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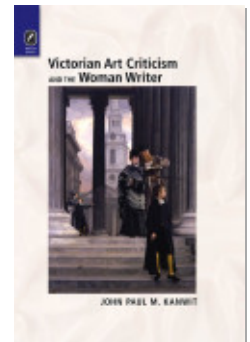
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CHAPTER 2



“Mere outward appearances”?

TEACHING HOUSEHOLD TASTE AND SOCIAL PERCEPTION IN ELIZABETH GASKELL’S *NORTH AND SOUTH* AND CONTEMPORARY ART COMMENTARY

Many twentieth-century readers have critiqued Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1854–55) for its apparent conventional-ity. Raymond Williams complains that the novel follows a typical Victorian pattern in solving class conflicts with money. Sally Shuttleworth argues that the novel’s ending “in the safe surroundings of a middle-class drawing-room” (xxxiv) implies an ultimate avoidance of political problems. While recognizing in *North and South* the importance of private life in the public realm, Catherine Gallagher nevertheless concludes that the text’s families are ultimately separate “from the larger society” (148). As Deidre d’Albortis, Hilary Schor, and other critics have more recently shown, such readings assume that Gaskell was more interested in household details than in political change.¹ For Susan Johnston, the critique of Gaskell as primarily a domestic novelist relies on the erroneous idea that domestic and public life were distinct in the nineteenth century. While some prominent Victorian writers hoped to institute this separation, domestic and public life were in fact intimately connected throughout the period. As a result, claims Johnston, even “avowedly political fiction . . . [like *North and South*] depends on the originary and intimate space of the household in order to make its claims” (103). In ways that even recent criticism has only begun to

understand, Gaskell uses household details in her novels to effect profound political statements.

In tracing Gaskell's argument for political change through the domestic, this chapter examines *North and South* and some of Gaskell's other novels in the context of mid-Victorian writings on household taste. In doing so, I expand on a theme that I introduce in chapter 1: the notion that improving taste in the high arts, but also in the realm of everyday manufacture and design, would have profound economic and moral effects on the country. As my discussion of government hearings in chapter 1 demonstrates, conceptions of taste were always politically inflected, especially in issues involving working-class designers and middle-class consumers. Class conflicts in *North and South*, I assert in this chapter, are substantially addressed through the development of perceptive household taste by some middle-class characters. Though Gaskell treats problems of industrialization and the working class in all her novels, *North and South* is the only novel in which Gaskell demonstrates how a master can learn to confront social problems through sensitivity to the domestic. Patsy Stoneman perceptively notices that "*North and South* focuses on mill-owner rather than worker [as in *Mary Barton*] precisely because Elizabeth Gaskell has recognized the workers' impotence to control the terms of the class struggle" (83). While many studies of *North and South* focus solely on the heroine Margaret Hale, I follow Stoneman in considering the intertwined development of both Margaret and the mill owner, John Thornton.

An example will suggest the prominent way in which Gaskell symbolizes Thornton's evolving taste. At the novel's close, Thornton "draw[s] out his pocket-book, in which were treasured up some dead flowers" (436), and presents the dried roses to his lover, Margaret.² The roses may seem an unlikely indication of Gaskell's ability to think beyond the mere preservation of middle-class domestic spaces, a preservation that Shuttleworth and others view as the primary aim of the conclusion. The roses, however, indicate Thornton's newfound ability to see people in both his public and private life—especially Margaret and the mill hands—as more than mere stereotypes. At first, Thornton sees Margaret as primarily an aesthetic object, much as Margaret's first suitor, the superficial Henry Lennox, fetishizes Margaret by describing her "eyes so lustrous and yet so soft . . . lips so ripe and red" (415).³ *North and South* states explicitly that Margaret is not comparable to a hothouse flower. In the second chapter, the narrator notes that "her mouth was wide; no rosebud that could only open just enough to let out a 'yes' and 'no,' and 'an't please you, sir'" (17). In chapter 16, Margaret remarks that she does not want to be "one of those poor sickly women who

likes to lie on rose leaves, and be fanned all day” (128). Indeed, Margaret’s inherited money and her active care for workers as individuals make possible the plan for productive dialogue between masters and men at the end of the novel (Stoneman 79). Though Henry objectifies Margaret throughout the novel, Thornton begins to see her in more complex terms, appreciating her care for workers rather than evaluating her based solely on her appearances and gestures. The roses, then, symbolize this new complex understanding.

Just as Thornton once stereotyped Margaret, he first views workers in stereotypical terms. While showing sensitivity to Margaret and her family, he disregards the suffering of some workers as “but the natural punishment of dishonestly-enjoyed pleasure, at some former period of their lives” (85). In offering the roses to Margaret, Thornton shows his understanding of Margaret’s more personal vision. After looking intently at the roses, Margaret remarks, “They are from Helstone, are they not? I know the deep indentations around the leaves” (436). Thornton’s gesture indicates that he has learned to see in a similarly detailed way (though he does not yet articulate this understanding) and will no longer look at social problems from one point of view. What seems, then, a very private, even conservative, middle-class romantic gesture has in Gaskell’s imagination a larger significance for English society. In her introduction to *Wives and Daughters*, Pam Morris notes that the recurring references to roses in that novel suggest that, in addition to masculine strength, “Englishness might also involve qualities that are fragile, sensitive, associated with love, beauty and poetry” (xxix). In *North and South*, I argue, the roses indicate Thornton’s suitability for what Gaskell envisions as a kinder version of capitalism, led by captains of industry who possess perceptive taste both within and outside of the home.

The kind of household taste that Thornton develops became a national goal during the debates of the 1835–36 Select Committee on the State of Arts and Manufactures. While also concerned with the high arts, the hearings focused on the improvement of British manufactures. Witnesses argued that the current inadequacy was not a question of talent but one of learned skill. In order to elevate the tastes of the workers and the consumers who would buy their products, the committee advocated free public galleries and government-run art schools. These institutions would teach workers to create better-designed products and consumers to appreciate this craftsmanship. The consumer’s freedom to select industrial products of high taste, the committee suggested, would demonstrate Britain’s commitment to democracy.

