

LITERATURE

NEEDLES, CHINA CUPS, BOOKS, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE VICTORIAN FEMININE IDEAL IN RHODA BROUGHTON'S *NOT WISELY, BUT TOO WELL* AND ELIZABETH GASKELL'S *NORTH AND SOUTH*¹

AGNIESZKA SETECKA

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

ABSTRACT

Considering Victorian presentation of women as angelic, that is, spiritual, beings, it is rather surprising how much their presence was manifested by material objects. Baskets of needlework, tea equipage and novels lying around in a parlour were an unmistakable sign of the house being occupied by women. Indeed, my contention is, the objects did not clutter Victorian interiors, either real or imagined, merely for practical reasons or to produce the "reality effect." They are a material representation of the immaterial and function as metaphors for angelic women's spiritual qualities. Rather than functioning merely as details to enhance the illusion of the real (and thus as elements of style) or simply reflecting the Victorian world (and thus as empty forms), material objects are essential in constructing a middle-class (feminine) identity. My paper concentrates on Rhoda Broughton's *Not wisely, but too well* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* with an attempt to show how objects help construct a feminine ideal and, simultaneously, reveal the ideal to be just a construction. Broughton's Kate Chester and Gaskell's Margaret Hale find themselves in situations where their middle-class status might be compromised. Still, they both manage to reassert their position through effectively manipulating the signs of middle-class respectability. The "flimsy and useless" things they surround themselves with point to their "essentially feminine" qualities. Yet, the very superfluity of the objects reveals their relation to the characters' economic status. They are, then, the site where the material and immaterial meet, where the borders between the economic world and the domestic world blur.

An angelic woman, "[m]arr'd less than man by mortal fall" (Patmore 1866: 23), man's moral guide and his conscience, whose "privilege, not impotence, / Ex-

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empties her from the work of man” (Patmore 1866: 72) is the hallmark of Victorian culture. Considering the Victorian presentation of women as spiritual beings removed from materialistic concerns of the male world, it is rather surprising how much a woman’s presence is manifested by material objects. Baskets of needlework, tea equipage, novels and knick-knacks lying around the parlour were an unmistakable sign of a house being occupied by women. My contention is that the objects did not clutter Victorian interiors, either real or imagined, merely for practical reasons or to produce what Barthes called a “reality effect”. Instead, they function as a material representation of the immaterial and serve as metaphors for angelic women’s spiritual qualities. Rather than functioning merely as details to enhance the illusion of the real (and thus as elements of style) or simply reflecting the Victorian world (and thus as empty forms), material objects are essential in constructing a middle-class (feminine) identity.

This article analyses Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855) and Rhoda Broughton’s *Not wisely, but too well* (1867) to show how writers use objects to construct a feminine ideal which is above sheer physicality. Gaskell’s Margaret Hale and Broughton’s Kate Chester find themselves in situations where their middle-class status might be compromised, either because of their strained financial situation or because of their irregular behaviour, not corresponding with the Victorian notions of decorum. Margaret’s family, never rich, falls even lower in financial terms, when her father decides to give up his career as a clergyman. With only two servants, reduced to a life in a small house “of thirty pounds a year” (Gaskell 1998: 79) in an ugly industrial city, Margaret believes “[t]hey are at the lowest now; they could not be worse” (Gaskell 1998: 77). In addition, she associates with the working-class Higginses and even, to her mother’s horror, adopts slang expressions. The scene where she protects Mr Thornton by making “her body into a shield from the fierce people beyond” (Gaskell 1998: 179) appears particularly offensive to the middle-class notions of decorum, as “[b]y becoming an agent in the public sphere and the centre of all eyes she has turned herself into a public woman, an *actress* not an angel, potentially a fallen woman” (Ingham 1996: 67, original emphasis). Kate Chester, the protagonist of Broughton’s novel is, in many ways, an even more ambiguous character. She is described as “misguided” and “ill-conducted” (Broughton 1967: 117), mainly because of her rather unfortunate affair with Dare Stamer, who turns out to be married, and with whom she is on the verge of eloping. Gilbert describes her as “hover[ing] on the border between proper, sexually chaste middle-class womanhood and unrestrained passionate transgression, between health and disease, good and evil. Both morally and physically, she inhabits a borderland and represents an unduly permeable quality of that borderland” (Gilbert 1997: 121), which, indeed, is a statement that could apply also to Margaret Hale in Gaskell’s novel. Still, both protagonists manage to

