

“Salvation in a False Direction”: How Domestic Materiality in two Literary Case Studies Reconfigures the Victorian Family

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Setting the Scene:

Marx and Engels explore the Family in a Capitalist Economy

In *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Friedrich Engels asserts that English industrialization has disrupted a harmony that had previously occupied the homes of the peasants enmeshed within feudal systems. Engels’ yearning for a peaceful home life imitates Rousseau’s desire to reinstate the self-sufficiency and freedom that was present when men lived in the state of nature. Engels demonstrates his affinity for principles articulated in *The Social Contract* and the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* when he observes that the members of these agricultural households “were comfortable in their silent vegetation”¹ (17). Later², Marx will dismiss the desire for “the isolated hunter or fisherman” and will argue that “Robinsonades”, amongst whom Engels must be included, misinterpret the figure of the natural, solitary producer³ (*Introduction* 124). Instead, Marx believes

¹ Rousseau asserts that in the ‘state of nature’ men are “tranquil and innocent” (*Inequality* 45). Engels’ reference to “silent vegetation” gestures to Rousseau’s savage who “agitated by nothing, is given over to the single feeling of his own present existence, without any idea of the future, however, near it may be, and his projects, as limited as his views hardly extend to the end of the day” (*Inequality* 46).

² Engels composed *The Condition of the Working Class in England* from September 1844 to March 1845. Marx and Engels wrote *The German Ideology* together between September 1845 and summer 1846 (*Preface* 1).

³ The degree to which Rousseau proposes a return to ‘the state of nature’ is a controversial subject. For a full description of this critical landscape, see Alessandro Ferrara’s *Modernity and Authenticity: A Study of the Social and Ethical Thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. State University of New York Press, 1993, p. 30-39. For the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to understand that Marx is critical of those social theorists who idealize a ‘natural man’ functioning outside of competitive systems. Instead, Marx contends that the purpose of Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* is to demonstrate how inequality amongst individuals in a social group arises out of methods of production and the security of property.

that Rousseau anticipated the “ ‘bourgeois society’, which began to evolve in the sixteenth century and in the eighteenth century made giant strides towards maturity” in the political theory that proposes an alternative social order to combat the disruptive effects of competition (*Introduction* 124). Marx chides social historians of the 18th century who largely saw the individual “as an ideal whose existence belongs to the past” where Marx understands the individual as “a product of the dissolution of feudal society” (*Introduction* 124).

Marx believes that any idealization of an isolated family unit errs for a number of reasons. First, isolation at this stage of social development would only occur when a member of a civilization is cast out of their community. Second, the romanticization of isolation violates the Aristotelian principle⁴ that man is by nature a social animal. Finally, man can only “individualise himself only within society” and, for that reason, he thrives in community (*Introduction* 125). In light of Marx’s criticism, Engels’ romanticization of the isolated family unit within the feudal system must be reexamined to determine whether their “material position was far better than that of their successors” (Engels 16). It will be the goal of this paper to determine the degree to which shifting materiality in the market and in the home governs the future of the Victorian family.

In his representation of the peaceful feudal homestead, Engels idealizes the sedentary occupations of the women who work within the home: “Before the introduction of machinery, the spinning and weaving of raw materials was carried on in the working man’s home. Wife and daughter spun the yarn that the father wove or that they sold” (Engels 15). He also claims that the men of this earlier age were entirely virtuous because there were no temptations to lure them away from the household. Engels speculates that these “good husbands and fathers...had no temptation to be immoral, there being no gin palaces or low houses in their vicinity” (Engels 16). Engels attributes the harmony of the household to the fact that they “had their children the whole day at home, and brought them up in obedience and the fear of God; the patriarchal relationship remained undisturbed” (Engels 17). For Engels, familial dissonance is acted out as members of household leave the enclosed unit.

