Unitarianism and Social Reconciliation in *North and South*

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Abstract: Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855) is traditionally categorized as an industrial novel. The protagonist Margaret Hale is the daughter of an Anglican clergyman living in the South of England who relocates to the industrial North with her family after her father resigns from the Church due to religious differences. There in the northern town of Milton, Margaret witnesses the new reality of an industrializing England: she sees the mill-owners and the millworkers locked in a struggle. Although class-oriented criticism of the novel often highlights its depiction of class relations between the masters and the workers, the novel is in fact equally, if not more, invested in the integration of the two contending ruling classes – the old gentry and the new bourgeoisie, and this integration is developed through Margaret's encounter with the town of Milton and her eventual marriage to Mr. Thornton, the industrialist. Although this point has been overlooked relative to the critical focus placed on relations between the ruling class and the workers, it is nonetheless an important element of the narrative and, moreover, a distinctly Unitarian one. This integration is a Unitarian interest, less related to points of principle or doctrine but closely connected to social reality. The new ruling class emerging from the industrial towns of the North and the Midlands, among whose ranks Unitarians were over-represented, demanded access to the social capital and prestige of the old order. As such, the marriage plot in the novel is also an argument for Unitarian integration in the establishment.

Kuzey ve Güney Romanında Üniteryenizm ve Toplumsal Uzlaşma

Öz: Elizabeth Gaskell'in *Kuzey ve Güney* (1855) romanı geleneksel olarak "endüstriyel roman" kategorisinde değerlendirilegelmiştir. Başkarakter Margaret Hale İngiltere'nin güneyinde yaşayan bir Anglikan papazının kızı olup babasının kiliseden istifasının ardından ülkenin kuzeyindeki bir sanayi şehrine taşınır. Milton kasabasında Margaret, sanayileşen İngiltere'nin gerçekliğiyle yüzleşir, patronlar ve işçiler arasındaki çatışmaya şahit olur. Romanın sınıf temelli okumaları ağırlıklı olarak bu iki sınıf arasındaki çatışmalara odaklansa da esasen anlatı, iki rakip "egemen sınıf," yani eski seçkinler ve yeni sanayici zenginler arasındaki çatışmaya ve bu sınıfların entegrasyonuna daha büyük bir yer vermektedir. Entegrasyon romanda Margaret ve sanayici Mr. Thornton arasındaki ilişki üzerinden işlenir. Bu entegrasyon, Üniteryenizm ilkelerinde çok sosyal gerçeklikle ilgili olarak resmedilir. Kuzey ve Orta bölge endüstriyel kasabalarından çıkan ve ağırlıklı olarak Üniteryen zenginler oluşan bu yeni egemen sınıf, eski seçkinlerin toplumsal sermayesine ve itibarına erişmek istemektedir. Dolayısıyla romandaki evlilik anlatısı, Üniteryenlerin müesses nizama katılması yönünde bir argüman niteliği de taşımaktadır.

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Introduction

This article explores the influence of Unitarianism, a dissenting Christian faith popular among the industrial middle classes of England in the nineteenth century, on *North and South*'s central theme of social reconciliation by tracing how the novel's portrayal of the union of competing ruling classes corresponds to central concerns of Unitarianism as it was practised in England during the 1840s and 1850s. The novel is very invested in the integration of the two contending ruling classes, the old gentry and the new industrial middle class, and this integration is developed through the protagonist Margaret Hale's encounter with the town of Milton and her eventual marriage to Mr. Thornton, the industrialist. Although this point has been overlooked relative to the critical focus placed on relations between the ruling class and the workers, it is nonetheless an important element in the narrative and, moreover, a distinctly Unitarian one. This integration is a Unitarian interest, less related to points of principle or doctrine but closely connected to social reality. The new ruling class emerging from the industrial towns of the North and the Midlands, among whose ranks Unitarians were over-represented, demanded access to the social capital and prestige of the old order. As such, the marriage plot in the novel is also an argument for Unitarian integration in the establishment.