reassert their position through effectively manipulating signs of middle-class respectability. Their cosy parlours and especially the “flimsy and useless” (Gaskell 1998: 96) things Margaret and Kate surround themselves with point to their “essentially feminine” qualities. Yet, far from raising the characters above the material world of social and economic dependencies, the apparently superfluous objects might become crucial in establishing their position in the class society since, as Bourdieu (1984: 77) observed, “social relations [are] objectified in things”. The objects thus become a site where the material and immaterial meet, where the borders between the economic and the domestic world blur.

When the narrator in “Mr Gilfil’s love story” (1857) wants to signal Mr Gilfil’s “wifeless existence”, he describes a rather bare and uninviting room where “no portrait, no piece of embroidery, no faded bit of pretty triviality, hint[ed] of taper-fingers and small feminine ambitions” (Eliot 1994: 84). It is only in a locked chamber that, long after her death, Mrs Gilfil’s presence may still be felt in the objects that she left behind, her “dainty looking glass” and “a faded satin pin-cushion, with the pins rusted in it, a scent bottle, and a large fan ... an unfinished baby-cap, yellow with age” (Eliot 1994: 85). Not only are the objects suggestive of Mrs Gilfil’s feminine virtues, but they also contribute to the impression of warmth and comfort so sadly missing in the remaining rooms. In fact, the effect of cosiness, effected by a skilful application of “pretty trivialities”, is one of the three categories which, together with scarcity and excess, Thad Logan identifies as dominating conventional descriptions of the parlour in Victorian fiction (Logan 2001: 207). According to Logan, scarcity signifies both economic and psychic insufficiency, excess stands not merely for wealth but also for vulgarity and female sexuality (2001: 207-211), and cosiness connotes “a perfect fit between the self and the world” (Logan 2001: 212) and middle-class housewifely competences. Consequently, the parlour becomes “a newly significant space” (Logan 2001: 1), inextricably linked with the ideology of domesticity and articulating both social and economic status of the family.

Far from being merely a setting for a scene, descriptions of parlours and objects to be found there in Gaskell’s *North and South* and Broughton’s *Not wisely, but too well* constitute a significant element in the construction of female characters and help to validate their middle-class credentials. The Hales’ parlour in Gaskell’s novel is essential in establishing their distance both from the working-class Higginses and the nouveau-riche Thorntons. Whereas the Higginses’ dwelling, uncomfortable and untidy, furnished only with necessary articles bespeaks scarcity, Mrs Thornton’s drawing room, which swells with objects, all glittery and rich although evidently not used much, indicates excess. Both fail to produce the desired effect of cosiness, warm domesticity and easy comfort. Paradoxically, Mrs Thornton’s rooms, for all her wealth, are particularly uninviting, since they are either used only on special occasions and therefore have the impersonal air

about them, or they are extremely austere and, as Mr Thornton perceives them, “handsome, ponderous ... with no sign of feminine habitation ... and no convenience for any other employment than drinking and eating (Gaskell 1998: 78-79). The solid and dull furniture of the dining room, where Mrs Thornton usually sits, speaks of her evangelical virtues, an impression supported by the Bible commentaries on the sideboard, of her seriousness and industry, as well as of her son’s financial success, which is not, however, translated into cultural capital.

Mr Thornton, whose study of the classics betokens his aspirations to gentility, recognises the superiority of the Hales over his own *nouveau-riche* family. Although in financial terms Margaret Hale sank to the very bottom of the middle class, she possesses cultural capital, which, as Bourdieu (1986: 245) indicates, is acquired unconsciously, and “cannot be transmitted instantaneously (unlike money, property rights, or even titles of nobility) by gift or bequest, purchase or exchange”, and which she manifests by her taste in decorating the drawing room. When Mr Thornton visits the Hales, he is struck by the way their little parlour differs from his mother’s splendid rooms, which might be “twice – twenty times as fine; not one quarter as comfortable” (Gaskell 1998: 78-79). Although the objects in Margaret’s parlour are rather simple and old, they nevertheless produce the required impression of cosiness:

Here were no mirrors, not even a scrap of glass to reflect the light and serve the same purpose as water in a landscape; no gilding; a warm, sober breadth of colouring, well relieved by the dear old Helstone chintz-curtains and chair covers. An open davenport stood in the window opposite the door; in the other there was a stand, with a tall white china vase, from which drooped wreaths of English ivy, pale green birch, and copper-coloured beech-leaves. Pretty baskets of work stood about in various places: and books, not cared for on account of their binding solely, lay on one table, as if recently put down. Behind the door was another table decked out for tea, with a white table cloth, on which flourished the cocoa-nut cakes, and a basket piled with oranges and ruddy American apples, heaped on leaves

(Gaskell 1998: 78-79).