Engels argues that the feudal system began the process of commodification by transforming members of the working class into transferable external objects devoid of independent facilities:

They were not human being; they were merely toiling machines in the service of the few aristocrats who had guided history down to that time. The industrial revolution has simply carried this out to its

⁴ See Aristotle’s *Politics* Book 1, Ch.2 (1253a2).

logical end by making the workers machines pure and simple, taking from them the last trace of independent activity, and so forcing them to think and demand a position worthy of men. (Engels 17)

Engels’ terminology that depicts the worker as a reified machine correlates with the theory of working class commodification which Marx had formulated a year earlier. Published in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, this theory would fundamentally alter the eco-political landscape: “Production does not simply produce man as a commodity, the human commodity, man in the role of commodity; it produces him in keeping with this role as a mentally and physically dehumanized being” (*Economic* 121). Departing from Engels, Marx claims that the roots of commodification are located in the divisions of labor that naturally manifest amongst the members of a family. Marx states:

Within a family and, after further development, within a tribe, there springs up naturally a division of labour caused by differences of sex and age, and therefore based on a purely physiological foundation. More material for this division of labour is then provided by the expansion of the community, the increase of its population and, in particular, conflicts between the different tribes and the subjugation of one tribe by another (*Capital* 471).

In this passage, Marx locates the cause and order of a system of commodities not in the nascent forms of capitalism, such as feudalism, but in the organic hierarchy of the family. For Marx, the “distribution of labor within the family and the labor-time expended by the individual members of the family, are regulated by differences of sex and age” (*Capital* 171). For both Engels and Marx, it is both natural and necessary for successful rural production to designate tasks as masculine or feminine. Marx describes the designation of gendered labor:

The different kinds of labor which create these products – such as tilling the fields, tending the cattle, spinning, weaving and making clothes – are already in their natural form social functions; for they are functions of the family, which, just as much as a society based on commodity production, possess its own spontaneously developed division of labor. (*Capital* 171)

When the members of the family leave the self-contained unit and enter the production-based society, the individuals suffer commodification and, as a result, the relations amongst family member are abnormally altered. Marx suggests that

this corruption is the result of the invasion of the “fantastical forms” of labor and fictitious value allocation (*Capital* 165).

Marx defines “fetishism” as the interjection of social relations, the determining factor in value appraisal, in a “world of commodities” (*Capital* 165). This formal transformation of commodified bodies occurs when the value of the object is no longer material but only a function of the social circumstance. Finally, social relations of material objects become the center of value determination instead of their physical nature: “the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labor as objective characteristics of the products of labor themselves” and has “absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this” (*Capital* 164-165).

In the article “Reading Capital with Little Nell”, Matthew Rowlinson notes that both Marx’s description of commodification and the easy compliance of materiality in a market of exchange are plainly gendered. Rowlinson suggests that Marx’s allegory for the exchange of commodities includes a doubled passivity (375). First, Marx asserts that the commodity can offer no resistance to its owner and, second, Marx likens this weakness of the commodity to a woman’s inability to reject a man’s sexual advances. Marx describes this gendered commodity:

Commodities cannot themselves go to market and perform exchanges in their own right. We must, therefore, have recourse to their guardians, who are the possessors of commodities. Commodities are things, and therefore lack the power to resist man. If they are unwilling, he can use force; in other words, he can take possession of them. (*Capital* 178)

Marx’s footnote fully explicates the gendered process of this exchange when he situates the literal market in a real location that the allegory takes as its model:

In the twelfth century, so renowned for its piety, very delicate things often appear among these commodities. A French poet of the period enumerates among the commodities to be found in the fair of Lendit, alongside clothing, shoes, leather, implements of cultivation, skins, etc., also “*femmes folles de leur corps*” (*Capital* 178 n. 1).

If a commodified body entering the market becomes essentially feminized by this exchange, then, by extension, the working man will also suffer a feminization. Engels names the ‘unnatural femininity’ of a commodified husband and the disruption of the ‘natural’ labor distribution as the cause of familial dissonance in a capitalist system.

Not only does the man suffer a castration in the market, the woman finds herself effectively ‘raped’ by the owner of her commodified body. Engels acknowledges these pseudo-sexual violations when he describes the departure of the newly fetishized state of the household from traditional gender roles: “This condition...unsexes the man and takes from the woman all womanliness without being able to bestow upon the man true womanliness, or the woman true manliness – this condition [...] degrades, in the most shameful way, both sexes, and, through them, Humanity...” (155). After the husband and wife submit to acts of economic and material violence (which, for Marx, are synonymous), the unified household of the feudal system is replaced by a deviant familial hierarchy.

