MASTERS AND MASCULINITY:
THE MEN OF INDUSTRY IN ELIZABETH GASKELL’S MANCHESTER NOVELS

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Brittany Elizabeth Blake

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Abstract

of

MASTERS AND MASCULINITY:

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Masculinity within Victorian literature and culture is often distilled to general concepts of what it meant to “be a man” or “be a gentleman,” but the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell show a fluidity of masculinity through male relationships. Specifically, the masculinity portrayed in *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1854) presents two variations of masculinity through master-worker relationships, exposing the instability of a single definition of (gentle)manliness. In *Mary Barton*, the conflict between John Barton and John Carson is based on their shared agony of the loss of their respective only sons, and their mutual suffering leads to violence and a demand for revenge. With the intercession of Bible verses, the men are able to achieve reconciliation just before Barton’s death, urging male forgiveness and a master’s duty to move toward more humane treatment of his workers. The transformation of master-worker relationships in *North and South* is reliant on the keystone of masculinity, John Thornton. Thornton’s
definition of masculinity is based on man in relation to himself, and so even though others in the community judge Thornton’s masculinity on his work as a master, he attempts to be manly in relation to himself. The significance of suffering and violence of *Mary Barton* is lessened in Thornton’s world because the reconciliation of master and worker allows Thornton greater understanding of himself, and thus Thornton and Nicholas Higgins are ultimately united not as master and worker, but as men. The transformation of master-worker relationships from *Mary Barton* to *North and South* exposes the fluidity of Victorian masculinity, from violent action and religious reconciliation to self-knowledge and manly unity. Ultimately, Gaskell’s development of Thornton as a master and a man promotes a changing view of the individual capitalist and, most importantly, the individual man.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Jonas Cope

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Date
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Finally, to my incredible family, who have encouraged me all my life, and especially during my research, thank you. I could not have done any of this without your love and support. As Shakespeare wrote, “I can no other answer make, but thanks, and thanks.”
“Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans. Keep interested in your career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time. Exercise caution in your business affairs; for the world is full of trickery. But let this not blind you to what virtue there is; many persons strive for high ideals, and everywhere life is full of heroism.”

— Max Ehrmann
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## Chapter

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Chapter 1

Introduction: The Threads of Gaskell’s World

Just off the bus route, a small housing development sits in Manchester. Walking just a few minutes further, one finds oneself in front of a small white house with a neat iron gate and understated gardens. There are no enormous signs, no grand navigational beacons, but there is a small sign on the gate: “Elizabeth Gaskell’s House,” underneath which the hours and admission fees are neatly listed. The restoration of the Gaskell House was only recently taken up, with a 2012 Heritage Lottery Fund grant aiding the substantial renovations the house needed (“Bringing the House Back to Life”). Inside, the house is set up to resemble, as closely as possible, what Gaskell’s home may have been all those years ago. Mr. Gaskell’s study includes a desk and a large collection of books, including a set of his wife’s novels. The sitting and dining rooms house small collections of the Gaskells’ belongings—Elizabeth’s wedding veil, William’s silver set, a collection of American first editions. Upstairs, a small exhibit on the restoration of the house, a chronicle of the saving of a piece of history; downstairs, a small tea room and an exit through to the gardens, which are in the process of being re-established. A visit to the Gaskell House is, put best, a quiet pilgrimage to the site of a brilliant writer’s life.

The tribute to Gaskell is even more subtle in London. In a stained glass window feet from the grave of Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell’s name was added in a memorial panel in Westminster Abbey’s Poets’ Corner two centuries after her birth. Her
name appears under other great British writers: Alexander Pope, Oscar Wilde, and Christopher Marlowe. For those unfamiliar with Gaskell, it is merely another name on another stained glass window. While the association with the likes of Pope, Wilde, and Marlowe is no doubt flattering, there are no great monuments to Gaskell’s work, nor great interest in memorializing her in the public mind. Instead, Gaskell’s role in the public mind is put on display by BBC adaptations of her works, especially in recent years.

BBC’s *North and South*, which debuted in 2004, starred Richard Armitage as the brooding John Thornton five years after an adaptation of *Wives and Daughters* came to television. Most recently, Dame Judi Dench has starred in two series of *Cranford*, the first in 2007 and the second, a Christmas special, in 2009. The casts of the adaptations are, for lack of a better term, star-studded: Michael Gambon, Francesca Annis, Eileen Atkins, Tom Hiddleston, and Michelle Dockery, just to name a few. The number of actors, established and up-and-coming, that have taken part in Gaskell’s pop-culture legacy is extraordinary, drawing attention toward the writer whose importance to British literature is still being analyzed.

As a contemporary of Charles Dickens, Benjamin Disraeli, and Charlotte Brontë, Gaskell wrote during, and about, a period of intense change for Britain. Manchester, Gaskell’s adopted home after her marriage, was a city at the heart of England’s industrial revolution, and life amidst industrialization provided her opportunities to observe and write about the changes society experienced. *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South*
(1854) are often paired together as Gaskell’s “Manchester novels,” as Mary Barton, subtitled “A Tale of Manchester Life,” is set explicitly in Manchester and North and South takes place in Milton, a city clearly based on Manchester itself. Both novels address the challenges of engaging in the industrial world, particularly the textile industry, while society adjusts to changes in the working and middle classes. The conflicts between master and worker, in particular, display the tensions within a changing society.

The focus of this work of scholarship is two-fold: firstly, to examine Mary Barton and North and South as they present the masculinity of masters and workers, and secondly, to analyze the changes the master-worker relationship experiences between novels. In Mary Barton, particular attention is paid to the conflict between John Barton and John Carson, worker and master, who suffer the losses of their only sons and seek vengeance for their suffering. The examination of North and South looks at the relationship between John Thornton and Nicholas Higgins, master and worker, as Thornton works to define himself as a man and Higgins’s opinion of the master changes through their friendship. Where Mary Barton presents a fractured relationship that offers only brief, but hopeful, reconciliation, North and South uses an act of union—the alliance formed between master and worker—to show the possibility of a peaceful master-worker relationship based on mutual respect and honesty.
Because much of the discussion in this thesis, especially concerning *North and South*, hinges on language, it is important to note the handling of the terms used to address masters and workers within the texts. While both *Mary Barton* and *North and South* center largely on female protagonists, language serves as the division between classes for the men. The dialect of Barton and Higgins, for instance, marks their positions as less-educated men from a specific area of the world, while Carson and Thornton’s language, which rarely if ever slips into Mancunian dialect, position them as educated men who are in control of both power and money. In the versions of Gaskell’s novels which are being used for this research, both published by Norton, editors Thomas Recchio (for *Mary Barton*) and Alan Shelston (for *North and South*) make a point to “translate” what dialect is possible. Sometimes the dialect has no known “translation,” though the characters speak in English and other characters are capable of responding in conversation. The difficulty of directly “translating” characters’ dialect occasionally proves challenging to an analysis of the text, but generally the ensuing discussion makes comprehension possible.

More important than local dialect, however, is the word choice within discourse. At the heart of the discussion of word choice are Thornton and Higgins, who appear near-constantly at odds with each other while batting around the terms “man” and “master.” Because those employed to work are commonly called “men” or “hands,” a discussion of masculinity becomes weighed down with what usage of the word is appropriate. For
reasons of clarity, therefore, this thesis intends to utilize certain words in certain aspects
of discussion. Firstly, “man,” unless used in a direct quotation from Gaskell’s works, will
be used to address the gendered males of the novels. Thus, Thornton and Higgins are
both to be defined as men based on their gender. Second, the terms “laborer,” “worker,”
or “employee” will be used in discussion of the men employed to work in the mills,
limiting the usage of the term “hands” to quotes from the text itself. Finally, “master”
will be maintained to mean the man in charge of the mills in order to appropriately
engage with both the term with which laborers address their employers and the power
structure innately embedded within that term.

The complexity of language within Gaskell’s work is a topic for further research
on its own, but the developments within Mary Barton and North and South also further
discourse surrounding the master-worker relationships within the Manchester novels. By
acknowledging the delineation of roles within the texts as created by language of the
industrialized world, male relationships are highlighted and can be more thoroughly
examined as that language changes. While the language does not change significantly in
Mary Barton, the differences between it and its fellow Manchester novel draw attention
to the changes Gaskell created within the master-worker relationship and, most
especially, in the masters and workers themselves as men.

With the consideration of language in mind, this scholarship is divided into four
chapters. Chapter Two introduces the historical context of masculinity as it will be
examined in the works. Using critical theory of Victorian masculinity, this chapter will lay out the complications of defining masculinity because of the impact of social changes in Britain during the period. Chapter Three focuses on the two Johns of *Mary Barton* and the three “stages” necessary to create peace within the master-worker relationship. These stages are male suffering, violence against another man, and mediation/reconciliation, which comes only briefly at the novel’s conclusion and requires the intervention of Biblical text. Chapter Four turns the attention to *North and South* and Gaskell’s changing fictional master. Although Thornton and Higgins’s relationship includes the three stages seen in *Mary Barton*, male suffering and violence against another man are more limited—Thornton’s father commits suicide before the novel begins, and Higgins’s neighbor and colleague Boucher commits suicide after prompting a violent riot against Thornton’s mill—and the mediation/reconciliation is given greater attention. Throughout the novel, Thornton is defined by others and by himself, and so the reconciliation with Higgins comes at the determining of his masculinity. Chapter Five, the conclusion, reiterates the changes between Gaskell’s novels and the broader significance of the development of a compassionate Thornton.
Chapter 2

The Phantom of Manhood

In his 1831 essay “Characteristics,” Thomas Carlyle addressed the dilemma of manhood in the changing times. That portion of the essay heavily quoted in discussions of Victorian masculinity specifically grapples with the downfall of the old ideals and the rise of the new. Carlyle writes, “For young Valour and thirst of Action no ideal Chivalry invites to heroism, prescribes what is heroic: the old ideal of Manhood has grown obsolete, and the new is still invisible to us, and we grope after it in darkness, one clutching this phantom, another that; Werterism, Byronism, even Brummelism, each has its day” (Carlyle 29). The definition of manhood, according to Carlyle, is fluid rather than fixed, and with such fluidity comes the threat of immorality. The old ideal, according to Carlyle, is based in faith, which drives a man to be strong in the face of difficulty, and is “bound up with aristocratic notions of rank and honour” (Mallett vi). If the old ideal, a known entity of chivalry and heroism, has now become “obsolete,” what is society to do? The fact that he also points out three varieties of manhood which have failed to endure the test of time invites the reader to contemplate the differences between “phantoms” of manhood.

Carlyle’s three phantoms of manhood present changing concepts of masculinity, especially as compared to the “old manhood” of chivalry and faith. Werterism, referencing Goethe’s The Sorrows of Young Werther, reflected the dramatic young man
who ultimately commits suicide after being unable to marry the woman he loves. An almost cult-like following of Wether began, as did the style of dress à la Werther. The second phantom, Byronism, expands Werterism to a fascination with the foreign and less gentlemanly behaviors. Known perhaps equally for his poetry and his shocking love life (though he actually may be more notorious for the latter than the former), Lord Byron also became a fashionable figure due to his retreat from society’s accepted behaviors and looks. Dramatic fashion, such as Thomas Phillips’s portrait of Byron in Albanian dress, and a reputation of being “mad, bad and dangerous to know” made Byron a dramatic example of masculinity. But for Carlyle, Byronism, like Werterism, is a phantom that exists briefly and then fades—for all the excitement a Byronic masculinity can bring, the lifestyle is not easily maintained, as can be noted by the fact that Byron himself died in 1824 at only thirty-six years old. The third phantom of manhood, Brummelism, is based on Beau Brummell, a friend of the Prince Regent credited with the rise of dandyism in British culture. Brummell focused his fashion on simplicity and tailoring, moving toward more practical, yet attractive, clothes that are the foundation of the modern man’s suit and tie. Like Byron, the Brummell lifestyle is not an easy one—the man himself fell into deep debt and ran away to France to avoid repayment—and so another phantom of manhood slips away.

While the phantoms of manhood that Carlyle condemns faded out, the Victorian masculinity is, as he wrote, not easily defined. Manhood, with the rise of the middle
class through the self-made man, became more flexible in both fashion and behavior. How, then, are we to define Victorian manhood as it applies to Gaskell’s works? Like Carlyle, one must accept that defining manhood scientifically, with unanimously approved appearances, behaviors, or qualities, is like groping in the dark and seizing all different phantoms, each of which claims to be manhood. Thus, developing a working definition of masculinity by which Gaskell’s characters can be measured requires the combination of several scholars’ understandings of masculinity in the Victorian era.

In Herbert Sussman’s *Victorian Masculinities* (1985), he considers manliness as a continuous process, impossible to pin down to a single definition. Much of Sussman’s work attends to Carlyle’s discussion of the significance of the monastery for development of masculinity, as the monastery is a purely masculine space in which the men focus on silence and labor under the idea of gaining proximity to God. Within the spectrum of masculinity’s process, however, Sussman points to an association of manhood with the cotton industry, comparing the industrial cotton mill to Carlyle’s male-centric monastery, “a wholly male world” (Sussman 61). Such spaces, under the control of the master and in the hands of the laborers (who have access to the union of fellow men), present the opportunity to establish masculine communities based on labor and relative silence.

Another scholar of masculinity, James Eli Adams, expands on Sussman’s ideas in his 1995 work *Dandies and Desert Saints*. Focusing on middle-class male writers, including Carlyle, Dickens, and Kingsley, Adams examines the “constructions of
gendered identity as forms of intellectual and social authority” and “on the connections between the literary and social logics informing those constructions” (Adams 12).