The juxtaposition of the two rooms enhances the contrast between vulgar display and comfort and, more significantly, implies a different set of values which Margaret and Mrs Thornton represent. Where the latter privileges expensive and showy articles (glass, gilding), Margaret favours objects which, not expensive in themselves, have either a sentimental value (“dear old Helstone chintz curtains”) or aesthetic value (the vase with nicely arranged branches of trees, apples “heaped on leaves”: the choice of natural rather than manmade objects strengthens the impression that they are valued for aesthetic reasons rather than because of their monetary value); if Mrs Thornton provides for the body (in her room there is “no convenience for any other employment than drinking and eating”), Margaret’s room implies nourishment for the mind and spirit. In other

words, Mrs Thornton's room stands for material value and economic capital, whereas Margaret's parlour points to the immaterial, spiritual and intellectual values or cultural capital.

Mrs Thornton's bad taste is even more evident in another scene in the novel, when Margaret comes to see her and is ushered into the parlour, which overflows with numerous objects, all rather expensive. Most of the furniture is bagged up and smaller objects are covered by glass shades to protect them from dust, which gives the place an air of a museum kept spotless by an assiduous curator rather than a room inhabited by living people.

[Mrs Thornton's drawing room] seemed as though no one had been in it since the day when the furniture was bagged up with as much care as if the house was to be overwhelmed with lava, and discovered a thousand years since. The walls were pink and gold; the pattern on the carpet represented bunches of flowers on a light ground, but it was carefully covered up in the centre by a linen drugget, glazed and colourless. The window-curtains were lace; each chair and sofa had its own particular veil of knitting. Great alabaster groups occupied every flat surface, safe from dust under their glass shades. In the middle of the room, right under the bagged-up chandelier, was a large circular table, with smartly-bound books arranged at regular intervals round the circumference of its polished surface, like gaily coloured spokes of a wheel

(Gaskell 1998: 112).

As the objects in the room are evidently rarely used, their function is reduced to mere display. Even the books, which might signal a pleasant occupation, are treated simply in terms of ornament, since they are evidently not read. As Lindner (2000: 385-386) indicates, the accumulation of "lifeless, inert and impersonal" objects in Mrs Thornton's parlour "might prove as jarring as their absence" in a household of a working-class man, and they might become "an unmistakable obstacles to social comfort". Rather than being a cosy refuge from the troubles of the outside world, a place associated with leisure, Mrs Thornton's parlour shows "evidence of care and labour, but not the care and labour to procure ease, to help on habits of tranquil home employment; solely to ornament, and then to preserve ornament from dirt or destruction" (Gaskell 1998: 112). Interestingly, "the snowy, icy discomfort" of Mrs Thornton's room contrasts with "the oppressive heat" of the fire in the Higginses' abode, lit "as a sign of hospitable welcome", but "making the whole place feel like an oven" (Gaskell 1998: 99). It is between the sterile existence of the social upstarts and the comfortless life of the working classes that Margaret has to oscillate to maintain middle-class status.

Similarly, Kate's home in *Not wisely, but too well*, and its heart, the parlour, corroborates her gentility. Whereas the aristocratic Stammers' residence might appear "comfort and luxury's self" (Broughton 1967: 25), it is also "a sham of

shams" from the outside, "a positive eyesore" (Broughton 1967: 24). Kate's dwelling, in contrast, is represented as relatively humble, "small" and "unpretending" (Broughton 1967: 130) but also a space isolated from the outside world, providing a shelter both from weather and (moral) dangers lurking outdoors, and represented by the fever spreading in the lower-class neighbourhood. Like Margaret in Gaskell's novel, Kate managed to create a cosy interior, a "nutshell" or a "snuggery" (Broughton 1967: 130). The narrator invites the readers to "figuratively take off the roof of [Kate's] house, and just glance into the snug little drawing-room" to observe

