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NEITHER MEEK NOR DOCILE: AN ANALYSIS OF MARGARET HALE AND JANE
EYRE IN ELIZABETH GASKELL'S NORTH AND SOUTH AND CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S
JANE EYRE

McKell Ferguson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

Department of Literature and Languages

Catherine Ross, Ph.D., Committee Chair

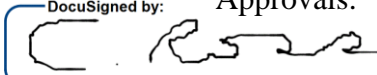
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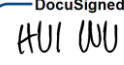
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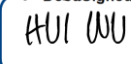
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Neither Meek nor Docile: An Analysis of Margaret Hale and Jane Eyre in Elizabeth Gaskell's

North and South and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

McKell Ferguson

April 2023

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Abstract

The Victorian period was an era of societal change in Great Britain. Viewing gender in hetero- and CIS- normative terms, the “woman question” – what to do with unmarried women – became a topic that was widely debated. Activists such as Barbara Leigh Smith, Francis Power Cobbe and Josephine Butler advocated for better education and employment opportunities for women emphasizing the need for women to find dignity and fulfilment outside of the private sphere to which they were relegated. *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and *North and South* by Elizabeth Gaskell reflect the issues facing middle-class women during this period, including the desire to find fulfilment and dignity in their lives. My paper examines the protagonists of these two novels, Jane Eyre and Margaret Hale, as examples of women who were beginning to question their role in society. Using the works of scholars such as Elaine Showalter, Ellen Moers, Barbara Leah Harman, Patricia Ingham and Nicola Thompson, it examines how these two characters both subvert Victorian expectations for women and conform to them. It posits that while historically Brontë has been viewed as a radically feminist writer, Gaskell is more successful in subverting Victorian notions of gender roles, for she successfully offers her audience a more admirably free and dignified yet still respectable female protagonist, one who is not only about to be happily married but who is also a land owner and sponsor of a “master of industry.”

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Apr. 2023

Neither Meek nor Docile: An Analysis of Margaret Hale and Jane Eyre in Elizabeth Gaskell's

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Introduction

One of the cultural practices that shaped Victorian life, particularly for the upper and middle classes, was the concept of “separate spheres” for men and women. Viewing gender in hetero- and CIS normative terms, men were expected to be out in the world, making money and providing financially for their families. Dependent upon men for financial support and social acceptance, women were to stay home, raise the children, and run the household. Wives and daughters had few other choices than to fill subservient roles in the home. However, many women could not or did not want to marry. Those without male relatives to support them needed to find ways to support themselves. Occupations considered appropriate for women were limited and often low-paying; thus, these women could not find the independence necessary to provide for themselves. Called at the time “redundant women,” these souls became the burden of their male relatives; or if they had no male relatives willing to care for them, they became a burden on society. Sparked by the 1851 census, which reported a large number of single women, an excess of 500,000 (Dreher 3), “The Woman Question” – what to do with unmarried women – became a major topic of discussion. Responses to this problem, such as education, employment, and emigration were debated in the period and have been explored by modern scholars such as Lee Holcombe, Pat Jalland, Ellen Jordan, and Kathryn Hughes.

Despite the concern the 1851 census incited, the phenomenon of redundant women was not a new one. According to Pat Jalland, “From 1600 . . . about one-third of all women under thirty were likely to be single” (254). While the problem may not have been part of mainstream discussions before 1851, women certainly acknowledged their precarious position in society. Female writers from Mary Wollstonecraft to Jane Austen to the Brontë sisters created female characters who struggle with patriarchal norms and pressures to marry well or risk degradation and poverty. In this monograph, I examine two Victorian novels, *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë and *North and South* (1854) by Elizabeth Gaskell and how Brontë and Gaskell create in their protagonists, Jane Eyre and Margaret Hale, redundant women who successfully subvert societal expectations and seek independence and agency. I argue that while historically Brontë has been viewed as a radically feminist author, Gaskell is more successful in subverting Victorian notions of gender roles, for she successfully offers her audience a more admirably free and dignified yet still respectable female protagonist, one who is not only about to be happily married but who is also a land owner and sponsor of a “master of industry.”

The focus of critical discussion of redundant women, their representation in Victorian literature, and the subversion of Victorian ideas of women and gender within the works of both Brontë and Gaskell has changed over the decades since scholars began including Gaskell in mainstream studies alongside Brontë’s novel. In *Literary Women* (1963), Ellen Moers expounds on the Victorian expectation that women be submissive and how this ideal is often reflected in novels: “In novels. . . ‘all women are to be levelled, by meekness and docility, into one character of yielding softness and gentle compliance’” (17). In order for a woman to be “virtuous” she needed to forego her own feelings and needs and submit to a man. Related to this is the idea that a woman should not speak unless it is to say something kind or submissive (18). The expectation

in Victorian novels was that the female characters would display these “virtues” of meekness, submissiveness, and docility. However, Moers argues that many of the characters created by women writers, including Jane Eyre, defied the stereotype. They were allowed to express themselves and be contradictory. They are allowed to say “No” to authority (16). Yet, in spite of, or perhaps because of, these rebellions, readers are drawn to these characters. While Moers focuses her discussion on Jane, I argue that Jane only says no when pushed to the limit by the Reeds and then by Rochester – and after the first time she collapses. Margaret, on the other hand, while submissive to her father, is not at all submissive to Thornton. She is often uncourteous to him and does not hesitate to tell him no.

Critical analysis of rebellious women in Victorian literature continues in the 1970s. In her book, *Reader, I Married Him: A Study of the Women Characters of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot* (1974), Patricia Beer comments on the dissatisfaction of women in the Victorian period who were trapped in the private sphere that is represented in Brontë’s works. Beer explains, “The home life of some of her heroines shows all the possible frustrations experienced by women in that age” (117). She later adds, “It is not surprising to find that the idea of escape is central to the novels of Charlotte Brontë” (124). Connected to the idea of escape is the desire for independence. Beer describes Jane as a character who “though lonely and deprived, respects and cherishes her own individuality (88). Additionally, while Jane takes the socially acceptable path of becoming a teacher, her experiences in that occupation “all have a certain independence of scope” (89). It is her occupation that allows Jane to escape the frustrations that many women felt and maintain her sense of individuality even with Rochester. In contrast, Elizabeth Gaskell does not present work as a way towards independence. In the case of Margaret in *North and South*, work is a moral

necessity, “being essential to well-being” (168). She argues that Margaret chooses to submerge herself in social work “because she is not happy” (168) and because it is good to be occupied, and not as a means to give herself independence or fulfilment. While Gaskell did create female characters who were bold and did not always align with what society expected, Gaskell’s depictions remain rather conservative, and her novels idealize the nurturing role of women – of women’s role being to take care of others – rather than women’s rebellion and self-fulfilment. It is true that Margaret chooses to do social work out of a sense of duty as a clergyman’s daughter and as a way to keep herself busy. However, she also chooses social work after rejecting the easy life of her aunt and cousin and over their objections to her chosen work. They expect her to use her money to become a woman of leisure who can afford the clothes and parties they themselves enjoy. Margaret, while it may not be the ideal, chooses to seek for more meaning to her life.

In *A Literature of their Own* (1977) Elaine Showalter examines the conflict between the desire for rebellion and self-fulfilment versus the expectation of obedience with which many authors grappled in their own lives: “Where did obedience to her father and husband end, and the responsibility of self-fulfilment become paramount?” (24). Was the only way to find self-fulfilment to rebel? Showalter analyzes *Jane Eyre*, specifically Jane, including Jane’s search for fulfilment. Showalter argues, “In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë attempts to depict a complete female identity . . .” (112). Part of this identity is a rebellious spirit. Showalter suggests that the character of Jane and her self-fulfilment became a pattern for other Victorian writers to follow: “The post-Jane heroine . . . was plain, rebellious, and passionate . . . she usually was the narrator of her own story. Jane . . . Mrs. Gaskell’s Mary Barton and Margaret Hale . . . were more intellectual and more self-defining” (122). For Jane, it is easier to show a rebellious spirit because she has no father figure to disobey. In contrast, Margaret has a father whom she loves and respects. Thus,

her rebellious spirit may be less obvious than Jane's, but as Showalter suggests, both Jane Eyre and Margaret Hale reflect the feminist feelings of the time and are women who seek to find their own way and their own fulfillment.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar also emphasize the desire of Victorian women to become independent in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979). Within the novels discussed, they examine what they view as a connecting characteristic among female literature of the period: "a common, female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art, and society" (xii). In chapter ten "A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress," Gilbert and Gubar frame *Jane Eyre* as a bildungsroman in which she works toward "an almost unthinkable goal of mature freedom" (339). Her experiences and friendships at Lowood teach her to be a rational/mature being, but it is not until she leaves Rochester that she is truly able to start her path toward independence. It is because she has gained independence and Rochester has been humbled that they are able to be together. However, they must remove themselves from society because real society would not allow them to truly live in it as they are – the concept is too radical.

While the majority of literary criticism in the 60s and 70s gave attention to *Jane Eyre* and other "canonical" works, the 1980s up to the present have seen more scholars exploring Elizabeth Gaskell and the ways in which her novels demonstrate progressive ideas. Barbara Leah Harman's article "In promiscuous Company: Female Public Appearance in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*" (1988), examines how Margaret radically rebels by moving into the public sphere. Harmon discusses the Victorian notion that a woman's public and private life cannot be separated: "Walking alone in the city streets, speaking before a mixed audience, appearing at a

polling booth, engaging in the world of business or politics, even eating in a restaurant might compromise a woman's reputation" (351). This view on women's private and public life is what gave so many Victorians concerns about women entering the workplace or any other form of public life. She examines the scenes in which Margaret is "compromised": when she befriends one of the factory workers, when she is seen at the train station with her brother and subsequently lies to protect him, and when she puts herself in physical danger to protect Thornton from the rioting workers. Speaking of these scenes, Harman states, "displaying the private body on the public stage . . . and internalizing the taint of public shame. . . Gaskell both challenges the conventional boundaries between private and public and legitimizes public action for women" (361). By putting Margaret in what would be viewed as a compromising situation, Gaskell draws attention to the traditional Victorian view and advocates for women to enter into the public sphere. Viewed in this way, Margaret becomes a character who pushes back against social convention.