Significantly, Adams looks at masculinity as portrayed by his selected writers through models of masculinity. These models are the gentleman, dandy, priest, prophet, soldier, and professional, all of whom possess different qualities yet are also united in that they are more of a continuum of Victorian masculinity than distinct varieties. Most significant in regards to approaching Gaskell’s male characters, especially John Thornton, is Adams’s analysis of the Carlylean hero and his opposition to the dandy. Carlyle’s hero is anchored in morality, action, and sincerity, while the dandy is a performer for society. Although it appears that the hero of North and South falls into the type of Carlylean hero, Adams’s study reminds scholars that masculinity as constructed by literature and society is not limited to the design of any one man. Through this widened scope, Adams addresses masculinity not merely in literature but in the authors themselves as Victorian men, and thus lends a more concrete understanding of the slipperiness of masculinity.

John Tosh, in A Man’s Place, breaks down masculinity of middle-class Victorian home life into the development of boys into men. Of significance is his discussion of the movement from boyhood to manhood through school. As a predominantly male experience, going to school, meaning education occurring away from the boy’s home, “was an indispensable introduction to the company of males,” particularly males of the boy’s age (Tosh, Man’s Place 105). At school, the boy must learn not only to
communicate with his contemporaries, but also sometimes to defend himself against them. After all, school could allow young men to engage in fist-fights as well as testing their independence, and even Anthony Trollope, in his autobiography, acknowledged the challenges a boy may face when surrounded by his peers. After school, Tosh notes, young men are encouraged to pursue appropriate careers (these are, after all, those young men of the middle and upper classes whose families can afford to send them off to school and encourage successful careers) and take part in the society game of matrimony. Marriage meant providing for a wife and, the most likely scenario, children, and such expectations could cause men anxiety over their decisions. Until the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, divorce required significant amounts of money to either annul the union or to put forth a private bill to obtain an act of Parliament for the divorce. Marriage, then, became for both men and women a contract not to be taken lightly (especially as women lost most of their admittedly few rights upon joining a man in matrimony).

Even within Gaskell’s works, masculinity experiences a shift of definitions. Chartism, an essential political aspect of Mary Barton, established its own variety of masculinity into which its members should attempt to fall. Chartism was a political movement with divided branches, although both branches emphasized the importance of family. The branch concerned with what Martin Francis calls the “moral force” “lionized domesticity,” while the “physical force’ Chartists suggested that the role of the plebeian activist was not to instruct his family at home, but to defend their interests, with his fists,
on the street” (Francis 642). Francis’s division of Chartism into “moral” and “physical” further highlights the conflicting definitions of masculinity within Victorian England.

While physical action was still considered an aspect of masculinity, the growing emphasis on moral behavior allowed a second avenue for men to be manly. Anna Clark, in “The Rhetoric of Chartist Domesticity,” notes that “Chartist men faced continual tensions between their advocacy of domesticated manhood and the necessity to build on the public strength of masculine trade organizations and the solidarity of pub culture” (Clark 87). Chartist men were supposed to be involved in their family, especially from a moral position, but were also supposed to be manly in accordance with other socially acceptable masculine behavior.

With such division even within a unified political union, it is no wonder that the men of *Mary Barton* are divided in their versions of masculinity. In Lisa Surridge’s “Working-Class Masculinities in *Mary Barton*,” Surridge notes that Gaskell’s concern with masculinity is a necessary part of the plot because the work is, according to Gaskell, about John Barton himself. Specifically, Surridge analyzes the Chartist movement’s version of masculinity focused on the family life. Manliness, in *Mary Barton*, is the “ideal combination of largeness, strength and tenderness” and it “rests unequivocally with working-class characters such as John Barton and Jem Wilson” (Surridge 333). The masculinity of working-class men is based on their connection to family as well as their strength. Working-class men are uniquely linked to children throughout *Mary Barton* as
they actively care for the children. “As a student in one of my classes exclaimed about *Mary Barton,*” Surridge writes, “‘The men literally walk into the novel carrying babies’” (333). John Barton and George and Jem Wilson all care for children, whether they are related or not—Barton, for instance, reunites a lost child with his mother because the child is crying. Such caring actions are not effeminate in *Mary Barton,* but rather a display of Chartist masculinity.

In *North and South,* masculinity becomes even less clearly defined, as Margaret Hale’s understanding of masculinity is based in her southern life and changes as she comes to understand northern men. One of the concepts Tosh touches upon in *A Man’s Place,* that of male education, is partially at play in Gaskell’s *North and South,* as Thornton’s friendship with the Hales begins when Mr. Bell suggests Mr. Hale as Thornton’s private tutor. Though Margaret is skeptical of a master’s desire for “the accomplishments of a gentleman,” her father argues that some of the masters are “conscious of their own deficiencies” and “want resolutely to learn,” emphasizing the importance of education not only in social standing but in the creation of the individual’s masculinity and gentlemanliness (Gaskell, *NS* 37). Margaret, after all, associates classical education with gentlemen, not masters, and her understanding of the difference between the two becomes a point of discussion in the later chapter fittingly titled “Men and Gentlemen.” For Margaret, coming from the south of England, northern definitions
of manhood and masculinity (focused on industrial success and disposable income) are not compatible with her ideas of what makes a man.

Significantly, Gaskell does not limit masculinity to Margaret’s understanding because John Thornton, during the dinner party, delivers a speech about his definitions of “gentleman” and “man.” Like Sussman, Adams, and Tosh argue, masculinity in *North and South* is fluid because Margaret and Thornton have different understandings of the same concept. Thornton, as will be discussed later, struggles to define himself and his relationship to his employees, but he attempts to do so against his definition of “man.” When Margaret and Thornton engage in a conversation about gentlemanliness, Thornton quickly declares that he does not know about the word “gentleman,” but he surely does not believe the individual to be a “true man.” When Margaret argues that “gentleman” includes “true man,” Thornton corrects her:

I take it that “gentleman” is a term that only describes a person in his relation to others; but when we speak of him as “a man,” we consider him not merely with regard to his fellow-men, but in relation to himself,—to life—to time—to eternity. A cast-away lonely as Robinson Crusoe—a prisoner immured in a dungeon for life—nay, even a saint in Patmos, has his endurance, his strength, his faith, best described by being spoken of as “a man.” I am rather weary of this word “gentlemanly,” which seems to me to be often inappropriately used, and often, too, with such
exaggerated distortion of meaning, while the full simplicity of the noun “man,” and the adjective “manly” are unacknowledged—that I am induced to class it with the cant of the day.

(Gaskell, NS 150)

Thornton’s argument against the use of “gentleman” helps manufacture the rubric for positive masculinity against which he repeatedly checks himself. To be a gentleman, he argues, is to compare and contrast, to observe a single man amongst others. The significance he places on “man,” and thus “true man,” comes from the fact that a man must be judged on his own merits against everything, including himself. Biblical overtones arise again in his reference to “a saint in Patmos,” alluding to St. John who was exiled to the island of Patmos, where he wrote the Book of Revelations. St. John, separated from everyone except himself and God, cannot be seen in relation to others if no others exist, whereas a gentleman of Margaret’s description, Thornton believes, can only be seen in relation to others.

Thornton furthers his argument against “gentleman” by his frustration that it is overused, as words so often are, to the point of being less meaningful than the simple word “man.” Thornton’s respect for the words “man” and “manly” are part of his understanding of himself, of his goals for himself, because a true man is one whom he can respect. In setting up a sort of rubric for manliness based on judging a man on his own merits, Thornton aligns himself with the more Evangelical idea of masculinity based
on a man’s conscience. Evangelical writers believed “the problem with manliness lay in its undue respect for the worldly standards subsumed in the notion of ‘reputation’; in its place they strove to establish ‘character’, by which they meant the internal urgings of a man’s conscience” (Tosh, “Gentlemanly” 467). Masculinity cannot be explicitly defined if each man is subject to the judgment of his own conscience. Thornton’s speech to Margaret makes the separation between modes of masculinity explicit in that being a gentleman does not necessarily include being a man. Separating “gentleman” and “man” means that masculinity cannot be restricted to any one definition because, in Thornton’s mind at least, “man” must be made in relation to himself. That Thornton also says the use of “gentleman” rather than using “man” or “manly” is part of the “cant of the day” further relegated “gentleman” to a word rather than a meaningful definition.

With such a spectrum of masculinity, even confined to the Victorian era, masculinity and manhood is impossible to exactly define. Even within Gaskell’s novels, the male characters are caught between variations of masculinity, whether the Chartist manliness of caring for family and being strong, or the fluidity of the word “gentleman.” Thus, the following analyses of Mary Barton and North and South does not argue for any one definition of masculinity in Gaskell’s work, but rather looks at her treatment of the varieties of manhood through master-worker relationships. Both novels involve, to a different degree, three “stages” of the development in the master-worker relationship: male suffering, action against another man, and mediation/reconciliation. For Mary
Barton, both John Barton and John Carson experience great suffering as fathers, and John Barton’s violent action in killing Carson’s son prompts Carson to act against his son’s murderer in attempting to have him arrested and hanged; by the novel’s conclusion, the men are unified in their agony through a sort of religious mediation that leads to a very brief reconciliation. The stages in North and South are less pronounced, but still at play: Thornton suffers from his father’s suicide before the novel begins, the workers’ sufferings prompt a riot against Marlborough Mills, and Thornton and Higgins eventually find peace with each other through Margaret’s mediation. Thornton’s success garners more attention than Carson’s, as he finds reconciliation with his employees not only professional, but as men. Peace between master and worker, regardless of the definition of masculinity, can come only through internal knowing of self, and it is only when the masters and workers have experienced agony and violence that they can turn their attention to building better relationships between men.
Chapter 3

The Gospel of Johns

The tragic romance of *Mary Barton* notably began with tragedy of Elizabeth Gaskell’s own life. In 1844, Gaskell gave birth to her first and only son, William (known as Willie), but less than a year later, on a family holiday in Wales, her daughter Marianne fell ill with scarlet fever and recovered, but Willie soon succumbed (Gérin 73). Beside herself with grief, Gaskell’s husband suggested she take up writing fiction as a distraction, and so her attention was diverted to the plight of everyday Mancunian life. Three years later, the product of her devastation was published. The tragedies of life in industrialized Manchester were enhanced by a mysterious murder, a passionate love story, and an analysis of the ever-present struggle between classes, especially between masters and workers.

While the response to *Mary Barton* was generally positive, William Greg, a friend of Gaskell’s and a mill owner, attacked the novel, claiming she wrote “misleading descriptions of both millowners and operatives” (Rose 128). An unsigned review in the *British Quarterly* stated, “[T]he chief objection which we have to bring against the work is, not that it represents anything to which an actual counterpart may not be found, but that it gives a one-sided picture” (“From Unsigned Review” 369). In 1849, Samuel Bamford, a former working-class radical, wrote to Gaskell, “You have drawn a fearfully true picture: a mournfully beautiful one also have you placed on the tables of the drawing
rooms of the great, and good it must there effect; good for themselves, and good also I hope for the poor of every occupation” (qtd. in Recchio 296). The emotional responses to the novel, both good and bad, struck Gaskell, and she wrote of her own reactions in her letters. In a letter to Julia Lamont, Gaskell wrote,

> Some people here are very angry and say the book will do harm; and for a time I have been shaken and sorry; but I have such firm faith that the earnest expression of any one’s feeling can only do good in the long run,—that God will cause the errors to be temporary [,] the truth to be eternal, that I try not to mind too much what people say either in blame or praise. (Gaskell, *Letters* 70)

Although her novel pits worker against master, Gaskell had no intention to do so in her own community. Her hope, it seems, was to draw attention to the problems with some masters and workers, and to encourage peaceful mediation of problems. Within *Mary Barton*, however, peaceful mediation is an act hard to come by.

Though the title is *Mary Barton*, the struggle between classes is most notably observed through male characters of Gaskell’s first novel. Gaskell herself wrote that “‘John Barton’ was the original name, as being the central figure to my mind; […] in writing he was my ‘hero’” (*Letters* 70). Keeping her intention in mind, it becomes clear that the master-worker relationship is a key part of *Mary Barton*. The relationship between master and worker is tense throughout the novel, initially because of the Chartist
movement and its attempt to gain voting rights for working men and later because of the murder of the young master Harry Carson. Harry’s murder sets off a series of events that sees Mary’s romantic interest Jem falsely arrested, Harry’s father John Carson seeking revenge for his son’s death, and Mary’s father John Barton seeking forgiveness for killing Harry. While Barton and Carson come from opposite sides of the master-worker relationship, they are united by the loss of their respective sons, and Carson’s eventual forgiveness of Barton’s sin unites the two, albeit briefly, as men rather than master and worker. Over the course of the novel, the relations between master and worker fall into three “stages”: male suffering, action against another man, and mediation/reconciliation. Barton and Carson, brothers in suffering, both lose their only sons and turn to action against the guilty party; ultimately, the relationship between Barton and Carson requires mediation through Biblical scripture and the reconciliation, though brief, pushes Carson to work toward better master-worker relations in the future of Manchester.

