

The role of women in percival and gaskell's north and south



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In modern day society, it is not uncommon to hear the phrase 'A woman's touch', being casually mentioned in discussions of style and the exercise of compassion. The phrase, however, is an apt description for the role of women in Elizabeth Gaskell's Victorian novel, *North and South*, and the resulting BBC miniseries adaptation directed by Brian Percival (2004). In the respective adaptations, both author and director strive to present the potential of women to be more than the submissive, demure and delicate figures that Victorian society appraise by defining what exactly is meant to be a man and what is meant to be a woman. Through the exemplar characterization of the male and female leads (Margaret Hale and John Thornton), and the unprecedented relationship that ensues between the two, both adaptations of *North and South* present an equalist ideal that depicts women not as triumphant conquerors, but as necessary mediators of our world.

When examining the males in *North and South*, it becomes quickly evident to audiences that John Thornton is Gaskell's representation of the stereotypical man. Possessing many admirable qualities that the men around him lack significantly, the novel repetitively describes the 'self made' nouveau riche owner of Marlborough Mills not only as 'handsome', but also 'noble' with a 'rigid thick' build and 'steadfast' personality. The BBC adaptation manages to transfer this physical description to the silver screen with the near perfect casting of English actor Richard Armitage, who delivers in terms of appearance and the deliverance of his lines. Despite these positive attributions to his character, however, Thornton cannot be described as a perfect picture of moral virtue. In both the original novel and the miniseries

adaptation, the male protagonist is depicted to be a man who 'tests everything to the standard of wealth' and holds a non empathetic 'survival of the fittest' ideology. As a result of these ideas, Thornton is implied to hold an exceedingly high opinion of his own character. The miniseries builds on this idea of induced pride and superiority, which have come about as a result of his circumstance, through the use of low camera angles when filming the character in the initial episodes of the series. The effect of these angles during scenes with his love interest and other feminine figures, also gives the impression to audiences that he is as a man who frequently 'talks down' to others. The riot scene of chapter 22 and episode 2 respectively is a scene that only confirms this inference. All throughout, audiences witness the male protagonist's shocking lack of empathy and disregard for the welfare of the working class, by remarking that violence (the gender typical solution of man) will make them see 'reason', and his command to Margaret: 'keep up her courage for a few minutes longer', as he automatically assumes she is a damsel in distress. When Margaret indignantly denies her 'damsel status' with a haughty 'I am not afraid!' and requests that the master speak to his workers 'like human beings,' 'man to man', Thornton begrudgingly agrees, but not before a 'dark cloud' comes over his face and his teeth, as the book puts it 'grind and set', both of which are implied signals that he finds the task of attempting to lower himself to the level of his workers as one that is tedious and difficult. This overall lack of empathy in all aspects of his life, combined with his unfailing belief in the system that 'one makes his own success with the means to which he is provided' make Thornton a fitting representative and vision for a world of men without femininity — cold, hard and without consideration of anything other than industrial profit.

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In contrast, Thornton's female counterpart Margaret Hale could be considered an apt generalized representation of women. As a graceful, southern English belle with a passion for social responsibility, Margaret is unafraid of pointing out the maltreatment of the working class by men of her status, it comes as no surprise that the protagonist of *North and South* was deemed by many as unconventional and even scandalous by readers of Gaskell's day. With that being said, Margaret, remains a woman of fault, not only due to her overwhelming sense of "pride and disagreeability", but also her excessive and unrealistic idealism. This particular *hamartia* of hers is only briefly implied in the book, but is explored in greater depth in the miniseries, specifically during the Masters dinner scene. At the table, Margaret, after Thornton accuses her of 'prolonging the strike' by 'supporting the strikers' with a basket of food, in shock, questions whether 'providing a dying baby with food' is 'simply a question of logic'. The emotively disbelieving way in which Margaret (Daniela-Densby-Ashe) delivers these lines of dialogue strike viewers in the heart, forcing them to acknowledge the absence of compassion in the world that men strive to achieve. While her prolonged call for empathy is admirable in this example, Margaret's idealism often reaches a point where she endangers herself and the individuals around her. An example of this can be found in chapter 22, the riot scene, in which Margaret, 'shaking with passion' places Thornton in danger of violence, when she asks him to calm a crowd of 'boys, cruel and thoughtless' 'whose stormy passions had passed their bounds, sweeping away all barriers of reason, apprehension and consequence.' When she attempts to calm the throng herself, armed with the foolish belief that her

words hold greater value than those of a man, she finds herself unable to do anything, and manages to also cause injury to herself in the process.

Margaret's actions during the riot, while not achieving their intended effect, were not insignificant to the events of the plot in itself. After she is struck down by the pebble in the original novel, Thornton stands ' amongst them', his workers, as if metaphorically lowering himself to their level in an effort to appease the wishes of his love. This is a great change from the logically reasoning Thornton audiences witness at the beginning, and is the first of many examples in which they witness just how much of an influence the female protagonist has been on his character. Over time, readers and viewers alike witness the character's stony demeanor melt away, and by the end of both the novel and series, audiences are shown a new and improved version of Mr. Thornton — a civil minded master who views his men not as a superior master, but as friends. Richard Armitage, the actor portraying Thornton, portrays this very well in the way he speaks to Nicholas Higgins after the loss of his mill, even reaching the point where the two, who originally despised each other, are able to set aside differences and shake hands. This significant moment, symbolizing the newfound compromises between social classes is emphasized in the miniseries' final episode with a close up detail shot of the two's firm handshake. In a similar way, Margaret Hale is also shown to have been influenced by her lover. These differences are quickly noticed by her father who aptly surmises the new grounded and humbled persona of his daughter in episode 4 of the miniseries: ' My word, Margaret! To admit that the South has its faults and Mr. Thornton has virtues! What has happened to bring about such a transformation?'. By

pointing out these pleasant changes, both Gaskell and Percival reveal that the two, man and woman, are better together than apart. The resolution of both narratives, with the upcoming marriage of the two young lovers not only shows the compromise between the North and South, but also the compromise between the two genders in society.

Although Percival is not as direct in his revelation of opinions regarding the role of women in society, he appears to quietly endorse Gaskell's belief that good men cannot exist without good women and vice versa, as each have an important role to play in an optimally functioning society. Readers and viewers find that the book neither endorses the feminist misconception that 'women can rule the world' or the patriarchal delusion that 'women are servants to men'. Rather, both versions of North and South find a more idyllic, common ground between the two—one which details the necessary requirements of true equality; between not only sexes but also the economic classes.