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Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*: the Novel in Progress

The story of the increasingly strained relationship between Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Dickens as her novel *North and South* appeared weekly from 2 Sept 1854, through 27 Jan 1855, in his magazine *Household Words* is well-known¹ It is also well-known that Gaskell revised her novel before publishing it in a two-volume book format. Others, such as Mary Kuhlman, have dealt with elements of this revision. Here, then, I will review the cumulative effect of those revisions, being concerned more with *North and South* as a Bildungsroman than as an industrial novel.² I will argue that when Gaskell revised her novel she did so in order to strengthen her principal concern: her presentation of Margaret Hale's development.

Annette Hopkins, Virginia Carwell, and Dorothy Collin have identified the source of the trouble between Dickens and Gaskell as the 'reckless' casting off of copy by Dickens' printers. This problem occurred as they and Dickens estimated the relationship between Gaskell's handwritten pages and the prospective printed pages that would appear in *Household Words*. The consequence of these misestimates was a miscalculation of the amount of space the novel would require. The question of space concerned not only the

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total amount the novel would require from start to finish but also the weekly amount of space each episode would require. And that question raised yet another: how to divide Gaskell's copy so that each episode would create sufficient interest to bring the reader back for the next one. By 24 Aug 1854, Dickens had concluded that accepting the story had been a mistake:

If I had known how it was to turn out, and that when they said in Whitefriars 'white,' they meant 'black,' or when they said 'Ten' meant 'Twenty,' I could not, in my senses, have accepted the story.³

As the periodical publication of *North and South* approached its close in January 1855, Gaskell felt badly dealt with, even deceived in the amount of space allotted to her novel. After having sent Dickens her last installment she complained to Anna Jameson that whereas she had thought her novel would be granted a 'too scant 22 numbers,' she was actually given only 20. Hence she complained that '... at last the story is huddled & hurried up. . . . Just at the very last I was compelled to desperate compression.'⁴

This 'desperate compression' is evident in a comparison of the number of columns of *Household Words* usually devoted to *North and South* with the numbers devoted to its completion. Prior to the rush to conclude, the largest installment was No 14, which occupied 18 1/4 columns. Two installments, No 8 and No 19, occupy 17 columns and 17 1/2 columns respectively. These are the longest installments of the 22 that constituted the serial text of *North and South*--the longest, that is, until the last three installments. Installment 20 occupied 20 columns, Installment 21 occupied 22 3/4 columns, and Installment 22 occupied 19 columns.⁵ By January of 1854 Dickens was jamming as much of Gaskell's novel into an issue as he possibly could.

The faulty estimates of space compounded another problem: the novel did not divide neatly into weekly segments. This frustrated Dickens by violating what he believed such serialization required and made Gaskell feel rushed and cramped by his demands. What all of this meant for *Household Words* is that, with each issue being 24 pages long, by the end of the novel's run *North and South* was occupying nearly half of each issue. What this meant for Gaskell appears in her preface to the two-volume book edition of 1855. There she complains she had been

compelled to hurry on events with an improbable rapidity towards the close. In some degree to remedy this obvious defect, various short passages have been inserted, and several new chapters added.⁶

This account of the Gaskell-Dickens difficulties is right as far as it goes.

However, the misunderstanding between Gaskell and Dickens runs deeper than the amount of space her novel would occupy in a weekly magazine. At the heart of the dispute may be differing conceptions of the novel she was writing and the one he had agreed to publish. Even the title of her book seems to have been an issue. As has been noted many times, she referred to her novel as either 'Margaret'⁷ or 'Margaret Hale'⁸ and not as *North and South*. On 2 July 2 1854, Dickens wrote to her, perhaps testily, that 'Margaret Hale is as good a name as any other; and I merely referred to its having a name at all, because books usually have names, and you had left the title of the story blank.'⁹ By July 26, however, the matter appears to have been settled, with Dickens telling her that 'North and South appears to me to be a better name than Margaret Hale. It implies more, and is expressive of the opposite people brought face to face by the story.'¹⁰ For her the story centered on the changing character of Margaret Hale. For him the center of

interest was the economic and cultural division between North and South. Contextual matters suggest that Dickens preferred the title *North and South* because he read Gaskell's work primarily as belonging to the same genre as his own *Hard Times*, which was appearing in *Household Words* while Gaskell was writing *North and South*. That he would read her novel in this way is understandable.

