

**Broken Bodies, Permeable Subjects:
Rethinking Victorian Women's "Agency" in Gaskell's *North and South***

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*"[A]ny woman, worthy of the name of woman, would come forward to shield,
with her revered helplessness, a man in danger."
(Gaskell, North and South, 195)*

<1>The riot scene in *North and South* is one of the most remarked upon in Elizabeth Gaskell's oeuvre, and it is commonly understood as a coming-together of opposed forces. When heroine Margaret Hale steps between mill owner John Thornton (whom she is growing to love) and his angry, abused workers (with whom she has come to sympathize), she becomes an almost impossibly flexible signifier for nearly all of *North and South*'s dizzying swarm of binaries. Margaret is aligned with, and literally stands between, the working-class and the bourgeoisie, the private home and the public street, the individual and the group, the masculine and the feminine, and between stoic reserve and passionate uproar. Critics have generally lauded this moment as an example of progressive womanhood. Margaret has been viewed as a feminist ideal, transcending the restrictions of public and private and serving as an agent of political reform. It would seem that her ability to move between separate spheres, stand in for them, and make them visible, is a powerful catalyst for social change. But Margaret's physical collapse in the riot scene also shows the consequences of such political action. She diffuses the labor conflict in this scene precisely because she weeps, bleeds, and succumbs to an injury from a flying stone. Later she claims that it was her very vulnerability—her "reverenced helplessness" as a woman—that made her such an effective political instrument. In fact, to the extent that working class injustice, industrial pollution, and the suffering of the poor are made visible as political causes in *North and South*, they all depend on the breaking of the female body and the exposure of the female interior.

<2>How do we make sense of a female political agency that is premised on the penetration and disintegration of the self? First we have to *see* it. For a number of decades—and with increasing urgency as we move into the era of posthuman studies—scholars have understood the "self" as a discursive construct, not hermetic, made and re-made by representation, public scrutiny, and the violence of norms and hierarchies. It is surprising, then, that Gaskell critics have consistently returned to a less persuasive model of selfhood as coherent. The most widely accepted interpretation of Margaret's entry into the public sphere is that she represents a feminist ideal, boldly stepping into a male role and becoming an effective political force on behalf of the suffering. Gaskell in fact entered the critical canon based on this notion, when in 1987 Patsy Stoneman argued that "*North and South* anticipates...modern feminist theory" (90). If Gaskell scholarship has not fallen far from this tree, then as a result it lingers in the shadow of some

rather stubborn assumptions. Stoneman's work arose out of a recuperative moment in feminist theory, a drive to uncover potent female agents who were able to work against repressive gender ideologies throughout history. Stressing "Margaret's ongoing involvement in the process of social change" (90), Stoneman laid the groundwork for a spate of criticism that would place Gaskell's novels within a narrative of increasing female agency that draws links from Harriet Martineau to contemporary feminism. In 1988 and again in 1998 Barbara Harman took notice of the importance of Margaret's body to the novel, but she also celebrated the progressiveness of the moment, characterizing the strike scene as "both thrilling and unprecedented, describing in a way quite unlike that of any previous novel, a woman who steps dramatically and fearlessly into the political turmoil" (Harman, *Feminine Political Novel*, 63). In 2002, Dorice Williams Elliott cited Margaret's intervention as evidence of a new world of female possibility that the previous generation of feminists, including Harriet Martineau, "could only imagine" (138). In 2004, 2006, 2007, and 2009, respectively, we have seen Margaret's political activity described as an example of: "the agency of the modern female subject" (Parkins, 517), "voice, agency, and self-determination" (Smith, 108), "the foundations for the feminist movement of the latter half of the century" (Morgan, 5), and "a controlled and determined response to conventional gender demands" (Fair, 222). In using *North and South* to write a feminist history of empowered womanhood, these critics rely on the language of individual agency. And in doing so, they overlook the fact that Gaskell's vision of Victorian womanhood is anything but agentic—her powerful protagonist achieves political ends only ambivalently and only by the deconstruction of hers and other female bodies. That these broken bodies are eminently visible, foregrounded, even, in the novel, speaks to how powerful the critical drive has been to recuperate such bodies for a story of female agency. To *see* these bodies, however, is to unlock an even more powerful feminist critique, one that does not ignore the broken female body but rather takes full measure of the ways that Victorian womanhood was physically and discursively vulnerable in the political sphere, and the ways that this was visible to Gaskell and her characters alike.