Marriage as a way of becoming part of the establishment in the Unitarian context is discussed by John Seed in "Gentlemen Dissenters: The Social and Political Meanings of Rational Dissent in the 1770s and 1780s." Seed argues that as rational Dissent – his designation for Unitarianism and affiliated sects – distinguished itself from older and more ascetic forms of Dissent in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it became more and more part of the established order:

> the boundaries between dissent and the anglican church [*sic*] were weakened as wealthier rational dissenters sent their sons to Cambridge university, mixed socially with anglicans [*sic*] and even, sometimes, married into establishment families. . . . Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there was always a steady leakage of unitarian families as wealth loosened their insertion within the social circles of urban dissent. ("Gentlemen" 315)

This historical account of how Unitarianism was reconciled, if only partially, with the established order, is not a straightforward parallel of how a union is negotiated between Margaret and Mr. Thornton in *North and South*. Rather, it is the idea of social integration and reconciliation itself, so important in distinguishing Unitarianism from the historically more removed and distinct sects in Dissent, that gives a Unitarian bent to Gaskell's

treatment of social reconciliation. At the same time, it is important to note that although Unitarian values permeated and underpinned Gaskell's fiction, almost no character in her novels, including *North and South*, is clearly identified as a Unitarian; neither is Unitarianism mentioned by name. As John Chapple notes, Gaskell was "Unitarian in a deeper sense[. S]he laid bare social and moral evils and yet showed that reconciliation and redemption could spring out of human suffering" (175). Instead of being identified with specific characters, Unitarianism informs the interactions and exchanges between Gaskell's characters as well as the construction of her plots and themes in a broader sense. This flexibility will become clearer as we look at relevant sections from the novel.

A considerable amount of scholarship on *North and South* focuses on the topics of social reform, philanthropy, gender and their intersections. A relatively unexplored aspect of the novel, by comparison, is the extent to which Unitarianism underpins and informs the narrative's treatment of these issues. A dissenting faith that rose to prominence especially among the bourgeois families of the industrial and commercial North beginning in the late eighteenth century, Unitarianism resembled Presbyterianism in its compatibility with the values of the capitalist middle class. A liberal, worldly, and secularizing faith from the beginning, its values and principles are at times indistinguishable from what we would recognize today as liberal or humanist concepts. However, the important role of Unitarianism not just in Elizabeth Gaskell's life, but also in the political life and the social fabric of Manchester, the real-life counterpart of the novel's Milton, necessitates a renewed look at a novel such as *North and South*. Unitarians were a "leading middle-class grouping" in Manchester during the first half of the nineteenth century, claims John Seed, in his study of the Unitarian influence in Manchester, "Unitarianism, Political Economy and the Antinomies of Liberal Culture in Manchester, 1830-50" (2). Seed draws attention to how the congregation of Cross Street Chapel, the Unitarian Chapel where Elizabeth Gaskell's husband William ministered, was "made up of the politically strategic strata of small capitalists, commercial servants and craftsmen," as well as "the managing elite of the chapel," who "were more exalted" ("Unitarianism" 4). Seed observes the influence of Unitarianism everywhere in Manchester, but especially in its cultural institutions.

Unitarianism in the Victorian Context

Unitarianism, a branch of Dissent, first established itself as a distinctly organized group in England in 1774, when clergyman Theophilus Lindsey left the Anglican Church and established the Essex Street Chapel alongside Joseph Priestley. In the broad sense of anti-Trinitarianism, Unitarian ideas were adopted in various places in Europe at various points in history, especially following the Protestant Reformation. Similarly, the ideas of dissenting figures from across the continent such as Michael Servetus and Fausto Sozzini were influential in the formation of a variety of Unitarian movements, the common denominator of which was their rejection of the doctrine of Trinity. In fact, in this broadest meaning of the term, even the early Christian heresy of Arianism, which rejected the

identity of Jesus Christ with God the Father, is a kind of Unitarianism, although in this case the more commonly used term is non-trinitarianism. The term "Unitarian" itself was in English usage as far back as the second half of the seventeenth century, with reference to various groups, such as the Polish Brethren or Socinians.