The moment was ripe for such fiction, and Victorian readers of both novels as *North and South* followed *Hard Times* in *Household Words* would have read them in a context now largely forgotten. For example, an editorial in *The Times* for Saturday, 10 Sept 1853, notes that the 'labouring classes' have been in dispute for months and alludes to 'thousands' of silent looms in Manchester.¹¹ On Sept 20, *The Times* observed that the number and variety of strikes in progress constitute 'an industrial revolution'.¹² On Sept 21, *The Times* reported on the dyers' strike in Manchester and, noting the strike was turning violent, said someone had thrown 'a large pavingstone at Mr. Crabtree, a master-dyer. . . .'¹³

Household Words itself carried regular commentary on such matters. The 10 Dec 1853, issue, for instance, ran James Lowe's 'Locked Out,' an article dealing with the Preston lock-out.¹⁴ In fact, when Dickens' *Hard Times* began its run on 1 April 1854, the Preston weavers' strike had been underway for months, and Dickens himself had written 'On Strike' for the 11 Feb 1854, issue of *Household Words*. 'On Strike' presents, in part, a dialogue between the anonymous Dickens and a Mr. Snapper as the two approach Preston on a train. Dickens urges that absolute right is with neither the managers nor the workers and that both sides must enter into 'something of feeling and sentiment; something of mutual explanation, forbearance, and consideration. . . .'¹⁵ This point,

pressed upon the disagreeable Mr. Snapper, forms the thesis of Gaskell's novel, published immediately after *Hard Times*, and suggests Dickens' interest in it might have been prompted by her advocacy of cooperation, not confrontation, as a way to resolve industrial conflicts.

Other *Household Words* articles published during this period, such as Henry Morley's 'Ground in the Mill' on 22 April 1854, would naturally have affected the Victorian readers' responses to Dickens' and Gaskell's novels.¹⁶ In a letter to John Forster dated 23 April 1854, Gaskell expressed relief that Dickens does not intend to introduce a strike into *Hard Times*.¹⁷ Furthermore, in 1855, following the completion of the *Household Words* text of *North and South*, Dickens ran at least three articles dealing with unsafe conditions in Manchester mills and urging compliance with the Factory Act. And, of course, Gaskell had included the throwing of a stone at the fictional Mr. Thornton as *The Times* had earlier reported one being thrown at Mr. Crabtree, the actual master-dyer.

To some extent, it seems, Dickens and Gaskell worked in tandem on these novels and Gaskell certainly wished to avoid duplicating obvious elements of Dickens' plot. Regardless of the basis of her story's appeal to Dickens, however, Gaskell saw the book principally as the story of Margaret Hale.

Jodi LaBelle's and my collation of the *Household Words* (HW) text with the text of the first book edition (NS) suggests that when Gaskell revised, she emphasized the changing character of Margaret Hale--not the North-South division--as the focus of the story. She did this by revising to accomplish two goals: to remove Margaret's dependence on outside support, and to undermine the pastoral romanticism Margaret

associated with life in the South. Coupled with the fact that it was Dickens and not Gaskell who most likely gave the novel its title, her revisions suggest she conceived of her novel primarily as a Bildungsroman.

Although the demands of weekly serialization may have left Gaskell dissatisfied with other aspects of her novel, she was most upset by the conclusion. Her major revisions began with chapter 44, the last chapter of Installment 21, and continued to the end of the novel; however, she also looked over the whole work and introduced a number of changes throughout. For one, she titled the chapters and began each with an epigraph that reflects the substance of the chapter in either mood or event. The epigraphs, identified in Angus Easson's edition, indicate a wide range of reading, but also suggest favorites. For instance, authors other than 'anonymous' whose works provided at least three epigraphs are Felicia Hemans, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Ebenezer Elliott, the Corn-Law Rhymer. By contrast, chapter 1 of the periodical text is prefaced by an epigraph from Tennyson's 'Will Waterproof's Lyrical Monologue'; the lines quoted focus on the desirability of social cooperation and serve as an epigraph to the whole novel.