While interested in training workers, the committee was far more concerned with educating middle-class consumers. Written some twenty years after the hearings, Gaskell's *North and South* would echo this emphasis on improved taste for the middle class. According to witnesses before the 1835–36 committee, the British consumer, like the British artist, already had a natural propensity for good taste. “I think we have instances of as much fine taste in this country as has been exhibited in any part of the globe,” opined Charles Toplis, vice president of the London Mechanics’ Institution (119). However, some witnesses testified that consumers had been misled by fashion, which favored inferior goods. J. C. Robertson, editor of *Mechanics’ Magazine*, argued that French designs were popular in Britain because of “a vulgar taste for what is far-fetched and high-priced” (128). Robertson’s charge would have an increasing resonance in the decades to come. As more of the middle class acquired products that had previously been restricted to the rich, commentators often labeled their tastes “vulgar” to differentiate them from those of the upper class. *North and South* betrays a similar anxiety about middle-class social climbers who superficially display what they wrongly assume is tasteful. According to early commentators, educating British consumers would provide the country’s manufacturers with a more suitable market than that created by vulgar fashion. Yet this education never achieved its desired effect; commentators complained throughout the Victorian period that British taste, despite its natural potential, was in need of correction.

Following the committee’s lead, Victorian art criticism regularly sought to help consumers make the right decisions about household goods. John Ruskin is now best known for his assessments of painting and architecture, but he also believed that such personal decisions as dress and home decoration were important to the strength of the British nation: “There is no national value, small or great,” he asserts in “Traffic” (1864), “which is not manifestly expressed in *all the art* which circumstances enable the people possessing that virtue to produce” (*Works* 18: 437, emphasis mine). Ruskin and other writers posited a close connection between architecture and interior decoration. Owen Jones asserts in his highly influential *Grammar of Ornament* (1856) that the “Decorative Arts arise from, and should be properly attendant upon, Architecture” (5). Although Ruskin’s “Traffic” takes architecture as its focus, the lecture provides one very significant example of household taste—consideration of the hypothetical gentleman who cannot spend money on the interior decorations recommended by Ruskin because he is engaged in a war with his neighbor. Ruskin suggests that the gentleman would be acting morally if, rather than waging war, he

spent money on wallpaper, fresco, and damask curtains (*Works* 18: 438–39). Considering Ruskin’s frequent advocacy of friendly relations between Britain and France and a pacifist approach to other countries, it seems that a concern with interiors is at least a partial solution to what he saw as Britain’s reliance on military solutions. Gaskell was thus not the only Victorian writer to attach political and national importance to household taste.

In Ruskin’s hierarchical conception of society, the upper class was primarily responsible for modeling good taste, a view consistent with liberal notions of education inherited from John Locke and others. As we will see, Gaskell assigns this role to the middle class. Ruskin warns in “Modern Manufacture and Design” (1859) that the British upper-class desire for gaudy dress—a fashion motivated by the desire to display wealth—threatens the power structure more than any political clubs or agitators: “The wasteful and vain expenses at present indulged in by the upper classes are hastening the advance of republicanism more than any other element of modern change” (*Works* 16: 343). By example, the upper class has convinced the lower class to wear clothing that Ruskin faults for its “flimsiness and gaudiness” (343). The insubstantiality of these garments points to Ruskin’s unease about the destabilizing effects of modern goods; thus, a question of taste becomes a spark for political revolution. While Ruskin sought throughout his career to democratize the high arts, he seems less certain here about the ramifications of equal access to household goods.

Other writers who focused on both architecture and household taste were similarly made uneasy by modern consumer society and so hoped to protect more traditional, class-based conceptions of taste. In *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* (1841), A. W. Pugin writes that “cheap deceptions of magnificence encourage persons to assume a semblance of decoration far beyond either their means or their station, and it is to this cause we may assign all that mockery of splendour which pervades even the dwellings of the lower classes of society” (30). Pugin believed that homeowners should decorate according to their class. While arguing for greater access to such decorations than does Pugin, the architect Charles Eastlake (nephew of the more famous painter) sets certain limits in *A History of the Gothic Revival* (1872): “To drag Gothic down to the level of a cockney villa, to parody its characteristic features in plaster and cast iron . . . would be intolerable” (371–72). Eastlake’s well-known *Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery and Other Details* (1869) expresses a similar desire to preserve traditional class boundaries within the home. Like many other contemporary manuals on household goods, Eastlake’s book teaches middle-class women to buy economical products in good

taste. Eastlake claims that his notions are based on “excellence which we might expect to be derived from common sense” (1), but they are in fact designed to distinguish his audience from the lower class. He remarks, for example, on a type of bedcover: “From an artistic point of view the counterpanes now manufactured for servants’ bed-rooms . . . are very suggestive in colour, but I fear that any approach to this style of coverlid would be regarded as objectionable in the ‘best’ bed-rooms” (190). For Eastlake, anything associated with the lower class cannot ultimately be in good taste.

Thus far, the story I have been telling about Victorian household goods seems to confirm the usual assumption that taste and class were closely linked. Judith Flanders representatively remarks in *Inside the Victorian Home* that “the greatest good [in decorating one’s home] was knowing one’s place and living up to it precisely” (170). But some influential critics, and particularly women writers, were more flexible. Lady Mary Anne Barker, who wrote a series of well-known books on household taste, was much influenced by Eastlake and other earlier critics. Barker, however, is much less rigid in her conception of the relationship between class and taste than are the male writers I discuss previously. While these critics complain about cheap products made to look expensive, Barker would rather have her readers display good taste than admit their lack of money. “This is a humble arrangement,” she writes of simple drapes for the bathroom in her 1878 *Bedroom and Boudoir*, “but it can be made as effective as if it cost pounds instead of pence. And this is one of the strong points in all hints on decoration, that they should be of so elastic a nature as to be capable of expansion under favourable circumstances, though not beyond the reach of extremely slender resources” (78–79). Here, Barker sounds more like Gaskell’s narrator in *Cranford* (as I discuss shortly) than a critic worried about the blurring of class lines.

