Gaskell's works. This has been the case especially in the last thirty years, as more and more critics have started analysing her works from feminist perspectives. Patsy Stoneman acknowledges that Gaskell was neglected by the "feminist revival" of the 1970s and credits her own study *Elizabeth Gaskell* with setting the wheels in motion (ix). In her analysis of *North and South*, Stoneman discusses the heroine's "traditional female concerns, preserving life and promoting well-being" and how it is related to "feminist rights and powers" (90). Another major feminist writer that has served as a source of inspiration as well as framework for this essay is Elaine Showalter. On the subject of *North and South* Showalter claims that Gaskell projects the "oppression of women" onto other oppressed groups through shedding light on the poor conditions of the working class (*Literature* 28). Ellen Moers argues the same point by claiming that many nineteenth-century female writers, including Gaskell, produced protest novels that sprang from their "feminine discontent", with their "passionate feminism" transformed into an urge to help others in need (18-19). My contribution to this field will mainly be a close study of Gaskell's portrayal of her heroine as both a refined lady according to the current norms and a progressive voice for women. I have also made a didactic approach. Specifically, I have designed a lesson plan that includes reading parts of *North and South* and working with origins and reasons for feminism in the classroom. In this section Murat Hişmanoğlu and Tricia Hedge have served as major contributors of the critical framework.

Transgression: Breaking the Norms

In the following chapter I will analyse Mrs. Gaskell's portrayal of her heroine, Margaret Hale, as a feminist. I aim to shed some light on situations where Margaret transgresses the gender norms for women of her social status in the Victorian era. The heroine's feminist aspects and actions to be discussed are her readiness to take on responsibilities, her interest in political and social issues and her moral as well as physical courage.

In the traditional Victorian family the parents were the natural authority, particularly the father who made the decisions and assumed responsibility for the family. However, in *North and South* the heroine's parents fail in this respect. Thus, by necessity Margaret takes on many responsibilities that would normally belong to "the man of the house". The failed parental responsibilities are apparent when Mr. Hale decides to give up his position as a minister and move to Milton. On this occasion Margaret not only has to tell her mother about the move but also arrange it herself. Stoneman distinguishes "the fallible nature of authority" as a theme in the novel, mentioning amongst other things the Church and employers as authorities that all fail in some respect (81). However, Stoneman fails to recognise the fallible authority of Margaret's parents. She nonetheless points out Margaret's assumption of these responsibilities in that she "makes decisions ... for others" and "arranges the move" (84). Margaret thus takes on the authority role of "man of the house" by assuming untraditional women responsibilities that ultimately gives her power.

One of Gaskell's techniques for enhancing Margaret's strong, feminist side is through contrasting her with her weak father. An example of this is when he tells her about the move, where he is described as "nervous and confused" and lacking "the courage to utter a word" without Margaret's encouragement (35). Patricia Ingham considers him "almost wholly feminised" (75) and continues by saying that the narrator treats him almost like a child to show how undesirable helplessness and weakness are in any person, no matter which gender (76). I would argue that Gaskell's way of "feminising" the natural authority of "man of the house", Mr Hale, not only is a way of enhancing Margaret's capabilities, but also a way to show an alternative to the authoritarian man and redefine the Victorian gender norms.

Another character that serves as a foil to Margaret is her mother, Mrs. Hale, who in many ways is the embodiment of the Victorian ideal of the frail woman. She complains a great deal when living in Helstone, calling it "one of the most out-of-way places in England" and claiming that "the near neighbourhood of so many trees affected her health" (16-17). In spite of her complaints, she is distressed when Margaret informs her of their approaching move to Milton. She weeps, complains, reproaches her husband and: "overpowered by all the troubles

and necessities for immediate household decisions ... became really ill” (54). It is clear that the narrator’s irony implies criticism of the frail woman ideal. At a later point, Margaret herself shows disdain for such ideals, protesting that she is not “one of those poor sickly women who like to lie on rose leaves, and be fanned all day” (151). Gilbert and Gubar argue that nineteenth-century women’s education in femininity aimed at making them “desire to be beautiful and ‘frail’” and that the ideals of the time seem to have actually “admonished women to *be ill*” (54). Through contrasting the weak and sickly mother with her strong daughter, Gaskell not only ridicules the Victorian ideal of frail women, but she also enhances her portrayal of Margaret’s strength and self-control.

Margaret’s sense of responsibility becomes clear when she arranges the move to Milton. Firstly, she supervises the packing, standing “calm and collected, ready to counsel or advise the men” (58-59). Secondly, she arranges for her mother to stay by the sea to “be spared all the fatigue” of looking for a house (57). Together with her father, Margaret then sets out to find a house for them in Milton and she arranges and decides which one is the most suitable for them. By shouldering these responsibilities for her parents, she takes on the role of “the man of the house”.

After they have moved to Milton, the Hales find it difficult to employ another servant, upon which Margaret undertakes chores, such as ironing and house-cleaning, herself. Here it may be argued that the duties she assumes are typically female ones. However, by taking on these chores she transgresses the class conventions of her time. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall claim that middle-class women’s responsibilities entailed the overseeing of heavy work rather than performing it themselves. A lady would occupy her time with needlework and other refinements (386-387). Mrs. Hale, again representing the Victorian lady, is appalled at Margaret performing heavy chores “like any servant” (86). However, Margaret assures her mother of the possible co-existence of work and refinement: “I don’t mind ironing, or any kind of work, for you and papa. I am myself a born and bred lady through it all, even though it comes to scouring a floor, or washing dishes” (87).