She also sharpened the realism of her presentation by introducing a number of minor changes in diction and word choice. For the more involved revisions of the novel, Gaskell returned to the last chapter of the penultimate installment of the *Household Words* text and rewrote from there. One recent feminist study emphasizes that by the conclusion of *North and South*, Margaret needs 'to take hold of masculine power'.¹⁸ Another insists that the conclusion 'seems to carry out an undoing of the heroine's expectations that parallels its undoing of her expectations at the beginning: none of the

old plots, it seems, will quite do'.¹⁹ Gaskell's reworking of the closing chapters of her novel shows her creating a new 'plot,' one that will 'do.'

In revising them Gaskell completed the story of Frederick, Margaret's brother, undermined Margaret's idyllic view of Helstone, and emphasized that a life like that of her cousin Edith's in London is impossible for her. After the death of Margaret's parents, Gaskell presented her with essentially three choices: she could remain in Milton, she could return to Helstone, or she could marry Henry Lennox and live the sort of dully conventional life she sees patterned by her cousin Edith. In revising the concluding chapters of her novel, Gaskell reorganized and expanded her materials to emphasize that Margaret's place is in Milton. These changes removed Margaret's emotional props and prepared her to assume control of the capital that comes to her through Mr. Bell's will and establishes her independence. When she accepts Mr. Thornton and life in Milton at the end of the novel, therefore, she is a considerably different woman from the one with whom the story began.

First, Gaskell dispensed with Frederick more certainly than she had in the serial version. Frederick, a British naval officer who had been involved in a mutiny years before, lives in exile in Spain for all but a few pages of the novel. When he returns to England, briefly and clandestinely, it is to visit his dying mother. With the aid of the lawyer Henry Lennox, Margaret attempts to clear her brother of the charge of mutiny, but leaves the outcome uncertain. In revision, Gaskell ended the case: Frederick cannot be cleared because too much time has elapsed for witnesses to be located. Receiving this news, Frederick denounces England, converts to Catholicism, marries a suitably exotic Spaniard, and adapts to his new country's life.

In *NS I*, chapter 25, the epigraph Gaskell chose to open the story of Frederick's return comes from Lord Byron's poem *The Island*, Canto the First, Section X, and refers to the mutiny on the *Bounty*. Among its attractions, *The Island* presents the story of the British navy's pursuit of the mutineers and the death of Mr. Christian. Margaret's worry, expressed at the end of the chapter, echoes the pathos of Mr. Christian's death as rendered in Byron's poem, a point which would have subtly enriched the experience of Victorian readers familiar with *The Island* or with the story of the *Bounty*. To open *NS II*, chapter 5, the chapter in which Mrs. Hale dies, Gaskell selected as an epigraph a quotation from Felicia Hemans' poem 'The Two Voices.' The epigraph addresses primarily Mrs. Hale's death but also implicitly comments on Frederick's situation as a wanted man. In Hemans' poem the voice of heavenly assurance is contrasted with the voice of earthly grief. The dead has gone 'home' and thus has been freed from earthly cares. Ironically, however, Frederick's coming 'home' has put him in danger and caused Margaret to compromise the truth. Completing Frederick's plot in revision, Gaskell sent him out of danger but in doing so eliminated one more of Margaret's southern supports. She cannot look to her permanently exiled brother for solace. Her mother dead and her father headed for the grave some pages later, Margaret must, increasingly, depend upon herself.