Barker also differs from male critics by claiming a distinct role for women in domestic taste. This assumption was challenged in the Victorian period; in *Hints on Household Taste*, Eastlake argues that women have no such special qualifications. But Barker complains of rooms that mimic the seventeenth century: “You scarcely ever feel as if any one lived in them—there are seldom any signs of occupation, especially feminine occupation” (92). Emilia Dilke, a well-known expert on French art history, similarly argued for the creative importance of women. “The refinements wrought into these pleasures,” she writes of domestic decoration in *The Renaissance of Art in France* (1879), “as well as into every other art of life, were enhanced by the presence of women at the Court” (26). Contemporary reviewers belittled Dilke’s “womanly” focus on upholstery (Fraser, “Women” 82), but

hers was a strategy to write women back into the history of art. Gaskell's aims are similar in *North and South*: Margaret's influence on Thornton's taste turns out to have profound political significance, allowing him to see Margaret and his workers in less reductive ways.

Like her comments on women's aesthetic perception in home decoration, Barker's attitude toward the supposedly strict correlation between class and household cleanliness challenged conventional wisdom. In *Hints on Household Taste*, Eastlake claims that avoiding draperies “saves something in the weekly washing bill” (192) and thus allows middle-class homemakers to differentiate themselves from the lower class through superior cleanliness. Barker, too, argues for the importance of buying products that are easy to clean. But Barker is less interested than Eastlake in making sure that her middle-class audience acts middle class (and not like the rich or the dirty poor) than she is in suggesting ways that those with limited means can have homes as clean as the rich. To be sure, says Barker, upper-class homes are clean because they employ the kind of servants—“strong-armed old-fashioned housemaids”—who “had been taught how to wipe dust off and carry it bodily away” (5–6). However, even without such an army, the middle-class homemaker can have a house just as clean by adhering to Barker's advice.

While it is difficult to determine how much contemporary writing on household taste Gaskell read, she was very familiar with Ruskin's art criticism. In her letters, Gaskell eagerly anticipates his lectures and classes. She certainly read *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and was acquainted with *The Stones of Venice* (Chapple and Pollard 161). She corresponded with Ruskin regarding artistic matters, thanking him in 1865 for his approval of *Cranford* and writing in the same year to ask for his help on behalf of an architect, Alfred Waterhouse, who had been excluded from a list of finalists to design the new law courts in London (Chapple and Pollard 742, 747). In her own domestic life, Gaskell was preoccupied with how household goods indicated class. Her letter to Charles Eliot Norton in 1859 betrays a concern with the fashion of her own home:

Yes! we have got our drawing-room chairs & sofas covered with new chintz. Such a pretty ones [*sic*], with little rosebuds & carnations on the white ground. . . . but you'll be happy to hear we are not rich enough to make many or grand changes. Indeed I don't think I should like to do it, even if one could. The house is to be painted and papered (passages & bedrooms) in May, but we shall rather adhere to the old colours. (Chapple and Pollard 536)

Gaskell here seems to follow her stricture in *Cranford* and *North and South* that the middle class can have nice possessions if they are not too showy. But she also envied the fancier household goods of Charles Dickens, which indicated to her his financial success as an author. Writing to Emily Tagart in 1851, Gaskell verifies a rumor about “the splendour of Mr[.] Dickens’ house” by noting that a friend who dined with him “writes me word that the Dickens [*sic*] have brought a dinner-service of *gold* plate” (Chapple and Pollard 175). Gaskell was well aware of the extent to which her own books could increase her purchasing power, and at times evaluated their worth in terms of her effort and the works’ potential popularity. She argued, for example, that *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* should earn her more than the six hundred pounds she received for *North and South* because “the amount of labour bestowed on that Biography, (to say nothing of anxiety in various ways,) has been more than double at least what the novel cost me; and I think that the Biography is likely to interest a wider class of readers, and to be in more permanent demand” (Chapple and Pollard 430). Notably, Gaskell omits any discussion here of intrinsic literary merit. Though her novels express anxiety about the spending power of the professional middle class, her own letters demonstrate a degree of acquisitiveness following her growing success as an author.

However, Gaskell is more flexible than some contemporary male writers in sometimes allowing her lower- and middle-class homeowners to mimic those in higher positions. *Cranford* (1853) shows the possibility of class mobility for the lower middle classes through proper “etiquette practices” (Langland, *Nobody’s Angels* 130). One of Gaskell’s central goals in *Cranford*, notes Jenny Uglow, is to argue against social status as an indicator of a person’s character (285). Gaskell often effects such arguments by focusing on the small details that many critics have dismissed as insignificant: “The technique of juxtaposing the profound to the everyday is brilliantly employed in *Cranford*, both to puncture pretension and to reconcile comic surface with emotional depth” (Uglow 289). To take a well-known example, the Cranford women hide their “very moderate means” by practicing what the narrator calls “elegant economy,” embodied in such social rules as not serving elaborate food to guests (*Cranford* 3–4). The phrase “elegant economy” demonstrates Gaskell’s knowledge of household books, as Eliza Acton’s well-known *Modern Cookery* (1845) contains a recipe for “The Elegant Economist’s Pudding” (C. Mitchell 181). For Cranford residents, “Economy was always ‘elegant’ and money-spending always ‘vulgar and ostentatious’” (4). Gaskell’s affection for these practices indicates that she would have sympathized with Barker’s adaptable hints. Admitting one’s

limited means—as more rigid household taste manuals urged their readers to do—is viewed as vulgar in Cranford. Captain Brown offends the women of Cranford by doing so, though even violating this rule does not preclude Brown from Cranford society; he is later “respected” and “his opinions [are] quoted as authority” (4).

Gaskell’s first novel, *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (1848), is likewise more flexible than most contemporary manuals in linking class and taste. Among Gaskell’s novels, *Mary Barton* stands out for its focus on the lower class. The novel does, however, feature one prominent example of middle-class taste. The mill owner, Mr. Carson, shows the kind of refinement that Thornton develops in *North and South*: “In addition to lavish expenditure, there was much taste shown, and many articles chosen for their beauty and elegance adorned his rooms” (*Mary Barton* 75). But, unlike Thornton, Mr. Carson is not positioned by Gaskell to solve social problems. The murder of Carson’s son Henry demonstrates Gaskell’s focus on class antagonism itself in *Mary Barton* rather than the possibility of philanthropy by cultured mill owners.