The English Unitarianism within which Elizabeth Gaskell is situated is a decidedly more well-defined group than this loose association of anti-Trinitarian doctrines. Although it owes a great deal to such precedents in terms of theology and doctrine, English Unitarianism is wholly understandable only within the context of English Dissent, and more broadly, the religious and ecclesiastical divisions of England. As Emma Knight and Mark Mason note in *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction*, Unitarianism distinguished itself from Methodism on the one hand, and old Dissent, most remarkably Presbyterianism on the other hand, as it emerged in the English context (52). Compared to Methodism, with its emphasis on religious enthusiasm and its orientation during its early period toward the poor, Unitarianism underlined a more rational and intellectual approach to Christianity, and accordingly, spread among the urban and/or commercial middle classes rather than the rural poor. It shared the same class identification with Presbyterianism. Indeed, Knight and Mason claim that it "was founded on a liberal capitalist politics that encouraged a faith compatible with genteel professionalism rather than unworldly devotion," which is very similar to their formulation of Presbyterianism at the end of the eighteenth century as "a 'tasteful' faith sanitized . . . for a chic, urban and bourgeois middle class" (52). The break, or rather shift, that definitively distinguished Unitarianism from Presbyterianism was its rejection of Calvinism. Despite its generally tolerant and latitudinarian acceptance of other faiths, the Calvinist doctrines of original sin and predestination were unacceptable to Unitarianism. These, then, are some of the ways in which Unitarianism in England gradually came to distinguish itself from adjacent faith groups.

Three years after Elizabeth Gaskell was born, The Doctrine of the Trinity Act, informally known as the Unitarian Relief Act, was passed in 1813, granting toleration for anti-Trinitarianism and Unitarian worship. Gaskell herself was born into a Unitarian family; her father was a Unitarian minister who later resigned, and her mother's side was also Unitarian. She married a Unitarian minister, William Gaskell, in 1832, and lived in Manchester where her husband was the minister at a Unitarian chapel. All her life, then, she was surrounded by Unitarians and Unitarianism; Unitarianism played an important role not just in her life as the daughter and wife of a minister, but also in her intellectual and creative output.

The Changing Definitions of Class

As discussed above, social reconciliation in the form of class integration, a central theme of *North and South*, was also a Unitarian concern. In order to fully appreciate how the two ruling classes in question, the old gentry and the new industrial bourgeoisie, came to

occupy such a position, let us consider the historical context. In discussing the transformation of the language used to talk about social groups in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in "The Language of 'Class' in Early Nineteenth-Century England," Asa Briggs notes how the term "class" replaces other, pre-modern designations such as "rank," "order" or "degree" during this period ("Language" 43). The change in language "reflected a basic change not only in men's ways of viewing society, but in society itself," Briggs writes, referring to the Industrial Revolution and its totally transformative effect on society and social relations as a whole ("Language" 44). And although the new terminology was readily accepted by most people, conservatives resisted it because of the new social order it implied; while both "middle classes" and "working classes" were claimed willingly by their owners, out of class consciousness and even pride, the phrase "higher classes" was taken up by the upper classes only as a last resort following the French Revolution, when their class position and power was no longer uncontested (Briggs, "Language" 51–52). Well into the nineteenth century, conservatives and defenders of the old order resorted to the outdated formulations of 'rank' and 'station', despite the ubiquity of class discourse, as a statement of their political position.