Warm green curtains, drooping in heavy folds; a thick-piled carpet, with a pattern of big lilies and ferns and red swirls; one or two tables covered with a pretty untidy litter; lots of books – poetry and novels and periodicals; a small stocking in the course of knitting, with the needles sticking out in all directions, inviting the knitter to resume her task; a half-finished drawing, not particularly well done; a piano open, with 'Santa Lucia' standing up, waiting to be sung, upon it. A strong smell of violets all about

(Broughton 1967: 130).

The outside world, cold and threatening, is thus shut out by the thick curtains, and the carpet seems to hush the unpleasant noises from the street and create an impression of softness and warmth. Rather than being carefully arranged and protected from dirt under glass shades, the objects in the room constitute an "untidy litter" which, far from suggesting slovenliness, is "pretty" and implies pleasant occupations, so unlike the formal, sterile and bored existence of the ladies in the Stamers' Llyn Castle. The smell of violets and, in another description of the room, of tea suggest refined, if sensual, pleasures:

A smallish room with a pleasant odour of tea in it – an odour not very hard to be accounted for, seeing that all the paraphernalia for tea was standing on the round table, with the shabby coated books, and the work-boxes; no candles or gas, nothing that made one feel any oppressive obligation to do something; nothing but firelight; two or three girl-shapes indistinctly seen looming in different comfortable attitudes about the room; girls with hats on their laps, that showed them to be but strangers and birds of passage

(Broughton 1967: 194).

The uncertain lightening of the room, the shadows of figures looming there, the "comfortable attitudes" of the visitors, the fragrant vapour of tea, all invest the room with a dreamlike quality and turn it into a cosy nest or a magical and fairy land, removed from the real, oppressive world outside.

The desired effect of cosiness is achieved mainly through accumulation of objects, of which books, work baskets and tea accoutrements seem to acquire a special significance and recur in the description of snug parlours in both *North and South* and *Not wisely, but too well*. The objects suggest an agreeable employment which, as Loudon insisted in 1839, was necessary to make a room look cheerful: “as nothing gives a room a more dismal effect than an appearance of idleness, every thing should be so arranged, both here [the library] and in the drawing-room as if the persons using the rooms had been employed in some way or other” (Loudon 2007: 799). Even more significantly, they also become potent symbols in constructing an ideal of (middle-class) femininity, as they point to a woman’s spiritual and angelic qualities. The objects and the atmosphere of the room marked it as feminine, so that, the narrator indicates: “You could swear that women lived in this room, and women with nice ladylike tastes too” (Broughton 1967: 130).

Thus, “pretty baskets of work” in Margaret Hale’s parlour, or “a small stocking in the course of knitting, with the needles sticking out in all directions” in Kate’s room, far from merely enhancing the reality effect and fulfilling Loudon’s minimal requirement that there should be “at least appearance of industry” (Loudon 2007: 799) in a room, suggest the essentially feminine occupation of needlework, which, in turn, had acquired associations with middle-class virtues. The apparently insignificant objects strengthen the feminine character of the parlour and suggest female bonding. As Maitzen (1998: 73) points out, needlework

figured in women’s lives in concrete ways that contributed to a strong sense of female community and culture. In the first place women learned to sew from other women, usually their mothers. Further, women sewed when they were together, often while enjoying the gossip or listening of one of their party to read aloud. ... such gatherings brought women together to share expertise as well as friendship and bound them together through the interests and priorities reflected in the common occupation of their fingers.

Indeed, the scene in Broughton’s novel where the Chester girls work on their dresses seems to be a perfect illustration of Maitzen’s words. The girls’ room, “filled to overflowing with a vast expanse of muslins and laces, and fiddle-faddles, which wandered billowy over the floor and the chairs and tables” (Broughton 1967: 147), is a female domain, where their brother is merely an intruder. Far from being merely a pleasant pastime, needlework became a signifier of feminine virtues. In *A woman’s thoughts about women* (1858), Dinah Craik represents needlework as a task which fosters thrift, industry and cheerfulness: “Who amongst us has not a great reverence for that little dainty tool [i.e. the needle]; such a wonderful brightener and consoler; our weapon of de-

fence against slothfulness, weariness, and sad thoughts; our thrifty helper in poverty, our pleasant friend at all times?" (Craik 1997: 181). However, although it signifies industry, needlework does not so much suggest work for wages as a labour of love and thus it becomes a symbol of loving and caring femininity:

From the first "cobbled-up" doll's frock – the first neat stitching for mother, or hemming of father's pocket-handkerchief – the first bit of sewing shyly done for some one who is to own the hand and all its duties – most of all, the first strange, delicious fairy work, sewed at diligently, in solemn faith and tender love, for the tiny creature as yet unknown and unseen – truly, no one but ourselves can tell what the needle is to us women

(Craik 1997: 81-82).

As Maitzen (1998: 65) indicates, for a middle-class woman it was not so much the final product of needlework that was significant, but "the intangible and heavily class-inflected traits putatively fostered by rigorous application of this difficult and tedious technical skill: elegance, taste, and refinement indicate affluence united with good breeding". Needlework, therefore, points to the world beyond mere physicality; it becomes a material manifestation of immaterial qualities.

Yet, however much the sewing paraphernalia might suggest the intangible, spiritual and moral qualities, they nevertheless are indicative of the social and economic position, and thus they refer back to the material conditions which they are supposed to deny. Indeed, by representing it as a universally feminine occupation, Victorians often blur class distinction. Elizabeth Stone, for example, in her introduction to *The art of needlework* (1840), describes needlework as an activity for women on all rungs of social ladder: "If there be one mechanical art of more universal application than all others, and therefore of more universal interest, it is that which is practised with the NEEDLE. From the stateliest denizen of the proudest palace, to the humblest dweller in the poorest cottage, all more or less ply the busy needle; from the crying infant of a span long and an hour's life, to the silent tenant of "the narrow house," all need its practical services" (Stone 2007: 3). Similarly, Craik describes needlework as a universally feminine occupation: "One trade in all its branches, domestic or otherwise, is likely to remain principally our own – the use of the needle" (Craik 1997: 81). Needlework, however, is not class-blind: it "highlights rather than diminishes class differences" (Maitzen 1998: 68). The kind of needlework done can actually speak volumes on the social position of the needlewoman. Margaret Hale's work, "embroidering a small piece of cambric for some little article of dress for Edith's expected baby", is described by Mrs Thornton as "[f]limsy, useless" (Gaskell 1998: 96) and it jars on her more practical sense. Indeed,

“flimsy” Margaret’s work might be, but Mrs Thornton is wrong when she believes it “useless”: it marks Margaret’s social superiority. By working on an item which is impractical and purely decorative she communicates her independence of mere practical considerations and she displays her cultural capital, which “can only be acquired by means of a sort of withdrawal from economic necessity” (Bourdieu 1984: 53-54). Even Kate Chester’s more practical (and therefore indicative of a lesser degree of freedom from the useful and the material) knitting, left uncompleted among objects suggesting other unfinished occupations (singing, reading, drawing) implies that for her needlework is not a necessity but rather a pleasurable activity, much like the apparently useless (especially because it is not very good) drawing.

The “distance from necessity” (Bourdieu 1984: 53), which Bourdieu saw as a mark of cultural capital (and therefore of class), is also evident in the custom of tea-drinking in the Victorian period. Tea accoutrements in both protagonists’ parlours do not so much suggest a proper meal as a social occasion, a conversation and shared sympathy, and so, much like needlework baskets, they are indicative of immaterial values, domesticity and of feminine virtues. Tea itself seems to have transcended mere physical conditions and acquired a moral significance (especially as an alternative to alcoholic drinks); it contributes to individual and national happiness:

Great indeed are the blessings which have been diffused amongst immense masses of mankind by the cultivation of a shrub, whose delicate leaf, passing through a variety of hands, forms an incentive to industry, contributes to health, to national riches, and to domestic happiness. The social tea-table is like the fireside of our country, a national delight; and, if it be the scene of domestic converse and of agreeable relaxation, it should likewise bid us remember that every thing connected with the growth and preparation of this favourite herb should awaken a higher feeling – that of admiration, love, and gratitude to Him “who saw every thing that he had made, and behold it was good”

(Sigmond 2007: 3).