While *North and South* posits the middle class as the best hope for alleviating social problems, *Mary Barton* suggests that less fortunate laborers can be helped by other working-class families. Gaskell’s descriptions of interior spaces indicate that the Bartons and Wilsons are able to provide assistance and that the Davenports are clearly in need of it. The Davenport family is unable to separate dirt from their below-ground living space. At street level, “women from their doors tossed household slops of every description into the gutter; they ran into the next pool, which over-flowed and stagnated” (66). Visitors to the Davenport home “went down one step even from the foul area into the cellar in which a family of human beings lived” amid a “fetid” smell (66). The sewage from above easily infects the Davenport’s cellar, causing disease and symbolizing their low state.

By contrast, the Barton home is described as a clean, pleasant place for visitors: “Check curtains . . . shut in the friends [who] met [in the house] to enjoy themselves” (13). Gaskell separates dirt in the Barton home from these living spaces; behind a door there is a “little back kitchen, where dirty work, such as washing up dishes, might be done” (13). Another door hides the “coal-hole” (13). In contrast to the sparsely decorated and dirty working-class homes in *North and South*, the Bartons’ furniture and knick-knacks attest to their relative comfort. For Uglow, “The minute description of this [the Bartons’] room, seen through Mrs. Barton’s proud eyes, displays the harmony that will be lost” (196). Uglow reads such domestic interiors as supporting a central theme in the novel: that rich and poor families “were

not so different” in spite of the pressures of industrialization (194). Yet the decorations seem nevertheless to distinguish this poor family from those above them and thus support a familiar narrative about the relationship between taste and class. Although the furniture appears luxurious, the narrator tells us that one table is made of “humble material” and that a tea tray is “japanned,” or made to look like Japanese lacquer (Wright 477). Like Barker, the narrator seems to approve of interior spaces that look somewhat nicer than they really are. But Gaskell, through her use of such words as “japanned” and “humble,” is careful to remind readers that these are people of limited means. Further, we are told that the room is charming in a naïve way: “The fire-light danced merrily on [the japanned tea-tray] and really (setting all taste but that of a child’s aside) it gave a richness of colouring to that side of the room” (13). As sympathetic as she is to the Bartons, especially in their willingness to help others, Gaskell reinforces contemporary liberal ideology by patronizing their tastes.

Like the Barton home, Alice Wilson’s cellar is “the perfection of cleanliness” (15), but is clearly set apart (as are its inhabitants) from what higher classes might enjoy. The Wilsons have protected their cellar from the filth and other dangers of the street above: “As the cellar window looked into an area in the street, down which boys might throw stones, it was protected by an outside shutter” (15). Still, we are reminded—as in the description of the Barton home—of the humbleness of the Wilsons’ interior. Alice’s bed is “modest-looking” (there is only one check curtain where there should be two) and the floor is always damp. The narrator also seems to confirm a stereotype about some poor women’s superstitious, almost witch-like use of “field plants, which we are accustomed to call valueless, but which have a powerful effect either for good or for evil, and are consequently much used among the poor” (15). These plants “oddly festooned” (15) Alice Wilson’s cellar window. The use of flora to decorate middle- and upper-class homes was depicted quite differently by Gaskell and other mid-Victorian commentators on household taste.

As my references to *Mary Barton* and *Cranford* should make clear, *North and South* is not unique in ascribing social importance to taste. While *Mary Barton* employs household cleanliness to differentiate among members of the working class, other novels critique those in the middle class who are obsessed with household goods. We will see this dynamic in *North and South*, but it is equally evident in Gaskell’s last novel, *Wives and Daughters* (1866). For Susan Johnston, there are no “trifles” in *Wives and Daughters* but rather household goods that carry real political significance (Johnston 95; qtd. in Stoneman 156–57). To take one prominent example,

Hyacinth (Clare) Kirkpatrick’s pervasive attention to household decorations indicates her superficiality, which is not insignificant to the novel as a whole: Clare’s “mistaken adherence to fortune and rank as the ends of life, rather than to the cultivation of those mental qualities wealth and status may afford, functions in the novel as a danger to the community” (Johnston 95; qtd. in Stoneman 156–57).⁴ Early in the novel, when Clare is still a schoolteacher, Gaskell’s narrator is sympathetic to her desire for more lavish surroundings, much as the narrator of *Cranford* presents the wishes of the townswomen in a positive light. Visiting the “Towers” house at the invitation of Lady Cumnor, Clare wonders, “One would think it was an easy thing to deck a looking-glass like that with muslin and pink ribbons; and yet how hard it is to keep up! . . . It is so difficult to earn money to renew them; and when one has got the money one hasn’t the heart to spend it all at once” (97). Through Clare’s reference to the generic “one,” Gaskell invites readers to identify with Clare. But once Clare becomes Mrs. Gibson after marrying the prominent village doctor, her all-consuming interest in household goods becomes evident. In order to keep up appearances, Clare redecorates her new stepdaughter’s room despite Molly Gibson’s protestations that she wants no such thing (214). Perhaps most tellingly, Clare “buys new dresses for show,” but fails to update her small and worn collection of underwear (Uglow 592). By contrast, Molly learns a simplicity of taste that correlates with her greater acceptance of the poor. Gaskell suggests in all her novels that the development of one’s own style—rather than following mere fashion—is an indicator of a character’s growing ability to effect political change.⁵ As I will demonstrate in later chapters, this emphasis on individual perception would become even more prominent towards the end of the century.

In its depiction of the interactions between the traditional upper class (the Cumnors) and an emergent professional class (the respected doctor, Mr. Gibson), *Wives and Daughters* examines some of the same issues regarding household taste found in Gaskell’s earlier novels. However, taste in *Wives and Daughters* does not function to alleviate class struggles between masters and workers as it does in *North and South*. Mr. Gibson seems uninterested in household decorations and does not concern himself much with class problems. The professional men of science in *Wives and Daughters*, Mr. Gibson and Roger Hamley, often make the wrong decisions, as Pam Morris notes in her introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of the novel (xi). Morris convincingly argues that *Wives and Daughters* addresses issues larger than the local class struggles that occupy Gaskell’s previous novels. These more global issues in *Wives and Daughters* include the interrelations

between Darwinism and imperialism: “In her earlier social-problem novels Gaskell could only offer the solution of individual reconciliation for class divisions; the myth of racial history developed in the 1860s allows her to construct a narrative that looks forward to an enlightened national unity in the guise of evolutionary progress” (xxv). Though Gaskell’s thinking may have changed by the time she penned her last novel, she clearly viewed the intervention by cultured middle-class individuals as a primary solution in her earlier works.