Engels explicitly names English women as the cause of the disruption within the domestic sphere because, once commodified, they alter the configuration of the family unit. He claims that “the employment of the wife dissolves the family utterly” (154). For Engels, the estrangement of the wife from the family is the most damaging consequence of industrialization because when “the wife supports the family, the husband sits at home, tends the children, sweeps the room and cooks” (Engels 154). Engels invests all his sympathy with the husband who “cannot escape from the family, must live in the family, and the consequence is a perpetual succession of family troubles, domestic quarrels, most demoralizing for parents and children alike” and, in the same breath, Engels chastises the Victorian wife for her absence.

After repeatedly bolstering all the traditional notions of gender roles, Engels unexpectedly overturns them. Assuming that London is the culmination of any economic system and culture because it is so ‘prosperous’⁵, Engels makes a *reductio* argument to show that the family has been unnaturally unified since the advent of feudalism. He suggests that, if the family, the fundamental unit of a civilization, is corrupted in the height of economic ‘prosperity’ then “we must admit that human society has hitherto sought salvation in a false direction; we must admit that so total a reversal of the position of the sexes can have come to pass only because the sexes have been placed in a false position from the beginning” (156). Engels concludes that the flaw in the earliest family hierarchy is the unifying principle of private interest. In other words, because the family comes together not out of an instinctive affection but simply as a “community of possessions”, its flaws are most clearly evidenced when the family is in its final state (Engels 156). It is important to note that this line of reasoning does not necessarily expose the patriarch as a false sovereign. Engels reasons:

⁵ Engels intends this statement to be taken ironically insofar as capitalism evaluates its own success by fantastically artificial systems of exchange

If the wife can now base her supremacy upon the fact that she supplies the greater part, nay, the whole of the common possession, the necessary inference is that this community of possession is no true and rational one, since one member of the family boasts offensively of contributing the greater share (156).

Here, Engels simply asserts that the authority of the father must be based upon his masculine sovereignty, endowed to him by nature, and that the capitalist society mistakenly understands the father's authority in the family to derive from his role as material provider. Then for Engels, the peaceful familial hierarchy will be reinstated and the father will resume his reign when the unnatural role of 'the provider' is removed.

Engels suggests that the false premise of 'the provider' will be abandoned after the government that subsidizes capitalism is overthrown. This paper will demonstrate from a brief survey of Victorian social polemics and literary trends that the myth of the masculine provider is overturned within a capitalist system as women enter the workforce. Violence and turmoil in the home and in the market accompanied this transition. Engels relates the story of the father who is forced to care for the household while his wife is in the workforce:

'...there sat poor Jack near the fire, and what did he, thing you? Why he sat and mended his wife's stockings with the bodkin; and as soon as he saw his old friend at the doorpost, he tried to hide them. But Joe, that is my friend's name, had seen it, and said: 'Jack, what the devil art thou doing? Where is the missus? Why, is that thy work?' and poor Jack was ashamed... (Jack said) 'now the world is upside down. Mary has to work and I have to stop at home, mind the childer, seep and wash, bake and mend; and when the poor woman comes home at night, she is knocked up. Thou knows, Joe, it's hard for one that was used to different.' (155)

The worker attributes his suffering to an 'upside down world' and reflects that his pain is intensified because the familial hierarchy has been upended when he 'was used to different'. Jack laments the gender reversal and the lack of employment for men but at no time in this passage does he express indignation about being denied his 'natural' right to provide. Engels wrongly credits the notion of a provider as the cause of this epistemic despondency when instead the disruption in the Victorian worker-family is caused by ideological violence that accompanies the death of the *gendered* provider. The remainder of this paper will examine two literary representations of the newly forged female provider and will also explore

the tensions that developed as people were forced to discredit gender-specific labor. I employ two literary case studies to document how two women, Charles Dickens's Nancy and Elizabeth Gaskell's Margaret Hale, escape commodification by asserting their materiality in a capitalist economy.