<3>My desire to change the critical conversation builds on Amanda Anderson's 2000 article, "The Temptations of Aggrandized Agency: Feminist Histories and the Horizon of Modernity." Anderson argues that Victorian gender scholars have been simultaneously espousing two paradoxical orientations: they assert the situatedness of historical subjects within identity-inscribing systems of power, but at the same time they rescue authors and characters from this very position, assigning them the omniscience to see gender constructions and the agency to instantiate new forms of subjecthood. This latter tendency to over-ascribe agency, she claims, results in "strangely aggrandized portraits of historically situated subjects, which sit uneasily next to the other figurations of women as unreflexively co-extensive with forms of power" (Anderson, 52). Anderson suggests several nuanced ways out of this bind. First, in her assessment of Davidoff and Hall's *Family Fortunes* (1987), she praises their recognition that gender ideology was in the process of formation, not an already established binary against which nineteenth-century women either rebelled or were defined. In other words, a historical subject might be usefully seen as "one groping mortal within an emergent ideology" rather than "an avenging angel cannily rearranging a series of ideological blocks" (Anderson, 57). Anderson further notes that we might see Victorian authors as having the kind of critical detachment we understand as reason or even theorization, without going the extra step of claiming for those authors a particular potency or agency within a history of gender politics.

<4> While the Gaskell critics I have cited above ostensibly claim agency for the character Margaret rather than the author Gaskell, this has not saved them from the pitfall Anderson describes. Firstly, whether focused on character or author, the celebrants of Margaret's heroic stand make the same paradoxical move of claiming for one woman the power to stand above gender ideologies that ensnare all the rest. And secondly, their claims for Margaret's agency are barely distinguishable from their subsequent placement of the novel and its author in a counter-history of female rebellion. Anderson's caution, therefore, has gone unheeded, perhaps because while it warns against the over-attribution of agency, it still relies on the "tempting" category of agency in the first place. What my reading will suggest is that "agency" is a term which already sets the critical conversation on a false trajectory because it assumes a certain coherence and invulnerability to the female subject that were not at all obvious to Gaskell. My argument thus goes further than Anderson's by attempting to see beyond the notion of the agentic self in the first place, but I believe this builds on, rather than contradicts, Anderson's thesis. Because it has been so roundly hailed as a mid-Victorian moment of female self-assertion, *North and South* is a particularly apt example to both expose and deconstruct the persistent replication of a recuperative, teleological feminist approach that has been stubbornly invested in outdated notions of the coherent, agentic self. Finally, in suggesting that this rush to find agency has ignored the staggeringly visible broken female body, I hope to resituate Elizabeth Gaskell with more subtlety into her historical context, revealing her model of Victorian female political action as one that is at once possible, predicated on self-disincorporation, and available for critique in its own moment.

<5> To move away from the restrictive category of agency/nonagency requires changing the framing question altogether. We can begin by understanding the shifting play of binaries in the novel (public and private, middle class and working class, industrial north and pastoral south) through what Caroline Levine has called "strategic formalism." She argues that social categories like public and private can be viewed as forms much like literary forms, which provide a structure for social life but are not structurally impervious; they are subject to reshaping and revision when they collide with other, sometimes incompatible social forms. For instance, Margaret Hale's actions as a philanthropist show how "women's work" challenges the separation between middle class and working class, as she creates meaningful relationships with the laborers she visits. And when the formal division between middle class and working class grows too distinct, the unrest of the workers forces the collapse between public and private, as both the suffering body and Margaret as its representative are forced into the political arena. The dominant framing question amongst critics has been: *Does Margaret Hale have political agency?* or, in Levine's terms, *How does Margaret Hale navigate and renegotiate the shifting play of different social forms?* But this approach assumes that the female subject itself is a coherent, bounded category that navigates shifting social forms, rather than a shifting, contested social form in its own right. I suggest we invert the question, instead asking: *How does the shifting play of social forms navigate and renegotiate female subjectivity?* This allows us to see the very category of "woman" as a socially constructed form that may be manipulated, instrumentalized, and broken, particularly in the service of political representation. Through Margaret, *North and South* forces us to understand Victorian womanhood as flexible enough to contain countless contradictory social identities without breaking, and, at the same time, just fragile enough to be broken in the service of politics. This moves us away from the binary question of whether

women have agency and into a more complex—and historically appropriate—understanding of female subjectivity as a porous, contested space.

<6>This essay argues that womanhood as presented in *North and South* must be theorized as fundamentally *permeable*. The novel is littered with remarkably fragile female bodies that serve a political goal of exposing pollution, suffering, and inequality. They are easily penetrated by the polluted air of Milton, the prying gaze of gossip-hungry socialites, the clash of paradoxical identities, and the advances of amorous men. They bleed, break, and weep, and they are poor strongholds for secrets and emotional interiority. The male body and the male subject are vastly less permeable than either the female body or the female subject, which are literally on the verge of “bursting [their] bounds” (157). But these penetrated female bodies and subjectivities also locate individual suffering, defuse conflict, and make visible the workings of the factory that insidiously conjoin with the internal workings of the laborer’s body. Thus, at the center of the labor struggle—more specifically, at the center of the project to make labor suffering visible to both management and the reader—is a pile of broken female bodies that are simultaneously the instruments and the byproducts of the representation of injustice. If political effectiveness is contingent upon breaking the boundaries of the female as opposed to the male subject, then we must rethink the category of womanhood in both *North and South* and the Victorian period more generally. To discuss Margaret’s agency as a woman is to assume that there is such a thing as a coherent form, “woman,” which I will argue is precisely what Gaskell’s novel calls into question.