Looking more closely at the examples of Margaret’s responsibilities, both as regards traditional male responsibilities and her class transgression, it is apparent that Margaret takes them on because of necessity. She acts out of compassion and need rather than a wish to show herself equal to men or above the social norms for women in her position. Nevertheless, through her actions, what we see is an unconventional woman equipped with both the capability to act and with strong independence of mind, often acting as the head of the household.

A later development in the novel further reinforces Margaret's role as head of the house. After some time in Milton, Mrs. Hale's complaints turn into serious illness. Again Margaret assumes responsibility instead of her father, who persuades himself that Mrs. Hale is only tired. Margaret insists on consulting a doctor about her mother's illness and forces him to tell her the truth, despite his reluctance to do so. Upon hearing that her mother is terminally ill, Margaret becomes very pale. Here we see her strong character through the doctor's thoughts. He sees her struggle for control and how "the very force of her will brought her round" (149). Margaret does not shy away from the truth, and furthermore, decides to take care of her mother herself: "Oh mamma! Let me be your nurse!" (150).

As time passes, Mrs. Hale's health deteriorates rapidly and Margaret sends for her brother, Frederick, in order for him to meet his mother one last time. Frederick, who has fled to Spain after having been involved in a naval mutiny, comes back to Britain with a death sentence hanging over his head. Yet, he manages to come to Milton unseen just in time to say a final farewell to his mother.

Following her mother's death, Margaret struggles to cope whereas her father and brother are broken by grief: "The father and brother depended upon her; while they were giving way to grief, she must be working, planning, considering" (298). Again Gaskell contrasts her heroine with the weak men in her surroundings. Emily Jane Morris claims that Gaskell's novels present a new norm for gender that is "radically feminist in the way that it suggests women's capabilities and agency in contrast with men's" (59). When the father and brother become paralysed by grief, Margaret is left with the responsibility of arranging the funeral. She also insists on attending the funeral even though "women do not generally go" (316). Margaret's activity is part of a tendency that Rubenius sees in many of Gaskell's heroines: "In times of mental strain they take refuge in heavy work instead of going off into hysterics" (123). It is obvious yet again that Gaskell advocates work instead of idleness for women and sees work as a way of empowering them.

The move to Milton exposes Margaret to a different world altogether from her former southern one. The industrial North exhibits not only a different pace and view of life, but also financial struggles and tensions between the social classes. Margaret nonetheless takes a lively interest in learning about the factories that rule this new environment and she seizes every chance to inform herself and acquire a better understanding of the industrial world and its people.

As a result of this desire to learn about business and economics, Margaret displays interests that are traditionally male rather than female. These interests are evident when

Margaret and her father attend a dinner party at the Thorntons' to which most of Milton's gentry, chiefly mill owners, have been invited. At dinner, the men's discussions naturally revolve around objects for concern within their profession, such as the economy, wages, workers and strikes. Margaret finds their conversations fascinating and "listened attentively" (192). She is relieved to turn from the ladies' discussions on "petty interests" to the men's "larger and grander" discussions (193). The ladies are even described as "dull" (198) and are treated with much irony by the narrator as they sit in silence "taking notes of the dinner and criticising each other's dresses" instead of listening or joining in the men's conversation (192). Davidoff and Hall claim that topics such as "business" and "politics" were considered unsuitable "for the fair sex" and instead ladies' interests revolved around "behaviour, dress and language" and on those aspects each lady would "judge and be judged" (398-400). Clearly Margaret's preference for the men's discussions and interests over women's places her outside her traditional gender role. Gaskell's irony towards the ladies that even might appear misogynist, I believe is her way of yet again criticising the limitations for women, this time in regards to what was seen as appropriate feminine interests and topics for discussion.

Furthermore, Margaret finds friends in the working class and in this way she gains an insight into the workers' lives and their views on their working conditions and employers. She learns of the hardships of the working class through an unconventional friendship with a girl named Bessy Higgins. Bessy has a bad cough due to "fluff" in her lungs from the hazardous working conditions in the cotton mills. The cough makes her unable to work and eventually leads to her premature death. On a visit to Bessy, Margaret learns about her neighbour, Boucher, and his starving children and she is appalled by the misery of this family (182-184). Through her acquaintance with Bessy she also acquires essential information from Bessy's father, Nicholas Higgins, with whom she discusses the relationship between workers and employers. Higgins is an intelligent and fair-minded man and Margaret listens with interest and respect to his views.

Distressed over the hardships of the workers, Margaret feels compelled to discuss this with one of the employers, Mr. Thornton, who is being tutored by Mr. Hale. Margaret argues that the employers demand that their workers be obedient and unquestioning as if they were "tall, large children" (139-140) to which Mr. Thornton replies that the workers behave like children and thus need a "firm authority" (139-140) even advocating a ruler such as Cromwell as an employer (145). Having been presented with this other point of view, Margaret discusses the upcoming strike with Higgins, this time trying to put forward the employer's point of view, reasoning that raising wages might be impossible for the masters because of

“the state of trade” (158).