Despite this attention to taste in *North and South*, Gaskell does not simply follow popular midcentury guidance. Significantly, she seems ambivalent about the moral importance of good architecture, an idea that was much in vogue in the 1850s and that was reflected in the writings on household taste that I discuss previously. Responding to Mr. Bell’s sarcastic question about whether Milton can serve as a model of good architecture, Thornton says, “We’ve been too busy to attend to mere outward appearances” (334). In light of the novel’s interest in aesthetic perception, Thornton’s position is certainly reductive. Indeed, Mr. Hale responds to Thornton in Ruskinian fashion: “Don’t say *mere* outward appearances. . . . They impress us all, from childhood upward—every day of our life” (334). Hale, however, fails to convince Thornton; he expresses his opinion “gently” (334), without explaining why architecture is significant—a surprising silence from an author who so admired Ruskin’s lectures on the subject. Earlier in the novel, we learn that Hale is equally incapable of convincing workers of the moral importance of good architecture; the lesson that he plans on ecclesiastical buildings is “rather more in accordance with his own taste and knowledge” (141) than the interests of his working-class audience. Unlike Ruskin, Gaskell shows that architecture appeals only to already cultured individuals, not to masters and men.

Learning about other forms of culture is, however, presented as important for the middle class. For all the novel’s objections to the superficial uses of visual art, Gaskell suggests an important role for the exhibition of well-used books, which was reflected in contemporary discourse on household taste. As Mary Anne Barker advised her middle-class readers, “To my mind books are always the best ornaments in any room, and I never feel at home in any place until my beloved and often shabby old friends are unpacked and ranged in their recess” (89). Barker’s description of her books as “shabby” hints at her learning; she both displays and reads them. “Reading,” notes Uglow, “in all senses is a clue to the argument of Gaskell’s later works—*Sylvia’s Lovers*, *Cousin Phillis*, and *Wives and Daughters*” (590). Literature provides similar insights into the characters of *North and*

South. Most important, the well-used literary works indicate their owners' depth. The Hales' home at Helstone might want the newest fashions, but the family's books indicate their cultured status. Upon first visiting Helstone, Henry Lennox picks up Dante's *Paradiso*, which just happens to be lying on a table in the drawing room. Next to *Paradiso* is a dictionary from which Margaret has copied words. Not surprisingly, the superficial Henry sees these as "a dull list of words" (23). But the words indicate Margaret's active engagement with, not mere show of, books. Similarly, in the Hales' new drawing room in the manufacturing town of Milton, "books, not cared for on account of their binding solely, lay on one table, as if recently put down" (79). In contrast to the Hales' bookish interiors, the Thorntons' dining room contains, except for the Bible, "not a book about the room" (76)—an absence that the novel equates with a lack of understanding. Mrs. Hale's dislike of books, for example, is connected with her failure to empathize with her husband. Mrs. Thornton's overly practical household arrangement is counteracted by her son's willingness to learn about classical literature from his tutor, Mr. Hale, a project of acculturation that further divorces him from the purely commercial stereotype of the businessman and that points to his worthiness as both a mate for Margaret and a Carlylean captain of industry.

While some forms of high culture hold obvious significance in *North and South*, household taste is Gaskell's primary way of differentiating between those who have the perception to solve social problems and those who do not. Gaskell often, but not always, connects household taste with class in this novel. Criticisms of *Mary Barton* as too allied with working-class interests may have influenced Gaskell's somewhat more stringent differentiation of classes—primarily through the binary of dirt and cleanliness—in *North and South*. Middle-class homes are invariably clean in this novel. Writing in *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, Kate Flint notices that Mrs. Thornton uses "dust-sheets" to protect her furniture from the Milton air (45). Moreover, following mid-Victorian advice about cleanliness, Mrs. Thornton criticizes the Hales for a drawing room "altogether full of knick-knacks, which must take a long time to dust; and time to people of limited income was money" (96). However, though the Hales' decorations might require more work, there is no indication that their house is anything but clean.

By contrast, dirt seems inescapable for the working class. Flint writes that Mrs. Thornton's "pragmatic middle-class angst [about dust] is put into perspective by Bessy Higgins telling of the conditions in the mill, where the air is full of bits of fluff, "as fly off fro' the cotton, when they're card-

ing it, and fill the air till it looks all fine white dust. They say it winds round the lungs, and tightens them up” (45). Bessy’s sickness causes Margaret to realize the plight of industrial workers (Uglow 372). But factory dirt was also closely connected to unclean homes: contemporaries argued that working-class women like Bessy neglected their domestic duties while working in factories (Shuttleworth xxv). Indeed, the Higginses’ home is dirty when Margaret visits, despite the attempts of Mary Higgins—Bessy’s “slatternly younger sister” (99)—to clean it. Margaret does not realize that Mary has tried to clean the house with “rough-stoning” and has also built a fire “as a sign of hospitable welcome,” a fire not needed because of the heat of the day (99). *North and South* shows that, despite such efforts, lower-class homemakers do not have the means or taste to keep clean homes and welcome guests with appropriate gestures. Thus, while sympathizing with factory-induced disease, the novel differentiates the dusty working-class home from the washed middle-class interior. *North and South*’s binary of dirt and cleanliness reflects a pervasive Victorian discourse that was used to marginalize the lower class. “Dirt,” writes Mary Douglas, “is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systemic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements” (qtd. in Flint 46).⁶ As discussions about the working class visiting art galleries and museums make clear, dirt was frequently associated with the “low,” even as proper taste was viewed as morally uplifting.

Despite her more stringent association of dirt with the lower-class home in *North and South*, Gaskell does not always correlate characters’ taste with their class. Though coming from somewhat humble origins, John Thornton exhibits both good taste and a relative indifference to household goods, characteristics that mark him as suitable for a higher-class position. His mother, by contrast, is obsessed with household goods. Mrs. Thornton may follow contemporary household manuals in criticizing the Hales’ knickknacks, but Gaskell associates the Hales with good taste. The Hales—recently reduced in class stature—appreciate nature, high culture, and household goods that are in good taste. Gaskell’s distinctions among these middle-class characters cannot simply be reduced to a traditional/nouveau-riche binary, as some readers have claimed.⁷ As the often-washed curtains and chair covers that they move from Helstone to Milton indicate, the Hales lack the money to decorate a home according to most contemporary guidance. The differences between John Thornton and his mother further demonstrate that characters in one class—here the nouveau riche—do not necessarily share the same tastes.