The material benefits of tea (improving health and economic condition of the nation), important as they are, seem to be overshadowed by its moral advantages. Sigmond presents tea-drinking not simply as a physical activity but as an almost religious experience, which lifts human thoughts towards heaven and helps experience the Creator’s benevolence. Tea, as Sigmond (2007: 1) puts it, provides for man’s “daily nourishment or for his solace” but if it does suggest nourishment, it is without invoking gross physicality: being a rather insubstantial meal, tea strengthens the spirit rather than the body, and thus becomes a sign of feminine sympathy, solace and comfort.

Both in *North and South* and in *Not wisely, but too well* tea drinking is contrasted with the more vulgar activity of satisfying bodily hunger. Kate, whose room is filled with the aroma of tea, is first presented against the background of a rather unpleasant and vulgar lodging house, where she stays with her aunt and uncle, and where the smell of mutton, “seemed to have been walking up and down the stairs all the morning, and paying a good long visit to each of the bedrooms in turn” (Broughton 1967: 14). In contrast to the smell of flowers or of tea, as Langland (1995: 42) indicates, “[k]itchen odors or smells [were] associated inevitably with bodily processes and needs” and for that reason were “taboo” and metonymically linked to lower classes. The pleasant smell of tea functions as a sign of Kate’s refinement, her domesticity and of comfort she offers. Similarly, Gaskell contrasts the elegant simplicity of tea served by the Hales with Mrs Thornton’s vulgar dinner party. The former “denies its function”, as Bourdieu would have it, because its form or aesthetic aspects seems to have precedence over function (satisfying hunger). It is not even a proper meal, and it does not so much serve to recuperate physical strength but it becomes sustenance for the weary spirit, an expression of love and care. Thus, when Margaret offers her father a cup of tea, she lifts to him her eyes “full of light, half-laughter, and half-love” (Gaskell 1998: 79), as if, with the cup, she wanted to offer him her sympathy. Mrs Thornton, in contrast, can only supply food for the body, and does not understand that genteel society does not depend merely on exchanging meals:

[Margaret’s mother] would have been astonished, if she had seen the sumptuousness of the dinner-table and its appointments. Margaret, with her London cultivated taste, felt the number of delicacies to be oppressive; one half of the quantity would have been enough, and the effect lighter and more elegant. But it was one of Mrs. Thornton’s rigorous laws of hospitality, that of each separate dainty enough should be provided for all the guests to enjoy, if they felt inclined. Careless to abstemiousness in her daily habits, it was part of her pride to set a feast before such of her guests as cared for it. Her son shared this feeling. He had never known – though he might have imagined, and has to capability to relish – any kind of society but that which depended on an exchange of superb meals

(Gaskell 1998: 160).

There seems to be a correspondence between tastes in cultural practices and tastes of food, “the archetype of all taste” (Bourdieu 1984: 79). Bourdieu distinguishes between “the taste of necessity, which favours the most ‘filling’ and most economical foods” and “the taste of liberty or luxury – which shifts the emphasis to the manner (of presenting, serving, eating etc.) and tends to use stylized forms to deny function” (Bourdieu 1984: 6-7). Read in this light, Mrs Thornton’s ostentatious dinner and the sheer amount of food served, which only

strengthens the impression that her guests gather at dinner to eat their fill, reveal her cultural deficiency. The exaggerated sumptuousness of Mrs Thornton's table constitutes a link between Mrs Thornton and the lower classes, above which she has only recently risen. Where she can only see the superficial signs (exchanging meals), a genteel person would be able to grasp the deeper level of meaning (exchange of sympathy, consolidating a group). Even if the remark about Margaret's "London cultivated taste" is ironic, as has been suggested,² it is evident that she is more conversant with the middle-class system of signification than Mrs Thornton, or her daughter Fanny, for that matter, might ever be.