The first stage of the master-worker conflict and resolution is male suffering, which takes shape in *Mary Barton* through the loss of sons and the father’s subsequent grief. While Jem Wilson displays signs of male suffering and agony, he does not act out violently in response to the loss of his father and brothers. His physical reaction to his brothers’ deaths, as the “strong, active, manly elder brother,” is to stand at the cupboard, his back to the women in the house, until his “sturdy frame [shakes] with his strong agony” (Gaskell, *MB* 68, 71). Jem reacts only when his grief cannot be completely
observed by the women, limiting his grief to his own masculinity, and even then, he
shakes with “strong agony.” The degree to which Jem experience grief is similarly
reflected in both John Barton and John Carson when they lose their sons. Both men
experience the agony of loss, specifically of their only sons, and the force of their pain
drives their search for a form of revenge.

In the context of male suffering, the use of the word “agony” is a significant
repetition. Both Barton and Carson experience grief based on the loss of an only son, but
their suffering is affiliated not with mere sadness, but agony. The Oxford English
Dictionary defines agony as “anguish of mind, great mental trouble or distress. Also: an
instance of this, a paroxysm of grief,” as well as “extreme bodily suffering, often such as
to produce writhing or throes of the body; severe pain” and “the convulsive throes or
pangs of death; the death struggle” (“Agony”). Agony cannot easily be thrown off
because it takes control of the emotions, whether the mental as “a paroxysm of grief” or
the physical “convulsive throes.” Barton does not suffer the crippling effect of agony
when he finds his son dead, but his wife’s death drives him to silence, forcing him to
suffer his grief within his own mind. Carson, meanwhile, suffers physically when he
learns of Harry’s death, and at one point even begins to lose his balance as he prepares to
face his son’s corpse. Though the word “agony” is used thirty-four times in the novel,
and never strictly associated with the male characters, its use is strongest when the men
suffer it. Mary and Mrs. Wilson, when they are struck with agony, are allowed to cry out
when they experience the emotion—Mary kneels and cries when she loses her mother, and Mrs. Wilson is struck by “motherly agony” when she is told Jem has murdered Harry Carson (MB 197). The men, Carson in particular, cannot express their agony openly, instead turning away from women in order to cry, or refusing to cry because the women are already doing so. When Carson’s wife learns of her son’s death, her emotion causes a physical reaction in him: “Her husband shuddered at the outward expression of the agony which was rending his heart” (MB 184). Mrs. Carson, as a woman, is able to express her agony in front of her husband, but Carson attempts to remain stoic. His movement, a shudder, is a physical response to his not being able to express his agony as his wife does. Though they share the significant emotion, only Mrs. Carson is allowed to express her grief openly, and Harry’s father is limited to quiet, manly agony.

Barton is the first father to lose a son in the novel, and he does so through little fault of his own. Though he is a dedicated worker, Barton loses his job at Hunter’s mill and cannot find another because “at every mill was some sign of depression of trade! some were working short hours, some were turning off hands, and for weeks Barton was out of work, living on credit” (MB 24). Without a job, Barton is forced to rely on credit to provide for his family, but credit eventually runs out and Barton is left without an income and with a family to feed. The situation worsens when his son falls ill with scarlet fever. The boy, “the apple of his eye, the cynosure of all his strong power of love,” survives the crisis of the fever, but without proper nutrition he is doomed to death
(MB 24). As Barton walks by a local shop, his son dying at home, he sees food on display—food which he cannot procure for his sick child—when Mrs. Hunter leaves the shop. The wife of his former employer is “followed by the shopman loaded with purchases for a party” (MB 25). Though Barton was turned out on the pretext that the business was experiencing financial difficulties, the master’s wife has enough money to throw a party while Barton’s son dies. On his return home, Barton is met with a terrible sight: “his only boy a corpse!” (MB 25). While Barton observed the pleasures of the masters through Mrs. Hunter’s shopping excursion, his own son died without his father’s presence, and Barton’s misfortune only continues when his wife dies as well.

The death of Mary’s mother is not agonizing simply because it follows the death of Barton’s son, but because she is Barton’s connection to humanity generally. Upon her death, “one of the ties which bound him down to the gentle humanities of earth was loosened, and henceforward the neighbours all remarked he was a changed man” (MB 23). Barton loses his wife and, with her death, any hope he may have had for a second son. Though he still has Mary to care for, Barton’s loss sends him into a stupor, out of which his daughter is able to bring him only after he has shed tears for his wife. Most interesting in the loss of his wife is how Barton is told to cope with the loss. After the doctor determines Mrs. Barton has died, he says, “You must go down stairs. This is a great shock, but bear it like a man. Go down” (MB 21). Barton receives no sympathy from the other man, nor does he receive any helpful direction. Instead, he is sent away
from his wife’s body to go downstairs and “bear it like a man.” How, one may ask, can death be borne “like a man”? As Jem Wilson demonstrates, and as John Carson will also illustrate, “masculine” grief cannot be fully observed by women—in the cases of the other men, a tearful face must be hidden from view, and he reacts strongly to the agony of loss. But beyond the restricted display of grieving, bearing grief “like a man” is never explicitly explained. It can be no surprise, then, that Barton’s reaction is to walk away and be distracted from his daughter’s grief. Mary’s arrival beside him does not distract him from his tears, “for his burst of grief would not be controlled,” and it is only once she cries with him that “he check[s] himself” (MB 22). The feminine presence of Mary at his side forces Barton out of his grief so that he can address his role as the father, the patriarch of their rapidly shrinking family.

The second stage of Mary Barton’s master-worker relationship, that of action against another man, is Harry Carson’s murder by John Barton, which prompts John Carson’s legal retaliation. Barton’s violence is not only man against man, but is incited by Harry’s mockery of the starving workers and the union’s decision to murder him. At the union meeting in which Harry’s insensitive caricatures are discussed, Barton says, “It’s the masters as has wrought this woe; it’s the master’s as should pay for it” (MB 168). Not only does he swear his life to the cause, but Barton also calls his fellow union workers to align themselves with his thinking, that the masters have created the situation and, therefore, the violence should be acted out against them. The determination to
wreak violence against the masters in retribution for the sufferings of the workers and their families becomes a savage lottery in which one man will be the one to act against Harry Carson: “A number of pieces of paper (the identical letter on which the caricature had been drawn that very morning) were torn up, and one was marked” (MB 168, emphasis in original). The emphasis Gaskell places on “one was marked” stresses the point that only one man goes forth to murder Harry Carson, and the weight of the violent act rests only on his shoulders. Barton, having drawn the marked paper, is chosen to perform the murder, “But no one, save God and his own conscience, [knows] who was the appointed murderer” (MB 168). Secrecy lends safety to Barton’s act in that his fellow worker cannot turn against him when the hunt for the murderer begins, but the secrecy also separates Barton from his masculine community. Like his retreat from his daughter after his wife’s death, Barton is left alone to cope with his sins after he kills another man’s son.

Further evidence of Barton’s connection between his son’s death and his murder of Harry Carson is the temporary insight into Barton’s thoughts. As Barton walks through the dark streets, “his thoughts were running on little Tom; on the dead and buried child of happier years” (MB 175). Along his way, Barton finds a lost child, who he returns to the mother, and then goes forth into the night. Barton, on his way to murder Harry Carson, is not thinking vengeful thoughts of the union or against Harry. Instead, his mind is turned to his own son, who was the “child of happier years,” now “dead and
buried.” Barton’s moment of nostalgia reminds the reader that he has suffered, and been weighed down by that suffering, for years. Although he is not directly thinking of Harry Carson or the union, Barton’s “thoughts linked to his intention to kill the young Carson reminds readers of the chain of events that led to Barton’s desire for vengeance” (Recchio 302). The connection between Barton’s past suffering and Carson’s future suffering is made real in Barton’s act of violence against Harry Carson, though the reader is reminded of the starting point of Barton’s tragedy.

For John Carson, the loss of his only son is devastating, despite also having three daughters. Where Barton’s son is the victim of an apathetic master-worker relationship, Carson’s child is murdered directly by the hands of an aggrieved (and greatly pained) laborer. Furthermore, Harry’s death is the result of sudden violence, and news of his death is carried to his father through female voices. The family nurse alerts Harry’s sisters first, and she says to Sophy, “Can you bear to hear it? Remember, master is in the next room, and he knows nothing yet. Come, you must help me to tell him” (MB 181). The women of the house, except Mrs. Carson, must come to terms with Harry’s death first, and the duty falls upon Sophy to convey the loss of an only son to her father. Barton’s discovery of his son’s death comes from his physical awareness of death—he sees his son’s corpse with his own eyes rather than receiving word from anyone beforehand. Though Carson must physically see his son’s corpse, he learns of death through a female mediator, and when he hears the news he “[sinks] back in his chair, and
hid[es] his face in his hands, and bow[s] his head upon the table. The strong mahongany
dining-table [shakes] and rattle[s] under his agony” (MB 183). As Jem was unable to face
the women in the house as he grappled with news of his brothers’ deaths, Carson is
forced to hide himself from Sophy and the nurse before he can fully react to the news.
The fact that the narrator once again uses the term “agony” to describe male reactions to
the death of a beloved male relation reinforces masculine suffering as both acute and
unable to be communicated.

As Barton was roused from grief over his wife by Mary, Carson is forced back
into reality by Sophy. In an attempt to comfort him, his daughter puts her arms around
him, but he responds, “Go! you are not Harry” (MB 183). His living children, all three
daughters, are also experiencing the grief of losing a brother, but Carson’s masculine
connection with his son pushes his daughters away. Carson is also required to talk to
policemen regarding Harry’s murder, but he gives himself no time to grieve before
meeting with them. Instead, he approaches the difficult interview by forcing strength:

At first when he stood up he tottered. But steadying himself, he walked,
as firmly as a soldier on drill, to the door. Then he turned back and
poured out a glass of wine from the decanter which yet remained on the
table. His eye caught the wineglass which Harry had used but two or
three hours before. He sighed a long quivering sigh, and then mastering
himself again, he left the room. (MB 183)
Carson’s tottering, then steadying, is a physical manifestation of his grief, as he becomes literally unbalanced at the loss of his son. But, as the doctor told Barton, Carson must “bear it like a man,” and so he presents himself “as a soldier on drill,” marching with purpose and determination. When Carson turns back for the wine, it is no doubt to steady his nerves, but it only serves to remind him of his loss, which forces him to further recalibrate his approach to Harry’s death. The quivering sigh is his last opportunity to express grief while in the safety of only family company, as he is going to face the policemen, outsiders to his home. What is most remarkable in Carson’s movements, however, is the word choice that he “masters himself” before leaving the room. Not only does this call to mind a sort of stiffening of the sinews, but it also recalls Carson’s role within the broader community of Manchester. Carson is, above all, a master, and while the loss of his son is personal, he must maintain the air of a man in control of his emotions for the sake of business and his position in society.

Carson’s advantage over Barton, if it is to be called that, in the loss of his son is that he has the money and power to seek vengeance for Harry’s death. The money he has gained from business cannot bring his son back, but he believes it may help in the form of legal revenge. In conversation with the police superintendent, Carson says, “Well, sir, half—nay, if necessary, the whole of my fortune I will give to have the murderer brought to the gallows,” and though the policeman informs him that three or five hundred pounds is more than sufficient reward money, Carson says, “Make it a thousand” (MB 185).
Having money to spare allows Carson to seek out his son’s killer through legal channels greased with the temptation of large amounts of money in exchange for information.

Where Barton’s lack of money was a cause of his son’s death, money becomes the driving force of Carson’s revenge. The ease with which Carson is able to insist on one thousand pounds reward money reminds the reader that the Carsons are not merely rich, but that they are wealthy enough to have a thousand pounds to spare in order to find a criminal. Like Barton standing outside the shop while Mrs. Hunter takes home food for her party, Carson’s income as a master allows him the freedom to seek out his son’s killer instead of focusing on his remaining family.

What is most terrifying in Carson’s fury is his determination to find the murderer within a limited period of time. His fortune allows Carson to fund the search for Harry’s murderer, but he also pushes the police to pursue the case beyond what is expected. Carson does not strictly call for justice, but for the arrest of his son’s murderer. His conversation with the policeman stresses his bulldog resolution in seeking out the killer:

“Spare no money. The only purpose for which I now value wealth is to have the murderer arrested, and brought to justice. My hope in life now is to see him sentenced to death. Offer any rewards. Name a thousand pounds in the placards. Come to me at any hour, night or day, if that be required. All I ask of you is, to get the murderer hanged. Next week, if possible—to-day is Friday. Surely with the clues you already
possess, you can muster up evidence sufficient to have him tried next week.”

“He may easily request an adjournment of his trial, on the ground of the shortness of the notice,” said the superintendent.

“Oppose it, if possible. I will see that the first lawyers are employed. I shall know no rest while he lives.” (MB 187)

Though Carson calls for justice, it is justice on his terms and at the rate he dictates. He recognizes that his wealth allows him better access to justice for his son’s death and offers up all of his worldly goods to seek out the killer. He also Presses the policeman to pursue the case to the point of finding the murderer and having him hanged within a week. When the policeman reminds Carson that the perpetrator has rights, Carson does not care—the rights of Harry’s killer are meaningless, and his money that can buy the best lawyers will, in his mind, smooth the way for a speedy trial. Wealth and pursuit of legal revenge is Carson’s path forward, and his final words that he will not rest while the murderer lives cement his goal: to have the murderer arrested and hanged, to punish death with death.