Dicken's Nancy:

Materiality as a means of Emancipation in a Commodified Market

During the Industrial Revolution, tensions in the market and the family manifested themselves in two distinct manners; they either encouraged a propensity for violence or they idealized a return to the 'natural' order of the family. Dickens is a useful representative of the times because he has made use of both stratagems in order to discredit the altered domestic hierarchy. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens embodied the violence of familial disorder and romanticization of the 'natural' family within the figure of Nancy. Murder is one of the most extreme consequences of domestic disorder but one example that is often cited by social reformers during the Victorian period⁶. The figure of the sexually indiscriminate

⁶ In his reform polemic, *In Darkest England: The Way Out*, General William Booth offers this report of a domestic murder/suicide to demonstrate the “social condition of the Sunken Millions”:

“But how much more terrible must it be for the married man with his wife and children to be turned out into the streets. [...] now and then out of the depths there sounds a bitter wail as of some strong swimmer in his agony as he is drawn under by the current. A short time ago a respectable man, a chemist in Holloway, fifty years of age, driven hard to the wall, tried to end it all by cutting his throat. His wife also cut her throat, and at the same time they gave strychnine to their only child. The effort failed, and they were placed on trial for attempted murder” (41).

Henry Mayhew provides this gruesome account of a homicidal wife and husband in his meticulously transcribed encyclopedia of working-class occupations, *London Labour and the London Poor*, in order to demonstrate the effects of dissolute living situations on the city's working children:

“ ‘On Friday, 31st May, 1816, William Moles and Sarah his wife, were tried at the Old Bailey for the wilful murder of John Hewley, alias Haseley, a boy about six years of age, in the month of April last, by cruelly beating him. Under the direction of the learned judge, they were acquitted of the crime of murder, but the husband was detained to take his trial as for a misdemeanor, of which he was convicted upon the fullest evidence, and sentenced to two years' imprisonment. The facts, as proved in this case, are too shocking in detail to relate: the substance of them is, that he was forced up the chimney on the shoulder of a bigger boy, and afterwards violently pulled down again by the leg and dashed upon a marble hearth; his leg was thus broken, and death ensued in a few hours, and on his body and knees were found scars arising from wounds of a much older date.’ This long-continued system of cruelties, of violations of public and private duties, bore and ripened its natural fruits. The climbing boys grew up to be unhealthy, vicious, ignorant, and idle men...” (398).

woman who is violently murdered by her partner is the site of a great number of didactic appeals for chastity and temperance⁷. While this tragic figure is constructed with the intention of instruction, the authors of fictional episodes feel compelled to destroy these errant female characters (wives and single women alike) for many reasons. A Victorian author attempting to provide moral correction might be motivated to commit literary murder because female characters have been sexually contaminated by their professions or living situations. Nancy's profession is never made explicit but is truly palpable within the force of the narrative. She and her companion Bet are initially described with language that falls just short of unequivocally calling them painted prostitutes, and their physical description serves to make them a cipher for all women of their profession:

They wore a good deal of hair: not very neatly turned up behind; and were rather untidy about the shoes and stockings. They were not exactly pretty, perhaps; but they had a great deal of colour in their faces; and looked quite stout and hearty. Being remarkably free and agreeable in their manners, Oliver thought them very nice girls indeed. (Dickens 68)

Dickens reserves beauty for women of a certain class (his Rose Maylies) so that this aesthetic may be fundamentally associated with sexual purity or women (like Agnes, Oliver's deceased mother) who repent of their sexual proclivities. Dickens' prostitutes are allowed freedom which deprives them of social propriety but grants them a sort of mobility that is not accessible to Dickens' beautiful figures of femininity.

Because Nancy's mobility places her within the market of exchange, Dickens is further compelled to destroy his construction of the licentious woman. Marlene Tromp, citing Rowlinson, suggests that Nancy elicits the violence because she is a commodified body that is excessively material: "we must read Nancy's excessive materiality and her role in a series of economic exchanges as evidence of another form of the manifest historically situated tensions Rowlinson sees...Nancy secures the economic exchange, serving as the material conduit, the body that bears the