This clash between the old and the new terminologies is also evident in *North and South*, mostly in the confrontation between Margaret Hale and the culture of the industrial North where she is transplanted. Indeed, this is one of the threads in the narrative through which the overarching theme of social reconciliation in the novel is developed. Initially disdainful of the new bourgeois culture and dismissive of the gradations and distinctions it contains, Margaret eventually comes to appreciate this new breed; in turn, something of her well-bred gentility is imparted to the Milton millocracy. The reconciliation of the old gentry and the new ruling class, signified by the marriage of Margaret to the manufacturer and industrialist John Thornton, is not quite the unification of "the two nations" as first envisioned by Benjamin Disraeli (1804–1881) in *Sybil, or The Two Nations* (1845). In fact, although in *North and South* Gaskell spends considerable energy and space on working out the relationship between the working classes and their middle-class employers, the novel culminates in the reconciliation of the two distinctly non-working classes, as represented by the union of Margaret and Mr. Thornton, rather than ending with the amelioration of relations between the working classes and the industrial middle classes, as represented by the friendship of Higgins and Mr. Thornton.

A small market town prior to the Industrial Revolution, Manchester began its expansion in the last decades of the eighteenth century and rose to prominence in the first half of the nineteenth century as an industrial centre. It became the centre of the cotton industry, which completely transformed Manchester. "Cotton made modern Manchester," Briggs notes in *Victorian Cities*; "[i]t created a small class of wealthy men – they were perhaps the first to think of themselves as a 'class' – and a large class of 'working men' who were often doomed to severe suffering" (88). This new way in which social groups (now referred to as "classes" for the first time) related to each other shaped even the physical reality of Manchester: in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Friedrich

Engels describes how, "by unconscious tacit agreement, as well as with outspoken conscious determination, the working-people's quarters are sharply separated from the sections of the city reserved for the middle class" (57). This segregation of the classes, and the abject conditions in which the working class lived, was the other side of the story in which Manchester was a leading, exemplary city of the nineteenth century in all its modern, industrial glory. Indeed, in *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City*, Patrick Joyce argues that even though Paris is often considered to be the capital of nineteenth-century modernity, Manchester also has a claim to "a peculiar sort of centrality," one that is based on "production and distribution" (154). Manchester's centrality is peculiar because as the blueprint for all urban industrialism to come, it set the terms by which it would later be evaluated. Since its industry was both unprecedented and so integral to its identity, labour relations and related disputes also played a large part in the discourse over Manchester. In "Labour Disputes and the City: Manchester and Milton-Northern," Tomoko Kanda traces how in her Manchester novels, *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South*, Gaskell utilized not only incidents from real life in industrial towns, as covered by "articles and reports in print," but also material from contemporary social problem novels, and elements of the "factory paternalism" discourse prevalent during the period (47). Apart from occasional critical interventions asking to reconsider the novel's contextual framework, *North and South* is still read and interpreted in very much the same terms, as an account and critique of class and labour relations in an industrial city.

Earlier Critical Reception

While this is an accurate general framework, it is also important to acknowledge the centrality of Unitarianism and its various tenets in the construction and resolution of *North and South*'s narrative and themes both in its own right, and also as a response to certain criticisms of the novel's perceived weaknesses with regard to its literary form, politics and ending. *North and South* has been criticized for its sustained emphasis on social reconciliation over more radical resolutions, especially by Marxist critics such as Raymond Williams and Arnold Kettle who, as discussed above, were influential in the recognition of industrial, or social problem novels as a genre. Raymond Williams found fault with how in industrial novels, including *North and South*, "[s]ympathy was transformed, not into action, but into withdrawal" (118). Arnold Kettle writes that "in her political and social ideas, . . . Mrs Gaskell was a fence-sitter," and that "intellectually, she is far less adventurous, far less radical than Disraeli" (178–179). In *Criticism and Ideology*, Terry Eagleton draws attention to how, during the prosperity of the eighteen-fifties the working classes became "politically incorporated" to the established order, and remarks in a footnote on the same page that *North and South* marks this "historical mutation" in ideology whereas *Mary Barton* represents an earlier moment in time (111). The comparison to *Mary Barton* is significant, and not an isolated instance since the more immediate focus of that earlier novel on the plight of the working classes is often

contrasted – sometimes favourably – to the middle-class point of view found in *North and South*, despite both novels' broader engagement with problems caused by industrialism. Although working-class characters such as the trade unionist Nicholas Higgins, his daughter Bessy or neighbour John Boucher are also provided space and perspective in the narrative, the focal character of Margaret is middle class herself and ultimately, it is this middle-class perspective which dominates *North and South*. Raymond Williams also identifies a genuine "structure of feeling" in *Mary Barton* where the everyday experience of the working classes is concerned, although he finds that Gaskell is not able to sustain it until the end of the narrative.