Following up on "In Promiscuous Company", Harmon continues to discuss the relationship between the public and private sphere and the ways in which Gaskell complicates the ideals and social mores of her time in *The Feminine Political Novel in Victorian England* (1998). While women were expected to stay safely in the private sphere of the home, Margaret represents Gaskell's belief the women could, in fact, enter the public sphere. Part of the expectation that women stay in the home was to protect them from sexual harm. Harman describes Margaret's growing interest in Thornton's world, and thus the world of work throughout the novel. The strike scene is the ultimate merging of the public and private, but it comes at a cost. The scene is viewed as sexual, and by extension, Margaret's reputation is unprotected; she is "'symbolically' deflowered" (65). She believed her status as a woman would

protect her. However, as Harman explains, “Margaret fails to appreciate . . . the way in which her appearance on a public stage revokes the very protection that she wished to elicit” (66). By placing herself in the public sphere, she lost the protection that would normally be afforded to her as a woman. Still, even with these deconstructions of boundaries, some critics have read the end of the novel as conservative. Harman disagrees. She states, “The novel confirms what critics of female emancipation tended to fear – that access to public life means access to potentially dangerous kinds of sexual intimacy for women – and it does so while affirming and hence finally legitimizing, both female public action and female sexuality” (75). Thus, Gaskell’s novel ultimately advocates for women’s place in public spaces.

Like Harman, Patricia Ingham views Margaret as a much more radical character who steps outside the bounds of social expectations. In *The Language of Gender and Class: Transformation in the Victorian Novel* (1996), Ingham devotes chapter four, subtitled “Gendering the Narrator: The Subversive Female,” to *North and South*. Ingham examines how the narrative voice in the novel helps to subvert “the social status quo” (55-56) by making Margaret “unfeminine.” Three qualities that defined “femininity” during the period were honesty, submissiveness, and conforming to society. Ingham argues that throughout the novel “. . . Margaret Hale does not remain a standard middle-class . . . heroine . . .” and this nonconformity is also unfeminine (56). Part of Margaret’s nonconformity is her unwillingness to submit to Thornton as a wife. She rejects his first proposal because she does not want “a marriage that will relegate her to a position of mere womanly influence . . .” (69). Instead, she waits until she can “control his actions as an employer” (70). Margaret changes the power dynamic in the marriage when she offers him the money to save his businesses, becoming a partner and entrepreneur.

Ingham argues that Margaret's subversions cause the reader to rethink notions of masculine and feminine, a radical concept for the time.

Gaskell is not the only writer to present a different view on marriage. Ingham addresses this concept in her book *The Brontës* (2006). Ingham presents the "idea of womanliness as selflessness," (139) that the Victorians preached. She argues that the works of all three Brontë sisters question this notion and this questioning points to "the heretical possibility that marriage and a household to run do not represent the limit of what women need to use all their capacities" (139). Regarding *Jane Eyre*, Ingham states, ". . . the threatening presence of the wretched Bertha Mason looms as a warning against marriage undertaken out of passion or avarice" (140). Ingham acknowledges that even while the novels question traditional marriage, most of the sisters' novels end in a fulfilling marriage – *Jane Eyre* included. However, *Jane Eyre* is "more complex" (140). She explains, ". . . Jane speaks of perfect concord and of mutual confidence, while Rochester's physical dependence on her gives her a gratuitous control over him which may suggest that agency and power now reside with her" (140). Jane taking care of an injured Rochester, Ingham argues, is not advocating for "womanliness as selflessness," but rather gives Jane a form of power in the relationship that she would not have had otherwise. While true, the fact remains that Jane's happy ending is founded on a marriage in which she is the primary caregiver to both husband and child within the home – the epitome of the Victorian ideal. Whereas, Margaret's happy ending is less clear. There is the implication of a future marriage to Mr. Thornton, after which she will have to cede her property to him, but the novel ends before this event, with Margaret as an independent heiress entering the masculine sphere of business.

Part of the interest in placing *Jane Eyre* and *North and South* together is the difference in how both authors have been perceived by literary critics. Brontë has long been a standard in the

feminist Victorian literary canon while Gaskell is more recent (Thompson 1). This is in large part because Brontë's novels have been read by modern scholars as radical and pro feminist. In their seminal feminist work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar not only allude to *Jane Eyre* in the title, but label the novel as "rebellious feminism" that incensed reviewers of its day (338). Furthermore, they suggest, ". . . not even a Wollstonecraft or a Mill could adequately describe a society so drastically altered that the matured Jane and Rochester could really live in it" (369-70). Brontë's feminist thought was quite radical for the period – too radical for most to even imagine the world she was trying to create. Gilbert and Gubar are not the only critics to attribute radical feminism to Brontë. In discussing all three Brontë sisters, Inga-Stina Ewbank states, ". . . the art of the Brontë's was in the deepest sense feminist" (xvi). She further argues that Charlotte was the most progressive of the three: ". . . Charlotte Bronte is the one whose art . . . is stamped through and through with evidence that she had made the woman question, in its least technical and most personal sense, her proper sphere" (204). The woman question was her main focus and at the very center of her writings.

While critics have praised Brontë's feminism, other literary critics have been dismissive of Gaskell's largely because her heroines end their novels married. Barbara Leah Harman explains, "Early critics of Gaskell's novels . . . consistently read them as an expression of her traditional conservative views" (*Political Novel* 52). This reading is in part because Gaskell's female characters do not "reject traditional femininity and construct identity outside of patriarchal norms" (Camus 4-5). Most end up in good marriages, or, in the case of *North and South* with the promise of a good marriage. They do not demonstrate the radical feminism that critics have found in Brontë's work and were therefore thought to be less feminist and "unworthy" of consideration. However, as I will argue, *North and South* and Margaret do

demonstrate a radical form of feminism for Victorian women as she enters the public sphere and becomes a woman of business and industry.

Despite dismissals of Gaskell as conservative and praise of Brontë's feminism, neither author is wholly radical or conservative in their views on women's issues and the "Woman Question." In Pearl L. Brown's essay "From Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* to Her *North and South*: Progress or Decline for Women?" (2000), Brown views Margaret as a character who represents a more traditional view of Victorian women, but the eponymous character Mary Barton as a more progressive one. Brown argues that even though *Mary Barton* was written and takes place in the earlier part of the Victorian Era, Margaret in *North and South* is more restricted and has fewer options than her earlier counterpart. In addition, she states that Mary Barton "achiev[es] greater autonomy and self-actualization" (347). According to Brown, while industrialization and the rise of professionalism brought more opportunities to men, it further isolated women. These conditions would have made it more difficult for Margaret to become autonomous and self-actualized. Hence, Gaskell's solution for Margaret is independence thanks to inheritance and a good marriage. Yet, the novel's ending only hints at a marriage between Margaret and Thornton while it makes clear that Margaret is determined to follow her own path and use her money to become a businesswoman – entering the public sphere by aiding Thornton in saving his business.

While Brontë is often viewed through a modern lens as a radical feminist for the period, she also demonstrates rather conservative views in her writing. A contemporary and friend of Charlotte Brontë thought her novels "deplorably restrictive in terms of women's rights . . . Charlotte's 'lamentable' philosophy of self-sacrifice and her emphasis on romantic fulfilment became positively 'traitorous' when offered as a model for others" (Fenton-Hathaway 140).

Furthermore, when Brontë does present female characters who defy the status quo, it is only “exceptional individuals . . . and trying to empower the unexceptional was a waste of energy” (Fenton-Hathaway 142). The belief that only some women could break away from the prominent ideology enforces that same ideology onto others and is a more conservative notion. Thus, the majority of women, who were not exceptional, still needed to remain in line with the Victorian values and model self-sacrifice and a happy marriage.

In contrast, Gaskell could be quite radical in her ideas. One analysis of *North and South* claims, “. . . *North and South* has only a skin-deep conformism. Beneath lies a deep structure of dissidence effected by a narrator whose perspective is not what would have been regarded as appropriately feminine” (Ingham, *Gender and Class* 56). Marianne Camus suggests that Gaskell’s writing has a “discreet but persistent undermining of Victorian values running beneath [her] apparent conformism . . .” (10). While Brontë’s works are more visibly radical when viewed through a modern lens, Gaskell’s feminism is more subtle, but it is still radical in its own way.

This mixing of conservative and progressive ideas is not unique to these two novels, but is standard for female literature of the Victorian period. Nicola Thompson in “Responding to the Woman Questions: Rereading Noncanonical Victorian Women Novelists” (1999) discusses the reasons why some Victorian women have not been accepted into the academic literary canon. Many other female novelists such as Harriet Martineau, Charlotte Yonge, and Elizabeth Braddon remain outside the canon with little critical analysis of their works. Thompson contends that the main reason for this is that these other Victorian women writers are viewed as anti-feminists. However, Thompson argues that these novels in fact “demonstrate divisions and tensions concerning women that make such judgements simplistic” (3). She states further, “All Victorian

women novelists, whether we now label them as radical or conservative, were fundamentally conflicted in their own beliefs about women's proper role" (3). Because of the conflicting nature of the ideologies expressed, Victorian novels become "melting-pots of ideological conflict and exploration of attitudes toward women's nature and role . . ." (4). Thus, in reality, there is not a clear line between feminist and antifeminist. Rather, the works of all women of the Victorian period demonstrate the complexity of the issues and the debates. Both Gaskell and Brontë demonstrate contrary and controversial ideologies that are worthy of analysis and that lead to my thesis that Gaskell's work is in fact more radical than Brontë's.