Barton and Carson both pursue forms of revenge in their grief, and though their paths are not the same, they are similar. With Mary to support, Barton returns to work after the death of his son and wife and becomes part of the Chartist movement, a masculine environment in which a man’s role within the domestic sphere is as important
as his work for political rights. Carson, however, does not seek out masculine
community to find solace after his son’s death. Instead, he turns to his wealth and his
position in society to push the police to find the murderer and put him on trial. Once he
is alone, Carson says, “But you shall be avenged, my poor murdered boy” (MB 188).
Carson does not express his grief to another man, but limits his heartache to himself, and
swears for vengeance as his way to cope with grief. He mirrors Barton’s removal from
his family (though Barton only has Mary as far as blood relatives go) by rejecting his
daughters and focusing solely on the promise of a legal revenge. After Carson swears to
avenge his son’s death, the narrator interjects, “To avenge his child’s death, the old man
lived on; with the single purpose in his heart of vengeance on the murderer. True, his
vengeance was sanctioned by law, but was it the less revenge?” (MB 188). Carson’s heart
has been turned to only vengeance, just as Barton turns to the union. But where Barton is
turned to violence through the union community, Carson pursues legalized murder in the
hanging of his son’s killer. As the narrator asks, “was it the less revenge?” Carson may
be within the realm of legality in seeking out his son’s killer, but the vigor of his pursuit
strips his actions of honorable intent as his money and position are a major factor in his
ability to seek death for another man.

After Jem is found not guilty (for the suspicions that follow him cannot allow him
to be declared innocent), the masculine tension within the novel revolves around the
Barton-Carson conflict and the desire for its resolution. Mary and Jem first see Barton
and Carson together at the Barton home, where Carson has heard the worker confess to murdering Harry. Barton becomes the direct object of Carson’s fury, as the master reminds Barton that Harry was his only son: “Don’t dare to think that I shall be merciful, and spare you, because you have come forward to accuse yourself. I tell you I will not spare you the least pang the law can inflict,—you, who did not show pity on my boy, shall have none from me” (MB 314). Barton’s confession, which is an act not merely to cleanse Jem of a perceived sin but is also a way for him to cleanse his own conscience, cannot be accepted by Carson because the master has come too far in his search for vengeance. He once again calls on the law to punish the perpetrator of the crime, declaring he shall be pitiless for his son’s sake. As Barton sought out the Chartists and organized revenge against the masters for the loss of his son, Carson continues to pursue his legal right to press charges.

Barton’s response to Carson’s determination to have him convicted is a dramatically softened version of the man who pulled the trigger on Harry. Barton points out that he did not ask for mercy, and goes further by saying that hanging would be a welcome way to die. He adds, “[I]f you’d hanged me the day after I’d done the deed, I would have gone down on my knees and blessed you. […] Why, sir, I’ve been on the point of killing myself this many a time to get away from my own thoughts. […] God above only can tell the agony with which I’ve repented me of it” (MB 314). Barton asks for no mercy, and utilizes the word “agony” to describe his suffering. Previously, Barton
had not been directly connected to agony, except through the suffering of those around
him, but in the moment of seeing another suffering father face-to-face, Barton admits to
his suffering. Barton even admits to contemplating suicide as an alternative to living
with the knowledge that he has killed a man, but he suffers because he believes God
sends him agony as punishment, and that he must serve his earthly sentence.

The pain of losing a child is made equal to the pain of taking a man’s life, and
both Barton and Carson suffer masculine agony because of the violent action. As Carson
prepares to leave the Barton house, he gives a passionate speech about the pain of losing
Harry. His only son is dead, and the knowledge he sought which he believed could begin
to bring him peace has only upset him more. Carson cries out over his loss, and for the
first time, Barton recognizes that despite their different roles in the master-worker
relationship, both he and Carson are fathers without sons:

The eyes of John Barton grew dim with tears. Rich and poor,
masters and men, were then brothers in the deep suffering of the heart;
for was not this the very anguish he had felt for little Tom, in years so
long gone by, that they seemed like another life!

The mourner before him was no longer the employer; a being of
another race, eternally placed in antagonistic attitude; going through the
world glittering like gold, with a stony heart within, which knew no
sorrow but through the accidents of Trade; no longer the enemy, the
oppressor, but a very poor and desolate old man.

The sympathy for suffering, formerly so prevalent a feeling with
him, again filled John Barton's heart, and almost impelled him to speak (as
best he could) some earnest, tender words to the stern man, shaking in his
agony.

But who was he, that he should utter sympathy or consolation? The
cause of all this woe.

Oh blasting thought! Oh miserable remembrance! He had forfeited
all right to bind up his brother's wounds. \(MB\ 316\)

Whatever suffering Barton has experienced in losing his son he has long blamed on the
masters and their proclivity of putting trade above laborers, but as a fellow \textit{man}, Barton
cannot help but understand Carson’s pain. Tom Barton did not die violently at the hands
of an angry union worker, but died at the hands of a society which did not allow his father
to provide what was necessary. Mourning removes the division between master and
worker, unifies them as the race of men, all of whom feel deeply the loss of their
children, and especially their sons. For Barton, Carson’s emotional outburst, in which he
actually sobs before others (Mary is the only feminine force within the house during the
 tears), is a painful reminder of what he has taken from another man: “Every fresh
quivering sob of Mr. Carson’s stabbed him to his soul” \(MB\ 317\). In the almost
exclusively male gathering in the Barton house, Carson is allowed to reveal his emotions and Barton is able to openly suffer for his act of violence. Both fathers are free to experience their agony in the company of each other.

The reappearance of “agony” in Carson’s visit to the Barton home recalls the deep suffering the fathers experience upon the initial losses of their respective sons, but it also calls to mind the Biblical association of the word. While the Oxford English Dictionary defines agony as anguish and suffering, both mentally and physically, it also includes the following: “The mental struggle or anguish of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46)” (“Agony”). This specific Biblical passage, the Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, tells of Jesus’s prayers before his arrest as he awaits Judas’s betrayal. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus steps away from his disciples and prays, “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt” (King James Version, Matt. 26:39). Although Jesus does not wish to be betrayed and to suffer, he accepts that God’s will be done. The agony Jesus suffers in the garden is not the physical throes of agony that Carson suffers upon learning of his son’s death, but the mental suffering more similar to the agony of Barton upon losing his wife and son. At the end of this portion of the Gospel, Jesus calls to his disciples to rise, saying, “[B]ehold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners” (KJV, Matt. 26:45). Though he has prayed three times to God that the suffering may pass him by, Jesus recognizes that the suffering is his to experience. Despite being
used repeatedly in the novel, and not strictly among male suffering, “agony” in the moment between Barton and Carson recalls its Biblical allusion because Barton’s search for forgiveness utilizes Biblical language, and Carson must reconcile his desire for revenge against Barton with his reading of the Gospel.

Although Barton asks Carson for forgiveness, one suffering father cannot forgive the other, even in the face of Christian language. Calling upon religious phrasing, Barton begs, “I care not for pain, or death, you know I don’t; but oh, man! forgive me the trespass I have done!” (MB 317). Without forgiveness from the father (and man) he has wronged, Barton cannot find peace. The murder of Harry Carson did not help the union, and it did not help ease the ache of loss for Barton—only a man’s forgiveness can help him forgive himself. Carson refuses to forgive his son’s murderer, and declares, “Let my trespasses be unforgiven, so that I may have vengeance for my son’s murder” (MB 317). In a moment that could potentially give both Carson and Barton the peace they seek, Carson is even more driven to destroy Barton’s life by legally taking it. It does not matter that Barton is clearly ill and distraught over his actions, nor that he still has a child living (and that Carson himself has three daughters alive and doubtless working through their own grief over their brother’s death). What matters is that Carson still has the money and influence and determination to make Barton pay for his actions. Rejecting Barton’s echo of the Lord’s Prayer, Carson turns from God, under the impression that achieving revenge will be more satisfactory than forgiveness. If Barton was able to see that the master was
only a man, Carson still has not realized that the worker is also only a man, and therefore fallible and suffering just as much as he.

It is from the mouth of a child that Carson is prompted to reconsider his punishment for Barton’s sin. On his way home, Carson sees a small girl knocked over by a boy and when he is about to be punished, the girl cries out, “He did not know what he was doing” (MB 318, emphasis in original). The boy, who is not punished, is saved by the girl’s insistence that his action was done without knowing the consequences. She is even injured, though slightly, and still begs for mercy for the boy who caused her harm. Carson recognizes that the girl’s words are an echo of scripture, and upon his return home he turns to the family Bible. The passage to which the girl’s comment alludes is Luke 23:34, at Jesus’s crucifixion: “Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots” (KJV). Jesus, the son of God, suffers on the cross and yet still calls for his heavenly father to forgive those who injure him. Carson, whose own son has died at the hands of another man in agony, cannot find it in his heart to forgive Barton, yet the Bible speaks of Jesus dying on the cross and yet asking God to forgive trespasses between mortal men. Having just come from Barton’s home where he explicitly denied Barton any forgiveness, Carson is reminded of a divine father-son relationship, in which the son is also lost and yet the father forgives.

Religion, and specifically Carson’s physical experience with the family Bible, ultimately prompts his return to Barton’s home to extend forgiveness to another man in
agonized. The family Bible is not worn or loved, but preserved as a way to track births and
deaths, and so it is “all grand and golden, with its leaves adhering together from the
bookbinder’s press, so little had it been used” (MB 319). When Carson sees the Bible on
his desk he allows himself to cry. The narrator takes a moment to reveal Carson’s
thoughts: “In spite of his desire to retain the revengeful feeling he considered as a duty to
his dead son, something of pity would steal in for the poor, wasted skeleton of a man, the
smitten creature, who had told him of his sin, and implored his pardon that night” (MB
319). Carson may be able to seek legal action against Barton, but he also pities the man
who was driven to murdering Harry because he sees the suffering Barton has
experienced. Barton has physically suffered from his actions, becoming weaker and less
like himself, and he has already acknowledged his suffering can only be truly known by
God. After hearing the girl in the street ask for mercy for a boy who injured her, Carson
has turned to the Bible for guidance, and whether or not he pursues charges against
Barton hinges on his reading: “All night long, the Archangel combated with the
Demon” (MB 320).

While Archangel and Demon battle over Carson, Barton grows weaker, nearing
death without the forgiveness necessary to bring him peace. Barton similarly turns to his
religious education in his hour of need, but tells those gathered around him that he has
been disenchanted with the Bible because of his great suffering. The loss of his son and
his observations of the suffering of the working class turned him from the Bible: “At last
I gave it up in despair, trying to make folks’ actions square wi’ th’ Bible; and I thought I’d no longer labour at following th’ Bible mysel’” (MB 321). Master and worker have set aside their youthful religion for self-preservation. For Carson, the Bible was a tool to learn to read, and his business has ruled his life. For Barton, the apparent ease with which upper classes ignore Biblical teachings and yet encourage the working classes to act according to scripture disappointed him as he struggled to cope with his grief. Both men leave religion behind as they develop professionally, and when they experience loss they reject their childhood faiths. Yet the intercession of a little girl’s overheard words prompt Carson to return to Barton to offer forgiveness and restore peace to both of their consciences.

Upon his second arrival at the Barton home, Carson seems to recognize the significance of the moment and takes action to forgive his son’s murderer. Though he has previously crossed the physical threshold of the Barton home, Carson comes the second time in peace. The door is opened to him, and the act of crossing over into the worker’s house reflects Carson’s crossing from a place of anger to a place of forgiveness. Additionally, Carson’s forgiveness of another man’s sin is the crossing of an emotional threshold, and Carson literally takes Barton in his arms as the worker dies. Once master and worker, Carson and Barton become two men bound together by their mutual agonies, by their being fathers missing their sons. As he holds his once-enemy, Carson, at Mary’s behest, does his best to pray:
No other words would suggest themselves than some of those he had read only a few hours before:

“God be merciful to us sinners. —Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us.”

And when the words were said, John Barton lay a corpse in Mr. Carson’s arms. (MB 321)

The prayer Carson recalls is two Biblical allusions at once. The first, that God be merciful to sinners, is from Luke 18:13, in which Jesus tells the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. In the parable, the Pharisee offers thanks that he is successful but the collector says, “God be merciful to me a sinner” (KJV Luke 18:13). The lesson, Jesus says, is to be humble before God and to ask for mercy. Barton’s sin is an obvious one in that he commits murder, which is against one of the Ten Commandments, but Carson’s sin is less strictly Biblical, as he seeks out legal revenge rather than forgiveness. Both fathers, it would seem, are in need of mercy from a heavenly father.

The second aspect of Carson’s prayer is, of course, a reference to the “Lord’s Prayer,” or the “Our Father.” Found in Matthew 6, the people are instructed to offer this prayer as a simple way to communicate with God. Babbling at God is a heathen form of prayer because “your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him” (KJV Matt. 6:8). Within the prayer itself is the line which Carson offers up as he holds Barton, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us.”
Thomas Recchio suggests that “rather than granting Barton forgiveness, Carson’s quotation from the Lord’s Prayer begins with a recognition of his own guilt, […] confirming not simply the human equivalency of Barton and Carson as men but the moral equivalency of Carson and Barton as murderers” (Recchio 293-4). Though Recchio argues that Carson’s understanding of himself as a murderer is “moral knowledge,” the significance should rest on the union of the men through their sufferings rather than their actions against each other. The forgiveness of trespasses, which forms a significant part of this later relationship between Barton and Carson, takes center stage because Carson not only says words he previously rejected, but he does so while holding the man who trespassed against him. The Biblical narrative that influences Carson’s decision mandates forgiveness, “and all versions of John Barton’s life thus become irrelevant to the novel’s concluding and redeeming action: Carson’s forgiveness” (Gallagher 87). Forgiveness is all Barton asked upon his confession, and in finally offering forgiveness Carson allows the man to find rest—it is only after the words of the “Our Father” that Barton gives in to death and faces the God whose judgment he fears.