⁷ Beth Kalikoff examines how street literature of the period romanticized the gallows and exposed the 'skeleton in every house' (78) which threatened political and domestic stability. For the intersections of sensationalism and the yearning for public displays of justice, see *Murder and Moral Decay in Victorian Popular Literature*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1986, p 61-79. Upending this gendered binary of aggressor and victim, Mary S. Hartman's offers a biographic report of 'middleclass murderesses', the social triggers that motivated their acts of violence, and the public response to their trials. See *Victorian Murderesses*. New York : Schocken Books, 1977.

violence of the exchange” (43). The greatest piece of evidence Tromp offers for Nancy’s materiality and her “capacity [for] physical damage that Rose transcends in her angelic demeanor” is the graphic nature of Nancy’s murder (33). Following this argument, Dickens’ fascination with brutality that injures his morally deficient characters seems to assign these characters a weighty corporality associated with sinfulness and corruption. Then, Nancy’s sinfulness and corporality make her body a fitting site for material exchange.

I believe that an alternate account of Nancy’s physical person and gradual materiality may be offered that is more in keeping with Dickens’ narrative and will consistently position Nancy’s body within the market. Many critics⁸ have commented on the Victorian tendency to present women of the upper and middle-class as disembodied occupants of the domestic realm. Engels and Marx, on the other hand, would argue that all women of this period are essentially bodiless and, because of their status as commodities, they have been separated from their natural materiality in order to function in markets of exchange. If it is true that women of all levels of society were similarly commodified, it matters little whether they operated as commodities in the market of ‘dignified’ marriage or the market of prostitution. In both instances, the presence of private property contaminates sexual and political unions. Turning back to Dickens, Nancy’s presence in the market compels her to submit to the disembodiment. As a commodity, Nancy cannot resist the whims of her owner and pimp, Bill Sikes, who forces her into the market of sexual exchange. Tromp argues that Nancy becomes a site of exchange in her meeting with Mr. Brownlow and Rose and, further, her materiality is exaggerated when Bill Sikes physically restrains her (35). Therefore, if Nancy has already been introduced into the market of prostitution by Sikes, her meeting with Brownlow and Rose only reiterates her disembodied condition.

It seems more plausible that, in this episode, Nancy attempts to reclaim her materiality and to embody herself with the market of her choice. While struggling with her decision to help Oliver, Nancy’s body is alternately represented as diminished or unnaturally robust because, attempting to leave the market of exchange that Sikes’ governs, she oscillates between states of material presence and disembodiment:

⁸ The term “angel in the house” was coined by Coventry Patmore with his 1855 lyric poem of the same name. For a description of the critical work that concerns the intersection of economy and the domestic angel, see Tromp 27-28 and 34-35. Nina Auerbach convincingly demonstrates the difficulty that arises when the gendered title of ‘domestic angel’ is applied to dramatically different Victorian characters. See p. 63-108 of *Woman and the Demon*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982.

She was resolved. Though all her mental struggles terminated in this conclusion, they forced themselves upon her, again and again, and left their traces too. She grew pale and thin, even within a few days. At times she took no heed of what was passing before her; or no part in the conversations where once she would have been the loudest. At other times, she laughed without merriment, and was noisy without cause or meaning. (Dickens 358)

When the time for the meeting arrives, Nancy is initially incorporeal but, as she begins to act independently of Sikes, she asserts her material presence:

‘Hallo!’ cried Sikes. ‘Nance. Where’s the gal going to at this time of night?’

‘Not far.’

‘What answer’s that?’ returned Sikes. ‘Where are you going?’

‘I say, not far.’

‘And I say where?’ retorted Sikes. ‘Do you hear me?’

‘I don’t know where,’ replied the girl.

‘Then I do,’ said Sikes, more in the spirit obstinacy than because he had any real objection to the girl going where she listed.

‘Nowhere. Sit down.’

‘I’m not well. I told you that before,’ rejoined the girl. ‘I want a breath of air.’ (Dickens 359)

In this episode, one can literally trace Nancy’s slow materialization as she resists Sikes’ attempts to maintain her disembodied state. She begins as a disembodied voice whose place and travels are vague and only negative (‘Not far.’). Next, she positions herself as a voice but is still only making statements of negation (‘I say, not far.’). Nancy is then presented by the narrative as an intellect and a ‘girl’ but, still, she can only allowed to make negative observations and she is not capable of an authoritative voice (‘I don’t know where,’ replied the girl). Finally, she achieves physicality when she remarks that her body is ‘not well’. In her final response to Sikes’ commands, Nancy possesses a voice that occupies time insofar as she refers to her previous statements and, through this temporality, she establishes her materiality. Most significantly, she voices desires that are in opposition to those of Sikes, who Marx would metaphorically designate as ‘the bourgeois capitalist’.