Margaret proceeds with this kind of discussing and mediating between the two men, Higgins and Thornton, thus really between workers and masters. After the strike, when Higgins is out of work because he refuses to leave the Union, Margaret sends him to Thornton and after an initial refusal the two men shake hands and Higgins is hired. This is yet another proof of Margaret’s untraditional participation in men’s affairs. Morris argues that Gaskell wants to convey the necessity of open communication between masters and workers (34) and Margaret helps this process by moving “into the masculine realm” and reconciling them (25). Ingham argues that Margaret’s advocacy of the working class breaks “the limits of possibility” in relation to language and gender (63). I interpret Ingham’s argument as another way of saying that Margaret breaks the gender norms both by speaking and acting in the public sphere and also by taking a stand on a political issue, or in Morris’ words in “the masculine realm” (25). Adding to this, Shirley Foster argues that Gaskell criticises the separation of spheres and by positioning Margaret with her “feminine qualities of understanding and conciliation” as a mediator between the men she indicates that gender is vital in this solution which challenges “patriarchal systems” (110-111).

Towards the end of the novel, Margaret gains financial independence through an inheritance from her godfather. Ironically, with this inheritance comes the role of landlord to Mr. Thornton. With her financial future secured, Margaret decides to take “her life into her own hands” which includes learning about economics (497). She shows an interest in the administration and investment of her money and she consults a lawyer to help her with this. In the end when Mr. Thornton is forced to shut down his mill, Margaret offers to invest in his company, explaining to him that “you could pay me much better interest” (519). Undoubtedly Margaret is influenced by her love for Mr. Thornton but it is also a sound investment. This way she proves her financial awareness in a way which is not traditionally connected to her gender.

Showalter argues that Margaret humiliates Thornton through the “self-sacrifice” of lending him her money (*Literature* 84). Similarly, Morris sees Thornton as “feminised” by being rescued by Margaret on several occasions, but his change is complete only when he accepts her money. Not until he accepts being “sheltered by a woman” can the marriage take place (38). Both Showalter and Morris see Thornton as humiliated or feminised, but to me he seems simply made more equal to Margaret. Although I agree that Margaret’s economic advantage over Thornton has made her more equal to him, I would claim that it is her own effort to learn about economic matters that in the end enables their marriage. Thus, I would

emphasise Margaret's strength in action rather than her passive inheritance as the empowering of women that Gaskell was aiming for.

Margaret's strength of character is not only seen in her assumption of responsibilities and wider sphere of interests, but also in her courage. She shows both moral and physical courage and she puts both her maidenly reputation and physical well-being at risk by standing up for and protecting others. Her moral courage makes her take on "men's discussions", that is difficult discussions that men ought to take on but that they shy away from. We see this early in the novel when Mr. Hale asks Margaret to tell his wife about the move to Milton. On this occasion, his weakness is obvious when he exclaims "I dare not tell her!" (43). Instead Margaret has to summon up her courage and tell her mother. A later situation in the novel where Margaret takes on a difficult conversation is when the poor working-class father, Boucher, has been found dead and someone must tell his wife. As a friend and neighbour, Higgins is the first choice but he refuses: "I canna go" (351). People then turn to the former minister Mr. Hale, but he is "trembling from head to foot" and clearly unable (351). Again Margaret accepts the necessity and declares "I will go" (351). Here, the two men are clearly better suited for the task than Margaret, but they lack in moral courage. By contrasting Margaret's courage with the men's weakness, Gaskell further emphasises Margaret's strength of character and willingness to accept responsibility.

Margaret's hardest dilemma is when it becomes necessary for her to act against her own beliefs of right and wrong. This happens when she has to lie to the police in order to protect her brother Frederick (324). Here Margaret acts against her own strong moral values, something that makes her physically ill: she "fell prone on the floor in a dead swoon" (326). Even after her attack of physical and moral anguish, she maintains her strong sense of protecting her loved ones and the narrator concludes that "she would tell that lie again" (329). What further complicates this incident is that Mr. Thornton knows about the lie and Margaret worries about being seen as "degraded" in his eyes (336). This episode has been the subject of many discussions amongst critics. Uglow analyses Margaret's emotions after the lie and calls her "overwhelmed with shame" after having "denied her guiding principles of truth" (383). Patricia Beer describes the lie as "necessary", but what complicates the incident is Margaret's "maidenly modesty which prevents her from explaining matters to [Mr. Thornton]" (173). Stoneman argues that the guilt Margaret feels is "disproportionate" to the lie, but that her emotions might have been increased by the shame she feels when Thornton suspects her brother of being her lover (85-86). While Stoneman may have a point that some sort of sexual shame might be involved in Margaret's anguish, I do not think that her guilt is

disproportionate considering her very moral character and feminine virtues. However, the conclusion of the critics' discussion is that there seems to be a consensus amongst them in that they all see Margaret's lie as necessary and that she acted in the only way open to her. Thus, Margaret acts in a morally correct way even though she risks her own reputation. This is an obvious transgression of gender norms, in a time when women's reputation in society was everything.

Apart from her moral courage, Margaret shows physical courage in times of danger. The strike has been going on for some time when Thornton calls in workers from Ireland. Agitated by this, the striking workers cause a riot at his mill. Margaret is visiting the Thorntons at this time and gets trapped along with the women and servants in the house while Mr. Thornton is away. At the sound of the approaching mob, fear and panic start to spread among the ladies. Thornton's sister, Fanny, throws "herself in hysterical sobbing on the sofa" (206) and later on faints from the sound of the gate giving way to the angry mob (208). Margaret even has to help the otherwise so controlled and strict Mrs. Thornton who tries to shut a window with "trembling fingers" (208). Where the other women go into hysterics, Margaret, although frightened, is able to stay composed.