The dramatic conclusion of the Barton-Carson storyline can be said to verge on the melodramatic and overly religious, and after the courtroom drama of Jem’s case and Mary’s adventures leading up to the trial, the sudden turn to God feels somewhat out of place. Within the text, however, the master-worker relationship can only be resolved with a third-party mediator. Whereas *North and South*’s mediation comes at the hands of
Margaret Hale, female intercession does not help Barton and Carson make amends. Arguably, Mary is too close to both men to be able to mediate successfully—Margaret’s strength is, after all, her position as an outsider in Milton society, whereas Mary is Barton’s daughter and Harry Carson’s almost-lover. Instead, the brothers in suffering are brought together through a sort of divine intervention, with God and Christ standing in as examples of a son’s suffering and a father’s forgiveness of sins. The religious words Carson experiences remind him that ultimate judgment is not his place, no matter how legal his pursuit of justice is. God is the judge of Barton’s sins, and it is Carson’s duty as a similarly grieving father to forgive Barton his trespasses.

After Barton’s death, the novel quickly ties up loose ends, including Carson’s future as a master in Manchester. Barton’s friend Job Leigh tells Carson “The masters has it on their own conscience, —you have it on yours, sir, to answer for to God whether you’ve done, and are doing all in your power to lighten the evils that seem always to hang on the trades by which you make your fortunes” (MB 333). Though Job specifies that the knowledge of workers’ sufferings lay with the masters, it is the emphasis on the master’s own conscience that recalls the period’s changing masculinities. Manliness was becoming more internal, the conscience of a man dependent on his own conduct and how he perceived himself. To internalize Job’s comment allows Carson the opportunity to examine the workings of his heart—as Barton faces God and judgement on his own, so too must Carson come to terms with his conscience on his own.
The struggle not only to forgive but to seek a way to ease the workers’ lives requires Carson to reconsider how he operates his business in order to try to find peace with himself. The final words on Carson are focused on his internal changes, the way his heart and his conscience have been affected by the murder of his son. Carson works to correct the inequities as best he can in his position as a master:

To his dying day Mr. Carson was considered hard and cold by those who only casually saw him, or superficially knew him. But those who were admitted into his confidence were aware, that the wish that lay nearest to his heart was that none might suffer from the cause from which he had suffered; that a perfect understanding, and complete confidence and love, might exist between masters and men; that the truth might be recognised that the interests of one were the interests of all, and, as such, required the consideration and deliberation of all; that hence it was most desirable to have educated workers, capable of judging, not mere machines of ignorant men; and to have them bound to their employers by the ties of respect and affection, not by mere money bargains alone; in short, to acknowledge the Spirit of Christ as the regulating law between both parties.

Many of the improvements now in practice in the system of employment in Manchester, owe their origin to short earnest sentences
spoken by Mr. Carson. Many and many yet to be carried into execution, take their birth from that stern, thoughtful mind, which submitted to be taught by suffering. (MB 335)

Having suffered the greatest loss he could have imagined, that of his only son’s life, Carson has experienced the complete gamut of emotion, from agony to fury to forgiveness, and ultimately to determination to solve problems facing his industrial society. The lack of communication between master and worker was partly responsible for Barton’s early loss of his son, and the continued muted and failed dialogue pushed Barton to kill Harry. For Carson, then, finding a way not merely to improve the living or working conditions of the employees but to encourage discourse between men is the most logical way to prevent another tragedy.

Carson’s final role in the novel is to become a source of change in Manchester society. His belief in the possibility of forming healthy relationships between masters and workers makes Carson seem idealistic, but he also recognizes the necessity of education within masculine relations. In an industry largely controlled by men, a solid relationship based on mutual respect and knowledge of the system would allow master and workers to compromise for the betterment of their society as a whole. Masters, in a changing system, could explain business plans to workers in order to avoid misunderstandings about wages or orders. Workers, meanwhile, could communicate grievances through peaceful discussion instead of being driven to violence as Barton was
at the behest of the union. For the narrator to state that it is Carson who urges change between masters and workers positions the master in a fictionalized history of Manchester in that his suffering, his loss of an only son, leads to changes in the industry. Most important, however, is that the changes Carson helps implement can only be initiated because of his agony, and his sympathy to a brother in agony found in Barton.

As a conclusion to *Mary Barton*, masculine unification through a reading of the Gospel is a romantic idea. To believe that two men from such opposing sides of society can be brought together through the loss of sons and the rediscovery of God seems almost impossible. Yet Gaskell does not present forgiveness as an easy road for Carson, and his suffering is as real as Barton’s despite their different positions in the industry. Master and worker are united by their manly agony over the loss of an only son, and such sympathy between classes is noteworthy. John Forster, in a 1848 review of *Mary Barton*, wrote that Gaskell “does not affect to offer any solution of a problem involving so much misery, but appears to think that good may be done by wholesome sympathy, and would seem to have written this with hope. Perhaps not unreasonably or unwisely” (qtd. in Recchio 296). The hopefulness with which Gaskell wrote *Mary Barton*, with such attention to the master-worker relationship, becomes the jumping off point for *North and South*. What Carson achieves in *Mary Barton* is a step forward for masters and workers to start treating each other not as enemies, but as *men*, united in their humanity, and especially in their agony.
Chapter 4

Master or Man?

The struggle to define masculinity continues in Gaskell’s *North and South* and is evident even in her private letters. Writing to Emily Shaen, Gaskell described her challenges in finishing the work, especially where her hero was concerned. She knew the changes required for the plot, she wrote, “But hitherto Thornton is good; and I’m afraid of a touch marring him; and I want to keep his character consistent with itself, and large and strong and tender, *and yet a master*” (*Letters* 321, emphasis in original). Throughout *North and South*, tensions between master and worker run high, and the conflict of Thornton’s position as master or man is the linchpin in the novel’s construction of masculinity. Where *Mary Barton* utilized violence between the classes to emphasize the strained masculinities of masters and workers, the riot in *North and South* acts more as a point upon which the plot turns. The workers become more and more agitated by Thornton’s refusal to send back the Irish workers he has hired, and though the violence that takes place is meant against Thornton, it is Margaret who is physically harmed when a worker throws a stone. Thornton attempts to position Margaret in safety and calls out the rioting workers for harming a woman, but when a single voice from the crowd says, “Th’ stone were meant for thee; but thou wert sheltered behind a woman!” Thornton’s masculine sensibilities rise up and, unshielded by a now-injured Margaret, he says, “There is no woman to shield me here. You may beat me to death—you will never move
me from what I have determined upon—not you!” (NS 163-4). The brief and dramatic exchange between master and worker highlights the tension in Milton not merely between employer and employee, but between defined versions of masculinity. The workers, after all, cannot know that only moments before Margaret was struck in protecting Thornton that she had also called his manhood into question and demanded he go to face the rioters “like a man” (NS 161). Thornton himself is a key figure in understanding Miltonian masculinity, primarily because his manhood is widely discussed. From his own understanding of “man” and “gentleman” to his role as a master, Thornton is the touchstone to which characters repeatedly return in their discussions of master-worker conflicts and what makes a man truly manly.

Thornton’s understanding of the difference between “man” and “gentleman” is key to developing a sense of masculinity amongst the characters of North and South. During his speech to Margaret at the dinner party, Thornton explains that his impression of a “gentleman” lacks a sense of manliness in exchange for socially acceptable behaviors. Furthermore, he says, “[W]hen we speak of him as ‘a man,’” we consider him not merely with regard to his fellow-men, but in relation to himself” (NS 150). Thornton does not use the word “gentleman” as freely as Margaret because he believes the “gentle” condition can only be used in relation to others—manliness, for Thornton, must come from an internal, and individual, masculinity. For Margaret, masculinity is associated with gentlemanliness, as exemplified in her father and Mr. Bell. Both men are Oxford
classicists, and though Mr. Bell is a Miltonian by birth, he is of a southern disposition.

Thornton even comments to Mr. Bell, “But you are hardly acquainted with our Darkshire fellows, for all you’re a Darkshire man yourself” (NS 330). Thornton follows a division of geography (Darkshire versus non-Darkshire) with the division of masculinity. Mr. Bell cannot understand Thornton’s relationship with his workers because he has removed himself from the masculinity of the north. Mr. Hale, Thornton notes, “is a gentleman, and his wife and daughter are ladies,” and although Thornton and Mr. Hale become friends, Mr. Hale never fully understands Thornton’s northern sensibilities (NS 71).

When Thornton declares Mr. Hale a “gentleman,” however, he does not appear to do so in mean-spirited judgment—he is describing his new acquaintance to his mother in explanation of why he is dressing for dinner. Mr. Hale, though not a man in Thornton’s terms, is a gentleman—perhaps Thornton considers his new friend a “gentleman” in relation to his own “man”—and one worth treating well.

Yet Thornton is, from the beginning, an enigma of a Milton master. His independence and determination are counterbalanced by his pursuit of education and interest in the classics—“Thornton’s ‘northern’ characterization is permeated with ‘southern’ components, such as his love for the classics, pertaining to Mr. Bell or Mr. Hale” (Antinucci 133). Margaret wonders aloud why a manufacturer would have any desire to learn about literature, and Mrs. Thornton expresses the same concern for her son, though it is cloaked in disdain for his attention being divided by classics rather than
scorn at his interest in them. Like the definition of masculinity itself, Thornton does not neatly fit into either the northern or the southern masculinity. Though she is speaking to her son’s tutor, Mrs. Thornton has little trouble explaining, “Classics may do very well for men who loiter away their lives in the country or in colleges; but Milton men ought to have their thoughts and powers absorbed in the work of to-day” (*NS* 104). For Mrs. Thornton, her son’s greatest desire should be success within his trade, which he is already on his way to achieving. Having drawn himself up after his father’s suicide, Thornton has already made a great achievement in simply becoming a master, but his mother desires more for her son. When she informs Mr. Hale that her son’s name is known in the manufacturing business across Europe, Mrs. Thornton shows the same scorn to the circles of “gentlemen” who do not know her son as Margaret showed to a manufacturer choosing to pursue the education of a “gentleman,” saying, “Idle gentlemen and ladies are not likely to know much of a Milton manufacturer, unless he gets into parliament, or marries a lord’s daughter” (*NS* 105). Mrs. Thornton sets no store by the “gentlemen” of the Hales’ circle, those who are idle and do not labor for their position in society. Undeniably, Mrs. Thornton is biased toward her son, who earlier relayed Margaret’s disdain for him to his mother, but her bias is also based on her life in Milton, where a man is made by his own actions. Parliament or marriage to a lord’s daughter, no matter the distinction they would bring to her son in higher social circles, is not Mrs. Thornton’s
desire for her son. Instead, she wants his success to be driven by his work as a master of Milton.

Like Mrs. Thornton, the other masters in Milton seem to respect Thornton based on his work as their fellow master rather than his “gentlemanly” achievements of education. When the Hales are invited to the Thorntons’ party, Margaret and her father are thrown into a house filled with the men in control of Milton. The masters, like Thornton, are looking for ways to end the strike and return their mills to prosperous business, and the visit of the stranger Mr. Horsfall presents an opportunity for Margaret to observe Thornton’s ability to navigate discourse within the community of the masters. At the dinner table, the masters engage in a debate about one of Horsfall’s questions and Thornton steps in, “[giving] an opinion, the grounds of which were so clearly stated that even the opponents [yield]” (NS 148). In that moment of expressing his opinion, Thornton gains, in Margaret’s view, a dignity which she had not previously noticed, but the more significant point of his interjection is that his fellow men yield to his opinion. Thornton smoothes over a dispute at his table by expressing himself clearly and, presumably, with great rationality. His coolness of head in being able to express an opinion to the point that his opposition agrees with him is one of the traits which is later useful in his dealings with the workers after the riot, and in the midst of his own it furthers his roles as a powerful (and masculine) master.
As Margaret observes Thornton’s control of the discussion at his table, and his quiet dignity in so doing, she recognizes that his power comes from being among other masters. In the Hales’ residence, he is not in control of the situation, entering the house as a guest and a pupil, and one whom Margaret judges. In his own home, and surrounded by people with whom he works, Thornton comes into full power as a master, lacking any hesitation or concern at being judged which he presents with the Hales. Surrounded by masters,

there was no uncertainty as to his position. He was regarded by them as a man of great force of character; of power in many ways. There was no need to struggle for their respect. He had it, and he knew it; and the security of this gave a fine grand quietness to his voice and ways, which Margaret had missed before. (NS 149)

Having the respect of the other masters lends Thornton the confidence to engage in debates, and to know that his opinion, if well supported, will be thoughtfully received by his colleagues. But it is not enough that Thornton is confident because the other masters respect him—in respecting their colleague, the masters recognize his character and power as an independent man. After all, “The dominant code of Victorian manliness, with its emphasis on self-control, hard work and independence, was that of the professional and business classes, and manly behavior was what […] established a man’s class credentials vis-à-vis his peers and his subordinates” (Tosh, “What Should” 183). The masters judge
Thornton on his business prowess and his command of conversation amongst fellow professionals, and like Mrs. Thornton he is respected and masculine because of his professional demeanor.