Not only have Brontë and Gaskell been viewed differently by literary scholars, but the novels in question are very different. One is a Gothic Romance complete with Byronic hero and dark secrets; the other an Industrial/Political novel complete with union strikes and the struggles of the working class. Considering the varying criticisms of both authors and the differences in the novels, it is, in the words of Elizabeth Haldane, "particularly interesting to have them placed in conjunction one with the other" (140). However different they may seem, there is much commonality. The novels were published relatively close to each other – *Jane Eyre* 1847; *North and South* 1854. In addition, the latter was published after the two women had met in person and become friends a fact that supports Showalter's suggestion that Margaret Hale was patterned after Jane Eyre. Both novels reflect the "Woman Question" and the condition of women generally during the period. Most importantly, both novels demonstrate the "melting-pot of ideological conflict" suggested by Thompson. Out of this pot of conflicting ideas about women, the figure of Margaret Hale emerges as more successful in contesting the Victorian ideology of gender roles because it transforms Margaret Hale – who begins the novel disliking "shoppy people" – into a landowner and entrepreneur.

Rebelling Against Expectations

In order to understand the ways in which both Jane Eyre and Margaret Hale conform and rebel, it is important to understand Victorian ideals of femininity and womanhood. Cheryl R. Jorgensen-Earp describes what was considered to be “the Perfect Lady (True Womanhood)”: “. . . two primary characteristics mark the Perfect Lady: submission to/support of the patriarch and gentility” (84). Women were expected to uphold the separate spheres by obeying their husbands and fulfilling their role as wives and mothers. Indeed, women were expected to be the “fragile, docile, dependent wife at the home tending to the comforts of husband and children” (Okin vii). Furthermore, women were expected to “trust to her husband’s judgement (Rubenius 62). This ideology limited a woman’s ability to express her own agency and define her own life. However, as Victorian society progressed, many began to examine these ideals and beliefs more closely and to question them. According to Aina Rubenius, “Some women were beginning to voice their opinion that woman was considered as a mere appendage of man without any intrinsic value of her own, and public opinion was slowly awakening to the fact that English law treated women, or at least married women¹, as irresponsible children” (1). This “awaking” and rebellion against these ideals is reflected in Victorian literature including *Jane Eyre* and *North and South*.

Jane Eyre

While both Jane Eyre and Margaret Hale demonstrate the new awakening that was beginning – neither character completely fulfills the role of Jorgenson-Earp’s “Perfect Lady” – Jane exhibits a more natural tendency to rebel. In her introduction to the novel, Erica Jong suggests that the reason critics disliked the novel when it was first published was because the

¹ While Rubenius emphasizes the treatment of married women, and while indeed, single women had control over their own money and property that married women did not, even single women did not have complete autonomy. Margaret, as has been mentioned, is expected to obey and follow her parents. Even Jane needs permission from Mr. Brocklehurst and her Aunt Reed in order to take up a new position as governess at Thornfield.

eponymous heroine was “a complex human being rather than a stereotype” (v). In addition, Jane represents “women’s anger, rebellion, and nonconformity” (Jong v). Jane’s rebellious and non-conforming attitude strikes the reader from the very first chapters. The reader’s introduction to Jane is her defiance of her cousin John Reed who is forcing his authority on her as the future master of Gateshead. John violently attacks her and when she defends herself, she is the one who is punished. However, she “resist[s] all the way” to the red room (11). In resisting, Jane is rebelling against the authority of both her cousin and her Aunt Reed. Even as a young child, she knows that she is being treated unjustly and uses what resistance she has.

Not long after the incident of the red room, Jane again shows her lack of submission in her interview with Mr. Brocklehurst. Upon being catechized by Brocklehurst about what she must do to avoid Hell, she responds, “I must keep in good health, and not die” (32). Her cheeky response solidifies Brocklehurst’s view that she is a bad, sinful child. Yet, she does not apologize and continues to give him unsatisfactory answers. After Brocklehurst leaves, Jane continues to resist. Being dismissed by her aunt, Jane confronts Mrs. Reed for the unjust treatment she has received over the years. An older Jane narrating the moment reflects, “*Speak*, I must: I had been trodden on severely, and *must* turn . . .” (35). She does not want to conform to society’s expectations of her. She feels herself to be a human being with agency, and she uses that agency to speak her mind even in the face of authority.

While events at Lowood would seem to quell Jane’s rebelliousness, it comes back in force as an adult. As explained by Ellen Moers, Brontë uses a simple device to show Jane’s rebelliousness: “. . . she has her say no” (16). The pattern of Jane saying “no” can be seen most clearly in her relationship to Rochester. After their engagement, Jane is aware that following the tradition of society – to submit to the whims of her husband – takes away her agency and her

ability to control her own life as a free individual. Rochester attempts to shower Jane with new clothes and jewels. She rejects all of the proffered gifts, except for a wedding veil at her fiancé's insistence. Jane, being uncomfortable with the disparity in their class and incomes insists that she will not become the docile housewife who depends on her husband for room and board and is decorated by his gifts. She firmly tells Rochester that she does not want to be "crushed by crowded obligations" (274). She continues, "I shall continue to act as Adèle's governess; by that I shall earn my board and lodging, and thirty pounds a year besides. I'll furnish my own wardrobe out of that money, and you shall give me nothing . . ." (274). Rejecting Rochester's gifts denies him power over her and places her in control of the engagement moving forward.

Jane also rejects Rochester's amorous advances, preserving her maidenly integrity. According to Gilbert and Gubar, "Rochester, having secured Jane's love almost reflexively begins to treat her as an inferior, a plaything, a virginal possession . . ." (355). Gilbert and Gubar continue to explain that many critics have read Jane's responses as prudishness on the part of both the character and the author. However, Jane's refusals of his embraces and insistence on another paradigm for their relationship are "attempts at finding emotional strength rather than expressions of weakness" (355). She is asserting her own sense of self as an individual, not submissive to anyone else including a husband.

While Jane finds it easy to say "no" when Rochester wants to objectify her, it is much more difficult when, devastated by learning about his wife, she must make a decision about her future. After grieving alone in her room, Jane comes to the determination that she must leave Thornfield, and Rochester. At first, she resists that thought: "'Let me be torn away, then!' I cried. 'Let another help me!'" (302). That fact that Jane is willing to submit to the will of another, to give up her agency in this moment demonstrates the distress that she is feeling. She knows what

she needs to do, but she is willing to hand her agency over to another if it means she does not need to make that choice. However, this willingness only lasts for a moment, then she says, “No; you shall tear yourself away, none shall help you: You shall yourself, pluck out your right eye: yourself cut off your right hand: your heart shall be the victim; and you, the priest, to transfix it” (302). Jane says “no” to herself. She says “no” to the desire to submit. She takes her life back into her own hands as she determines that she will leave no matter the pain that it causes to herself. She is not willing to let anyone else determine her destiny.

The resolution Jane finds in this moment continues as she confronts Rochester on the night before she escapes from Thornfield. He attempts to convince Jane that nothing has changed, that they can still live together as husband and wife; they can run away to Europe and no one will ever know that that are not legally married. After it all, he asks for one final promise: “Just this promise – ‘I will be yours, Mr. Rochester.’” To his urgent plea Jane responds, “Mr. Rochester, I will *not* be yours.” Furthermore, she tells him that it would be “[wicked] to obey [him]” (321). Rochester is physically stronger than her and emotionally charged. Yet he does not try to overpower her in this moment, although he threatens too, because her will is so strong. It might be tempting for Jane to become submissive, weak, and docile. She could follow him to Europe and no one would know their secret. Yet she still says “no.” She rejects his offer, following her own conscience. In a moment, she considers giving in, asking herself, “Who in the world cares for *you*?” She passionately replies, “*I* care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man” (322). Once again Jane demonstrates the emotional strength that she does during their engagement. While choosing to stay with Rochester under these circumstances would in itself be rebelling against Victorian morals, by saying “no” Jane stays

true to herself and her own character. She admits that in making this choice she is following the norms of society; however, she is not following them because she is afraid of Victorian judgement. She is making the choice based on her own feelings and beliefs.

Despite the difficulty of her decision to say “no” to Rochester, Jane will once again need to find the strength and courage to defy societal expectations by saying “no” to her cousin St. John Rivers when he proposes to her and asks that she accompany him to India for missionary work. St. John invokes God’s will, forcing it upon her saying ““God and nature intended you for a missionary’s wife. . . I claim you – not for my pleasure, but for my Sovereign’s service”” (409). He is hoping that Jane, a churchwoman, will accept his authority as a man of God and submit to his desire. When she tells him that she is willing to accompany him, but as his sister and companion, not his wife, St. John falls back on societal expectations: ““Adopted fraternity will not do in this case. If you were my real sister it would be different: I should take you and seek no wife. But as it is, either our union must be consecrated and sealed by marriage, or it cannot exist: practical obstacles oppose themselves to any other plan”” (412). The “practical obstacles” in this case are society’s expectations and beliefs. It would not appear “right” or “proper” for them to go as siblings when they are not. Jane rejects his proposal and his reasoning. When St. John criticizes her for only being willing to give half of her heart to God, she replies righteously, ““Oh! I will give my heart to God. . . *you* do not want it”” (413). Jane is unwilling to accept the idea of St. John as the arbiter of God’s will on earth. She also rejects his notion that she is ““formed for labour, not for love”” (409). As her closest male relative, St. John has some claim upon Jane and her obedience. However, Jane is not willing to submit to his supposed authority as either cousin or priest. She refuses to acquiesce and instead frees herself to forge her own life.