The Hales: Representatives of the Old Order

Initially in the novel, Margaret represents a particular albeit outdated understanding of class. Daughter of a clergyman of the Church of England and descending from the gentry on her mother's side, Margaret is first introduced to the readers while living in the London townhouse of her Aunt Shaw at the outset of the novel in quite a lavish lifestyle, as a companion to her cousin Edith. As soon as Edith gets married, Margaret returns to live with her parents in the bucolic southern village of Helstone, and although in these initial chapters of the novel her characteristic sensibility and reasonableness are contrasted to Edith's frivolity, her father's timidity and her mother's querulousness, a new dimension is introduced to her character once she and her family relocate to the Northern mill town of Milton. Unfamiliar with the social fabric of this manufacturing town, Margaret tries and fails to interpret the people around her. In fact, her misinterpretation begins even before she leaves Helstone; in answer to her mother's suggestion that they visit a family living on the other side of the parish, Margaret says: "Are those the Gormans who made their fortunes in trade at Southampton? Oh! I am glad we don't visit them. I don't like shoppy people. I think we are far better off, knowing only cottagers and labourers, and people without pretence" (19). In this instance, her disdain for the arriviste "shoppy people" who made their fortunes in trade rather than having inherited it is modified by her sympathy for the cottagers and labourers, a distinction which at the same time ensures that she is not indiscriminately supercilious toward the lower classes. It is rather the social mobility to which Margaret objects. Overall, Margaret's understanding of social divisions is distinctly pre-modern; in answer to her mother's criticism that she "must not be so fastidious," she answers that she isn't: "I like all people whose occupations have to do with land; I like soldiers and sailors, and the three learned professions, as they call them" (19). It is evident that she doesn't think of society in terms of class relations as regulated by labour or economy; rather, there is something reminiscent of the three orders of the medieval society – the nobles, the clergy and the peasants – about her outlook. There are those who do manual labour – the people working the land; those who fight – the soldiers and the sailors; and the three learned professions, divinity, law and medicine, who constitute a sort of clergy among themselves. Her insufficient knowledge of social divisions and groups extends to her inability to distinguish tradespeople, such as butchers

and bakers, from manufacturers. When she is corrected on this point, told that coach-builders are quite different from butchers and bakers, she replies that it does not really matter, especially since she prefers walking to riding in coaches (19). She is similarly dismissive toward the manufacturers of Milton whom she has not yet met and believes that "classics, or literature, or the accomplishments of a gentleman" would be wasted on such people (39).

Margaret's realization of the new social reality occurs gradually once she is in Milton. At first, she is overwhelmed by the different, free and familiar manner in which factory workers conduct themselves in their daily lives and around her, but she adapts relatively easily to this new situation. It might be that from her standpoint, labourers are labourers, whether they work the land or the machines. Her adjustment to the ruling class of this town, the industrial middle class, however, is fraught with difficulty and resistance on her part. Culturally conservative, she clings to her pre-modern markers of social distinctions and refuses to recognize Mr. Thornton as her equal, relegating him to some in-between category between herself and the working class by insisting on designating him as a "tradesman." Her ambivalence is evident, for instance, from her claim that "he is not quite a gentleman, but that was hardly to be expected," in describing her first impression of him to her mother (64). However, Margaret also agrees with her father when he says that Mr. Thornton is "neither vulgar, or common," and she argues that he could hardly afford to be so, seeing as he is such a "great tradesman" (64–65). She shrugs off her father's warning that Milton manufacturers are different from tradesmen, and she persists in this attitude in the first half of the novel.