Books have acquired an even more complex meaning than either needlework or tea. Their status as commodities is obviously problematic, and so is their uneasy position between the material and the intangible. In *North and South* Mrs Thornton seems to view books merely as ornaments which should display her wealth, and therefore they are valued "on account of their binding solely" (Gaskell 1998: 79). In her drawing-room books are "smartly-bound" and "arranged at regular intervals round the circumference of [a table's] polished surface, like gaily coloured spokes of a wheel" and evidently not read (Gaskell 1998: 112). They might actually be her daughter Fanny's books, revealing her rather superficial veneer of culture. In Mrs Thornton's dining room "[t]here was not a book with the exception of Matthew Henry's Bible Commentaries, six volumes of which lay in the centre of the massive sideboard, flanked by a tea-urn on one side, and a lamp on the other" (Gaskell 1998: 76). The books, probably constituting Mrs Thornton's Sabbath reading, suggest puritan values, the stress on duty rather than pleasure, which enabled her to gain the economic, but not cultural, capital. Margaret, in contrast, manages to convey the idea of books being a source of intellectual pleasure, pursued for the individual improvement or to provide entertainment (or consolation, as the case might be) for others. Much like other signifying practices, reading seems to be useless in the purely economic sense, which Mr Thornton points out when he comes to study the classics with Mr Hale:

But I ask you, what preparation [the classics] were for such a life as I had to lead? None at all. Utterly none at all. On the point of education, any man who can read and write starts fair with me in the amount of really useful knowledge that I had at that time. I was too busy to think about any dead people, with the living pressing alongside of me, neck to neck, in the struggle for bread. ... Now that I have my mother safe in the quiet peace that becomes her age, and duly rewards her former exertions, I can turn to all that old narration and thoroughly enjoy it

(Gaskell 1998: 85).

² The Conference on the Novel and its Borders, Aberdeen 2008; see also Ingham (1996: 60-61).

By indicating that he can only indulge in the impractical activity of reading once he secured the financial resources, Mr Thornton exposes the interdependence of the economic and cultural capital, and implies that it is the economic capital that makes the acquisition of culture possible. At the same time he is evidently well aware that it is not money alone, but the activities which appear useless from the purely pecuniary point of view – like the knowledge of the classics – is what constitutes a gentleman.

Books, however, are the most ambiguous of the three signifiers of genteel feminine virtues discussed here. Although in both *North and South* and *Not wisely, but too well* they are associated, at least to some extent, with women and help to construct the ideal of (middle-class) femininity they, nevertheless, traditionally belong to the male domain of learning. There is, in fact, much anxiety about women reading in the Victorian period. Although women, often deprived of formal classical education, were not expected to read the classics, light contemporary fiction was often presented as equally improper, since it was seen as frivolous and harmful to the morals. By making Margaret read Dante's *Paradiso*, Gaskell establishes her superiority over Fanny Thornton, whose "smartly bound" volumes seem to be nothing more than parlour books. Simultaneously, however, Margaret transgresses on the male domain, since it requires learning to read Dante in original. Reading may offer "a (moral and intellectual) ladder" but it may simultaneously constitute a moral danger. Kate, in contrast, indulges in light fiction of the day and the poetry of Byron, which she prefers to the religious tracts she distributes among the poor. Her novels might be seen as responsible for exciting her passions, and thus the connection of reading and the spiritual and intellectual improvement is undermined. In fact, as Gilbert indicates, the Victorian discourse abounds in metaphors of reading as eating, sexual intercourse or taking (Gilbert 1997: 18), and thus establishes the link between reading and the physicality of the body. Gilbert (1997: 115-127) points out the connection between Kate's reading, sexual passion and disease. Interestingly, then, although books help the narrator construct Kate as a feminine character who is unconcerned with the material world to the extent that allows her to enjoy the "useless" activity of reading, simultaneously, they undermine the her angelic character by suggesting the possibly corrupting power of books.

Needlework, tea-sets and books, far from being insignificant objects used merely to produce reality effect, should be read as important signifiers of middle-class femininity. It is through more or less conscious manipulation of the signifiers that Margaret and Kate can display their freedom from the merely utilitarian or grossly materialistic and, consequently, their gentility. If Kate appears less successful, it is because her choices (knitting rather than embroidery, a casual way of serving tea, Byron rather than Dante) are more transparently related to the functional, the material and the body. Paradoxically, however, the

characters can manifest their superiority to the material world only through the use of material objects. The objects, although not necessarily valuable in monetary terms, are not absolute necessities, which renders them either useless or unaffordable luxuries to working-class characters. Yet, they are vital for the middle-class characters because of the ideological value they have acquired. Consequently, not only do the objects become a site where the material and the immaterial meet, but also they undermine the characters' complete disengagement from the material world and reveal the interdependence between the cultural capital and the economic logic.

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