<7>The sick female body in *North and South* takes on a variety of forms: Bessy’s specific industrial affliction, Mrs. Hale’s and Mrs. Boucher’s fatal illnesses of mysterious causes, Margaret’s very real swoons, and Fanny’s probably feigned ones. But all of these different illnesses are linked through the novel’s constant twinning of the somatic and the emotional. The Hales’ servant worries Margaret will “make herself deadly ill” (47) if she continues to cry; Dixon cannot predict her mistress’s health because “[t]he illness seems so much more on the mind than on the body” (50); and Mrs. Thornton cannot tell whether her maternal jealousy is “more physical or mental” (209). These links between emotional and bodily ailment are not figurative but rather intrinsic, sometimes causal, and often one and the same. Phrases like “sick with disappointment” (245) multiply so conspicuously and frequently that it becomes difficult to know when a character ails of the mind or the body, or indeed what the difference is. Extensive scholarship on Victorian psychopathology has demonstrated that the distinction between mental and physical ailments was troublesome to draw, and that female physiology—particularly hysteria, nerves, and fainting spells—was frequently a topic of public scientific discourse.⁽¹⁾ Gaskell’s scientific moment was thus uncertain, unable to fix the cause of “functional nervous disorders” as mental, bodily, or social in nature; they were, as Jane Wood argues, “[n]either obviously organic nor exclusively mental...occurring in the connections between mental and bodily experience” (4).

<8>In her moment of supposed political agency when she defuses the mill riot, Margaret is also most obviously a representative of such uncertain female “ailment.” The narrative is positively at a loss to declare whether her swoon is a result of the blood-producing pebble or the tear-producing emotional trauma of the scene; Gaskell describes her as “sick with affright” (179), and John and Mrs. Thornton debate whether her unconsciousness is the result of “a fainting-fit” or being “very seriously hurt” (181). This brief scene twice more juxtaposes the diction of illness

and of nerves, the narrator explaining that “the *sickly* daze of the swoon made her miserably *faint*” (182; emphasis mine) and describing her voice as “faint” when she explains that she was “a little sick” (184). While the mill strike is certainly a climactic moment, in many ways it merely crystallizes the complex web of relations amongst all of Milton’s susceptible female bodies. The words “sick” and “faint” construct a linguistic chain that binds Margaret to all of the novel’s women, to all of their broken bodies and ailing minds, in the slippery connective spaces “between mental and bodily experience,” as Wood puts it. These bodies are linked by the fragility of their boundaries and their ability to be permeated by air and society, making them epistemologically unstable sites and particularly vulnerable subjects.

<9>The uncertain discourse surrounding “functional nervous disorders” Wood highlights makes the female body frighteningly unknowable, which both encourages its penetration by the male scientific gaze and also makes it a strange place for Gaskell to locate political agency. As we will see, Gaskell’s women have political efficacy precisely *because* they are vulnerable subjects, but efficacy and agency are far from equivalent. Wood goes on to claim that Victorian authors took up the physiological uncertainty of the female body insofar as it posed a threat to subjectivity: “[N]ovelists were more concerned with the wider social meanings and the disputed interpretations of morbid states than they were with clinical accuracy. They were concerned, also, with questions of identity and with the implications for coherent selfhood of alienating nervous conditions” (4-5). “Coherent selfhood” is precisely what critics have attributed to Margaret, when in fact this very notion was under strain in Gaskell’s time. Margaret and her fellow female characters do important work to represent suffering and effect labor reform, but these acts take place through the particularly unstable female body. It becomes very difficult to speak of agency when the agent herself is permeated and disincorporated.

<10>Female ailment in *North and South* turns fatal when women’s bodies are penetrated by corrupt external material from the Milton factory. Bessy suffers from cotton “fluff” and Mrs. Hale from the “‘unparliamentary’ smoke” (59) that “crept up to the very windows, and was driven in to every open door in choking white wreaths of unwholesome mist” (65). Each woman’s death is a political act of making visible the detrimental effects of industrial waste and pollution. Gaskell’s proto-eco-critical project here taps into what Leila S. May contends was a robust contemporary concern with the potential for circulating airborne particles to corrupt homes and bodies. According to May, Victorian social reformer Henry Mayhew’s concern about pollution was sparked by his ability to trace letters in the dust that settled on his furniture. This “terror of contamination by minute particles of corruption” (May, 18) picks up on Mrs. Hale’s concern that “it is impossible to keep the muslin blinds clean here above a week together” (82). When Margaret flees into the cottage at Helstone and fastens the doors, when she locks herself into rooms to allow her emotions expression—indeed, when the Thorntons clap shut their house in preparation for the riot—the sanctity of the female body becomes inextricable from the sanctity of the domestic space. Both are vigilantly guarded but ultimately permeated by the “unwholesome mist” that pushes its way inside and “chokes” the home and its women.