Gaskell's contrast between those characters with perceptive taste and those who focus on mere appearances is tellingly played out in the drawing rooms of *North and South*. Johnston usefully remarks that the drawing room—as “the locus of both household intimacy and the household's negotiations with outsiders” (129)—is central to Gaskell's claim that the household and the outer world were closely connected, not separate spheres.⁸ Mrs. Thornton's drawing room serves to create surface appearances, something noticed by both outside visitors and her own son. Upon visiting the Thorntons' drawing room, Margaret observes, “Wherever she looked there was . . . not care and labour to procure ease, to help on habits of tranquil home employment; [but] solely to ornament, and then to preserve ornament from dirt or destruction” (112). Margaret's perspective on the ideal drawing room as conducive to “tranquil home employment” suggests its role as mediator between outside and inside: far from being isolated from the world of work, this domestic space requires and allows real “labour,” albeit in a comfortable setting. Thornton realizes that his mother's drawing room is “twice—twenty times as fine” as the same room in the Hales' modest Milton home but “not one quarter as comfortable. Here [in the Hales' Milton drawing room] were no mirrors, not even a scrap of glass to reflect the light, and answer the same purpose as water in a landscape painting; no gilding; a warm, sober breadth of colouring, well relieved by the dear old Helstone chintz curtains and chair covers” (78–79). Similar to their use of knickknacks, the Hales' neglect of the mirrors commonly used in decorating upper-class homes and associated with popular (especially after Ruskin's *Modern Painters*) landscape paintings violates contemporary manuals on household taste. But, despite her adherence to contemporary household advice, Mrs. Thornton's use of mirrors is superficial, “a picture intended to be gazed upon and not lived in” (Johnston 130). Moreover, the mirrors provide insight into Mrs. Thornton's character by reflecting her “false front”—her presentation of a self much more confident than she really is (Uglow 376). The Hales instead display their actual origins to outsiders while also providing comfort, decorating their Milton drawing room with their “homey” Helstone curtains and chair covers.

Like Mrs. Thornton, Henry Lennox is too practical in his view of domestic decoration. In the novel's critique of Henry, Gaskell seems to depart from the 1835–36 select committee's view of design as important for primarily economic reasons. Though the narrator notes in chapter 1 that Henry has tastes similar to those of Margaret—“he liked and disliked pretty nearly the same things she did” (10)—his superficial appraisal of household goods indicates his ultimate incompatibility with her. In this

instance, Gaskell seems to depart from Ruskin's famous stricture in "Traffic" that "taste . . . is the ONLY morality" (*Works* 18: 434). Though they like "the same things" (10), Henry and Margaret have very different values. Tellingly, Henry focuses on the monetary value of the Hales' drawing room at Helstone rather than on its natural beauty—the attribute that Margaret most loves. Henry observes that "the carpet was far from new; the chintz had been often washed; the whole apartment was smaller and shabbier than he had expected, as back-ground and frame-work for Margaret, herself so queenly" (23). Though Margaret had earlier acknowledged her home's modest furnishings to Henry, he nevertheless expects more from a woman with a "good family" (23). Henry believes that he can provide a better "frame" (23) for a woman whom he envisions as an aesthetic object. Henry's later hope of winning Margaret when she gains her fortune suggests that he is motivated by superficial concerns: "He was fully aware of the rise which it would immediately enable him, the poor barrister to take. . . . He had seen that much additional value was yearly accruing to the lands and tenements which she owned in that prosperous and increasing town [Milton]" (415). Henry, a member of an ascending profession, obsesses about overt displays of wealth and raising his class stature—attributes that would have led many contemporaries to call him "vulgar." In *Modern Painters*, Volume 5, Ruskin representatively defines vulgarity as "an undue regard to appearances and manners . . . by persons in inferior stations of life" (*Works* 7: 353–54). Gaskell too seems preoccupied with this class-based conception of vulgarity, which was a pervasive concern in discussions about taste.

The tag of "vulgarity" would surely apply to the new family that moves into the Helstone vicarage after Mr. Hale resigns his position. The narrator mocks this family for "spending an immense deal of money" with little taste or judgment (393). As Margaret and Mr. Bell tour Margaret's old home, Bell sarcastically compliments what Mrs. Hepworth, the new vicar's wife, refers to as "improvements" (392–93). The narrator wryly comments that the new family is "not troubled with much delicacy of perception," and so Mrs. Hepworth fails to realize that "Mr. Bell was playing upon her, in the admiration he thought fit to express for everything that especially grated on his taste" (393). Though Mr. Bell's views are not always endorsed by the novel, his tastes here are clearly superior to those of Mrs. Hepworth. In addition to explaining her obliviousness to Bell's sarcasm, the family's perceptive shortcoming also applies to Mrs. Hepworth's household taste and larger domestic management.

Thornton sets himself apart from what Catherine Gallagher calls the "prefabricated association between trade and vulgarity" (182) by his selfless

and perceptive appraisal of household decoration. Unlike Mrs. Hepworth, Henry, or his mother, Thornton is not a middle-class social climber intent on displaying his own wealth. He convinces the Hales' Milton landlord to change the wallpaper after hearing Mr. Hale's complaint.⁹ Despite his occupation as mill owner, Thornton had already recognized “a certain vulgarity” (62) in the house that seems improper for Margaret once he meets her. Thornton never tells the Hales that the change was his decision and so never receives credit for his beneficence. By emphasizing Thornton's good taste through this selfless action, Gaskell shows that he has the potential, even early in the novel, to be more than a typical master. Margaret herself associates the wallpaper with “vulgarity and commonness” (65)—the same terms she connects with tradesmen. Margaret perceives Thornton's difference from this stereotype: “With such an expression of resolution or power, no face, however plain in feature, could be either vulgar or common” (64–65). Still, seemingly influenced by the contemporary belief in physiognomy as well as by Thornton's occupation, Margaret terms Thornton “not quite a gentleman,” noting that his face “is neither exactly plain, nor yet handsome, nothing remarkable” (64). She further stereotypes him based on physical appearances and occupation in remarking, “I should not like to have to bargain with him; he looks very inflexible. Altogether a man who seems made for his niche, . . . sagacious, and strong, as becomes a great tradesman” (65). A central part of Margaret's character development is her growing appreciation of Thornton's strengths as an individual, rather than simply as a quality specimen of his profession. Her perceptiveness allows her to examine and reexamine Thornton and eventually to see him in less stereotypical terms.