From her childhood, Jane shows a rebellious nature and a willingness to defy the unjust power of individuals and crushing societal expectations. She speaks her mind to those in authority and rejects social propriety when it infringes upon her rights as a free human being. According to Gilbert and Gubar it is Jane Eyre's "refusal to accept the forms, customs, and standards of society – in short, its rebellious feminism" that led to many outraged readers and critics of the time (338). On the other hand, it is these strong, passionate rebellions that have led feminist critics to hold Jane Eyre as a paragon of feminism over the centuries while other works, like those of Elizabeth Gaskell have been disregarded.

Margaret Hale

While Jane Eyre, both as a child and adult, reveals a passionate and rebellious nature, Margaret Hale does not. In fact, Margaret appears to be every bit the proper Victorian lady at the beginning of *North and South*. She is quiet, calm, and obedient to the aunt who has taken her in. However, when looked at more carefully, her adherence to the standard of "Perfect [Victorian] Woman[hood]" is only "skin-deep" (Ingham, *Gender and Class* 56). Educated in London with her cousin Edith, Margaret lacks many of the superficial "feminine" accomplishments that were praised as being most attractive to a potential husband. Comparing the three young women in the novel who have wealth and status, Margaret, her cousin Edith, and Thornton's sister Fanny, in relation to how they fit the role of the proper middle-class woman Camus explains, "Margaret is probably the character furthest from the stereotype. She is not as pretty as Edith. She is not very keen on housework although she is competent at it. She cannot even play the piano . . ." (93). Yet, Margaret is the character with whom the reader is meant to sympathize. Edith, while kind and loving toward Margaret, is a vain and simple character; she does not understand Margaret's desire to run her own life. Fanny is spoiled, self-centered, stupid, and condescending. Margaret is

self-sacrificing, but she is also brave, industrious, opinionated, and – ultimately – an agent in her own life.

Margaret, of course, comes from more fortunate circumstances than Jane, and has not been treated in the same abusive manner. She has been surrounded her whole life by those who love her and want to take care of her. Thus, while she may not have all the feminine accomplishments, she has fewer reasons to rebel and is more willing to submit to the adults in her life and the social expectations than Jane is. When her father tells her they will be moving to Milton, she objects at first, but then accepts his decision rather quickly. This is in part because, at 18, she is still dependent on her parents to take care of her. Margaret has no choice but to follow; and, in fact, she does much of the work necessary to effect the move. Addressing Margaret's reaction, Haldane adds that "The girl was marvellously loyal . . ." (110). She is so loyal to her father that she agrees to be the one to break his news about leaving the church and their home to her mother. And while she listens to her mother's complaints about the situation, she does not express her own grievances. She tries her hardest to help ease the situation for both of her parents.

Notwithstanding her outward loyalty, Gaskell's depiction of Margaret's conflicted feelings as the family prepares to move mirrors the complexity of the discussions surrounding Victorian women and their role in society. For example, Margaret had once appreciated the "wild adventurous freedom of [the local poachers'] life . . . and felt inclined to wish them success . . ." (55); then, just before the move she panics. She realizes she lacks their freedom. Taking a final walk the evening before the move, she hears the servant closing up the house; she runs back fearful that she will be shut out for the night – symbolically shut out of her family, the class system, and any meaningful role in Victorian society. Margaret longs for the freedom to choose

her own path but also clings to the seeming safety and security, or at least the shelter and food, provided if she stays within the bounds of “proper” society. Margaret’s conflicted feelings are an example of the “skin deep conformism” discussed by Ingham (*Gender and Class* 56). While she “unquestionably accept[s] [her] father’s authority” on the surface (Rubenius 97), Gaskell provides the reader with Margaret’s inner rebellions and desires which do not fit the Victorian ideal that “. . . all women are to be levelled, by meekness and docility, into one character of yielding softness and gentle compliance” (Moers 17). Still, at this point in the novel, her rebellion remains inward, while outwardly she conforms to the expectations of society.

Although her rebelliousness is not expressed, Margaret’s outward loyalty and submissiveness is only demonstrated in regards to her father. In response to other men, particularly Thornton, she demonstrates a more defiant and questioning attitude. In the words of Marianne Camus, “One may certainly say that Gaskell does not create sweet submissive angels smiling their sad smile of resignation” (49). When she perceives Thornton disparaging her beloved south, she immediately takes up the conversation and enters into its defense. Upon hearing about the strike, Margaret jumps to the defense of the mill workers. She questions why Thornton and the other mill owners are not more open in explaining the trade situation to the workers. She accuses Thornton, and the other masters, of treating the workers like “tall, large children – living in the present moment – with a blind unreasoning kind of obedience” (119). Later, when the workmen threaten Thornton’s home in protest, Margaret refuses to be sent upstairs with the servants who are hiding (174). In addition, she urges Thornton to “Speak to your workman as if they were human beings” (175). In these instances, Margaret is able and willing to debate with Thornton about the relationship between masters and workers. She is not simply willing to accept Thornton’s authority as man and master.

In addition to Margaret's willingness to debate with Thornton, another rebellious aspect of Margaret is Gaskell's depictions of her being on display in public in ways that were not usual for the proper Victorian lady. According to Barbara Leah Harmon, "Walking alone in the city streets, speaking before a mixed audience . . . even eating in a restaurant might compromise a woman's reputation" (Promiscuous Company 351). The ease with which a reputation could be harmed is echoed by Jorgenson -Earp: "Virtue was so highly valued in the Perfect Lady that even rumor of its loss could consign a woman to the status of Fallen Women" (85). One example of Margaret scandalously stepping out of the private sphere and into the public is her decision to throw herself in front of Thornton in order to protect him from the angry mob that has surrounding his home. The result of Margaret's choice to act is not only physical harm but also damage to her reputation as a Victorian lady. In the aftermath of the event, "Everyone is astounded by the presumptuousness" (Harman, Promiscuous Company 369) and the gossip begins immediately. If even the simple acts of walking alone or eating in a restaurant could destroy a woman, then publicly throwing her arms around a man to whom she is not related would most certainly destroy it.

Margaret presents mixed emotions as she looks back on her actions. She is mortified by the conversation between Fanny and the servant as she lay semi-conscious on Thornton's sofa, but she acknowledges that there is scarcely another conclusion they would come to "after disgracing [herself] in that way" (188). She also feels "a deep sense of shame that she should thus be the object of universal regard . . ." (189). On the other hand, she is determined to not care what others think and support her own decision. After pondering the situation, Margaret declares to herself, "I would do it again, let who will say what they like of me. . . let them insult my maiden pride if they will. . ." (188). Margaret is unwilling to submit to what society deems as the

perfect, pure, and chaste woman. Furthermore, Margaret's mixed reaction to this situation demonstrates her character growth. She is becoming more bold, more willing to break social norms, but she still holds the same fear of being locked out of society that she did in Helstone.

Margaret's conflicting feelings about some of her public behavior and the presumptuousness of others is the beginnings of another subversion: using her own moral compass and not society's – a concept that was not always in Gaskell's writings. Rubenius explains, "In the course of her literary career, [Gaskell's] ideal changed from submissive wife of the earliest stories to the wife of strong character, willing to accept moral responsibility" (62). This new ideal of a woman accepting moral responsibility, and questioning the beliefs of Victorian society, is reflected in Margaret. According to Alan Shelston regarding *North and South*, ". . . morality is not something given . . . but something which has to be discovered . . . Margaret has to find her own way . . ." (xiii). By the act of discovering her own morality in the midst of repressive Victorian attitudes about women, Margaret becomes an agent rather than a submissive woman following custom.

Perhaps the most striking example of Margaret finding her own morality is her navigation of the fallout of her brother Frederick's visit and the disastrous events at the train station as he is leaving. When questioned by the inspector about the death of Leonards, Margaret lies, telling him that she was not there. She internally cries, ". . . that I knew Frederick were safe!" (269). When she later learns of Thornton's involvement in the case, and that he knows about her lie, she feels a sense of shame at the thought of what Thornton must think of her, but she does not feel the need for "penitence before God" (277). While society would condemn her for lying, she feels that she has done the right thing before God in protecting her brother. She may regret Thornton's reproach – after all, she has come to realize that he is an admirable man with whom she may be

in love, and she does not want him to think less of her, yet she does not regret placing her own sense of morality above society's. Her brother is safe, and that is what is most important.

It is no coincidence that this character defining event involves Margaret's brother. Not only does she use her own sense of morality by putting the safety of her brother over her duty to the law and society, but according to Patricia Ingham, Frederick's mutiny "provide[s] Margaret with a near example of how an individual may question the established order out of a sense of burning injustice. It is through affinity with Frederick . . . that she develops a model for dissent" ("Introduction" xvi). The account of Frederick's mutiny tells a story of a man who, though he disliked his superior officer, only fought back to save the lives of others, not himself. Though admittedly the account is "very much exaggerated by the narrator, who had written it while fresh and warm from the scene of the altercation" (107), Margaret is impressed by her brother's courage to "defy arbitrary power, unjustly and cruelly used – not on behalf of ourselves, but on behalf of others more helpless" (109). It is because her brother dissented that she is able to protect him as he protected his weaker crewmates from their tyrannical captain.

It is interesting to note that Margaret learns this "model of dissent" and any other sense of morality despite her mother who demonstrates virtually no real agency in her life. According to Carol A. Martin, this is a deliberate move on Gaskell's part. In her essay "No Angel in the House: Victorian Mothers and Daughters in George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell," Martin speaks to the idealization of motherhood during the Victorian era and the largely accepted concept of the "angel of the house" – that women were the moral centers of the home and would pass that morality to the children, especially their daughters. However, in Gaskell's works there is a lack of strong, moral mothers, "a refutation of the simplistic and sentimental view of motherhood" (299). Martin also points out that in many cases, the mother cannot be a moral guide because she

has died; however, *North and South* is a unique case: “Margaret Hale’s mother in *North and South* lasts longer – over half the novel – but she is a weak woman, both physically and spiritually” (300). Without agency of her own, Margaret’s mother cannot be the moral compass her daughter needs.