In the dramatic climax of the novel, the angry workers outside Thornton's house pose a great threat to both the Irish workers and the women trapped in the house. Mr. Thornton has made his way back to the house at this point with the news that soldiers are coming. Margaret is indignant to hear that he has called in soldiers to fight off the mob and urges him instead to "speak to your workmen as if they were human beings" and he complies (209). However, on seeing how the workers are preparing to attack Thornton, Margaret realises that she has put him in danger and rushes out to protect him. While throwing her arms around Thornton and thus protecting him with her body, she pleads to the crowd to go home and not to "damage your cause by this violence" (212). All this time, the threat of the situation is pressing and although Margaret becomes "sick with affright" when a clog is thrown in her direction, she stands her ground and tries to reason with the angry crowd until she is struck by a stone hitting her head (212).

This is an obvious display of both moral and physical courage from Margaret's side that not only leads to a physical injury but also to a stain on her maidenly reputation. From a spectator's point of view, Margaret's acts are the passionate display of the feelings of "a girl in love" (221) which in Mrs. Thornton's words makes Mr. Thornton "bound in honour" to offer marriage to her (224). Margaret realises what people must think of her, and she is filled with shame and anguish. She repents of the actions that have led to this stain on her

reputation, but after some reasoning with herself she concludes that she did the right thing: “let them insult my maiden pride as they will – I walk pure before God” and she refuses Thornton’s proposal (226). It may be argued that the reason for Margaret’s public actions is indeed her love for Thornton, in spite of her claims; however, an equally valid motive is a humane desire to “preserve life” (Stoneman 79). This is, yet again, an example of Margaret’s moral and physical courage where she puts both her reputation and physical self in danger, yet concludes that her act was the only right thing to do.

The public sphere in the nineteenth century “had little space for women” (Davidoff and Hall 416). Indeed, women’s appearance in public was “associated with self-display and illicit sexuality” according to Barbara Leah Harman (357). However, Margaret not only appears in public, but she also speaks to an entire crowd of men as well as publically protecting a man with her body. In this way Gaskell “reverses the conventional understanding of gender relations” where the man should protect the woman, yet “reinstates it” by her heroine’s repentance of her actions afterwards (Harman 368). Harman further claims that Gaskell challenges the current norms for the private and public spheres and “legitimizes public action for women” (361). Thus one could claim that by letting Margaret take part in the public sphere, Gaskell challenges the norms of separate spheres thereby contributing to feminist efforts to change them radically.

To sum up, Margaret’s actions break the current norms for her gender. She assumes an unusual number of responsibilities and in many aspects acts as head of the house. She also takes an interest in traditional men’s affairs and uses her connections to learn and mediate between workers and masters. On top of all this, she has a compassionate and courageous character that makes her act when necessary even though her actions may endanger her physical self and jeopardize her reputation. Margaret’s public actions are viewed by many critics, as well as myself, as Gaskell challenging society’s division of separate spheres. Gaskell shows the need for changing gender roles by having her heroine break the gender roles of necessity, yet excelling in the masculine realm. This strongly implies that women’s capabilities are equal to those of men which not only questions the separation of spheres and the Victorian gender norms but also the concept of gender on the whole.

Tradition: Keeping within the Gender Roles

Having examined how Gaskell's heroine breaks the norms for her gender, we will now turn to how she conforms to the gender roles of her time as a refined and virtuous lady. Showalter argues that many nineteenth-century female writers "proclaimed ... their antifeminism" (*Literature* 21) and clearly there was a need for them to do so. Writers needed to avoid making their female characters appear "unwomanly" (Showalter, *Literature* 21). By avoiding extremes, and by disguising their "feminism", female writers could reach and influence readers who might otherwise be repelled. This may well be the reason for Gaskell having her heroine, Margaret, act in both a progressive, feminist way while also remaining a "womanly" woman.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first part of my analysis brings up three themes or, if you will, roles connected to women of the Victorian era: "the angel in the house", "the female visitor" who is involved in charitable work and the refined lady. It would be misleading to argue that Margaret is in total compliance with these roles or that these roles are without nuances. Rather, as we shall see, she follows these norms to some extent. The second part of the chapter will focus on the contradictions and ambiguity of the Victorian ideals and how Margaret struggles to find a balance between keeping to the gender roles and doing what is morally right or personally fulfilling.

The term "the angel of the house" refers to two aspects of the ideal Victorian woman: her behaviour should be that of an angel, and secondly she should be physically centred to the realm of her home. The term itself comes from the title of a poem by Coventry Patmore that praises the virtuous but ordinary woman whose one aim in life is to please her husband (Gilbert and Gubar 22-23). Gilbert and Gubar further explain that this selfless, modest and chaste "Victorian angel-woman" was the ideal that young girls were taught to emulate (23-24). Not too surprisingly, this ideal has received much criticism, not least because it diminishes women and narrows their physical world to their home. Elizabeth Langland, however, illuminates the significant role that women played as an "angel" and ruler of the household, something that gave them a key role in managing the lower classes (8).