<11>Even though Mrs. Hale’s disease is likely not caused by the “unhealthy, smoky, sunless” air (204), the exact nature of her disease is kept secret, leaving an empty place in the narrative that Dixon, Mr. Hale, Mrs. Hale, Frederick, Edith, and Mrs. Shaw all attribute to the Milton air.(2) The novel thus uses her ailing body as an opportunity to linger over the fact that polluted air can

and did cause such deaths, representing an ecopolitical concern through a female body that is opened to speculation. By contrast, Bessy's fatal illness is not mysterious or speculative but all-too-graphically known; the polluted air inside the mill has poisoned her from within:

“Fluff...They say it winds round the lungs, and tightens them up. Anyhow, there's many a one as works in a carding-room, that falls into a waste, coughing and spitting blood, because they're just poisoned by the fluff...I've heard tell o' men who didn't like working in places where there was a wheel, because they said as how it made 'em hungry, at after they'd been long used to swallowing fluff, to go without it.” (102)

The factory pollution has given Bessy consumption, a disease whose “origins were shrouded in mystery” and thus operated as a flexible signifier in literature (Byrne, 2). But this passage is anything but mysterious. It both illustrates the insidious violation of Bessy's body as well as enacts it; the reader is allowed to follow the “fluff” inside Bessy's body to see how it “winds round [her] lungs”—just like the “choking white wreaths of unwholesome mist” that penetrate the Hale home. Bessy's description is abjectly destructive and somatic: she is “poisoned” by the fluff, and other workers “spit blood.” Bessy's body is especially permeable beyond its penetration by pollution; she complains too of the factory noise, lamenting that she “shall ne'er get the whirr out o' my ears, or the fluff out o' my throat i' this world” (102). Byrne argues that Gaskell uses Bessy's ill body as a “model of pathologised capitalism” and that ailing bodies in Victorian literature help express social critique (62). While Byrne is right to recognize the body as a political instrument, she does not address the gendered nature of such instrumentalization in *North and South*. Men ingest the “fluff” as well—although the men in Bessy's tale are only described as having increased appetites—but it is Bessy, through the graphic description of her internal injuries, who represents the suffering of the working class. She brings this plight to the attention of Margaret, in her role as a middle-class woman who visits the poor, and Margaret in turn represents it to a larger audience of both Miltonites and Gaskell readers.

<12>Despite the thorough and seemingly unavoidable penetration of Bessy's body by the mill air, despite her allusion to “many a one” who has suffered alike, and despite the cloud of smoke that hovers over Milton, we never see a male body destroyed by external agents. Mr. Hale, despite breathing the same air as his wife, succumbs to a heart ailment. Leonards drinks himself to death, Mr. Bell dies out of view in Oxford of a probable spleen condition, and Boucher takes his own life by drowning. Boucher's body remains a strangely impenetrable thing, defined entirely by its surface qualities: “...his glassy eyes, one half-open, star[ed] right upwards to the sky...[H]is face was swollen and discoloured; besides, his skin was stained by the water in the brook, which had been used for dying purposes” (294). Though we might immediately notice a parallel with Margaret's deathly pose and “upturned face” when she faints at the riot, Boucher's body resists the kind of deconstruction of its boundaries that allows Margaret to weep and bleed. The narrative focuses instead on his surfaces: his “glassy eyes,” his “swollen” face, and most pointedly, the dye on his face. This Milton contagion stains Boucher's skin, marking the edge of his body but penetrating no further (and not causing his death), a striking contrast to the fluff wound around Bessy's lungs.(3) Margaret immediately feels the “sacrilegious” error of exposing the body to the public gaze and covers his face, which, by shielding the male body from exposure, transfers the gaze onto her: “The eyes that saw her do this followed her, as she turned away from her pious office” (295). It is not just that male bodies are not made ill by Milton;

neither are their bodies penetrated by outside agents of any kind—including the narrative gaze. Mr. Bell is positively guarded about his physical condition, which neither Margaret nor the narrative work hard to contest. The malfunctioning of Mr. Hale's heart in death is kept as private as the doubts of his heart in life, as he dies at Oxford and has no inquest. Neither does Leonard have an inquest, and even if he did, Margaret would be more severely pried open than the dead man by the subsequent public scrutiny. The novel "abounds with various diseases and deaths" (Byrne, 62), but while women's deaths are caused by—and invite—somatic penetration, even the novel's gaze stops short of entering the male body.