Marx’s description of the process by which private property is annulled is strikingly similar to the embodiment that Nancy’s achieves through her power of speech: “The transcendence of private property is therefore the complete

emancipation of all human senses and qualities, but it is this emancipation precisely because these senses and attributes have become, subjectively and objectively, human. The eye has become a human eye, just as its object has become a social, human object” (*Economic* 139). To escape commodification, Marx suggests that the worker must make his senses human and, in doing so, claim personhood by means of the body’s material functions. Because Nancy discovers that reclamation of her senses is the means to her independence, she is able to assert her materiality. The question then arises: why does Nancy die such a violent death?

Nancy’s death is tragic precisely because it follows her triumphant seizure of materiality. After Nancy becomes the agent of her own fate and reacquires her material body, Nancy finds herself in danger of violent retribution because, by controlling her capital, she threatens Sikes’ bourgeois economics. Deviating from Marx, I would suggest that Nancy’s newly-acquired materiality is a positive element of her identity insofar as she functions in the market of information exchange under her own direction. Because of her materiality, Nancy can be evaluated by real elements of her personhood as opposed to the imaginary denominations assigned within a commodified economy. When she describes the location and countenance of Oliver’s kidnapper, Nancy liberally offers a lengthy physical description of Monks, “the localities of the place [and] the best position from which to watch it without exciting observation” (374). In exchange for Oliver’s whereabouts, Brownlow offers Nancy “quiet asylum [...] entirely beyond the reach of you former associates [to] leave as utter an absence of all trace behind you, as if you were to disappear from the earth this moment”. Nancy flatly refuses Mr. Brownlow’s offer of incorporeity and, through her refusal, maintains her material agency⁹. Nancy’s flaw is not, as Tromp suggests, “the capacity for physical damage that Rose transcends in her angelic demeanor, an attribute linked particularly to her class”¹⁰ (33); it is her inability to predict that her newly-acquired materiality would offend Sikes’s sense of economy. Because Nancy has just grasped hold of significant materiality, the reader laments Nancy’s decision to *return* to Sikes more than her “moral failings” (Tromp 32).

The incredibly gruesome murder scene that follows Nancy’s reunion with Sikes confirms his need to return Nancy to the state of a disembodied commodity. The violence that results from Nancy’s newfound materiality offers one example of the disruption that may be caused in a household after a woman independently enters

⁹ Brownlow’s offer contains marked similarities with Dickens’ “An Appeal to Fallen Women” such as the promise of anonymity and domestic comfort and peace.

¹⁰ I do not disagree with Tromp when she argues that Rose Maylie’s purity and incorporeal body protect her from physical violence. See *The Private Rod* p. 26-28.

the market and governs her own exchange. Dickens pointedly denies Nancy the happy family reunion that he allows Olivier. While Dickens idealizes the ‘naturally’ ordered family when he leaves Oliver “truly happy” surrounded by his family in prayer and “gratitude to that Being whose code is Mercy, and whose great attribute is Benevolence” (438-439), he punishes Nancy for upsetting the ‘natural order’ when he leaves her “nearly blinded with the blood rained down from a deep gash in her forehead”, clutching Rose Maylie’s handkerchief, praying “for mercy to her Maker” (383).

Margaret Hale as a Masculine Provider in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*

In many of her industrial novels, Elizabeth Gaskell demonstrates how the “development of class antagonisms keeps even pace with the development of industry” (*Manifesto* 40) but, here ends Gaskell’s resemblance with Marx and Engels’ Communist reform. Vehemently opposed to violence, in *North and South*, Gaskell advocates sympathy and promotes “the transformative potential of direct contact between members of different classes” (Anderson 108-109). Turning now to a heroine of industry, I argue that Margaret Hale asserts her material presence in the household and reimagines the state of the commodified worker.