Most significantly in regards to the riot, the other masters see Thornton’s power as an unassailable fact, and so believe that he is the best man to break the strike. Hamper and Slickson, two other masters, are notably mentioned in having less-than-honorable ways of facing the strike, but Thornton stands firm in his position against the workers. At one point, Thornton, in the throes of a sleepless night of trying to find a solution to the strike, says to himself that he must import the workers from Ireland because of Slickson, “confound him and his dodges! He thought he was overstocked; so he seemed to yield at first, when the deputation came to him,—and of course, he only confirmed them in their folly, as he meant to do. That’s where it spread from” (NS 134). Unlike Slickson, Thornton speaks plainly even to his men, and when he determines to bring in Irish workers he stands by his decision because the work must be done. At the party, the masters acknowledge that Thornton does not seem quite himself, but they attribute it to the strike and continue to put their faith in him as the master who will break the strike. Thornton, they believe, “[is] as iron a chap as any in Milton. The hands had mistaken their man in trying that dodge on him. And they chuckled inwardly at the idea of the workmen’s discomfiture and defeat, in their attempt to alter one iota of what Thornton had decreed” (NS 149). To the other masters, Thornton’s character is so strong that he is
the one amongst them who can break the strike. Again, his professional masculinity affords him the respect of his colleagues because he displays self-control and independence.

Where the masters see Thornton as a powerful colleague, Margaret, as an outsider in many ways, sees Thornton through several overlapping lenses. Thornton is a manufacturer (not a gentleman) in the north who desires an education that seems unnecessary for his station, a man who has worked for his position in society, and a man who seems like granite for all his sympathy for the working-class people Margaret befriends. Margaret’s position as outsider is similarly complex, in that she is a woman from the south whose immediate family is middle class, though she has spent much of her life with wealthy relatives. Transplanting her into a place where masters and workers are always at odds over an industry of which she knows little means that Margaret’s interpretation of masculinity is skewed by her knowledge of masculinity as defined in the south, with special attention paid to Captain and Henry Lennox, both of whom are respectable young men with respectable occupations (soldier and lawyer, respectively). When, for example, Margaret returns to London after her father’s death, she stays with her cousin Edith and Captain Lennox, who is explicitly described as being gentlemanly: “Captain Lennox was easy, kind, and gentlemanly; sat with his wife in her dressing-room an hour or two every day; played with his little boy for another hour, and lounged away the rest of his time at his club, when he was not engaged out to dinner” (NS 338).
Though the captain is easy and kind, his gentlemanliness is directly followed by his brief interactions with his wife and child (two or three hours of his day are spent with them) and his lounging. Notably, the narrator’s association of Captain Lennox with the word “gentleman” only comes after Margaret has adjusted to Milton life and has seen another version of masculinity to which she can compare the Lennox brothers.

Margaret’s life in Milton allows several opportunities for her to urge discussions of master-worker relationships based on her interactions with workers she knows, specifically the Higgins family. One conversation before the riot provides two moments of Margaret’s interest in the relationship’s need to adjust to allow for more compassion. Discussing the impending strike with Thornton and Mr. Hale, Margaret says that she finds Milton society strange, “I suppose because, on the very face of it, I see two classes dependent on each other in every possible way, yet each evidently regarding the interests of the other as opposed to their own” (NS 109). Margaret’s opinion is influenced greatly by Higgins and his observations about the relationship, and Thornton works to explain the master-worker relations to his acquaintances. While Thornton speaks as a master, he tries to rationally explain the conflict and the differences between what Margaret seems to see as the compassionate south and the independent north Thornton loves. Margaret later says, “God has made us so that we must be mutually dependent. […] Neither you nor any other master can help yourselves. The most proudly independent man depends on those around him for their insensible influence on his character—his life” (NS 112).
Margaret once again argues for the necessity of master and worker acting together toward a greater good, speaking against Thornton’s beloved independent spirit. Yet in this moment, Thornton reveals to her one of his greatest strengths as a master in his understanding of the men themselves.

Though the masters and workers are tied together through their industry, Thornton points out that the masters are not responsible for every aspect of their workers’ lives, and that the workers must have independence from their employers. Furthermore, Thornton points out that the workers are quick to notice the ills of a master, and tells Margaret,

Why, if I were a workman, I should be twenty times more impressed by the knowledge that my master was honest, punctual, quick, resolute in all his doings (and hands are keener spies even than valets), than by any amount of interference, however kindly meant, with my ways of going on out of work-hours. [...] I rely on the straightforward honesty of my hands, and the open nature of their opposition, in contra-distinction to the way in which the turn out will be managed in some mills, just because they know I scorn to take a single dishonourable advantage, or do an underhand thing myself. [...] What the master is, that will the men be, without over-much taking thought on his part. (NS 113)

Thornton believes that the master’s attitude toward his workers is reflected in the workers’ attitude toward their master. In this, he tries to make Margaret understand that
his goal is to be a good master, one who is honest with his men and holds tight to his convictions. These characteristics Thornton prizes are what make him the ideal master to lead the strikebreak, and no doubt influence the other masters’ respect of Thornton. What Margaret struggles to understand of northern independence is what Thornton seems to most clearly see as a great strength of Milton men. He is himself honest and resolute, and expects his workers to be the same. Where Slickson and Hamper may toy with their workers during the strike, Thornton is explicit in his refusal to give in to union demands and imports the Irish workers because it is his business. Honesty and resolution become markers not only of a good master and worker, but of a good man because these are the traits on which Thornton places great significance. Margaret may not fully understand the importance of what Thornton says about Milton men initially, but as she adjusts to Milton life she recognizes the truth of Thornton’s words.

Margaret’s most significant role in the development of Thornton’s masculinity, however, comes in the form of her action during the riot against Marlborough Mills. Her discussions with the master present him with opportunities to speak out against the way workers are behaving or how Margaret views the north and its people, but Thornton is forced into action when Margaret challenges his masculinity. The workers gather at the gates and Thornton assures Margaret that the crowd will be dispersed by soldiers, but Margaret does not approve of the impending violence of the soldiers.
“Mr. Thornton,” said Margaret, shaking all over with her passion, “go down this instant, if you are not a coward. Go down and face them like a man. Save these poor strangers, whom you have decoyed here. Speak to your workmen as if they were human beings. Speak to them kindly. Don’t let the soldiers come in and cut down poor creatures who are driven mad. I see one there who is. If you have any courage or noble quality in you, go out and speak to them, man to man.”

He turned and looked at her while she spoke. A dark cloud came over his face while he listened. He set his teeth as he heard her words.

(NS 161)

Thornton’s response as he listens Margaret’s words is a physical one: he looks at her, his face darkens, and he sets his teeth while she speaks out against his decision to call other men in to break up the riot. It is not enough that he has called in soldiers to act violently against fearful and hungry workers—he has called in other men to take on his role a a powerful man in the situation. Margaret specifically calls on Thornton to face the strikers if he is not a coward, which targets his masculinity on a basic level. After all, a man should not be afraid to face other men. Moreover, Thornton’s response to the riot comes after he and Margaret discuss the difference between a “gentleman” and a “man,” and to have a young woman demand that he “face them like a man” must bring his own desire to be a man back to haunt him. Margaret also draws Thornton’s attention to the fact that the
workers are human beings and therefore thinking and feeling men. Though she, in the next breath, calls the workers “poor creatures who are driven mad,” Margaret has befriended enough workingmen that she believes it necessary to understand them as humans, first and foremost. Her speech’s conclusion is to again directly question Thornton’s courage and nobility as a man. In defense of his name, and his masculinity, Thornton must face the rioting workers himself.

Here it seems only right to point out that, although Margaret follows Thornton out and physically shields him from the rioting workers, this does not totally condemn Thornton’s masculinity. Margaret’s desire to protect Thornton may arise from her growing sense of courage or nobility or any other term that has heretofore been used in regards to male characters; her protection may also, as scholars like Barbara Leah Harman have suggested, be an act of unconscious sexual desire for Thornton. In her 1988 article “In Promiscuous Company,” Harman argues that the scene is part of a figurative “deflowering” of Margaret; the sexuality and desire of the scene in Harman’s argument is, to be fair, what the event seems to expose to those who observe the scene, specifically the servants and Mrs. Thornton. But after Margaret is injured and Thornton admits his attraction to her, a worker calls out that Thornton has been protected by a woman and Thornton exposes himself to the potential of more violence. Thornton’s masculinity cannot be lessened because Margaret’s strength has increased; rather, Thornton and Margaret, in this moment, seem to draw closer to an ungendered strength of
character through their mutual need to protect the other. Thornton’s display of masculinity in facing the rioters is driven by Margaret’s disparagement of his manhood, and he reacts as he believes a man should: by immediately going out to face the crowd. Margaret and Thornton drive each other to be more courageous, and, in Thornton’s case, to act as the man he believes himself to be.

After the riot, Margaret returns to the safety of sitting room conversations about the master-worker relationship. Especially after Higgins loses his job and takes on the care for Boucher’s children, Margaret desires the two Milton men to come together and talk. Thornton has now revealed his strengths as a master to Margaret, and she, in turn, has come to a better understanding of Milton society. With this understanding, Margaret believes that Higgins and Thornton could form a sort of union between master and worker, and she tells her father so after Higgins visits: “If he and Mr. Thornton would speak out together as man to man—if Higgins would forget that Mr. Thornton was a master, and speak to him as he does to us—and if Mr. Thornton would be patient enough to listen to him with his human heart, not with his master’s ears —” (NS 281). Margaret knows that Higgins could not be happy in the south, but that he must provide for Boucher’s children, and the only master she believes capable of helping Higgins is Thornton. The discussion, however, can only take place if the men meet not as master and worker, but as men. In Margaret’s scenario, Higgins must forget that the person to whom he speaks has power over him in business and must also speak as honestly as he
does to the Hales. Thornton, meanwhile, would have to listen “with his human heart, not with his master’s ears,” emphasizing that Thornton does have a tender heart that could listen to Higgins’s case were the rational ears of a master taken out of the equation.

Margaret’s language here is made more interesting by her division of Thornton into two pieces, namely the human heart and the master’s ears. Higgins is not so dissected by Margaret in her imagined scene, instead only made to talk as he does to himself. Thornton, however, is made into two versions of himself, one which is tender enough to hear Higgins and one which is business-driven enough to deny the man work. Dividing the master into these two pieces is striking because early in the novel, Thornton comments that he knows Margaret “does not like to hear men called ‘hands,’” and says, “so I won’t use that word, though it comes most readily to my lips as the technical term, whose origin, whatever it was, dates before my time” (NS 110). The synecdoche of “hands” for workers takes the humanity out of the group discussed—human beings doing work are reduced to a pair of appendages. Yet Thornton must, for Margaret, be divided into heart and ears not because he is reduced beyond humanity, but because the division of Thornton into two parts is what reveals his humanity. Margaret desires a conversation between Higgins and Thornton that is between two men rather than two individuals divided by their positions in the industry. By recognizing Thornton’s two aspects, Margaret aligns herself to Higgins’s eventual opinion about the man, and allows for the
transition of the narrative of Margaret’s relationship with Thornton into the union between master and worker, man and man.

Developing Thornton’s masculinity as a master and a man requires the insight of a working man, Nicholas Higgins. As a worker in Hamper’s mill, Higgins does not have direct contact with Thornton for much of the novel, but his role as a union man means that he hears about Thornton, and so Higgins acts as one of Margaret’s guides concerning the master. In Milton society, Thornton’s position and disposition are respected by people who share his interests: the other masters respect Thornton because of his business sense and his determination to succeed in his trade, while Mrs. Thornton is not only proud of her son’s professional achievements, but is biased based on his personal achievements. Margaret may recognize Thornton as a leading man in Milton society, but she views his accomplishments and influence within the society through the eyes of a displaced southerner. Higgins, in discussing Thornton with Margaret, puts forth a version of the man as a master through the eyes of a worker, making Higgins’s opinion of Thornton key to understanding the man himself. After all, Higgins has no cause to speak well of Thornton because they are of separate spheres in society, and so his view is, if anything, biased against Thornton. With this bias in mind, Margaret, and thus the reader, is convinced that Higgins’s testimonies regarding Thornton’s behavior must be authentic, and authenticity is one the traits Thornton himself admires.
In one of their early conversations, Margaret is surprised when Higgins brings up Thornton’s name as one of the masters against whom the workers intend to strike. Higgins’s initial description of Thornton first introduces Margaret to an unbiased view of the man (as she can hardly trust Mrs. Thornton to describe her son without bias).

Margaret asks what kind of master Thornton is, and Higgins replies,

“Did yo’ ever see a bulldog? Set a bulldog on hind legs, and dress him up in a coat and breeches, and yo’n just getten John Thornton.”

“Nay,” [says] Margaret, laughing, “I deny that. Mr. Thornton is plain enough, but he’s not like a bulldog, with its short broad nose, and snarling upper lip.”

“No! not in look, I grant yo’. But let John Thornton get hold on a notion, and he’ll stick to it like a bulldog; yo’ might pull him away wi’ a pitch-fork ere he’d leave go. He’s worth fighting wi’, is John Thornton. […] It’ll never be an honest up and down fight wi’ [Slickson], as it will be wi’ Thornton. Thornton’s as dour as a door-nail; an obstinate chap, every inch on him,—th’ oud bulldog!” (NS 124)

Higgins does not attempt to make Thornton sound like a gentleman, but instead offers a worker’s understanding of the man’s personality. Notably, Higgins does not condemn Thornton for his bulldog-like qualities. Thornton holds onto notions tightly, a trait which his fellow masters appreciate when he refuses to give in to the demands of striking
workers, but Higgins notes that “he’s worth fighting wi’,” and to be worth fighting with means that Thornton is worthy of being a master. Once again, Thornton’s desire of honesty and authenticity is highlighted, now through the eyes of a worker (and not even one of his own employees). Higgins also compares Thornton to Slickson, who Thornton also later blames for riling up the workers, and notes that Slickson plays games with his workers, where Thornton is straightforward with his employees. The master of Marlborough Mills may be as obstinate as Higgins says, but he is at the very least obstinate and honest.