<13>Having differentiated the female body by its permeability and having used the penetrated female body to represent political causes, Gaskell simultaneously asserts that only the woman is an appropriate political mediator. A foil to his daughter, Mr. Hale also visits the poor and listens to the "earnestly-told tales of suffering and long-endurance," but we only find out that he does so through a brief narrative aside. He fails, therefore, to present such suffering to the novel's readers or to the mill owner, for when Mr. Hale brings "all his budget of grievances" to his friend Mr. Thornton, he passively allows him to explain away the suffering body through his beloved "economical principles" (152). Margaret fiercely rejects such reasoning, "as if commerce were everything and humanity nothing" (153), leaving her alone with the burden of making the working class plight visible to both the industrial management and the Victorian reader—and ultimately, of resolving the dispute. What is at stake is visibility, and the task of both Margaret Hale and *North and South* is to present these inexpressibly suffering and radically individual bodies to the public political discourse. To force the Mr. Thorntons of the world to trade their "economical principles" for a little "humanity." Margaret is more equipped than her father to enter the homes of the poor, to see their bodies, and to translate this suffering to a public forum.

<14>But in this work Margaret treads a thin line between representing others and becoming other herself. The first time she appears in the novel, it is when Mrs. Shaw calls not for her but for her cousin: "'Edith! Edith!' cried she...Margaret stepped forward" (8). Thus interpellated for the first time—and as someone else—Margaret mutely stands in "as a sort of lay figure...as Edith was still asleep" (9). Henry Lennox, the man who penetrates her character against her will, remarks that Margaret is forever "carried away by a whirlwind of some other person's making" (11). This trope of Margaret as *being* other, or being produced *by* another, is again figured when Thornton dreams of her as a split between the "Una and the Duessa" (331), or when Mr. Bell expounds a potentially endless list of new identities he believes life in Milton has led her to wear: "she's a democrat, a red republican, a member of the Peace Society, a socialist —" (330). Most evocatively, Dixon suggests that in Margaret's angry moments, she can see Frederick's "stormy look coming like a great cloud over [her] face" (130). That Dixon figures Margaret's embodiment of her brother as a "cloud" evokes the pollution over Milton, and thus the penetration not just of corrupting beliefs, as Bell suggests, but of a physically corrupting element into the body. Margaret is figured as an empty receptacle, "opening her heart" to the suffering of the poor, and literally open to embodying another.

<15>The dual qualities of "woman" as both permeable subject and effective mediator are in fact causally linked, as female political efficacy is the direct result of unstable female boundaries. Margaret and Mrs. Thornton, who can scarcely speak civilly to one another, do agree on the political effectiveness not just of women but of vulnerable women's bodies. Mrs. Thornton

describes a scene of industrial conflict not unlike the one into which Margaret throws herself, in which she herself had to act as a mediator: “[I]t needed to be a woman...It was as much as my life was worth” (116). Her very life as a woman is equal in value to the political task she is able to perform by virtue of her female vulnerability. Margaret similarly argues that women “feel the sanctity of our sex as a high privilege when we see danger” (194), and she tells Thornton that she intervened at the riot because “any woman, worthy of the name of woman, would come forward to shield, with her revered helplessness, a man in danger from the violence of numbers” (195). Thornton seems to want to turn the story away from politics and onto the marriage plot, as so many critics argue that the riot scene does. But Margaret’s speech here forces his gaze back onto the political, attempting to keep his attention—and ours—on the industrial conflict. She also highlights the paradox of female political engagement, namely, that it is her “helplessness,” or her need to be shielded, that allows her to shield others.

<16>But if a woman is effective in such moments because of her vulnerability, then her very intervention also threatens to expose the porousness of her self. The riot scene perfectly demonstrates Margaret’s permeability in the exact moment when her limp body successfully diffuses the political violence:

[T]he retrograde movement towards the gate had begun—as unreasoningly, perhaps as blindly, as the simultaneous anger. Or, perhaps, the idea of the approach of the soldiers, and the sight of that pale, upturned face, with closed eyes, still and sad as marble, though the tears welled out of the long entanglement of eyelashes, and dropped down; and, heavier, slower splash than even tears, came the drip of blood from her wound. Even the most desperate—Boucher himself—drew back, faltered away, scowled, and finally went off... (180)

Margaret’s collapse, which causes the mob to disperse, has two possible causes: physical injury (the blood dripping from her wound) and emotional fatigue (the tears dripping from her eyes). Physical and emotional trauma, as we have seen, are linked through the language of illness, but also by their shared ability to threaten the boundaries of a woman’s body and subjectivity. In this scene Margaret is penetrated both physically and emotionally as the elements of the scene—a rock, and the general excitement—get under her skin literally and figuratively. But her boundary is permeated in the other direction, too, as both her physiological and emotional interior burst their boundaries and manifest externally in the form of blood and tears. The tendency to “aggrandize agency,” as Anderson puts it, has given us an image of Margaret as an intentional female actor intervening in the history of women’s rights. But the notion of agency is radically attenuated by the fact that women’s efforts both result in and *depend upon* the woman being penetrated and broken by such an intervention.