Thornton's good taste in changing the wallpaper points to his compatibility with Margaret but also underscores a problem early in the novel. Like Henry Lennox, Thornton views Margaret as an aesthetic object. He thinks the Milton house unsuitable for Margaret after seeing “her superb ways of moving and looking” (62). Despite Thornton's attraction to Margaret's beauty, he is subsequently repulsed by a physical gesture—her unwillingness to shake hands with him, which he attributes to her pride: “Even her great beauty is blotted out of one's memory by her scornful ways” (86). Thornton's equation of physical beauty and proper gesture further demonstrates that he views Margaret in aesthetic terms. Just as household decorations could supposedly be read to identify the purchaser's values, manners were (and still are) equated with one's inner character. Margaret has failed to conform to the code of manners associated with her new industrial home, a code that purports to represent acknowledgment between

equals.¹⁰ As Terry Eagleton has argued, the Shaftesburian combination of ethical conduct and aesthetics “is most evident in the concept of manners. . . . that meticulous disciplining of the body which converts morality to style, deconstructing the opposition between the proper and the pleasurable. . . . Like the work of art, the human subject introjects the codes which govern it as the very source of its free autonomy” (41). Margaret has not yet learned to view such physical contact—a gesture that seems natural to Thornton—as pleasurable. But Thornton sees her failure to shake hands as an aesthetic shortcoming, an indication of her pride or lack of manners. A central barrier to their relationship is thus a misunderstanding about two different, class-based aesthetic perspectives: the democratic equality signified by Thornton’s handshake and the feudal, hierarchical model of Margaret’s parting bows. Thornton’s presentation of the Helstone roses at the end of the novel indicates the increased aesthetic understanding between the two.

Most important, the roses indicate the status accorded in Gaskell’s novels to nature, which was central to conceptions of household taste in the mid-Victorian period. As John Steegman notes, the ideal was to bring garden and interior into an “intimacy” with one another through the introduction of cut flowers, “by the use of french-windows and verandas[,] . . . [and] by so designing the garden that all its qualities were immediately visible from indoors” (316). Lady Cumnor’s room in *Wives and Daughters* features “freshly gathered roses of every shade and colour” and chairs “covered with French chintz that mimicked the real flowers in the garden below” (97). As is evident from *Wives and Daughters*, which represents England before the Reform Bill of 1832, this careful relationship was influenced by older, aristocratic notions of gardens and was most often realized in upper-class homes. But some commentators—and especially women writers—sought to show middle-class readers that an intimacy with nature was also possible for those with more limited means. The art historian Anna Jameson begins her 1829 article on Althorpe and its art gallery by describing the mansion’s somewhat modest family and natural environment: “It has altogether a look of compactness and comfort, *without pretension*, which, with the pastoral beauty of the landscape, and *low situation*, recall the ancient vocation of the family, whose grandeur was first founded . . . on the multitude of flocks and herds” (81, emphases mine). Writing later in the century, Barker extends Jameson’s suggestion that such a home is in reach of the middle class: because of the availability of floral decorations and the beautiful views outside the windows, “in the country it is every one’s own fault if they have not a lovely bedroom” (11). For Barker, all decorations in good

taste “should be in harmony with even the view from the windows” (13). “I know a rural bedroom,” she writes approvingly, “with a paper representing a trellis and Noisette roses climbing over it . . . and outside the window a spreading bush of the same dear old-fashioned rose blooms three parts of the year” (11). Of course, Barker’s homeowners, like Jameson’s, have at least the money to possess and fashionably decorate a country home; her advice would not be practicable for the lower classes.

As these commentaries make clear, nature itself is at least as important as any household goods. Similarly, Gaskell’s foregrounding of nature in her novels indicates her distrust of the commercialization of art and the spending power of the new middle class. In *North and South*, roses and other flora brought into the house, the countryside itself, and even household landscapes are more significant than purchased commodities. Thornton’s changing of the wallpaper, along with the chintz brought from Helstone, helps the Hales settle into Milton, but it is not enough to make them fully comfortable: “It needed the pretty light papering of the rooms to reconcile them to Milton. It needed more—more that could not be had” (65). Gaskell avoids reducing the problems of displacement to mere proper decoration. The Hales could, of course, use more money to adorn their new home, but the narrator’s “more that could not be had” (65) suggests the need for less concrete goods as well.

Nature brought into their Milton home is one way that the Hales mitigate the smoky city that so depresses them upon their move. A china vase in the drawing room contains “wreaths of English ivy, pale-green birch, and copper-coloured beech-leaves” (79). This use of nature provides the color lacking in Mrs. Thornton’s drawing room. Moreover, the colors are not the artificial ones of the roses in the Milton wallpaper, about which Margaret complains, “Pink and blue roses, with yellow leaves!” (65). Toward the end of the century, writers including Oscar Wilde and James Whistler would claim that artists could creatively improve on nature. Here, following Ruskin’s earlier strictures, Gaskell criticizes the false representation of nature, especially when commodified as a tasteless decoration, while positing truth to nature as a kind of national virtue. The ivy in the Hales’ Milton drawing room, like the roses with which Gaskell ends her novel, suggests the national significance of tasteful, natural home decoration. The ivy is not generic but specifically English. In addition, by representing the Hales’ ability to decorate even their Milton home with nature, Gaskell hopes to show the possible connections between the English countryside and the city, and between the English north and south.¹¹ Above all, the Hales’ country home at Helstone was intimate with a cared-for landscape: “The mid-

dle window in the bow was opened, and clustering roses and the scarlet honeysuckle came peeping round the corner; the small lawn was gorgeous with verbenas and geraniums of all bright colors” (23). The Hales lack this kind of lawn in the city of Milton, but they are still able to include nature in their home decoration and thus provide a link with their old home in the southern English countryside.