Margaret is the Victorian angel in many ways: she runs the household and she is selfless and caring. She also performs the angel's practical task of taking care of the household which entails both managing the servants and, as discussed earlier, taking on heavy household chores. She nurses her sick mother and when her mother has passed away, she is described as a "strong angel of comfort" for her father and brother (297).

Part of her selflessness lies in her constant suppression of her own emotions in order to

protect others around her. She tells no one about her involvement or injury at the riot at Thornton's mill and the same goes for her lie to the police to protect Frederick. Even though Margaret has no husband to please, she takes care of her father and suppresses her own sorrows and fears to keep him happy. Even as a little girl she hid her tears not to upset her father (5). Later on, she protects him from learning about Mrs. Hale's illness.

Although an angel, Margaret is not, in her own words, "one of those poor sickly women" (151). In other words she does not fit into the prescribed role of the frail and innocent woman that men had to "support, protect – and oversee" (Davidoff and Hall 28). Stoneman argues that while Margaret is described as an angel, she is not weak but strong and caring (84). Caring, Stoneman argues, is the "authentic voice of women" through which Gaskell's heroines "refuse to 'suffer and be still'", but choose to take action and stand up for those in need (134-135). Motives such as "caring" and "the need to preserve life" seem to be used to legitimise women's public and political action, which ultimately give women more power and, as Stoneman puts it, a "voice". Margaret neither keeps to the domestic sphere nor does she particularly enjoy everything that is considered womanly such as dresses and weddings. Ingham argues that this is Gaskell's way of attempting to rewrite the role of the angel of the house and renegotiating the separation of spheres (71-73).

Women played an important role in philanthropic enterprises. Dorice Elliott Williams calls this role "the female visitor" (135) and argues that philanthropy was the Victorian era's main method for "dealing with the nation's social ills" such as poverty and sickness (4). Philanthropy started off as "the natural extension of the idealized domestic sphere" for women and ended up playing a crucial part in redefining gender and class because it challenged the separate spheres (Elliott Williams 4-5). Simon Morgan remarks that philanthropy was also a way for the upper classes to control the lower classes through the female visitors giving (or withholding) provisions to those in need as well as, to some extent, educating them (86).

Even though Margaret is the ideal female visitor in many ways, she does not fit into Morgan's controlling function. She does not educate the working-class people. Rather in many ways they educate her. Margaret does talk to Bessy about God and urges her not to lose faith. However, instead of winning over Higgins, "the Infidel" to Christianity, Margaret learns about the strike and the working conditions for the working class. Furthermore, Margaret is unusual in that she gets emotionally attached to the people she visits, something that becomes clear after Bessy has died and Margaret mourns her friend and says a final farewell to her dead body (258). Several critics believe that through her heroine's philanthropic work Gaskell played an essential part in calling for more freedom and power to women. Foster argues that

Gaskell “radically for her time” challenges the separate spheres for men and women (110-111). Elliott Williams agrees and adds that Gaskell creates a “social sphere” in which “women play a vital role” (138). In this social sphere, Margaret’s role is important since her philanthropic work enables her to relate to the working class and mediate between the social classes (Morgan 91). Hence, Margaret’s actions both confirm and develop this role as “the female visitor”.

The refined Victorian lady had to live up to many social norms, but above all she should be sexually virtuous. This virtue should also be reflected in maidenly modesty of manner and appearance. The Victorian doctrines of masculinity and femininity were seen as separate and complementary to each other and a woman that showed signs of a masculine character represented “moral collapse” (Davidoff and Hall 191). A virtuous woman let herself be controlled and contained within the domestic sphere. Women’s sexuality was to be “ignored if not denied” (Davidoff and Hall 402). Girls were taught “submissiveness, modesty, selflessness” (Gilbert and Gubar 23) all reflected in their appearance. Any woman who did not conform to these norms or who showed signs of overt sexuality would be seen as a “fallen” woman, equal to a prostitute.

Margaret’s appearance is described in different ways depending on who is commenting. Thornton sees her as a “great beauty” (99) and at the dinner party a lady describes her as a “fine, distinguished-looking girl” (195). Drawing on these quotations, we may well fit Margaret into the norms of physical appearance for refined young ladies. Furthermore, Margaret is also described as having a “frank dignity” unusual for young ladies (69). In fact, her dignity is seen by some as “giving herself airs” (167). Margaret also misreads the situation when Thornton tries to shake her hand, which makes him think that she has “scornful ways” (99). However, with our heroine’s nurturing and caring qualities, as discussed earlier, it is easily concluded that such arguments are ignorant. In Ingham’s views, Margaret has both the beauty of “the Angel” and the appropriate middle-class manners at least in regard to body language (58). However, in spite of her good manners, the differences in cultural or social codes between south and north lead to some misunderstandings. Where the minister’s daughter seems to be given high social status in the south, in the north this is different. Here social status is determined more by personal wealth.

Margaret is and takes pride in being a virtuous and chaste young lady. Whilst the sexual tension between Margaret and Mr. Thornton is obvious to the reader, Margaret constantly denies any claims on herself as a sexual being. After Lennox’s proposal she is “ashamed of having grown so much into a woman as to be thought of in marriage” (34) and Mr.

Thornton's proposal is compared to "horror in a dream" (235). Uglow argues that Margaret is in "denial of her body, constrained by notions of 'maidenly dignity'" (372). Even though Margaret refuses two proposals, the end of the novel offers no other solution but marriage. Davidoff and Hall argue that marriage was the ultimate symbol of "women's containment" (451). However, in Margaret's and Thornton's case, as already argued, they are made more equal after Margaret has inherited money something that implies that their marriage might also be more equal.