Where Mrs. Hale is not, Mrs. Thornton is a mother with strong character and morals. Thornton describes her as “a woman of strong power, and firm resolve” (85) and credits her for his success after his father’s death. On her death bed, Mrs. Hale requests that Mrs. Thornton be a friend to Margaret when she dies. Yet, when Mrs. Thornton attempts to fulfill this promise thinking that Margaret “is in some strait, arising out of some attachment” (309), Margaret grows proud and defiant knowing that her would-be mentor does not have all of the information and is giving advice based on false assumptions. Consequently, Margaret rejects Mrs. Thornton as a motherly, moral guide.

Neither does Margaret use her father, even though he is himself following his own moral compass by rebelling against the Church of England. In discussing Mr. Hale’s choice, Elizabeth Haldane notes: “His whole action was no doubt guided by the highest dictates of conscience, but it strikes us at the same time as extremely selfish in its manner. The way in which not only the decision but the plans are made without once consulting the querulous but faithful wife, is typical of the attitude to the family so often adopted in those days by its head” (110). While her father’s decision to leave the church is rooted in a deep sense of his own morality, he does so at the expense of the family, using his authority as the societally appointment head of the household to make a unilateral decision. Mr. Hale’s selfishness in not consulting his wife in this decision and the fact that he puts the burden of informing his wife on Margaret rather than on himself does not

make him a moral guide for Margaret. Thus, Margaret turns to her brother as a guide for unselfish principle.

Margaret dissents from society's moral authority not only to save her brother, but to protect others as well. She openly questions Thornton's and the other mill owner's authority to treat their workers like unintelligent children. She learns to rebel by "defy[ing] arbitrary power, unjustly and cruelly used" (109). In both her physical protection of Thornton and her lie to protect her brother, Margaret, like Frederick, places her physical self and her reputation in harm's way in contrast to what society would tell her to do as a "proper" woman.

While Jane begins the novel as a rebellious woman and remains one throughout most of her story, Margaret's story is one of progression. Jane is rebellious by nature which is typical of Brontë's heroines as only "exceptional individuals could transcend those structures [or societal expectations of women]" (Fenton-Hathaway 142). Jane is an exceptional woman with an innate ability to rebel, while others without this innate ability cannot overcome Victorian ideals and expectations. Margaret represents a different type of woman. Margaret demonstrates that change is possible. Radical and rebellious women can be made, opinions can change, and women can begin to exert more power and independence in their lives and be less submissive. Throughout the novel, Margaret progresses from the quiet almost "perfect lady" to a woman who questions authority and desires to have her own agency.

After Margaret receives her inheritance from Mr. Bell, she once again finds herself grappling with society's expectations and her own desires. The narrator explains, ". . . she tried to settle that most difficult problem for women, how much was to be utterly merged in obedience to authority, and how much might be set apart for freedom in working" (406). Through Margaret, Gaskell is expressing the dilemma common among Victorian women and the very question that

Showalter explores in *A Literature of Their Own*. Rather than making Margaret a submissive and weak character who allows herself to be swept away by society's rules, Gaskell gives Margaret the strength and agency to question authority and decide her own actions in order to find fulfilment in her life.

Independence and Self-Fulfilment

While rebelliousness in Jane Eyre and Margaret Hale is one way in which both Brontë and Gaskell explore new attitudes about women in the Victorian period, they also emphasize the need for these two characters to experience independence and self-fulfilment. As Elaine Showalter explains, Margaret's question about the balance between obedience and self-fulfilment was not a unique one (24). Many female Victorian writers struggled with this idea. It also became part of the discussions among activists of the time. The Ladies of Langham Place² began the *English Women's Journal*³ which focused a great deal on the need for more employment opportunities for women (Jordan 157). According to Ellen Jordan the first goal of the group was "to extend women's rights to include the new rights that growing industrialism had brought to middle-class men: economic independence of fathers and self-actualization through work" (156). Activists like Josephine Butler advocated for better education for girls that would allow them a wider range of employment options as middle-class women could not do much outside the home aside from charitable work and teaching. However, the ideals of the private and public spheres made society slow to change.

In order to effect change, activists needed to be careful in their approach to women's rights. Attempting to make their views appear less radical, many took the approach that women who were allowed an education outside of learning the traditional feminine accomplishments

² formed in 1857

³ Established in 1858

would in the long run make better wives and mothers⁴. In her article “What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids?” Francis Power Cobbe argues, “The self-supporting and therefore self-respecting woman may indeed become a wife, and a good and happy one” (596). It is important to note Cobbe’s use of “self-supporting” and “self-respecting.” While framed as a way for women to become good, happy wives, the core of Cobbe’s argument is a desire for women to respect themselves through the ability to be independent and find a place for themselves outside of accepted gender roles instead of waiting around for a proposal that may or may not come, or may not be wanted. Cobbe emphasizes that because more women have had access to better, more edifying education “The dead sea of ennui in which so many of them lived is now rippled by a hundred currents from all quarters of heaven. . .” (605). Education has given them more productive, self-fulfilled, and happier lives.

Barbara Leigh Smith also speaks to this issue in her work “Women and Work” published in 1857. Smith discusses the plight of women who find themselves for one reason or another needing to earn their own way in the world. She states, “There are fewer paths open to them, and these are choke full” (16). There are already too many women trying to earn a living by the only options open to them. In addition, Smith describes the “distressed needle-woman . . . and broken-down governesses” emphasizing the undesirability of these occupations (16). She argues, “There is no way of aiding governesses or needle-women but by opening more ways of gaining livelihoods for women” (16). Furthermore, Smith argues, “Adult women must not be supported by men, if they are to stand as dignified, rational beings before God” (11-12). By denying women opportunities to find fulfilment outside of the private sphere, whether married or not, society denies them dignity and a sense of personhood.

⁴ See Jorgensen-Earp’s “The Lady, the Whore, and the Spinster: The Rhetorical Use of Victorian Images of Women”

Jane Eyre

Jane is certainly a female character in search of independence, self-fulfilment, and dignity. As in the case of their rebellious natures, Jane's struggle for her own independence is more evident and more open than Margaret's. While she is enjoying being Adele's governess, she has become restless with the stagnant life she has found at Thornfield: "It is vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity: they must have action . . . Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties . . . they suffer from too rigid a constraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer . . ." (Brontë 111). It is perfectly acceptable for men to feel discontent, but not for women. They are expected to enjoy a peaceful inactive life at home. Jane's description of her life at Thornfield encapsulates what Francis Power Cobbe would term "the dead sea of ennui" that many Victorian women found themselves in with their limited options (605). Jane cannot live in this "dead sea" and is ever in search of her place in the world, as many women of the time would have been.

Orphaned as a baby, Jane is placed in the care of her wealthy Aunt Reed who despises her because her mother chose to marry "beneath her." Without a father, brother, or other sympathetic relative, Jane has few prospects in life. Her aunt sees her as a burden both emotionally and financially. Even the servants see her as beneath them because she has no money of her own and does not contribute financially or through work in the household. Jane's saving grace is being sent to Lowood, a charitable school for clergymen's daughters. While conditions are harsh, Jane is given a basic education that will allow her to provide for herself as a teacher or governess, the two acceptably honorable jobs middle-class girls might take on. According to Victorian ideology, "By devoting herself to the care and education of children,

even for hire, a lady could fill the role for which nature had intended her . . . she would still enjoy that sheltering abode deemed to be her proper sphere” (Holcombe, 12). Being a teacher or a governess meant that a woman could still fulfill her womanly duty of caring for child and being in a home. But Jane, representing the many unmarried women who faced similar challenges, does not become a teacher because she feels it will help her fulfill her “womanly” duties, but because she is not presented with other choices. Instead of using her writing to advocate for more options for women, Brontë gives Jane the safe, socially acceptable way of providing for herself. After succeeding as a student at Lowood, she is offered a teaching position there. She knows that her aunt does not want her, and she has no other friends in the world. Jane becomes a teacher because it is her only option. This decision reflects Brontë’s personal philosophy about women finding independence.

While Brontë did not participate in or openly advocate for many of the political movements that focused on women’s rights, as a “surplus” woman herself she did express her concern for this group of women in her writing. According to Ewbank, “Independence . . . is a keynote in her thinking about her own life and the life of all unmarried women. It is also a central theme in all her novels” (157). As concerned as she was about female independence, Brontë did not believe that women should be allowed to enter “male” professions. In one letter she writes: ““Many say that the professions now filled only by men should be open to women also; but are not their present occupant and candidate more than numerous enough to answer every demand? Is there any room for female lawyers, female doctors, female engravers, for female artists, more authoresses”” (Ewbank xv). Brontë’s attitude toward women in men’s professions explains why Jane in her search for independence falls into the role of teacher and governess, the more traditional female occupations. Even while noting that women, especially

redundant women, needed independence, Brontë herself did not believe that they should step too far outside of the private sphere to find that independence.

Although Brontë does not allow Jane to go out and enter a more “masculine” occupation, she acknowledges that being a teacher does not always provide fulfilment in a woman’s life. Lowood freed Jane from the abusive home of her aunt, but it becomes its own prison, a fact she realizes when her friend and mentor marries and leaves Lowood. Reflecting on her life for the past years, Jane concludes: “I tired of the routine of eight years in one afternoon. I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped” (86). Miss Temple was a source of intellectual fulfilment for Jane. Once she left, Jane felt the monotony of her life. Instead of accepting her lot in life, Jane acts: “For Jane Eyre, action is a step toward independence” (Showalter 124). She decides that the best way is to look for a job as private governess, and she begins advertising and asking for references and eventually accepts the position of a governess at Thornfield.