<17>Gaskell’s portrayal is not an oddity; the female body as a political symbol is historically permeable. In remarking on the materiality of the suffering individual body that is so central to Gaskell and to the liberal politics of her time, Catherine Gallagher cites the female body in particular as representative of the nation’s health and reproductive potential (39). And Marina Warner shows that while male national symbols like John Bull and Uncle Sam are individuals “in command of their own characters and their own identity, [able] to live inside their own skins,” it is the role of female national symbols like Britannia and Lady Liberty to be aperticular,

capacious, and mutable: “Liberty is not representing her own freedom. She herself is caught by the differences, between the ideal and the general, the fantasy figure and the collective prototype, which seem to hold through the semantics of feminine and masculine gender in rhetoric and imagery, with very few exceptions” (266-267). The role of woman as an effective representative because her “skin” holds multitudinous and shifting identities, therefore, is not unique to Margaret Hale. The political agency that Gaskell models, which is both progressively female and disturbingly fracturing, follows the tradition of the female body as an already fractured symbol, stretched to encompass the whole nation while simultaneously being instrumentalized individually as a mediator in the homes of real people. The permeability of the female body parallels the capacious permeability of the woman-as-symbol, pierced by conflicting signification. This should encourage critics to treat the category of the female, both as a discursive subject and a material body, as far less than coherent and agentic.

<18>The notion of agency also runs afoul of the fact that the Lady Bountiful, or the female social mediator, was figured as a womanly obligation. Mary Elizabeth Hotz suggests that it was not the state but the individual, “especially the individual female, who must not only sustain a balance of interests between the two classes but render the economy more productive” (169). The role of philanthropist, then, loses some of the charm of volunteerism, cast instead as a series of social imperatives. But Hotz goes on to suggest that this move actually furnishes the woman with a kind of power: “In particular, Margaret intervenes in the strike scene to argue for a more comprehensive, public role for middle-class women in Victorian society” (169). Reading Margaret’s interventions as signs of her deliberate action or her “fearlessness” glosses over the fact that philanthropy—the woman’s work that created bridges from the home into the public sphere—was coded as a duty. When Margaret visits ailing Bessy, she is not stepping boldly into a new sphere but rather fulfilling a “vital function” that women were expected to perform in the community (Elliott, 136). Significantly, then, Margaret does not use her body to fight a feminist cause (this is not a case of “body politics”); someone else’s cause (working-class oppression) *uses her body*.

<19>The persistent critical approach based on Margaret as a feminist figure clearly obfuscates the novel’s broken female bodies littering the battlefield out of which Margaret is supposed to emerge with increased subjectivity. One source of this body-blindness is the persistent focus in feminist criticism, replicated in Gaskell criticism, on the public/private divide. Once thought to be controlling structures, later used to locate and recuperate resistance, and more recently re-written as social constructs in flux, the public and private spheres have never disappeared from the language of feminist theory and history; as recently as 2007 the “hallmark of contemporary feminism” was described as “its challenge to the otherwise seemingly clear divide between the private and the public spheres” (Lee, 163). Barbara Harman argues that *North and South* helps us see “how complex the relations are between private and public life,” particularly when the public sphere encourages “female self-manifestation and self-display” (*Feminine Political Novel*, 51). In discussing the collapse of “separate spheres,” Harman hints at but does not arrive at the fact that the woman herself is a kind of collapsed sphere, unable to retain its integrity nor its separateness from its surroundings. While deconstructing the distinctions between public and private, critics take as a given that the woman who navigates them is an agent of their deconstruction, not a deconstructable entity herself—as historical female political symbols have been. By contrast, Caroline Levine productively argues that the notion of separate spheres is

most suggestive, not when we debate whether it restricted or enabled women's agency, but when we understand it as just one of many social institutions that operated to impose order, sometimes appearing dominant but other times giving way to other forms of social organization. Levine's germane case study is the intersection of gender, politics, and the public/private divide: "The form of gender, split into public and private realms, encounters the form of the nation-as-family, and suddenly feminine confinement becomes national political agency" (649). Rethinking feminist approaches to *North and South* invites us to put more pressure on ideas about Victorian female subjectivity, and Victorian subjectivity more generally. It requires us to see bodies and subjectivities not as protagonists that contest gender binaries and public/private binaries but as contested categories themselves. In marrying political visibility to the broken female body, therefore, Gaskell stages something that the public/private framework is not built to hold. Her novel is less interested in what kind of agency Margaret Hale has as a woman than in what happens to the categories of agency and womanhood when they intersect with other social categories like labor and representation. In *North and South*, this intersection of womanhood and politics does not produce agency but threatens to disincorporate the subject. In other words, we should not be asking whether Margaret is a political agent, but whether we can speak of a coherent "she" in the first place.