When Gaskell added chapter 21, 'Once and Now,' to the second volume of the book edition, she removed another support from Margaret: a psychic one. By this point in the story, Margaret's mother and father have died, Frederick's plot has been resolved, and Margaret is living in London. When a visit to Helstone--Margaret's southern home before Mr. Hale moved his wife and daughter to the North—is proposed by Margaret's

godfather Mr. Bell, she is eager to go. In 'Once and Now,' she and Mr. Bell make the journey. In a novel that emphasizes transition, this visit is important because it forces Margaret to confront change and reflect on it in relation to her own life. For one thing, this return to her childhood home resolves certain of her feelings left unresolved in the *Household Words* text. In addition to establishing Mr. Bell as a wise father-substitute, elaborating his character, and preparing for his leaving Margaret his fortune when he dies, Gaskell has Margaret discover that Mr. Thornton has visited Helstone in an effort to understand her better. More importantly, however, Helstone is no longer as it was and neither is she. In *NS I*, chapter 2: 'Roses and Thorns,' Gaskell chose as an epigraph the opening four lines of Mrs. Hemans' 'The Spells of Home.' Later lines of this lyric with a Wordsworthian theme urge the reader to 'guard . . . well' the memory of her childhood home, for its 'spell' will be restorative after she has been exposed to 'the sullyng breath of the world.'²⁰ In adding 'Once and Now' to Volume II of the book edition, Gaskell returned Margaret to her childhood home from the 'sullyng breath' of Milton as Hemans' poem had urged, but with a difference. The intertextual operation of these revisions ironically subverts Margaret's pastoral hopes.

As she wanders the streets of her former home, visits the parsonage where she had been reared, and confronts for the first time the cruel superstitions of her former neighbors, Margaret understands she no longer belongs there. The reader sees, along with Margaret, that Helstone has always been to her a wistfully mythic place associated more closely with idyllic pastoral romance than with the realities of nineteenth-century life. Consequently, she begins to look forward instead of back and to wish for news from

Milton, where her future ultimately lies. She has needed to close this part of her past in order to move on. In revising, Gaskell emphasized that she does this.

Dispensing with Frederick and resolving Margaret's feelings about Helstone settled two of Gaskell's problems with her story. One more-- perhaps the most serious-- remained: how to establish Margaret's independence from the sort of conventional plot being lived by her cousin Edith. Gaskell found her solution in reorganizing and, to a lesser extent, in expanding her closing chapters. A couple of examples will make the point. In *HW*, chapter 44, Margaret has gone to London for an extended visit with Edith following the death of their father. In both the periodical and the book edition, Margaret is struck by the contrast between life in Milton and life in London: 'She was getting surfeited of the eventless ease in which no struggle or endeavour was required.'²¹ To focus her reader's attention on Margaret's ennui while in London, Gaskell titled *HW* chapter 44 'Ease Not Peace' when she established it as *NS II*, chapter 19, and preceded it with two epigraphs: 'A dull rotation, never at a stay,/ Yesterday's face twin image of to-day' (Cowper); and 'Of what each one should be, he sees the form and rule,/ And till he reach to that, his joy can ne'er be full' (Rückert).

She also made more specific what a typical day in Edith's household was like for Margaret. In *HW*, 'The course of Margaret's day was this: a quiet hour or two before a late breakfast; an endless discussion of plans. . . .'²² In revision, 'The course of Margaret's day was this; a quiet hour or two before a late breakfast; an unpunctual meal, lazily eaten by weary and half-awake people, but yet at which, in all its dragged-out length, she was expected to be present, because, directly afterwards, came a discussion of plans. . . .' At the end of this paragraph Gaskell changed Margaret from being 'wearied

with the inanity of the day' to being 'wearied with the inactivity of the day' (II, 263). In revision, Margaret more clearly requires the discipline of activity, something that will cause her to 'reach' to 'what [she] should be,' as the Rückert epigraph has it.

In its revision Mr. Bell's death removes Margaret's last prop and, as Mary Kuhlman has shown, causes Margaret to assert her independence by being determined to ride unaccompanied on a train.²³ When Mr. Bell dies and leaves Margaret his fortune, she is more than independent and self-reliant. She is prepared to accept the vitality of life in the industrial north. When Mr. Thornton's mill fails and he is financially ruined, Margaret is in a position to rescue him. What to do with Mr. Thornton's mill and how to end the novel had been a problem in 1854 when Gaskell was writing this section of the novel for *Household Words*. In October, she had written to Catherine Winkworth:

What do you think of a fire burning down Mr Thornton's mills *and house* as a *help* to failure? Then Margaret would rebuild them larger & better & need not go & live there when she's married.²⁴

Perhaps recalling she had used a mill fire in *Mary Barton* to turn a crisis, she settled on financial failure in *North and South*. It is also apparent from this letter that not until relatively late in her writing of the concluding chapters of the serial version of her novel had she herself settled on Milton as Margaret's home.