However, the reality in the Victorian period was that the life of a governess was not easy or enjoyable. “The governess was neither one of the servants, nor one of the family, and was often treated with contempt by both sides” (Shuttleworth “19-Century Woman”). Most faced loneliness from being cut off from family and friends and were over-worked by the families who employed them (Holcombe 12). Many did not make enough money to survive (Butler 5). In a letter to Elizabeth Gaskell, Brontë writes concerning the condition of women: “Certainly there are evils which our own efforts will best reach; but as certainly there are other evils – deep-rooted in the foundations of the social system – which no efforts of ours [women] can touch . . .” (Gaskell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë* 146). Again, Jane reflects Brontë’s own feelings. While there are actions she can take to improve her life, she is, in the end, bound to the restrictions placed on her by Victorian society. Teaching may not be the most fulfilling role, but she does the best she

can with her limited options. Jane knows that “a new servitude” is not the true liberty she wants (87). She also knows that it is the most realistic action to take.

Despite the terrible condition most governesses face, Jane is lucky enough to be hired by Mr. Rochester. While Jane does not face the challenge of being held in contempt by the household or of low pay, she does face the feeling of being cut off and isolated. One of the reasons she is drawn to Mr. Rochester is the feeling of acceptance and fulfilment she desires. He opens vistas of a larger life for her – he speaks about his education and travels and he includes her. In Rochester, Jane has found a true comrade, someone whose mind and faculties are equal to her own, someone who can remove the doldrums of everyday life. Most governesses were not as fortunate. Although Brontë gives Jane more freedom to grow in order to find the fulfilment she desires, it is not something that Jane does herself. Jane could have ended up in other situations that would have felt just as monotonous as Lowood. It is by luck that she finds her position at Thornfield and Mr. Rochester, a man who deigns to include her and treat her as an intellectual equal.

Still, Jane is passionate about finding self-fulfilment and freedom, and she expresses this desire to Rochester when he proposes. In frustration and despair, as she does not think the proposal is sincere, Jane cries out, “I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will” (257-58). Living as someone’s pet, unable to move freely in her own life is not Jane’s desire. She does not want to submit to a “master.” As discussed previously, even after becoming engaged to Rochester, Jane continues to assert her independence and her desire to support herself, insisting that she should remain Adèle’s governess and be paid. Jane’s goal throughout the novel is not to find a rich husband who will give her whatever she desires,

but to find a way to exert her free will and find her own happiness despite the obstacles presented to her as a woman.

The act of leaving Rochester gives Jane the opportunity to truly find her independence. Gilbert and Gubar argue, “For having left Rochester, having torn off the crown of thorns he offered and repudiated the unequal charade of marriage he proposed, Jane has now gained the strength to begin to discover her real place in the world” (364). Staying with Rochester under the conditions he proposed would have only brought Jane pain and would have left her at his mercy, either to keep caring for her or discard her as a used mistress when he desired. In essence, Jane risks losing her dignity if she chooses to remain with Rochester while he is still legally married to another woman. Instead, she makes the choice that, while still painful, has the greatest chance of bringing a more lasting stability and happiness. While her work at the poor country school feels degrading at first, she soon begins to take “an honest and happy pride” in the progress of her students (372). Thus, begins Jane’s self-discovery, but the finding of satisfying employment is not all Jane needs to be fulfilled.

While Jane has found some measure of independent dignity in teaching, it is not what she truly wants to do. Anna Fenton-Hathaway explains, “Charlotte explores work as a source of meaning throughout her novels, but invariably finds it inadequate in terms of female self-fulfilment” (143). Jane becomes a teacher because that is what Lowood trained her to be. It is a way to earn money for herself, knowing that no one else is willing to provide for her. But it is not enough for Jane. If work was all Jane wanted, she would have remained at her teaching post even after she received her inheritance from her uncle. With her inheritance, Jane discovers something even more fulfilling than work: love and family. When Jane realizes she has the money she

needs to not work, and that she has relations to embrace, she quits teaching and begins a quiet life with her cousins.

As with Jane's decision to become a teacher, her inheritance is another socially acceptable way to become independent. While Jane's decision to leave Rochester has given her emotional independence, the only way for Jane to be financially independent is to receive the money from her uncle – a lucky coincidence, not something that she could gain for herself. However, Jane's decision to share her new-found wealth with her new-found family is not what society would suspect. St. John tells her, “. . . it is contrary to all custom” and that society views the money as her right and property to keep for herself (393). Nevertheless, Jane is determined that she give her cousins an equal share of the inheritance and live together with them, leaving behind her work as a teacher.

Going back into the private sphere feels like a step backward in the progress Jane has made toward independence and self-fulfilment. However, her relationship with Mary and Diana is empowering and freeing: “The names of Jane's true ‘sisters,’ Diana and Mary . . . recall the Great Mother in her dual aspects of Diana the huntress and Mary the virgin mother, in this way, as well as through their independent, learned, benevolent personalities, they suggest the ideal of female strength for which Jane has been searching” (Gilbert and Gubar 364-65). Jane connects on a deeper level with her cousins, which is more fulfilling than any occupation. They study, write, and discuss together as they each follow their own enriching intellectual pursuits, not held back by material needs. It is the emotional connection and acceptance that she always desired from her Aunt Reed that make Jane feel as if she has found a place for herself. The inheritance, while still problematic, has allowed Jane and her cousins to create Virginia Woolf's allegorical “Room of One's Own” in which they can obtain their desire for knowledge and creativity.

Living contentedly with her cousins, Jane continues her journey towards self-fulfilment as she studies with Mary and Diana and in her interactions with and rejection of St. John. According to Gilbert and Gubar, for Jane to be truly independent, she must first reject St. John's marriage proposal. In comparing her relationship with Diana and Mary to her relationship with St. John, they argue:

St. John . . . has an almost blatantly patriarchal name, one which recalls both the masculine abstraction of the gospel according to St. John . . . and the disguised misogyny of St. John the Baptist, whose patristic and evangelical contempt for the flesh manifested itself most powerfully in a profound contempt for the *female*. Like, Salome, whose rebellion against such misogyny Oscar Wilde was later also to associate with the rising moon of female power, Jane must symbolically, if not literally, behead the abstract principles of this man before she can finally achieve her true independence. (365)

St. John with the associations to John the Baptist⁵ becomes the symbol for Victorian patriarchy and misogyny. Jane must reject his insistence that she follow him because he is a man who holds the power in society. She must reject his assertions that he knows God's will for her better than she does for herself. In rejecting St. John, Jane is asserting her right to have control over her own life and not be held back by society's rules. Throughout her story, Jane is seeking independence, dignity, and self-fulfilment. It becomes clear in her rejection of both Rochester and St. John that she desires more than to become a wife in the traditional Victorian sense. She is seeking for true intellectual partnership and emotional connection. Always passionate, Jane is not afraid to reject ideas that will take away her dignity and sense of self.

⁵ The novel was often criticized by contemporaries for its anti-Christian views (Gilbert and Gubar 338).

As with Jane's decision to go back to the private sphere after her receiving her inheritance, her decision to marry Rochester at the end of the novel feels like a step away from independence and self-fulfilment. Because of her inheritance, Jane has no need to marry for financial stability. Furthermore, *Jane Eyre* was published before the Property Act of 1870, which means that women would be subject to the laws of coverture upon marriage. Barbara Leigh Smith defined the law of coverture: "A man and wife are one person in law; the wife loses all her rights as a single woman, and her existence is, as it were absorbed in that of her husband . . . A wife's personal property before marriage. . . becomes absolutely her husband's. . ." (*Summary of Laws* 9-10). While the Property Act of 1870 and subsequent amendments would allow for women to be "enabled to acquire, during the coverture, certain classes of property to their separate use" (Griffith 2), Jane would be legally required to submit not only her inheritance, but her earned independence to Rochester, yet she is willing to take that chance. Thus, her choice to marry seems contradictory to all she has worked to achieve. Looking more closely at her decision and the circumstances surrounding it reveals some partial answers.

In part, Jane chooses to marry Rochester because she knows that he cares for her and does not desire to repress her. Jane refuses St. John because she knows he does not love or respect her and he wants to assert his authority over her. In trying to push her into marriage he asserts that "'God and nature intended [her] for a missionary's wife . . . not for love'" (409). Jane rejects this idea. She has been formed for love because she has been loved by Mr. Rochester. While Jane may feel that Rochester's desire to adorn her jewels is akin "a sultan purchasing gold and gems for his slave" (Pykett 92), she feels a greater oppression by St. John who is another red-room which ". . . stately, chilly, swathed in rich crimson, with a great white bed and an easy chair 'like a pale throne' looming out of the scarlet darkness, perfectly represents her vision of the

society in which she is trapped” (Gilbert and Gubar 340). St. John is exacting in his desires and wishes to see Jane submit as her Aunt Reed did when she sent her to the haunted room. In contrast to St. John’s coldness and oppression, Rochester “recognises and allows that will and energy in her . . . Where Rochester stood for life and warmth and energy, St. John exercises over her a ‘freezing spell’ and becomes a sort of death image . . .” (Ewbank 195). It is little wonder, then that Jane refuses St. John and is drawn to Rochester who not only allows her to be herself but loves her because of it. He does not try to repress her will but encourages it. Rochester shows her love and warmth where St. John only shows her coldness, ambition, and a desire to control. Rochester loves her spirit and does not want her to change who she is fundamentally as an individual.