When Mr. Hale tells his daughter, Margaret, that he has resigned from his ministerial and that their family’s social and financial position is damaged, a notable reversal occurs. Margaret becomes the head of household just as her father relinquishes his position as the leader of his parish. Mr. Hale surrenders his primacy in the home when asks his daughter to: “help me to tell your mother. I think I could do anything but that: the idea of her stress turns me sick with dread” (36). The language that Mr. Hale employs contextually unsexes him and, like the lamentations of Engel’s Jack, he speaks “low words of self-reproach and humiliation” (35). Mr. Hale’s mental exertion is so extreme that it causes him to become ill. A physical ailment that is the direct result of unsettling mental exertion is a weakness predominantly exhibited by women in the novel. Both Mrs. Hale and Fanny Thornton suffer from fainting spells, combat the vulgarity of capitalism, and scorn the appearance of the factories and workers that sustain their prosperity. In *North and South*, physical weakness is presented as diametrically opposed to the pursuits of capitalism.

Margaret undermines her father’s ministerial authority a second time because she displays mental fortitude. Margaret assumes her father’s role of provider when she dismisses the Mr. Hale’s blessings, the substance of their former livelihood:

he said solemnly: ‘the blessing of God be upon thee, my child!’ ‘And may he restore you to His Church,’ responded she, out of the fullness of her heart. The next moment she feared lest this answer to his blessing might be irreverent, wrong - might hurt him as coming from his daughter. (38-39)

Margaret’s newfound authority does not simply exhibit in communications with her father but is frequently observed by others who interact with her. Mr. Thornton is taken aback by Margaret’s demeanor: “instead of a quiet, middle-aged clergyman, a young lady came forward with frank dignity, - a young lady of a different type to most of those he was in the habit of seeing (57-58)”. By vocally and physically appropriating the place of her father in the domestic, Margaret asserts her materiality because, like Nancy, she achieves the “complete emancipation of all human senses and qualities”, a process that Marx contends is necessary to ‘transcend’ the limitations of private property.

Margaret’s materiality differs from Nancy’s because Margaret appreciates the powerful agency that is intrinsic to the role of the provider. During a visit from a prominent factory owner, Mr. Hale suggests that the worker should be dealt with as an adolescent. In opposition to her father, Margaret indicts the manufacturer for their doctrine of a necessary hierarchy of classes and, in doing so, gestures to the feudal denial of a natural equality. Margaret’s complaints against the ‘manufacturer’ are similar to those that Marx and Engels’ wield against bourgeois capitalist and, in this episode, Margaret proves that she is opposed to commodification of any form:

you are a man, dealing with a set of men over whom you have...immense power, just because your lives and welfare are so constantly and intimately interwoven. God has made us so that we must be mutually dependent. We may ignore our own dependence, or refuse to acknowledge that others depend upon us in more respects than the payment of weekly wages; but the thing must be, nevertheless. Neither you nor any master can help yourselves. (112)

Gaskell, by upsetting the hierarchy of father and daughter, masculine and feminine, in favor of such a sympathetic character as Margaret, pleads for equality and social justice in the Victorian workforce and demonstrates that the plight of the worker in a capitalist economy is not so different from that of a woman in any household.

Conclusion: “Salvation in a False Direction”

As women began to assert their material agency as providers within the home and workers within market, the Victorian family was reconfigured and the role of husband and father changed. Social reformers no longer sought a means for the working man to “escape from the family” in order to avoid a “perpetual succession of family troubles” (Engels 140). Instead, reformers like William Booth call for a shortening of the working day so that children do not grow up fatherless: “A father who never dandles his child on his knee cannot have a very keen sense of the responsibilities of paternity” (64). The revised notion of femininity gave way to a new sense of fatherhood; one that charged fathers to embody qualities of compassion and mutual sympathy that had been exclusively attributed to the female caregiver. Little by little, the plea to reinstate a masculine provider (a role that Engels ascribes to the false sovereignty of private interest) is replaced with the desire for natural affection amongst family members and, as women assert their materiality in the market, the family achieves their “salvation in a false direction” (Engels 156).

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