After Boucher’s suicide, Higgins, like Margaret, calls Thornton’s very manhood into question by suggesting that Thornton does not have the gumption to set the police after Boucher, but more significant in their relationship is when Higgins approaches Thornton for work after the strike. Having been thrown out by Hamper, Higgins must find work in order to provide for Boucher’s children and so goes to Marlborough Mills, where he waits for Thornton’s return. Their exchange is heated at best, and Thornton is in no mood to humor one of the members of the union which caused the strike, telling Higgins, “[D]’ye think I’ll take you on? I might as well put a firebrand into the midst of the cotton-waste” (NS 291). Higgins, with his own pride, does not want to ask for work, but Boucher’s children must be fed, and so he turns back to Thornton. Higgins says, “I’d promise yo’, measter, I’d not speak a word as could do harm, if so be yo’ did right by us; and I’d promise more” (NS 291). Higgins’s promises to speak to Thornton man to man,
promising to inform Thornton when the workers are dissatisfied and to follow Thornton’s rules, so long as he can work. From Higgins, the offer speaks volumes of his opinion of Thornton because, one assumes, he would not offer the same to Hamper or Slickson. Thornton requires no pledge against the union, as Hamper does, and is fair to his workers, unlike Slickson, and so Higgins’s offer can only be made to the master he believes he can trust.

Once Higgins becomes a paid employee of Marlborough Mills, his opinion on Thornton is given more authority than before. Having previously been acquainted with Thornton distantly as worker (and union member) and master, Higgins can now observe firsthand the kind of master Thornton is. Significantly, he repeats his earlier statement that Thornton is worth fighting with, now adding that he is also “too good for to be cheated” (NS 315). Higgins’s opinion of Thornton has changed only minutely, and certainly for the better, as he now declares that Thornton is “good,” and being so good he should not be cheated by his workers. Attesting to Thornton’s goodness as a master, Thornton discovers through his overlooker that one night, Higgins stays behind with another man to finish one of the jobs. For all his bulldog qualities, Higgins refuses to cheat Thornton of his labor, and goes further than his fellow workers in order to finish the jobs the mill has taken on. Of Higgins’s views of Thornton, his comment to Margaret after working at Marlborough Mills is perhaps the most telling. Higgins informs Margaret that Thornton has taken an interest in the education of Boucher’s children
(already a great step beyond the boundaries laid between masters and workers), and then says,

To tell the truth, [...] he fairly bamboozles me. He’s two chaps. One chap I knowed of old as were measter all o’er. T’other chap hasn’t an ounce of measter’s flesh about him. How them two chaps is bound up in one body, is a craddy for me to find out. I’ll not be beat by it, though. Meanwhile, he comes here pretty often; that’s how I know the chap that’s a man, not a measter. (NS 308)

As Margaret dissected Thornton into a master’s ear and a human heart, so Higgins notes that Thornton can be divided into two distinct beings, the master and the man. Such a distinction serves to separate the behaviors Thornton takes on as a master from his true self—after all, Higgins says the man “hasn’t an ounce of measter’s flesh about him,” similar to Margaret’s suggestion of his “human” heart, similarly void of master’s flesh.

Where other masters, like Slickson and Hamper, may also behave in a way that distinguishes their professional lives from their personal lives, it is Thornton to whom Higgins connects. Thornton pays an interest in Boucher’s children, even after the drama Boucher put Marlborough Mills through. Furthermore, Thornton visits Higgins at his home beyond his initial visit in which he offered work. Higgins says that Thornton visits often, and visits as a man, almost a friend, rather than the master. The thresholds crossed either in anger or in forgiveness in Mary Barton, when Mr. Carson visits the dying John
Barton, have become more permeable to Thornton, who visits Higgins and his family because he wants to, and because he is free to do so as a man. Thornton has, through his growing relationship with Higgins, begun to separate himself from himself—the master from the man—and in so doing has opened himself to friendship with Higgins and a greater understanding of his workers in general.

While Mrs. Thornton and the masters view Thornton’s masculinity through his business and Margaret and Higgins can divide Thornton into pieces of master and man, Thornton’s most telling moments of self-awareness and his desire to be a good man are in the moments of his greatest despair. After the riot, and after Higgins is hired at the mill, Thornton’s business is suffering and he is offered the opportunity to join in a speculation, a monetary risk like the one that ruined his father. Thornton recognizes that his mill is unlikely to recover from the strike, but his concern is for those to whom he owes money. He tells his mother, “I know now that no man will suffer by me. That was my anxiety,” and “I must give up business, but I pay all men” (NS 384). For Thornton, his masculinity includes his ability to pay back loans, and that he give his employees their pay as a responsible businessman. His father’s suicide, and the resulting debts which Thornton pays off, is surely responsible for his anxiety. As a young man who gave up his education in order to repay his father’s debts, Thornton has a distinct relationship with speculations and payments, namely that he has suffered the fallout of a bad speculation and paid the price of a financial failure. His interest in Boucher’s children is undoubtedly as reflective
of his personal history with the loss of a father as his disinterest in a speculation is
reflective of his father’s downfall. When Mrs. Thornton asks about the consequences of a
bad speculation, should her son choose that path, he says, “Honest men are ruined by a
rogue. […] As I stand now, my creditors’ money is safe—every farthing of it; but I don’t
know where to find my own—it may be all gone, and I penniless at this moment” (NS
384). Those men who hold Thornton’s debts are, to the master, honest men and, should
he engage in the speculation, it would be those honest men who would suffer from his
risk. His decision to reject the speculation is his rejection of a “chance for gain on moral
grounds,” and though the speculation is a success, “he is consoled by having kept clear of
mere gambling” (Henry 158). The fact that he only addresses his own situation after
telling his mother that the debts would be paid reveals his concerns are for what is right
rather than what is comfortable. Were he concerned with his personal finances at a time
of crisis, Thornton would not be a man (perhaps he would be a “gentleman,” concerned
with his status in relation to others), and so his resolution to “pay all men” and keep his
creditors from suffering furthers his own masculinity.

Thornton’s development of masculinity reaches its climax shortly after he tells his
mother that the debts can be paid. Though Thornton is clearly struggling with his
decision, his mother supports him and says that she will not miss the house, “but to have
you other than what you are will break my heart. What can you do?” (NS 384). Mrs.
Thornton, for all her love of her child, has not separated him into pieces as Margaret and
Higgins have done, dissecting him into master and man, and so his fall from grace in the business world will, in her eyes, make him what he is not. Thornton the master is the version of her son which Mrs. Thornton sees and believes to be the true man, and so Thornton’s response is somewhat surprising:

    Be always the same John Thornton in whatever circumstances; endeavouring to do right, and making great blunders; and then trying to be brave in setting to afresh. But it is hard, mother. I have so worked and planned. I have discovered new powers in my situation too late—and now all is over. I am too old to begin again with the same heart. It is hard, mother. (NS 384)

For all his mother’s pride for her son’s achievements, she does not recognize what Thornton himself does—that Thornton the master is not his only self, that he exists beyond his work as a man. Thornton sees that being himself, being “always the same John Thornton in whatever circumstances,” is all that he can do, and is also the best he can do. Despite changing circumstances, despite loss, despite everything, Thornton’s goal is to be true to himself and to remain the man he has become. The same John Thornton is the individual who does his best to be a good man, not just a good master—he shall “[endeavour] to do right, and [make] great blunders,” he will be a human with all his faults and failures. But, more than trying and failing, Thornton will continue to try again, even when faced with the loss of everything.
Though his masculinity is tied to his sense of goodness, of doing what is right and failing and rising again, Thornton also exposes himself when he says that to do so is hard. His admission of the difficulty he faces could be considered a weakness, a flaw in his shield of manhood, but the truth is that it is his admission which furthers his pursuit of masculinity. Thornton values honesty, and his admission is honest. After recovering from his father’s death, after building a successful business, after all of his hard work, Thornton is going to lose everything. It is worth noting that Thornton’s suffering has not been restricted to business, but that he has also been rejected by Margaret (the only woman he has ever loved, according to his innermost thoughts), he has seen her (presumed) lover, he has lost his friend Mr. Hale, and now he is to lose his business as well, after finally coming to a friendship with his employees. To have suffered so much, it is no wonder that he says, “I am too old to begin again with the same heart,” and that he repeats, “It is hard, mother.” His heart, the heart Margaret deemed human, has been through great suffering; even so, he will do his best to care for his workers and creditors, to continue to “be brave in setting to afresh.” Thornton’s bravery in admitting his fears and in trying to pull himself back up after he loses everything solidifies his masculinity because he judges himself against himself—he may not be a gentleman, but he proves himself repeatedly to be a true “man.”

While Thornton’s development of masculinity according to his rubric of “gentleman” and “man” reaches its climax in his verbalization of his determination to be
himself, Thornton can only reach that point of self after another event, namely his union with his employees. Higgins informs Margaret of Thornton’s interest in Boucher’s children and expresses his surprise at Thornton being “two chaps,” but their relationship develops beyond the walls of Higgins’s home. Before Thornton offers him a job, Higgins tells Margaret and her father that he does not want them to interfere with his job search: “Meddling ‘twixt master and man is liker meddling ‘twixt husband and wife than aught else; it takes a deal o’ wisdom for to do ony good” (NS 281). The parallels Higgins draws between master-worker relationships and a marriage draws attention to the idea of an act of union, probably most commonly seen in North and South as the matrimonial union between Thornton and Margaret. While Thornton’s romantic union is with Margaret, his union with Higgins and the workers is similar to a marriage in that two disparate parties are joined together in a mutual interest (the business) and must learn to work together in order to be successful. The clearest example is, of course, the building of the dining-room.

In the scene of Mr. Bell’s visit to Marlborough Mills, and his discussion with Thornton about the business, each word is clearly chosen with care and consequence. Mr. Bell, despite being from Milton initially, has removed himself from Darkshire and acts as Thornton’s landlord seemingly in name only. His visit to Milton is only in the wake of Mr. Hale’s death, so that the conversation of another man amidst Margaret’s grief (and her aunt’s interference with the house) is understandably comforting. Their
conversation turns from Margaret to the mill, and Mr. Bell asks his tenant, “What is that heap of brick and mortar we came against in the yard?” to which Thornton replies, “I’m building a dining-room—for the men I mean—the hands” (NS 328). Throughout their conversation, Thornton flounders for the right words that express his relationship with the workers. This first response is interrupted by dashes, presumably his pauses, as he says that the room is for “the men,” or rather, “the hands.” The synecdoche that dehumanizes the workers by limiting them to parts of a body returns, but only after Thornton scrambles for speech. For Thornton to call his workers “the men” as opposed to “the hands” goes against what seemed to earlier be his instinct. Thornton does, after all, pointedly address Margaret’s dislike of the term “hands” when discussing the workers though he says that the word is most commonly used. Yet with Mr. Bell, Thornton calls his workers “the men,” which is twice-associated with their position in his life. On the one hand, “men” is consistently used in contrast to “master,” one of the reasons this analysis of North and South has attempted to use worker/laborer/employee instead of “man.” On the other hand, “man” is Thornton’s preferred version of a gentleman. Thornton’s “true man” is a man beyond the boundaries set for defining “gentleman,” and he himself strives to be a “man.” The use, then, of “the men,” quickly followed by “the hands,” is a puzzling word choice. Is Thornton’s slip because of his remembrance that Margaret dislikes the word “hands,” or is it because he has now come to the point that the workers have become more than employees, and that he interacts with (and sees) them as men?
Describing the plan of the dining-room to Mr. Bell is another moment of Thornton’s indecision about his relationship with his workers. Thornton relates his discussion with Higgins about the possibility of buying food wholesale to provide a good dinner for the workers and tells Mr. Bell, “I spoke to my friend—or my enemy—the man I told you of” (NS 328). His response is again interrupted by pauses as he strives to find the proper word. Thornton’s first instinct is to call Higgins his friend, which clearly goes beyond the master-worker relationship they have so recently developed. His second choice of words is “my enemy,” which forces recollections of Higgins and Thornton at odds with each other, whether over the hunt for Boucher or over Higgins’s request for work. The two men are supposed to be enemies because they are employer and employee, and so exist in different spheres of Milton society. Yet Thornton has first called Higgins his friend, and so calling that same man his enemy does not seem sincere. To end his word troubles, Thornton finally says that Higgins is “the man I told you of,” and once again “man” can be defined in a variety of ways. The line between master and worker has, in the case of Higgins, been blurred for Thornton—unsurprising, considering that Higgins informed Margaret of Thornton’s visits earlier and expressed his observations that Thornton visits not as a master, but as a man. Thornton slips up later in the conversation when he tells Mr. Bell that some of the men, “my friend Higgins among them,” asked him to join them for dinner (NS 329). Without hesitation (the dashes
surrounding the clause are an interjection of clarification that the men who approached him included Higgins), Thornton calls Higgins his friend in the presence of another man.