Another partial answer for Jane’s marriage can be found by examining the fate of Mr. Rochester. When she returns to Rochester at the end of the novel, she finds a broken man who is now blind and crippled. Thornfield Hall which “represents the outdated rules imposed on women” is burnt to the ground (Jong vii). While throughout the novel Jane has felt the disparity in their class and income, Rochester’s injuries mean that they can reunite on more equal terms. In fact, according to Erica Jong, it was not Jane that needed to become equal to Mr. Rochester, but Rochester to her: “To be the equal of Jane Eyre, Rochester must renounce all other women, see his patrimony go up in flames, lose an eye and a hand, and become grateful where he once was arrogant. . . she cannot marry Rochester until he knows he is as dependent on her as she is on him” (viii-ix). Brought to a humbler state, a marriage between Rochester and Jane becomes balanced in a way that Jane can feel like an equal partner in the marriage and not simply a woman who needs a man to take care of her. Gilbert and Gubar also speak of the equalizing nature of Rochester’s injuries: “. . . when both were physically whole they could not, in a sense,

see each other because of the social disguises – master/servant, prince/Cinderella – binding them, but now that those disguises have been shed, now that they are equals, they can (though one is blind) see and speak even beyond the medium of the flesh” (368). Before his injuries Rochester allowed and encouraged Jane to be her true self. However, the word “allow” by its very nature recalls a master/servant relationship. They could never truly be equals when Rochester held all the status and power in society. At Ferndean, they truly see who the other is and express their full selves as well, making the marriage one of true equality despite laws that say otherwise.

Ultimately, Jane’s decision to marry once again reflects Brontë’s personal philosophy.

According to Ewbank:

Intimately bound up with the drive towards independence in the novels is the awareness that, ultimately, independence is not enough. Plot, characterisation and every other element in the novels go to emphasise the other aspect of Charlotte Brontë’s concern – the theme which Mrs. Oliphant . . . called ‘the desire of a lonely creature longing for its mate’. The theme of all Charlotte Brontë’s novels is the emotional and intellectual needs . . . of a woman, and her art is the expression of a personal vision of those needs. (Ewbank 159-60)

Though Brontë was concerned with independence for single women, she ultimately felt that an emotional connection to someone, specifically the connection of marriage, was more fulfilling. While she has found some measure of connection with her cousins, Brontë felt that the only truly happy ending could come if Jane found emotional as well as intellectual fulfilment which she does through Rochester.

Jane Eyre is a striking example of a female character seeking her place in the world. She passionately speaks out against the quiet, sedate lives women are expected to lead. She actively

seeks for ways to find fulfilment and a way out of the “dead sea of ennui” so common to Victorian women. In seeking her place in the world, however, she stays safely in the bounds of social acceptability. Her work as a teacher and governess allows her to take care of herself, but it does not give her the true fulfilment she desires. When she does reach a state of independence and fulfilment, it is only through a gift from her uncle. In the end, though it is a more equal match than many in the Victorian period, Jane chooses a life as a wife and a mother, fulfilling society’s ideal.

Margaret Hale

Less passionately than Jane articulating her feelings of discontent at the monotony of Thornfield, Margaret also seeks for independence and fulfilment in her life. One way in which Margaret displays a sense of independence is her daily walks around Milton. At first, Margaret is intimidated by the concept of walking alone. The rush of men and women leaving the factories and the comments made to her about her dress and appearance are startling at first; the comments from the men are especially alarming. The narrator describes Margaret’s feelings: “Out of her fright came a flash of indignation which made her face scarlet, and her dark eyes gather flame, as she heard some of their speeches. Yet there were other sayings of theirs, which when she reached the quiet safety of home, amused her even while they irritated her (72). While a “proper” young lady would find these comments offensive, Margaret’s feelings are mixed. She finds them inappropriate, but also flattering. Importantly, she chooses to keep walking the same path. Barbara Leah Harman discusses Margaret’s daily walks and her subsequent daily harassment by the factory workers. These “Verbal and physical invasions are meant to disrupt the very sense of class distinction that Margaret, for one, has been so eager in the past to maintain” (365). Nonetheless, as Harmon reminds the reader, Margaret not only continues her walks, she

“strike[s] up an acquaintance with one of the men” (366). Margaret could choose to maintain the class distinction; she could change the time of her daily walks, or pick a different route – it is what society would deem appropriate. It seems contradictory that in a desire for dignity, Margaret would choose to continue walking the same path at the same time of day listening to the men’s comments, yet Margaret’s desire to find her place in Milton overcomes her decorum. In choosing to continue the walks and befriend Nicholas Higgins and his daughter, Margaret takes the first steps towards independence and choosing her own path in life.

Margaret’s desire for a life of more freedom and independence is acutely felt in her reaction to her father’s visit to Oxford after her mother’s death. Invited by Mr. Bell to accompany her father, “. . . she felt as if it would be a greater relief to remain quietly at home, entirely free from any responsibility whatsoever and so to rest her mind and heart in a manner which she had not been able to do for more than two years past” (336). Over the past two years, Margaret has had the responsibility to care for the emotional needs of the family. She was the listening ear for both of her parents who would not or could not communicate with each other. She took on the responsibilities of the move from Helstone to Milton and of keeping her brother’s visit a secret. She feels “herself so much at liberty; no one depending on her for cheering care . . . and what seemed worth more than all the other privileges – she might be unhappy if she liked” (336). Margaret has spent so much time being stoic and strong, that freedom to ponder and express her true emotions seems more precious than any other freedom she might gain with her father gone. However, Margaret does not allow herself much time to bask in the freedom of feeling emotion or become inactive. She becomes “determined . . . to set to on some work which should take her out of herself” (337). Still, she has felt the relief of the

power of agency to choose to do nothing – to not need to be ready to fulfill the needs of others. She can now focus on finding fulfilment for herself.

As the story of *North and South* progresses, Margaret, like Jane, finds herself in the position of single orphan who needs to rely on extended family for her survival. Unlike Jane, Margaret's Aunt Shaw and cousin Edith are more than happy to take her in. In addition, Mr. Bell fulfills his promise to her father take care of Margaret. While the Lennoxes open their home to her, Bell, the practical man, still cautions Margaret to set up a "formal agreement" of payment with the Lennoxes so that she "won't be thrown adrift, if some day the captain wishes to have his house to himself" (356). Mr. Bell realizes how fragile Margaret's situation is as a single woman without parents. He wants to ensure that she will be protected no matter what. It is assumed based on the structure of society that she will need someone to take care of her. Her security depends on what is provided to her by men – Captain Lennox's continued good will and Mr. Bell's continued kindness and funds.

While Margaret has family willing to support her, she does, like Jane, desire to act and be active. The expectation to be a lady and be content with a quiet life in London is not enough for Margaret. She becomes "wearied with the inactivity of the day" (365). Once she has expressed her intention to take over her own life she informs her concerned cousin, "I shall be merrier than I have ever been, now I have got my own way" (407). Being able to live her life, and fill it with activity, gives her the dignity of independence. Also, as Jane does, Margaret does not step outside of socially acceptable roles for women – teaching, taking care of children, and philanthropy – the "womanly" duties. Even before she becomes an orphan Margaret chooses to place herself in more nurturing roles. Before leaving Helstone, Margaret spends her days visiting the poorer members of her father's parish and occasionally helping to teach in the local parish

school. In Milton, she provides for the working-class Boucher family after hearing about their struggles caused by the strike. She later takes it upon herself to “find herself occupation” (335), by teaching the younger of the orphaned Boucher children to read and write. Like Brontë, Gaskell is unwilling to push the boundaries of possible options for women and offer more radical solutions to the problems they faced. While she can express discontent and a need for fulfilment, any actions she takes remain within socially acceptable boundaries for a “proper” woman. These socially acceptable tasks may be part of Margaret’s journey toward emotional fulfilment and independence, but her financial independence, like Jane, comes from inheritance. Margaret’s further endeavors to find her place in the world can only happen when gifted money from a male protector.

The idea that a women’s financial stability can only come in the form of marriage or inheritance emphasizes the vulnerable position Victorian women, and especially women like Jane and Margaret, were in. Pauline Simonsen describes these positions as “intensely vulnerable if left without the support of father or husband” and that women’s “positions without husbands following their father’s deaths became precarious in the extreme” (515). Those closest to these redundant women were not unaware of the situation. The concern of family members for these women is illustrated in *North and South* with the conversation between Mr. Hale and Mr. Bell just before the former’s death. Mr. Hale poses the question, “What will become of [Margaret]?” when he dies knowing that he will leave her very little money (341). Mr. Hale is aware of just how vulnerable his daughter will be if orphaned. However, he is unsure how to secure his daughter’s future if he dies. He surmises that her cousin Edith and her husband Captain Lennox will gladly take her in. Mr. Bell reassures his friend that he will willingly take care of whatever

she may need. He fulfills this promise by making Margaret his heir. Thus, like Jane, she is able to continue her journey toward fulfilment without worrying about financial issues.