<20>Gaskell seems invested not in celebrating this boundary-crossing of the female body and identity, but in problematizing it, as it constantly takes place against Margaret's will. The novel is perhaps only matched in its attention to sick female bodies by its attention to Margaret's desire to preserve her own body and mind from penetration. Henry Lennox twice offends her with his speech, which she finds altogether too personally invasive: "Margaret did not quite like this speech; she winced away from it more, from remembering former occasions on which he had tried to lead her into a discussion...about her own character and ways of going on" (11). She recoils physically, "wincing," as though somatically pained by an attempt to penetrate her interior life. She displays similar unwillingness to be permeable in the opposite direction: "'Oh mamma, mamma! how am I to dress up in my finery, and go off and away to smart parties, after the sorrow I have seen to-day?'" exclaimed Margaret, bursting the bounds she had preordained for herself before she came in" (157). Margaret is deeply invested in setting the "bounds" of her self, but in this moment her inner life comes "bursting" out against her will. She is constantly at war with her countenance and body, that they might not betray her inner turmoil in front of others, even her family, from whom she escapes to her bedroom to hide "the hysterical sobs that would force their way at last, after the rigid self-control of the whole day" (47). Violations of her body and self thus "force their way" both into and out of Margaret's boundary between interior and exterior. Being able to inhabit public and private, male and female, laboring and middle class, is already a threat to cozy boundaries, and the more she works to reconcile disparate spheres, the more she finds herself "bursting the bounds she had preordained for herself," growing ill, fainting, revealing her inner secrets, and generally losing the distinctness of her boundaries. Her jealous safe-keeping—her "rigid self-control"—is doomed to fail, and in this failure she will be set apart from the male characters around her, who remain impermeable, controllable, above public suspicion, and unsusceptible to being instrumentalized politically.

<21>This war with her permeable body—the battle to keep herself in, and others out—results in a breakdown of that body that fundamentally erases the distinction between physical and emotional. When the police inspector enters her home to pry into her most dearly kept secret,

her brother's whereabouts and his involvement in Leonards's death, Margaret's attempt to maintain the integrity of her interior privacy is a physical "torture" that fairly breaks her body, causing "quick, sharp pain [which] went through [her] brain" (274). Her battle to keep this suffering internal is only barely won; a "momentary agony shoot[s] out of her great gloomy eyes," suggesting the very physical nature of the boundary that is her body and the very literal battle she wages to keep the internal from bursting that boundary. The inspector only misses this leak because he was not a "deep observer," the word "deep" further underscoring the physical spatiality of Margaret's potentially penetrated body (274). As soon as the inspector leaves, she locks herself into a room and falls "prone on the floor in a dead swoon" (275). Because of her fainting, which is not something Margaret is easily given to do, the scene cannot help recall her fainting at the riot, when she was likewise subject to the public gaze (here represented by the figure of the law) and likewise subject to public speculation about her personal, sexual life. Recalling the language in that earlier moment of her "pale, upturned face, with closed eyes, still and sad as marble," her swoon in this later scene is figured also by paleness, stillness, and death: "And all this while Margaret lay as still and white as death on the study floor! She had sunk under her burden. It had been heavy in weight and long carried" (276). Her very body succumbs to not just emotional burden but a "heavy" "weight" "long carried," a physical image that once again conflates the somatic and the psychological in such a way as to confuse the two and to highlight the inevitable breakdown of the female body.

<22>This bodily anguish that presents like a fever and threatens death but which results from her emotional suffering, is thrown into relief by the parallel *intellectual* suffering that John experiences by the very same piece of news and which he seems markedly more in control of. He waits until he can lock himself away in the recesses of his warehouse, and only then does he "[indulge] himself in the torture of thinking it all over, and realising every detail" (279). His "torture" takes place at his command, on his terms, and even at his pleasure, as expressed by the notion that he may choose to "indulge" in it. John Thornton has the luxury of keeping his emotional tortures private, and he is not subject to the same prying speculation regarding his relationship with Margaret. He himself turns this moment into his own violation of Margaret's self, as he says he "stab[s] her with her shame" (335), using her own unwanted permeability to further penetrate her in a blending of emotional and physical incursion and injury.

<23>Margaret seems to similarly bristle against her role as mediator. She rejects the notion that she was the one to suggest Mr. Thornton and Mr. Bell might come to an intellectual compromise, complaining, "I did not know it was my idea any more than papa's" (332). And where possible, she attempts to bring people together without introducing them herself, as she leaves Higgins and her father alone to introduce themselves. The novel's relentless insistence on aligning her attempted preservation and repeated loss of her own interiority with the sick bodies around her, as well as her dual role as mediator and representative, ultimately forces her own body to share alike in the suffering. In her desperation to garner "sympathy for the suffering animal" (390)—a feeling she experiences powerfully when confronted with the slain cat at the close of the novel—she exposes her own body and "cat-like" self (9) to a similar kind of ritual sacrifice. Ultimately, and significantly, Margaret describes her role as mediator, caretaker, and philanthropist, as an impingement on her "*liberty*":

When her father had driven off on his way to the railroad, Margaret felt how great and long had been the pressure on her time and spirits. It was astonishing, almost stunning, to feel herself so much at liberty; no one depending on her for cheering care, if not for positive happiness; no invalid to plan and think for; she might be idle, and silent, and forgetful,—and what seemed worth more than all the other privileges—she might be unhappy if she liked. For months past, all her own personal cares and troubles had had to be stuffed away into a dark cupboard; but now she had leisure to take them out, and mourn over them, and study their nature, and seek the true method of subduing them into the elements of peace. (344)