The interesting thing about Margaret's claim to the upper class, as she clearly perceives herself to be, is that it is not very straightforward or self-evident. Having lived with the rich and urbane family of her Aunt Shaw since she was ten years old, Margaret has received the education and the cultural taste/refinement of an urban upper-class woman. However, she does not have the family wealth that would make her eligible for an upper-class marriage. In fact, after his resignation from his position in the Church her father has become a paid worker of Mr. Thornton, making Margaret's already tenuous identification with the upper-class even more complicated and unstable. Instead of placing her protagonist in a governess plot, Gaskell presents her as the educated upper-middle-class observer of her society and the moral compass for an emerging ruling class. At the same time, Margaret's complicated social status in the novel, and her similarly complicated response to the social status of others, is a reflection of the unstable ways in which social class and status were formulated in English society in the first half of the nineteenth century, and perhaps also in a broader context, too. In *Class in Britain*, historian David Cannadine offers an alternative understanding of social class during this period—alternative, that is, to the model of class gradually replacing rank throughout the century, as proposed by Asa Briggs and others. Instead of a progression from an understanding of society as composed of hierarchical ranks or orders to society as

composed of two (upper-lower) or three (upper, middle and lower) classes, Cannadine argues,

> it now seems clear that throughout the years from the 1780s to the 1870s, British society was envisaged by contemporaries in essentially the same ways that it had been during the century before. All three models remained in being, with hierarchy still the preferred version. They retained their own specific vocabularies, but the languages of ranks and (especially) of class became increasingly common to all three. (79)

Essentially, Cannadine describes a time period when competing ways of thinking about social distinctions proliferated rather than cancelling one another out and borrowing the vocabulary of each other. This model of competitive cross-fertilization adds a further dimension to the struggle for the control of meaning that takes place between Margaret and Mr. Thornton as regards social status.

In the course of this struggle, Margaret first begins to doubt her rigid conceptions of rank and class when Mr. Thornton compels her to see that from his perspective, any worthwhile social status for a man would depend on action and performance rather than on an inherent and inviolable essence or quiddity. While attending a dinner at Mr. Thornton's house with his industrialist colleagues as guests, Margaret realizes that she admires "their anticipated triumphs over all inanimate matter at some future time which none of them should live to see" (164). Her appreciative feeling for these men, directed towards them for what they do in spite of who they are, confuses Margaret. Although their "sense of power" is "rather rampant in its display, and savour[s] of boasting," their "def[iance of] the old limits of possibility" somehow counterbalances their gaucheness and faux-pas in Margaret's itemization of these attributes side by side (163). The company of Mr. Thornton's colleagues thus makes Margaret question what is admirable and even desirable in a man.

Mr. Thornton, or a New Kind of Middle-Class Man

In *Masculine Identities: The History and Meanings of Manliness*, Herbert Sussman notes that valued attributes of masculinity and manliness changed during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ancient or medieval conceptions of masculine worth, based on "duties of public service" or "martial valor," were replaced with the concept of "economic man":

> Manliness as service to the common good in war and in peace was replaced by an ethos grounded not in community but in individual self-interest motivated by rational calculation of economic gain. For both the owners of the factories and its workers, manliness was performed through working hard, making money, and accumulating the commodities so easily produced by the machine. (81)

In some ways, this is a description of manliness as embodied by the colleagues of Mr. Thornton and distinct from Margaret's nebulously idealized 'gentleman'. However, in line with the novel's aim of promoting social integration and also with Cannadine's claim that

the categories of social status themselves are never uncontested and stable, the narrative immediately complicates this straightforward formulation of the industrialist or the 'economic man'. This complication is present both in Margaret's ambiguous response to the dinner guests and in Mr. Thornton's distinction between what it means to be a man, as opposed to a gentleman.