Also, similarly to Jane, Margaret chooses to use her inheritance in a way that is surprising to those around her. She could become a lady of leisure, living a comfortable life without worry or care. Instead, she chooses to use the money find meaning and purpose in her life. After receiving her inheritance from Mr. Bell, Margaret “took her life into her own hands . . . she had learnt, in those solemn hours of thought, that she herself must one day answer for her own life” (406). She chooses to spend her days in the poorer districts of London, caring for the people there as she did the working-class people of Milton. Margaret chooses a life of charitable work in part because with the inheritance she has no need of paid employment. In addition, Elaine Showalter observes that “Victorian women were not accustomed to *choosing* a vocation: womanhood was a vocation in itself” (21). Philanthropy being a common occupation for middle-class women during the period appears a good choice for Margaret (Gleadle 63). Margaret is conforming to societal expectations by choosing to spend her time in a more “feminine” pursuit, rather than looking for work elsewhere. Yet, while it might not be the most radical course from a modern perspective, Margaret’s cousin fears that her decision will make her a “strong-minded woman” (406). Margaret explains to her concerned cousin, “I have neither husband nor child to give me natural duties, I must make myself some . . .” (407). Her comment emphasizes the ingrained belief that a woman could only be fulfilled if she were a wife and mother. Margaret does not accept that marrying is the only way to find purpose. Without a husband and family of her own, she looks for other ways to find her place. For Margaret, simply doing as she pleases is a step toward independence in her life. She is no longer allowing her life to be dictated by her aunt and cousin or what they would consider “proper” for a woman to do. Instead, she is

determining where and with whom she spends her time. Margaret has made up her mind, and she continues to take steps to assert her independence, though in a very “womanly” endeavor.

Of course, by the end of the novel, Margaret breaks away from these “proper” occupations. After learning of Thornton’s financial troubles, she expresses her desire to use her money to help him gain back what he has lost and, in the process, becomes a woman of business. Having to explain the plan herself to Thornton because Lennox did not come to the meeting, it is clear that Margaret has had very little chance in the past to think about money in the same way as men like Thornton, and she stumbles through the proposal and the explanation. However, in the end it is Margaret who places herself in this position of entrepreneur and master of industry, making her own decision about her money and life.

This progress is seemingly overturned by Margaret’s acceptance of Thornton’s marriage proposal. According to Marianne Camus, the idea that Margaret would marry Thornton (or any other man) “is in contradiction with the rest of the novel and leaves the (female) reader with the uneasy feeling that a defeat has been dressed up as a happy ending” (92). On the surface, it does feel as though Margaret gives up everything she has worked for in her decision to marry. However, a closer examination reveals more going on than a simple socially expected happy ending.

While not as dramatic, Thornton goes through a humbling process similar to Rochester’s before Margaret agrees to marry him. When Thornton proposes for the first time, Margaret rejects him. She tells Thornton that she does not care for him in that way, although it could be argued that she is simply not ready to recognize her feelings. However, Patricia Ingham proposes that it is the balance of power that causes Margaret to reject Thornton. While the incident during the strike demonstrates that Margaret has influence over Thornton, Margaret desires more:

“What she most resists is a marriage that will relegate her to a position of mere womanly influence over him” (69). Margaret’s rejection is a rejection of the “angel-of-the-house” ideology that so defined Victorian thinking. She does not want to be the submissive woman who is the “moral center” of the home but has little power or influence otherwise.

At the end of the novel, this becomes possible. Having lost all his money, Thornton is unable to pay the rent on his properties and must give up his position as mill owner and find other work. If Margaret’s earlier rejection was because she did not want “mere womanly influence,” she now has the chance to do more. Indeed, her newly found wealth and Thornton’s desperate situation allow her to “control his actions as an employer” (Ingham, *Language of Gender* 70). She is acting as a partner in business, able to influence the decisions that are made. As with Jane and Rochester, Thornton’s situation places him and Margaret on more equal and balanced footing as they enter marriage. Thornton’s second proposal is more agreeable to Margaret because she can enter more as a partner than a wife with more power.

Additionally, Gaskell’s own marriage may have influenced her decision to have Margaret marry. According to Rubenius, “Mr. Gaskell followed the Unitarian tradition in his attitude towards women and never asserted his authority over his wife” (30). If the reader were given a glimpse into the married life of Margaret and Thornton, it may have been similar to Gaskell’s own in which, though the law would require Margaret’s money to go to her husband, it would remain her own to use as she pleased. Furthermore, considering the position Thornton’s mother has as being part of the business, it is very likely Margaret could take this role as well thereby retaining the independence and fulfillment for which she has worked and entering the public sphere.

For both Jane and Margaret, their search for independence is filled with Thompson's "melting-pots of ideological conflict" (4). While both seek happier, more fulfilled lives, they both stay within the confines of societal acceptability – Jane chooses teaching; Margaret chooses charitable work. Additionally, while both women become financially independent and work toward self-fulfilment, they are only able to do so by coming into an inheritance, not through any radical or progressive means. Their money is not earned through paid employment, but by receiving it as a gift from a man. Gaining their independence through inheritance presents a message of futility for any woman trying to gain that same independence through following her own desires and ambitions. Instead of subverting the patriarchal ideals, Brontë and Gaskell reinforce them. It is only because men take pity on them that they gain some form of independence and agency over their lives, thus making it a gift of men to women and not something that women can earn on their own. However, both Jane and Margaret use their inheritances in a way that goes against societal norms and expectations. They both use the money to continue to seek fulfilment and happiness in their lives and eventually gain that fulfilment.

For both women, their growth toward self-fulfilment becomes compromised when, despite the disadvantage that come with marriage, they accept proposals. However, both are accepting marriage on more equal terms as a partner and not in the traditional subservient role. In the end, it is a choice for Jane and Margaret to marry because they love and respect their partners. After all she has been through, Ewbank describes Jane's arrival at Ferndean, "And so, as a free individual as well as a passionate woman, she returns to Rochester" (197). This statement can also apply to Margaret. Both women have become the "self-supporting" and "self-respecting" women for which Frances Power Cobbe advocated. More importantly perhaps, both women have passionate feelings, not becoming of a "proper" lady, for the masculine heroes of

their stories. Because of their independence, they have a choice in how they want to live their lives, and they choose to marry for love, not to secure their own comfort or material needs as so many women did.

While her marriage to Rochester may be one built on a foundation of equality between partners, the fact remains that at the end of *Jane Eyre*, the reader sees Jane fulfilling her social obligations. She is living in the domestic sphere and taking care of her husband and child. She has no thoughts of continuing her career as a teacher. She does not even mention continuing her intellectual studies in which she found much happiness pursuing with Mary and Diana. Jane's happiness is tied to that of her husband and child, as a proper Victorian woman's happiness would be.

At first, Elizabeth Gaskell may appear as though she is advocating for these same traditional values. Gaskell is well-known for considering motherhood the most important calling a woman could have. In fact, "she considered motherhood to be women's most enviable fulfilment" (Gérin 258). However, according to Aina Rubenius Gaskell's view of the traditional ideal of the submissive wife changed over time, most likely influenced by her friends and acquaintances who advocated for women's rights (39). These changing views are demonstrated by the fact that, unlike Jane, the reader is never given a glimpse into the married life of Thornton and Margaret and is only given the promise of a happy marriage.

Not only does the ending not reflect a more traditional happy marriage, but it also crosses class and gender boundaries. Thornton is not a "gentleman" in the Victorian sense of the word. He is what Margaret at the beginning of the novel would refer to as a "shoppy" person – though wealthy, he is below her station because he is not part of the landed gentry. Yet, she does agree to marry him, knowing her Aunt Shaw, and others, would not approve of the match. Moreover,

Margaret is able to cross gender boundaries by saving Thornton from financial ruin and stepping out of the private sphere and entering into the public. Although their married life is never shown, the suggestion at the end of the novel is that she has become a business woman/financier – a masculine occupation in the public sphere. Margaret is a precursor to the “new woman,” defined by Pat Jalland as a category of spinster who has “the capacity to transcend the stereotypical role” and who “found fulfilment” outside of the private sphere (279). This “new woman” was a result of the discourse around women, education, and employment that would flourish in the 1860s and beyond. These discussions would allow for “independent single women to find satisfaction in a career outside of domesticity” (280). According to Harman, “Gaskell would have agreed with the notion that ‘the sphere of occupation for women’ had enlarged – and also that it should continue to do so” (*Political Novel* 49). Margaret ends the novel unmarried still and with a career outside of what would have been respectable for a woman. While Brontë felt that an emotional connection and marriage was ultimately more fulfilling than independence, Gaskell presents a more progressive view, one that anticipates the growing women’s movement.

Conclusion

The problems facing Victorian women were many and complicated. Most, however, stemmed from societal pressures and expectations along with enforced gender roles. Women, particularly those in the middle class, were expected to stay in the home and raise the children. They were expected to be meek and submissive to their husbands, or other male relatives. Because of the lack of education, they could not easily acquire gainful employment. They were reliant on the men in their lives to take care of their basic needs. The ideal gender roles were not always achievable as many women needed to provide for themselves, or simply felt themselves trapped by domestic life. Jane and Margaret represent both redundant women and the women

who felt that they needed more than the role society gave them. Both characters reject the idea that women should be submissive. They desire the dignity to direct their lives in the way they see fit and assert their agency and independence.

In placing these two works together, the “profound contradictions in the lives and careers of Victorian women novelists regarding what the Victorians called the ‘woman question’” become clearer (Thompson 1). Themes of independence and agency abound, yet there are moments that conform to societal expectations and ideals. The novels reveal the characters, and by extension their authors, grappling with questions of obedience and self-fulfilment.

While Jane is the more overtly passionate in her rebellion and search for independence, in the end, Margaret is more successful in breaking away from Victorian gender expectations. Jane remains within the bounds of the private sphere and what is acceptable for women. Society accepts her job as a governess and as a teacher because they keep in in the home/a more nurturing, caring, feminine role. She marries Rochester and becomes a wife, mother, and caretaker of an invalid.

Margaret, while not as passionate, is searching for the same independence and dignity as Jane. Margaret starts *North and South* as more submissive, but she is a character who grows into her rebellion and her desire to find fulfilment. And while she, like Jane, remains within the private sphere throughout much of the novel, the ending anticipates a future that is much more radical, one that is in the public sphere becoming a part of the business world or masters and men. While *Jane Eyre* deserves its place in the canons of feminist literature, *North and South* is a feminist work in its own right and should not be dismissed or forgotten.

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