A certain mark of superficial characters in *North and South* is their inability to perceive the importance of nature. The new family at the Helstone vicarage, in its zeal to build up the house, has neglected these natural surroundings. The children’s playthings have caused “the destruction of a long beautiful tender branch laden with [roses], which in former days [that is, when the Hales lived there] would have been trained up tenderly, as if beloved” (392). This mismanagement of nature is linked to Mrs. Hepworth’s faults as a mother; her failure to train the branch of flowers suggests that she has violated the popular Victorian adage of child rearing: “Train up a child” (Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, Prov. 22:6). For Stoneman, the “care of children is Elizabeth Gaskell’s crucial test of moral values; . . . it takes precedence over all other responsibilities” (33). In her emphasis on material possessions, Mrs. Hepworth fails this test; she is building a nursery but seemingly to emphasize her husband’s ability to spend money rather than for her children’s care. Indeed, Mrs. Hepworth’s many children seem, like their playthings, to be strewn about the vicarage.

While Mrs. Hepworth ignores nature, Henry appreciates it in a trite way. He notices the flowers outside Margaret’s Helstone window but then rapidly moves to appraising the monetary worth of the interior as insufficient for either Margaret’s queenly appearance or her family’s origins. Detailing Helstone before Henry’s visit, Margaret warns him, “I am not making a picture. I am trying to describe Helstone as it really is” (12). Nevertheless, upon arrival, Henry describes a fixed landscape painting: “Such crimson and amber foliage, so perfectly motionless” (28). In her reading of this scene, Johnston claims that Margaret and Henry are alike in their tendency to romanticize Helstone (108). But Johnston omits Margaret’s quick response to Henry’s description: “You must please to remember that our skies are not always as deep blue as they are now” (28). Gaskell clearly intends Margaret to be more perceptive than Henry—to be less focused on mere appearances. Henry’s pat phrases about art and nature point to a larger problem in art appreciation: the topic had become very fashionable by midcentury, particularly after Ruskin’s discussion of landscape in the first volume of *Modern Painters* (1843). To be sure, Henry is more perceptive than most of his family and friends, though he lacks the deeper vision

of Thornton. Margaret complains that most of the Lennoxes and their dinner guests “talked about art in a merely sensuous way, dwelling on outside effects, instead of allowing themselves to learn what it has to teach. . . . They squandered their capabilities of appreciation into a mere flow of appropriate words” (407). As I discuss in chapter 7, this worry about facile sensuality would become even more pronounced as critics encountered impressionist art. While later critics confronted this problem by emphasizing the difficulty of great art, Gaskell hopes her reader will, in Ruskinian fashion, see the truths nature has to offer rather than displaying a veneer of fashionable culture.

Unlike Henry and his family—who employ a “mere flow of appropriate words” (407) in discussing art and nature—Margaret and Thornton use the English countryside as a solitary place to reflect on their feelings for each other. Margaret walks in the country in an attempt to forget her mortifying talk with Mrs. Thornton, who accuses her of public impropriety for being out alone with a man late at night (Mrs. Thornton does not know that the man is Margaret’s brother, Frederick). Though Margaret cares little for Mrs. Thornton’s opinion, she constantly thinks about John Thornton’s estimation during this journey in the countryside. This reflection helps her realize how much Thornton means to her. Similarly, Thornton’s walk in the country helps “relieve” (208) his mind in a way that reveals his own feelings about Margaret. He walks in an effort to forget Margaret after she rejects him. But the journey only reinforces his “vivid conviction that there never was, never could be, anyone like Margaret” (208). For Gaskell, both art and nature have something to teach that will be lost for those who simply talk without experiencing them.

Thornton and Margaret’s closing remarks about the Helstone roses, like their earlier solitary walks in the countryside, suggest the importance of memory and the discovery of personal identity in the novel. Margaret’s gradual realization that Thornton is more than a tradesman is intimately connected with her understanding of his personal history—his humble beginnings and subsequent rise to a famous master. Thornton’s gift of the roses shows that he, unlike Henry, sought to understand Margaret’s identity through her connection with Helstone, a place she consistently recalls throughout the novel despite her father’s attempts to forget it. Thornton tells Margaret that he visited Helstone because he “wanted to see the place where Margaret grew to what she is, even at the worst time of all, when I had no hope of ever calling her mine” (436). Thornton remembers what Margaret had said earlier about her origins and seeks to discover them for himself. When Margaret and Thornton come together at the end of the

novel, it is in the context of their collective memories about their embrace during the riot, memories both delicious and embarrassing to both of them. Embracing Margaret for the first time since the riot, Thornton asks, “Do you remember, love? . . . And how I requited you with my insolence the next day?” Margaret responds, “I remember how wrongly I spoke to you,—that is all” (436). The roses, which Thornton presents immediately after this exchange, symbolize the couple’s ability to get beyond these personal embarrassments to a mutual understanding rooted in more positive memories.

But, as I have argued, the rose is a social as well as a personal gesture. Thornton’s serious attempts to elevate his taste and culture—of which his appreciation of the roses is a part—help him learn to read the complexities of Milton’s social problems as well as those of Margaret. As Susan Johnston remarks, “It is possible that modern critics have misread Victorian attentiveness to the household. . . . The foregrounding of the domestic, even in political resolutions, is not simply a rhetorical move that privatizes and therefore contains political problems, but one that presents the so-called private sphere as the originary space of civil society” (87). Johnston has in mind the transformative power of Thornton’s dining-room scheme, in which masters and men discuss as equals serious problems while eating, a literal representation of taste. For Johnston, one of Gaskell’s central arguments is “that the space of the marketplace will always be one of [merely] unlimited acquisition, with everything it entails, unless the intimate space of the household is brought into the market itself” (130). I have claimed that household taste and the related appreciation of nature, not just the dining-room solution, help bring the domestic into the market in *North and South*. The Helstone roses, like the decorations in the novel’s drawing rooms, are but one prominent example of good taste that mediates between the inside and outside world, between the personal and the political. Thornton’s more complex mode of perception—demonstrated through his presentation of the Helstone roses—will enable him to create productive dialogues with workers rather than polarizing stereotypes.