Part of Thornton’s reward for allowing the men to take credit for his idea is the establishment of trust between master and worker. The workers have seen Thornton do his part for the dining-room without overstepping his bounds, and Higgins has befriended him outside the mill itself. When Thornton shares dinner with his employees (which, he points out, he only does when they invite him so as not to inject himself unwanted into their lives), they are able communicate beyond master and man. Mr. Bell suggests that the workers would not dare to criticize a master when he is sharing their table, but Thornton replies, “I am getting really to know some of them now, and they talk pretty freely before me” (NS 330). By allowing the men independence in their endeavor, waiting for his orders from the men before he acts, Thornton has given the men reason to trust him, and trusting him means that the men feel free to speak to him as men. It may be unlikely that they criticize their employer to his face, but Thornton says that he is willing to speak his mind at a meal should another disagreement arise between masters and workers, and one assumes that the workers would be willing to speak just as freely. Maintaining independence for his men means that Thornton refuses any charity for the dining-room project that Mr. Bell offers. He argues that, should the work be influenced by charity, people will be “going, and talking, and spoiling the simplicity of the whole thing” (NS 330). Thornton recognizes the need for the workers to be free from
obligation, either to him (for inspiring the project) or to a stranger like Mr. Bell (for
giving money to the project). The independent northern spirit Margaret could not
understand reappears, this time within the workers’ ranks and serving as a reminder that
northern men desire independence, whether they are master or worker. As Mr. Bell says,
“Nothing like the act of eating for equalising men. Dying is nothing to it” (NS 330). In
eating, and in building the dining-room, Thornton has asserted his union with the
workers, with other men, and this union lasts him through the end of the novel.

When he has seemingly lost everything, Thornton has not yet lost his relationship
with his employees. He describes his work with the men as “experiments,” and when
pressed he says, “My utmost expectation only goes so far as this—that they may render
strikes not the bitter, venomous sources of hatred they have hitherto been. A more
hopeful man might imagine that a closer and more genial intercourse between classes
might do away with strikes. But I am not a hopeful man” (NS 391-2). Thornton does not
believe that building a dining hall and becoming closer with his employees has solved all
the problems that may exist between master and worker. On the contrary, he
acknowledges that such problems may never cease, but he hopes that the developed
relationship may, at least, reposition the masters and workers into the realm of being men
together. To lessen the violence or the malice of the strikes is a step in the right direction
to peace between the classes, but he does not raise his hopes to that. Thornton’s
rationality grounds his hopes, and so his effort to engage in a union with the workers
produces the potential to change the relationship. In this sense, the “experiments” have proven themselves worthwhile, as Thornton then says to Margaret, “Miss Hale, I had a round-robin from some of my men—I suppose in Higgins’ handwriting—stating their wish to work for me, if ever I was in a position to employ men again on my own behalf. That was good, wasn’t it?” (NS 392). Margaret, who has previously questioned his manhood during the riot and has expressed her belief that he possesses a “human heart” rather than being all master, is the only person to whom he turns for commendation on his experiments. Thornton sees the development of the workers signing on to work with him again as proof that he has been a good master, and a good man, because they are willing to align themselves with him when next they can. The fact that the round-robin is in Higgins’s handwriting means that that relationship in particular has grown in significance and in strength—Higgins, who is critical of masters at the best of times, is willing to seek out work with Thornton all over again if the opportunity arises. Margaret’s approval of the friendship (for that is what it must now be called), is given, and Thornton says, “I knew you would like it” (NS 392). Whether or not Thornton initially acted with kindness towards the workers because of Margaret is irrelevant—he has pursued a union with his employees on his own motivation—but he still seeks her approval. The woman he loves possesses the opinion which matters most to him, and her approval makes his pursuit of a more perfect union between masters and workers worthwhile.
Thornton, the object of two unions, develops his masculinity through both. Romantically, Thornton is united with Margaret and, although the marriage does not actually take place at the end of the novel, the promise of matrimony allies them until death do them part. A matrimonial union allows Thornton masculinity through the most basic understanding that he is to be Margaret’s husband. As has been previously discussed, Margaret’s authority over Thornton is not a emasculating of Thornton, but rather a movement for Margaret away from the utter (and utterly useless) femininity which her cousin Edith possesses. Margaret is no heroine to be dragged around by her husband while she inspects foreign lace and bears children, and her relationship with Thornton will allow her a sort of power that unites them in their pursuit of business success. Thornton’s platonic union between himself and the workers is one of absolute masculinity. The workers, the men, accept Thornton into their dining-room and share meals with him, speaking to him in a community of men. By rejecting his authority as the master, Thornton allows himself to join his employees and speak to them man to man. Such masculine community becomes a place for Thornton to exist no matter his business situation—the workers will work for him again, should it become possible, and no doubt Higgins will not throw over his friend for a change in fortunes. Thornton, who strives to be a “true man” for most of the novel, achieves his goal through his individual masculinity, and reinforces it through his union with the employees he finds to be just like himself—men.
North and South constructs a version of masculinity on the foundation of strong character. Where Margaret believes she understand masculinity, and uses the term “gentleman,” Thornton argues that “gentleman” and “man” are two separate entities, and he does his best to live up to his own expectations he has created through his understanding of a man. Thornton’s masculinity is bound up not in his role as a master, but in his strength of character that develops over the course of the novel. Margaret notably uses his work toward manliness as motivation to face workers despite the danger, which he does when he stands in front of the rioting workers. Higgins, meanwhile, offers a workingman’s opinion of a master, and his opinion changes as he realizes that the man himself is not trapped in only a master’s body. Of course, the most significant opinion of Thornton is his own, and through his labor for fair play and his consistency, Thornton achieves his masculinity. He does, after all, have a human heart (and, yes, a master’s ear), and that heart is tender enough to feel for Boucher’s children and for Higgins and even for Margaret herself.

He had tenderness in his heart—“a soft place,” as Nicholas Higgins called it; but he had some pride in concealing it; he kept it very sacred and safe, and was jealous of every circumstance that tried to gain admission. But if he dreaded exposure of his tenderness, he was equally desirous that all men should recognise his justice. (NS 295).
While Thornton attempts to hide his human heart under his role as a master, Margaret and Higgins both see it because they understand Thornton as a man. Thornton’s tenderness and sense of justice are equally part of his manliness—and act as further evidence of the difficulty of limiting Victorian masculinity to a single definition. Instead, Gaskell’s novels develop masculinity alongside the changing definitions of the Victorian period. Thus Thornton becomes the master which *Mary Barton* could never have included, the master who can admit his wrongs and face a worker while maintaining his manliness, because he ultimately defines himself not in opposition to others, but in his unions with them.
Chapter 5

“The future must be met”

Having begun this project with debates surrounding the concept of Victorian masculinity and manhood, it seems only proper to come full circle. Masculinity, gentlemanliness, manliness—all terms impossible to clearly define within the confines of Victorian literature, even within the novels of a single author like Elizabeth Gaskell. The masculinity of *Mary Barton* set master and worker within Manchester society against each other, with violence serving as a significant aspect of the relations between groups of men. John Barton’s violence, the act of murdering Harry Carson, rises from his own loss of a son, and John Carson’s pursuit of vengeance for his son’s death pushes the plot forward as he removes himself from human compassion. For the two Johns, mediation and reconciliation require Biblical intervention to remind Carson of his humanity and relationship with Barton as *men*. The violence of *Mary Barton* is limited in *North and South*, with the relationship between Thornton and Higgins taking on the focus that violence previously held. Masculinity is a working definition for Thornton, as his community defines him as a master and he works to define himself as a man. Thornton and Higgins’s reconciliation is extended further than the sudden forgiveness Carson offers at the end of *Mary Barton*, allowing master and worker to come together as men and Thornton to continue developing into the man he wants to be.
In *North and South*, the conversation between Margaret and Thornton about the difference between “gentleman” and “man” is a turning point in the novel’s version of masculinity. Where *Mary Barton*’s characters were defined by the period in which they existed—Barton’s masculinity of the Chartist movement, and the responding masculine vengeance of Carson—Thornton does not allow Margaret’s version of masculinity to overpower his own. John Tosh, in “Gentlemanly Politeness and Manly Simplicity,” points to the discussion as an example of the changes in Victorian ideas of “gentlemanliness” and “manliness,” based on social behavior (politeness) and individualism, respectively. Tosh writes,

> The discussion between Margaret Hale and John Thornton turned on the issue of which could be subsumed in the other. Margaret accepted the ascription of all worthy qualities to the gentleman, including what passed for manly ones. John dismissed gentlemanliness as no more than a code for ordering social relations, which did not touch the inner man. Given the inclusive character of manliness, it would be surprising if there were not substantial convergence. (Tosh “Gentlemanly” 471).

Even within one novel’s world, there is no single definition of masculinity, and without that limitation, individual men must work to define themselves through their behaviors. Tosh’s point, that Margaret and Thornton have different requirements for manhood, is only further evidence of the internal conflict existing within Victorian masculinity.
Despite Thornton’s disdain for the term “gentleman,” for example, Raffaella Antinucci declares him to be “an Industrial Version of the Victorian Gentleman,” arguing that he is a refashioning of Carlyle’s old ideals. Antinucci also writes that the conflicting views throughout the novel “[replace] the disjunctive conjunction versus with the more welcoming conjunctive, Milton and Helston [sic], city and country, masters and hands, men and gentlemen, Thornton and Margaret” (Antinucci 133). Thornton may not fit Margaret’s idea of “gentleman,” and Thornton may not wish to be labeled a “gentleman,” but in linking the two terms together through the use of the conjunction “and,” Gaskell does not attempt to limit masculinity. Man is not in opposition to gentleman, just as master is not in opposition to hands (or workers). Instead, they are connected, men coexisting with gentlemen, masters with workers.

The connection between men is one of the strengths of North and South, the success where Mary Barton struggles. Barton and Carson, though they find union, can only do so once they have both suffered masculine agony and even then, it can be achieved only as Barton dies. The relationship between Thornton and Higgins, however, grows out of mutual respect and the understood need to work together for success. Thornton recognizes Higgins’s abilities as a worker, and his compassion as a man, and Higgins recognizes Thornton’s worthiness as a master, and his compassion as a man. Thornton does not throw away his business for the sake of philanthropy toward his workers, but he respects them as individuals. The construction of the dining-hall is a key
instance of Thornton and Higgins as men, with their cooperation growing from interest in the well-being of the workers as individuals rather than the possibility of financial success. Thornton’s internal rubric of what makes a man, instead of subscribing only to the social concept of a gentleman, allows him to see his workers as human beings instead of laboring bodies.

Perhaps most significant in the development of Gaskell’s masculine characters is the acknowledgement of Thornton’s gentle nature. As a master, he is determined and unsympathetic. But, as Higgins reveals to Margaret when he explains Thornton’s visits to see Boucher’s children, Thornton “had tenderness in his heart […] but he had some pride in concealing it” (NS 295). Despite being tried with loss and rejection, Thornton maintains a tenderness of heart, toward both his workers and his social acquaintances. Thornton prides himself on his sense of justice, a justice that is vastly different from the justice Carson seeks in Mary Barton. While Carson desires legal justice for his son’s death, Thornton’s justice is in treating men well—he pursues Higgins as an employee because Higgins spends hours waiting for a meeting and Thornton believes it just to give him an opportunity to speak, and he cares for the Hales even after Margaret’s rejection because he cares for them. Thornton’s hidden tenderness, and his desire for just treatment of men, earns the respect of his workers and, ultimately, of Margaret. He becomes the master Mary Barton could not have included, the master who can admit his wrongs and befriend a worker while maintaining a sense of his own masculinity.
The transformation of master from John Carson of *Mary Barton* into John Thornton of *North and South* is a transformation of Gaskell’s masters into men. Thornton does not seek reconciliation with his employees through the Bible, as Carson does, but through his own actions as a fellow man. The change is evidence of Gaskell’s vision of the future: her “idealized man […] embraces the social transformations of capitalism, justifying its laissez-faire philosophy, but possessing the humanistic sensibility to improve the lives of his workers” (Henry 158). Carson’s obsession with capital gains, and then revenge for his son’s death, nears violence in its passion, while Thornton’s change is in becoming more driven by his humanity. Thornton’s transformation is not a conclusion in the development of Victorian masculinity, but another step toward a sort of compassionate capitalism, in which the masters recognize their employees as fellow men and in which masculinity can be redefined as the world changes. Unifying masters and workers through their humanity, their shared masculinity, opens the door to compassion on a broader scale.

During Margaret’s journey to Milton, she finds herself wishing that she and her family could stay by the sea, in an area between her old home in the south and her new home in the north. Though she wishes she could stay, “the future must be met, however stern and iron it be” (*NS* 55). For Margaret, the future is filled with change, just as Gaskell’s world was to be filled with unions and acts of Parliament, a growing world market and the eventual fall of aristocracy. For readers now, the future looks quite
different—new technology, new philosophy, new global relationships will do that to a worldview—but the spirit is the same. In order to grow as humanity, though, compassionate relationships like that of Thornton and Higgins must take shape. Men must speak to each other as men and not as master or worker, and with the rise of women in the workforce, we must make discussions equal amongst genders as well as races and religions. The world changes as the future is met, and Gaskell’s ability to develop her characters within the Victorian continuum of masculinity reminds readers even now that people and opinions can change, that hearts can grow, and that compassion is worthwhile. Above all, we should strive for Thornton’s mastery of self: “Be always the same John Thornton in whatever circumstances; endeavouring to do right, and making great blunders; and then trying to be brave in setting to afresh” (NS 384). No matter the challenges the future brings, Gaskell’s men encourage us to do what is right and good, and to rise again from defeat. United in our humanity, the future can be met, and changed for the better.
Bibliography