Following the dinner, during a private conversation Margaret questions Mr. Thornton regarding one of his fellow industrialists – "He cannot be a gentleman – can he?" (164). In answer to her, Mr. Thornton offers a comparison between the concepts of "man" and "gentleman" from his perspective to Margaret:

> I take it that "gentleman" is a term that only describes a person in his relation to others; but when we speak of him as "a man," we consider him not merely with regard to his fellow-men, but in relation to himself, – to life – to time – to eternity. A cast-away lonely as Robinson Crusoe – a prisoner immured in a dungeon for life – nay, even a saint in Patmos, has his endurance, his strength, his faith, best described by being spoken of as "a man." (164)

This is an interesting response on Mr. Thornton's part for a variety of reasons. To begin with, it is far from being a straightforward valorisation of the industrial middle classes over an outdated, declining or similarly negatively attributed gentry. Rather than contrast a gentleman and an industrialist – an upper-class man and a middle-class man – Mr. Thornton instead recognizes Margaret's preoccupation with the concept of gentlemanliness and offers a deconstruction of this idea. First, he claims that a gentleman is only ever so with relation to society, whereas a man is always resolutely himself. This is an argumentative sleight of hand because as indicated by the context in which this conversation takes place, the natural and constant 'man' he offers in contrast to the socially determined 'gentleman' is in fact an idealization of himself and his fellows, or middle-class men. By displacing the identity of a middle-class industrialist onto an ahistorical 'man', Thornton is able to subtly discredit the gentleman as unmanly. In doing so, he notably does not utilize the discourse of the 'economic man' as discussed by Sussman above; that is to say, he does not tell Margaret that his theoretical (middle-class) man is superior to an idle, upper-class gentleman because he is productive, and so on. Instead, he offers an inverted, or specifically manufactured portrait of the 'non-gentlemanly' man in order to win over Margaret: much like how aristocratic identity is designated as a birthright based on the inherent and inherited quality of honour – "an idea of status derived from the personal possession . . . of honor" – Mr. Thornton's concept of "man," as an alternative to "gentleman," is based on virtues such as endurance, faith or strength (McKeon 131). Elsewhere, for instance, in talking to Mr. Bell, he describes himself in decidedly different terms; identifying with his 'Teutonic' forebears, he says, "we do not look upon life as a time for enjoyment, but as a time for action and exertion" (334). Although, at first, his position appears to be more fixed in comparison to Margaret's complicated and unstable social status, then, in fact, Mr. Thornton's status, too, is located

in the same social context where the meaning of such concepts is constantly contested and redefined.

These constant shifts and re-positionings are very central in the construction and resolution of the novel's overarching theme, social reconciliation. In "Working-Class Masculinity and the Victorian Novel," Chris Louttit argues that from a certain standpoint, "the novel is about the discussion and social interaction between the working people and the manufacturing class. This structure and spirit of 'dialogue' and discussion is certainly pertinent in understanding constructions of masculinity in the text," and adds: "in dialogic spirit, the novel introduces manliness as a topic that is debated in more abstract terms by several of its characters" (40). As noted above, critical attention on *North and South* preponderantly focuses on the aspect of the relationships between the middle class and the working class; however, Louttit's argument is in fact also an apt description of the way class is negotiated between Margaret and Mr. Thornton. It is formulated and recalibrated in response to the position of the other, until at the end of the novel, the two characters find themselves sharing common ground enough to marry.

The symbolic or social value of the 'gentleman', or of the aristocracy, would eventually take much more than the arguments of fictional industrialists to exorcise. Briggs writes, "[t]he role of deference even in an industrial society was stressed, and the idea of a 'gentleman', one of the most powerful of mid-Victorian ideas but an extremely complicated one both to define and to disentangle, was scrutinized by novelists as much as by pamphleteers" ("Language" 69). *North and South*'s extensive engagement with the concept, then, is not out of the ordinary; in establishing social reconciliation, the novel would also have to find a place for the gentry. Through a series of displacements and inversions, bringing the ideas of innate versus acquired or performed status in conflict with each other, Gaskell establishes the grounds on which the old gentry and the new industrialists might be reconciled.