A study of *North and South* and its heroine reveals that there are many contradictions embedded in the ideals and norms for women of the Victorian era. Some of Margaret Hale's dilemmas highlight that there is a fine balance between doing what is morally right or personally fulfilling while keeping within Victorian gender norms. This was also the case for female writers, like Gaskell, who had to find a balance between obedience to custom and fulfilment of their ambition to write. This dilemma in the female writers' own lives "crops up in their novels as the heroine's moral crisis" (Showalter, *Literature* 24).

Although Margaret is interested in what are traditionally men's affairs, she pretends otherwise by keeping within her gender role in public. Such is the situation at Thornton's dinner party where Margaret is interested in the men's discussions. However, none of the ladies join the discussion, indicating that the social code prohibits them. Margaret too remains quiet, presumably not to appear different from the other women; but although Margaret does not discuss men's affairs in public, she discusses them within the domestic sphere with Thornton and Higgins. On these occasions the domestic sphere, women's sphere, is a safety zone for Margaret where she is able to challenge the rigidity of the public sphere without having to worry about appearing unwomanly.

Society's ideals of female sexuality and virtue turn into major personal dilemmas for Margaret. One of these dilemmas comes after her rescue of Thornton at the riot, when she experiences an inner struggle. She has acted out of an inner sense of what is morally right, yet her act has put a stain on her maidenly reputation. To redeem herself, she must act the virtuous lady and "avoid sexual shame, while not appearing to be aware of what it is she must avoid" (Stoneman 85). Uglow argues that Margaret is "constrained by notions of 'maidenly dignity'" which makes her refuse the proposal of the man she loves (372). Margaret's "maidenly dignity" most likely prevents her from accepting the proposal because accepting it would mean that she acknowledges herself as a sexual individual, which she denies. However, what Uglow fails to recognise is that at this point in the novel Margaret has neither admitted to herself nor to the reader that she is in love with Thornton. Thus, her rejection could only be

seen as a rejection of herself as a sexual being, not of her love.

The norms of maidenly behaviour also leave her restless with regret at not being able to clear her reputation after having been seen in public with a man, her outlaw brother. At this point she even explicitly acknowledges the restrictions that it meant to be a woman in the Victorian era: "I wish I were a man" (367). Margaret acknowledges the great difference between what is considered feminine and masculine conversation and what topics are suitable for conversations between the sexes. Had she been a man she would have been able to talk frankly with Thornton and redeem herself in his eyes, but because she has to pretend to be unaware of herself as a sexual being, she cannot discuss a sexual topic with him. Several critics point out that there are many contradictions like this within the angel of the house ideal. Elliott Williams argues that while the angel should be virtuous and chaste, she was seen as "inherently sexual" (7). In Davidoff and Hall's words: "idealized womanhood was asexual and chaste, yet the supreme goal for women was marriage and motherhood" (322). Langland finally concludes that "the image of the passive domestic angel" is contradictory in itself because of the responsibilities women had within the household and their social class (62).

Margaret's angelic selflessness throughout the novel reaches somewhat of a turning point at the end. After the heavy strain of nursing her dying mother and protecting her weak father and brother, Margaret finds herself emotionally drained. She is relieved to be on her own during her father's absence. She is finally free from the heavy responsibilities of caring for everyone but herself. On her own, she is able to think about her own troubles and behave as she wishes: "she might be idle, silent and forgetful" (411). Here, according to Ingham, Margaret and the narrator "offer a re-interpretation of womanly self-repression" (73). Ingham does not expand on this argument any further, but she seems to acknowledge the heavy toll of the self-repression entailed in the Victorian ideal. Thus Gaskell challenges these ideals by showing that it is crucial for women to be able to express emotions and opinions and tend to *themselves*, not only their families.

To conclude, our Victorian heroine has to live up to the many and sometimes ambiguous norms for her gender included in the roles of the angel in the house, the female visitor and the refined lady. Embedded in these norms are many contradictions that together with Margaret's own moral and personal values cause clashes and personal dilemmas for her. The rigid social division of femininity and masculinity also causes conflicts for Margaret since these notions prevent her from doing what she thinks right. In this way Gaskell uses Margaret and her personal dilemmas to illustrate how the current gender norms are both contradictory to each

other and unrealistic. Thus, Gaskell calls for changing gender roles and norms for femininity and masculinity.

Victorian Women in the Classroom

This essay on *North and South* has analysed how Gaskell calls for changing gender roles through her heroine, Margaret. Are there any didactic implications of this study? How can a nineteenth-century novel be made relevant in schools today? This chapter will focus on these questions by taking a didactic approach on teaching literature and specifically present a lesson plan on how to use Gaskell's *North and South* in the classroom.

So why should young people read literature in school? The syllabus for Swedish emphasises that “students should be given the opportunity to read literature to be able to see similarities as well as differences between themselves and other human beings from different times and places” (Skolverket *Läroplan* 160, my translation). However, the syllabus for English does not provide any reasons for reading literature, yet it is included in the “core content” section and in the knowledge requirements. Hence it seems likely that the reasons for reading literature in Swedish are equally valid for English, even though there might be a greater focus on the language itself in the latter.