Gaskell's decisions as she worked through the serial text of her novel and through her revisions in preparation for book publication accent the themes of change and mutual acceptance between the abstractions that constitute North and South and between the particular persons who are Mr. Thornton and Margaret. Although both Mr. Thornton and Margaret must change, Margaret's development is more thorough. Mr. Thornton must

accept his workers as men, not just synecdochially as 'hands,' and his management principles must be humanized accordingly. But Margaret's entire social and psychological orientation must change. As a woman, Margaret can finally accept Mr. Thornton only when she herself is independent, self-reliant, and fully realized. She signals her acceptance through a business offer to Mr. Thornton that creates a factory with model employer-employee relations. That done, the lovers declare themselves and unite.

When Margaret, in charge of her own capital, invests her southern fortune in Mr. Thornton's newly organized and progressively managed northern mill, Gaskell suggests a resolution that closes the story Dickens probably found most appealing. The classes are brought together harmoniously, and blessings are bestowed all round. Cooperation resolves apparently irreconcilable conflicts as the wealthy and graceful southern gentry embrace the energetic capitalistic North directed by a new managerial idea. For Gaskell, though, when Margaret and Mr. Thornton declare their mutual love they signal they are new beings, transformed selves, merging their lives in an unconventional middleclass partnership. This was Gaskell's vision of the novel from the beginning, and it is this vision that she clarified in *re-vision*.

Notes

1. Cf. Annette B. Hopkins, 'Dickens and Mrs. Gaskell,' *Huntington Library Quarterly* Vol. 9 (1946), pp. 357-85; Annette B. Hopkins, *Elizabeth Gaskell: Her Life and Work* (1952, rpt. New York: Octagon, 1971); Virginia A. Carwell, *Serialization and the Fiction of Mrs. Gaskell*

(Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 1965); Dorothy W. Collin, 'The Composition of Mrs. Gaskell's *North and South*,' *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* Vol. 54 (1971), pp. 67-93.

2. See Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*. (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1993), p. 369.

3. *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson, and Angus Easson. Vol. 7: 1853-1855 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 406.

4. *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, ed. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1967), p. 328.

5. Cf. Anne Lohrli, comp. *Household Words: A Weekly Journal 1850-1859. Conducted by Charles Dickens* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1973), pp. 128-34.

6. Elizabeth Gaskell. *North and South*. Vol 1. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1855).

7. *Letters*, p. 281.

8. *Letters*, p. 290.

9. *Letters*, Vol. 7, p. 363.

10. *Letters*, Vol. 7, p. 378.

11. P. 6.

12. P. 6.

13. P. 9.

14. *Household Words*. Conducted by Charles Dickens. Vol. 8, No. 194 (Dec. 10, 1853), p. 345-8.

15. *Ibid.*, Vol. 8 (Feb. 11, 1854), pp. 553-9.

16. *Ibid.*, Vol. 9, (April 22, 1854), pp. 224-7.

17. *Letters* , p. 281.
18. Patsy Stoneman, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987), p. 137.
19. Hilary M. Schor, *Scheherezade in the Marketplace* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), p. 149.
20. Felicia Hemans, *The Poetical Works of Mrs. Hemans* (London: Frederick Warne, 1898), p. 436.
21. *Household Words*, Vol. 10 (20 Jan 1855), p. 548; *North and South*, Vol. 2, p. 261.
22. *Household Words*, Vol. 10 (20 Jan 1855), p. 549; *North and South*, Vol. 2, p. 263.
23. Mary Kuhlman, 'Education Through Experience in *North and South*.' *Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol. 10 (1996), pp. 14-26, at p. 24.
24. *Letters*, p. 310.