The narrator here makes a telling contrast between Margaret's work on behalf of others and her own personal "liberty." Liberalism as a form of social organization prizes the individual, but only insofar as that individual can be rendered visible to the powerful. The implication is that, to the extent that Margaret serves this important political function, her own liberty is sacrificed. Gaskell thus stages a political intervention that depends upon women who are effective only insofar as they lose their subjectivity, are vulnerable, can be exposed inside and out, and who generally give up their own status as liberal subjects. Margaret's willingness to place herself in these situations is something critics point to in order to crown her as a proto-feminist political agent, but the breakdown of her body and the bodies that are metonymically aligned with her suggest a violation that is out of her control, deeply inevitable, and highly regrettable to her.

<24>Wendy Parkins rightly notes that Margaret's "desire—and her dilemma—is how to become a modern, self-governing subject" and suggests that the "potential" exists for Margaret's "unified self" to be undercut by her movements through various political and social spaces (516-517). While I would agree up to this point, I would suggest that Margaret's shifting identification with the poor and the gentry, the masculine and the feminine, results in much more than the "potential" of her deconstructed subjectivity. And I would certainly suggest that Margaret's highly mediated and permeated body defies Parkins's ultimate conclusion that these various identities constitute "the agency of the modern female subject" (517). Critics, in short, have been altogether too sanguine about Margaret's political agency; puzzlingly, they fail to note that such agency is tightly bound to a troubling, irreducibly somatic deconstruction. By forcing ourselves to pull down some of the inherited foundations set up by feminist theory, we can not only resist the temptation to "aggrandize" mid-Victorian women's political agency but also fill that absence with something more appropriate to Gaskell's historical moment. Ironically, this helps us "recuperate" Gaskell as a forward-thinker, all too aware of the ways that female bodies and subjects were discursively constructed, renegotiated, and instrumentalized by the violence of political representation. We can recognize this, however, without suggesting that either Margaret or Gaskell played a transformative part in enacting the feminism we know today.

<25>Fragility and flexibility. If not exactly antonyms, these terms stand in great tension with each other. Rubber bands do not break when we drop them; glass vases do not bend when we squeeze them. Either something gives or it gives way—how could it do both? And yet *North and South* forces us to understand Victorian womanhood, insofar as it intersected with the political sphere, as both a capaciously flexible signifier capable of standing in for the ill, the working class, the entire nation, and the suffering individual, and as a deeply fragile body, politically effective precisely because it threatened to shatter. The liberal project, then, of representing and advocating for individual liberty, threatens the very individual subjectivity that such liberalism

depended upon—at least for the Victorian political woman. Unravelling the critical tendency to recuperate agency into a teleological story, and refocusing the public/private divide onto the shifting boundary of the female body, brings us closer to a reading of *North and South* that squares with the deep ambivalence embedded in the novel. And by understanding the “self” as a potentially permeable form that did not merely interact with the social world but was and is penetrated, disincorporated, and deconstructed by the social, we approach a more useful understanding of “agency.”

<26>In many ways we have treated Gaskell just like Margaret, instrumentalizing her novel for the political goal of locating contemporary feminism in the nineteenth century. Gaskell’s own fear about being a professional writer was that it might expose her or make her “a scandalously ‘public’ woman.” In language that strongly echoes Margaret’s rejection of Henry Lennox’s marriage proposal, Gaskell wrote to her daughter that she “hate[d] publishing because of all the talk people make, which I always feel as a great impertinence, if they address their remarks to me in any way” (qtd. in Steinbach 50-51). The irony is that by reading her novels as promising moments in the story of women’s liberation, critics have subjected Gaskell to the same political instrumentalization as Margaret Hale. Just as women were “conduits” of the philanthropic turn, Gaskell too has become a conduit, to use Amanda Anderson’s phrasing, of the history of the modern (female) subject. To refocus our attention as I have been suggesting is to see Margaret Hale’s body as a troubling political tool, and to liberate Elizabeth Gaskell’s body (of work) from an all-too-similar subject position.

Endnotes

(1)See Hardy, Ellison, Pinch, Small, Vrettos, and Wood for an extensive treatment of the Victorian (and contemporary) discourses of psychopathology, fainting, and nervous disorders.(^)

(2)See pages 104, 204, 235, 249, 349, 363, eg.(^)

(3)Among the many innumerable points of comparison between *North and South* and *Mary Barton*, perhaps the most interesting starting place would be the parallel between Boucher’s stained body in *NS* and the corpse of Harry Carson. While quite graphically penetrated by the bullet that kills him, even in death we see that bullet hole converted into a spot on the surface of his body: “a blue spot (you could hardly call it a hole, the flesh had closed so much over it).” Mr. Carson’s “shuddering” in this scene is a response not to the body of his son, but to his wife’s inability to contain the emotions they both feel but that he keeps inside.(^)

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