Showalter sees many reasons for reading literature in school, from aspects of moral development to reading for fun (*Teaching* 22-24). Depending on which perspective one uses, there seem to be different reasons for reading literature. From a stylistic perspective, Paul Simpson sees literature as excellent material for exploring and discovering grammar and vocabulary (2). Stephen D. Krashen presents another reason with “the reading hypothesis” which argues that the more learners read, the better writers they become (18-19). For second-language learners of English, Murat Hişmanoğlu argues, literature is a valuable resource that can create both motivation and interest in learning (57). Reading novels is also a good way to expose learners to “authentic material”, that is texts that are not constructed solely for didactic purposes, as well as developing learners’ “knowledge about different cultures” (Hişmanoğlu 63).

There are, of course, several possible approaches to working with literature, much depending on what desired outcome the teacher sets for the lesson plan. The syllabus for English 6, that is the second year in the Swedish upper-secondary school, provides a basis for studying both authorships, literary eras and “living conditions, attitudes, values, traditions, social issues as well as cultural, historical, political and cultural conditions in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (Skolverket *English*). Taking a more analytical approach to literature, the syllabus also concludes that “themes, ideas, form” are to be studied (Skolverket *English*). Hişmanoğlu sees the content of novels as valuable subject sources that can be used for various activities including discussions and writing assignments

(58-59).

Why, then, should teachers use Gaskell's *North and South*? In Swedish schools today there seems to be an implicit literary canon at work which prescribes the works of Jane Austen or perhaps the Brontë sisters, but few students have ever heard of Elizabeth Gaskell. Nevertheless, Gaskell's contribution to literary history is important. She is unique in that she sheds light on social problems brought about by industrialisation at the same time as she problematizes women's marginalised role in society. Especially women's history is often neglected in schools and is thus important to work with explicitly. A didactic approach to Gaskell's *North and South* could easily be designed to develop students' empathy, but also to teach more about another culture and values of another time, a goal emphasised by several critics. *North and South* could be used in order to discuss several interesting topics, including the industrialisation, poverty, social classes and women's role in nineteenth-century England. To me, *North and South* seems perfect for a study of Victorian women and their marginalized role in society in relation to nineteenth-century values and attitudes.

The lesson plan in this chapter is based on the assumption that teachers have a limited amount of time and thus only extracts from the novel will be read. As Showalter puts it, teaching long novels can be problematic because of the limited time available and because learners read at different paces (*Teaching* 90-92). However, it is also possible to change this and let the students read the entire novel instead. This would entail turning this theme into a larger project, dividing the class into groups and letting each group read one nineteenth century novel written by a woman (perhaps Austen, Brontë and Gaskell) over the entire term. Each group could then present its novel to the other groups and they could discuss nineteenth-century women and female writers.

My lesson plan includes about four or five lessons depending on the class and the activities the teacher chooses. The first lesson starts with an introduction to the Victorian era, including its society, women and industrialization. This introduction could be given in a brief lecture by the teacher, clips from films, reading short texts about the period or, perhaps preferably, through a mixture of all of these. This stage is what Tricia Hedge calls "the pre-reading phase" which aims to make the students familiar with the context of the text (210). Here, historical background but also the novel's construction and plot will be presented. This stage is also important to activate learners' vocabulary. Hedge emphasizes that vocabulary could cause readers trouble with understanding a text and she encourages teachers to teach their students to guess the meanings of words (193). To further help weaker students, teachers could also provide a glossary of some old or difficult words from the text. By encouraging

students to guess words and providing them with a glossary, teachers will help students' reading comprehension and prepare them for the following reading assignment. This reading assignment is an extract from *North and South*, specifically the riot scene. This text is to be read as homework for the next class.

In the second class, the students will have read the extract for homework and they will now be given questions on the text to be answered individually in writing. These questions will ensure that students have understood the text and will prepare them for the next phase. Hişmanoğlu claims that comprehension of a text is reached on three levels: the literal level, the inferential level and the evaluative level (57). Teachers should provide questions suitable for each of the levels to assist in the pupils' reading comprehension. Literal questions deal with the setting or the plot, such as: "What arguments does Margaret give to convince Thornton to go down and talk to the mob?" Inferential questions pertain to the pupils' interpretations of the text. One such question could be: "Why do you think Margaret is ashamed of herself after the riot?" Finally, evaluative questions are designed to make students form their own opinions, for an example: "Do you think she did the right thing?" These kinds of questions will make students put themselves in Margaret's situation and sympathize with women's restrictive gender roles while using the information given in the introduction about the Victorian era. This stage in the lesson plan corresponds to what Hedge calls "the while-reading activities" that should "encourage learners to be active as they read" (210).

After this, it is time for another extract, this time the episode where Margaret's brother is involved in a fight and Margaret lies to the police about it. The extract could be read as homework or in the third class. Here the teacher could provide the students with some questions to prepare them for the discussion that follows. In the discussion it is possible to discuss both Margaret's act and its consequences and more general views on morality and the law. Examples of such questions are: "What would you have done in Margaret's situation? Is it right to protect a family member if it means breaking the law? Is it right to protect a family member if that person *had* murdered somebody?" By taking the discussion to a more general level, the teacher can help the students realise that even old books are relevant today. The subject of morality was as relevant in the nineteenth century as it is today and thus the students will come to realise that there are values that were relevant then and still are and these tie all of mankind together, no matter what place or time.