Critical responses to the marriage of Margaret and Mr. Thornton indicate that in the reader's encounter with it, the symbolic importance of the union almost instantly supersedes the event in itself. In "Romancing Manchester: Class, Gender, and the Conflicting Genres of Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*," Nils Clausson even discusses this overdetermination and says that in spite of other, symbolically-charged readings, a reader would "find that the conventions of the domestic romance more than adequate to account for the romance plot of the novel. The social and political conflicts that Gaskell raises and tries to resolve are presented almost entirely through the plot and character conventions of the romance" (3). Clausson is correct in noting that it is impossible to come to the ending of *North and South* without the mediating presence of critical overdetermination. To note just a few examples, Dorice Williams Elliott argues that "[b]y contrast to . . . rejected models of marriage, all grounded in the separation of men's and women's spheres, the relationship of Margaret and Thornton follows the formula that *North and South* gives for class harmony: familiarity with the other's language leads to

understanding, which leads to affection and cooperation" (48). While she interprets the marriage as a reformulation of the Victorian concepts of the domestic and private spheres, to be joined in the new concept of the social sphere, in "Fictional Philanthropy in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and *North and South*," Pamela Corpron Parker similarly argues that Gaskell strove to demonstrate that "the concerns of the industry and the home are interconnected and of vital interest to both men and masters, rich and poor, men and women" (330). For David Thiele, it is the middle class itself that is being consolidated through this union: "*North and South* eroticizes a particular vision of elite-led middle-class consolidation and knowledge diffusion. 'Mr. Thornton was in habits of authority himself,' but as he becomes a good member of the Hale Athenaeum, the well-rounded Margaret 'seem[s] to assume some kind of rule over him'" (281). Again, in sorting through all these interpretations, it is not that one among them is specifically more "accurate" than the others or less; it is rather that taken as a whole, they indicate how the ending is almost universally read as representative of social reconciliation. As such, in the framework of the sociohistorical context elaborated above – the Manchester of the eighteen-forties and the fifties, Gaskell's middle-class Unitarian milieu and so on– the recognition of overlap between the ending, and the desired as well as actual integration of Unitarians to the established order, would constitute a meaningful contribution to this body of criticism.

Finally, the two other minor marriage plots in the narrative, those of Margaret's brother Frederick and her cousin Edith, complement and foreground this particular function of the union between Margaret and Mr. Thornton. Margaret's brother Frederick rebels against the authority of his cruel captain out of his personal conviction that loyalty to truth and justice trumps loyalty to authority. On the one hand, he suffers immensely as a result of this act – his name is not cleared in England, and as he runs the risk of being hanged if he returns, he is condemned to a life on the Continent, away from his family. On the other hand, however, in addition to the clear conscience he enjoys as a result of not having blindly obeyed authority, he is financially rewarded – by Providence, or circumstance – in the course of his life in Spain. Married to Dolores, a girl from a rich family, "Frederick's worldly position was raised by this marriage on to as high a level as they could desire. Barbour and Co. was one of the most extensive Spanish houses, and into it he was received as a junior partner" (344). As such, his marriage plot mirrors that of Margaret's in how it presents union between members of different social (and even religious) groups as acceptable and even agreeable as long as it provides the parties involved with either capital or social mobility. Next to the complementary subplot of Frederick's marriage is the counterpoint of Edith, whose marriage, although not unhappy at all, is presented as a different and more old-fashioned affair. Edith's marriage is a more traditional kind of union, negotiated between members of the same social class, and by her mother rather than Edith herself. Edith herself is portrayed as a complacent woman, slightly frivolous before her marriage, and domestic and maternal as a married woman. Although the novel begins with Edith and her upcoming marriage, the focus shifts immediately to Margaret from the next chapter onward, relegating Edith to the status of

a secondary character. This displacement, too, demonstrates how the narrative privileges and advocates for a specific kind of marriage over others. The marriage of Margaret and Mr. Thornton, representative of the union between the old order and the new, is privileged precisely because of its symbolic function.

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