The final task of this project is a longish writing assignment. In this assignment, the students are given a statement to argue for using examples from the extracts and their knowledge of nineteenth-century Britain. This could be a general statement such as: "It was

hard to be a woman in nineteenth-century Britain”. It is also possible to design a writing assignment that is more specifically connected to *North and South*. The students could be asked to come up with their own version of how Margaret might solve her dilemma with her lie to the police, rewrite the same scene in modern times or write their own alternative ending to the story. This final section, which Hedge calls “the post-reading activities”, is where students “make use of what they have read in a meaningful way” (211).

To sum up, the benefits of reading literature are many: learning grammar and vocabulary, learning about morals/culture/history or reading to become a better writer. My lesson plan will hopefully give students some knowledge about women’s role in nineteenth-century Britain, but also make them recognise themes and feelings that people today have in common with people in the past. This is a good way of developing students’ empathic skills and of widening their perspectives. The project also gives valuable practice in reading, writing and speaking. In addition, it highlights women’s marginalised history, something that is a key factor to understanding the origins, motives and values of feminism. Finally, students will hopefully have had a wonderful experience while reading one of nineteenth-century’s truly great authors, Elizabeth Gaskell, which might help in the process of enlarging the implicit canon of Swedish schools.

Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to show how Gaskell makes her heroine, Margaret Hale break the norms for her gender and keep to her gender role. I also set out to disprove Gaskell's claimed "antifeminism" through showing concrete examples where Gaskell's heroine acts in ways that by extension empower women.

In the first chapter we saw how Gaskell's heroine, Margaret, breaks the current gender norms. She does this by assuming heavy responsibilities that would usually belong to men, forced to act as "the man of the house" in the absence of parental authority. By doing this Margaret defies the sick and frail image represented by her mother. Margaret also breaks the norms through her atypical interest in business, economy and social problems, which she utilises in a successful mediation between workers and employers. This assumption of responsibilities and unusual interests conveys a transgression of both class and gender norms which implies women's capabilities even in "masculine" areas.

Margaret's physical and moral courage puts both her reputation and herself in danger. Nonetheless, her strong sense of right and wrong makes her act when needed, often due to men's inability to act. It is clear that Gaskell promotes the action of her heroine over the passivity of her father and brother. This male passivity is quite the opposite of the Victorian norm for men and is yet another way of enhancing the heroine and her capabilities. Characters, both female and male, often act as foils, a technique Gaskell uses to highlight Margaret's strength of character. Through her courage, Margaret takes part in the public sphere, which challenges the separation of gender spheres. Overall, although some of Margaret's norm-breaking is forced upon her, she excels in the "masculine realm". In this way, Gaskell shows that masculinity and femininity are not necessarily two polar opposites, but rather they are socially constructed.

The second chapter showed how the heroine keeps to the Victorian woman ideal, which was divided into three roles: the angel in the house, the female visitor and the refined lady. In regard to the angel in the house, it was suggested that Margaret fulfils the ideal of taking care of the household by managing the servants and nursing her mother. However, she is not confined to the house. Through her role as the female visitor, Margaret gains legitimate access to the public sphere, which she uses to befriend and learn from the working class. This way, Gaskell's heroine challenges the separate spheres. Margaret's relation to the refined-lady ideal is perhaps her strongest tie to traditional values. She is virtuous, chaste and beautiful. However, at times these ideals come into conflict with Margaret's moral values. Such is the situation after her rescue of Thornton at the riot, where she has risked her maidenly reputation

to do what she knows to be morally right. Finally it was concluded that Margaret's heavy responsibilities and self-repression left her emotionally drained and thus she experiences a sense of relief at her father's absence after her mother's death and funeral. These dilemmas yet again show how Gaskell highlights the ambiguous and unrealistic ideals imposed on Victorian women.

This essay also offered a didactic approach that concluded that reading and working with Gaskell's works in school is valuable for a multitude of reasons. Some of these are to incorporate Gaskell into the implicit literary canon in Swedish schools, to highlight Gaskell's feminist tendencies and to learn from her realistic portrayal of the working class and her problematisation of industrialisation. By exploring the roots of feminism and nineteenth-century society's well-structured ways to diminish women, students are better equipped to understand feminists' struggles today and perhaps to discover hidden misogynist structures embedded in modern society.

This essay contributed to contest Gaskell's so-called "antifeminism". Rather than "antifeminist", Gaskell, like many contemporary female writers, disguised her feminist tendencies in the novels in order to not provoke the extremely patriarchal society in which she lived. This she did, as this essay has shown, through making her heroine both traditionally feminine while at the same time transgressing gender norms. By doing this, Gaskell could influence the general public in an implicit way, carefully undermining the readers' inculcated "knowledge" on gender roles and norms as they read her novel. Disguised as it may be, *North and South* still challenges the separation of gender spheres, criticises the gender norms and calls for more freedom for women.

The narrow norms for women and changing conditions brought on by industrialisation were surely very present in Gaskell's life in industrial Manchester. Like her heroine, Margaret, Gaskell had to struggle against prejudices and restrictions for women. She had to find a balance between the traditional roles of mother, wife and visitor while transgressing the norms with her typically "male profession" as a writer and her interest in political and social issues. Just like Margaret, Gaskell's success in the "masculine realm" gave added impetus to female capabilities and the need for liberation from the restrictive Victorian gender norms.

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