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Indian objects, English body:

Utopian yearnings in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*

Tara Puri, University of Bristol

Abstract

Focusing on the representation of Indian shawls and Indian tea in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, this article has two aims: first, it argues that the novel creates its ideology of domesticity and proper femininity through the creation a readable object world. It is evident that one of the consequences of the empire was to Indianise its English subjects, thereby making them more cosmopolitan and making the English home a monument to imperial Britain's success in the global system of commodity production, distribution, and consumption. These links then brought together the materiality of the empire and the Victorian preoccupation with material culture, constituting an imperial culture based on domestic interiority, visual and tactile pleasure, and political economy. Secondly, the article attempts to show how the ambiguities that enter the text along with these foreign objects unsettle the status quo established by the novel's middle-class ideology and propose utopian alternatives to it through a mobile, boundary-crossing female body and a more porous domestic setting. These alternatives are entirely speculative, incomplete, and restrained, but significant nonetheless, precisely because they turn this ideology's emphasis on the middle-class female body inside out, so as to recompose this body and its habitual spaces in new ways.

Keywords

Gaskell, *North and South*, tea, shawls, empire, material culture, domesticity, sexuality

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Incomprehensible body, penetrable and opaque body, open and closed body, utopian body.

Michel Foucault¹

A number of scholarly works published in the last twenty years as well as review essays published more recently have shown that studies of the Victorian period cannot escape the 'things' that crowd its cultural and textual artefacts.² This 'material turn' combined with studies of empire has led to exciting formulations about how the empire was lived and experienced through everyday practices, and explorations of the ways in which the British were 'at home' with their empire.³ Following from this well-established body of research, the aims of this article are twofold: first, by focusing more particularly on Indian objects and the female body in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*

¹ Michel Foucault, 'Utopian Body', in *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*, ed. Caroline A. Jones (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press), 2006, p. 231.

² See, for instance, Andrew Miller, *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); John Plotz, *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830–1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Catherine Waters, *Commodity Culture in Dickens's Household Words: The Social Life of Goods* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008). Also see the collections edited by Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin, eds., *Women & Things, 1750–1950* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009); Tim Barringer and Tom Floyd, eds., *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998); and Katharina Boehm, ed., *Bodies and Things in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

For review essays on the 'material turn' in Victorian Studies see Lyn Pykett, 'The Material Turn in Victorian Studies', *Literature Compass* 1 (2004), 1-5; Erika Rappaport, 'Imperial Possessions, Cultural Histories, and the Material Turn: Response', *Victorian Studies* 50.2 (2008), 289-296; Victoria Mills, 'Introduction: Victorian Fiction and the Material Imagination', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 6 (2008) <<http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk/article/viewFile/468/328>> [accessed 1 June 2015]; and Jennifer Sattaur, 'Thinking Objectively: An Overview of "Thing Theory" in Victorian Studies', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 40 (2012), 347-357; as well as the thought-provoking roundtable on Armstrong's *Victorian Glassworlds* in *Journal of Victorian Culture* 14.1, 2009.

³ Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, eds., *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Suzanne Daly, *The Empire Inside: Indian Commodities in Victorian Domestic Novels* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

(1855), this article will consider how the novel creates its ideology of domesticity and proper femininity through the creation a readable object world. It is evident that one of the consequences of the empire was to Indianise its English subjects, thereby making them more cosmopolitan and making the English home a monument to imperial Britain's success in the global system of commodity production, distribution, and consumption. These links then brought together the materiality of the empire and the Victorian preoccupation with material culture, constituting an imperial culture based on domestic interiority, visual and tactile pleasure, and political economy. The second intention of this article is to show how the ambiguities that enter the text along with these foreign objects unsettle the status quo established by the novel's middle-class ideology and propose utopian alternatives to it through a mobile, boundary-crossing female body and a more porous domestic setting. These alternatives are entirely speculative, incomplete, and restrained, but significant nonetheless, precisely because they turn this ideology's emphasis on the middle-class female body inside out, so as to recompose this body and its habitual spaces in new ways. Margaret's body, I argue, becomes able to traverse public spaces without becoming permanently contaminated or incapacitated by that contact, and the domestic realm she inhabits becomes a flexible space where she can play out bodily desires without the containment imposed by formal resolution.

Gaskell's *North and South* is deeply committed to making connections between the domestic and the industrial, the familial and the commercial, the private and the public, the national and the global. These connections, made through the person of Margaret Hale, are meant to draw out the ethical issues at stake in the novel, but in tracing them Gaskell also shows how one might slip between these seemingly opposing categories to open up a new range of possibilities. Much of this slippage happens, I argue, through a number of specifically Indian objects that find themselves

displayed in the Victorian home depicted by Gaskell, as well as on the body of the heroine who is its moral centre.⁴ The two objects that I will focus on in my argument are shawls and tea, both of which become vital to the overlapping processes of constructing an English middle-class domesticity and a female subjectivity in the novel. However, neither of these are straightforward categories for Gaskell, and this is a novel that consistently puts the ideas of class, national identity, and proper femininity under stress. These Indian objects then are not simply devices for shoring up Margaret's social status, as Suzanne Daly and Julie Fromer have argued, but function in ways that are more ambivalent.⁵ Daly and Fromer are right of course in pointing out the ways in which *North and South* systematically loosens their signification as foreign artefacts enough to make them central to the consolidation of Margaret's middle-class identity, while keeping intact their ability to add an erotic, exotic, charge to the already sexualised body of the middle-class woman. Compelling though this argument is, it is also incomplete; in the textual moments I will examine in this essay, I will show how this middle-class identity reveals itself to be less stable and more deceptive than it seems. This is partly to do with the fact that class is understood and signalled differently in the north and the south, but more importantly because the novel never lets us forget the labour upon which leisure is sustained. The tension that then propels this argument forward relates to the ways in which these desirable, almost titillating, Indian objects facilitate the performance of a middle-class femininity (however misleading and inconsistent it may be), while themselves becoming unevenly domesticated in the process.

In *The Ideas in Things*, Elaine Freedgood brilliantly argues for the importance of 'tracing the

⁴ Indeed, it is worth remembering that Gaskell's initial title for the novel was *Margaret Hale*, and it was on Dickens' suggestion that it was changed to *North and South*, checking the importance of this remarkably mobile heroine to the narrative for the benefit of the more oppositional schema that would bring it closer to Dickens' own *Hard Times*, whose publication exactly preceded *North and South* (*Hard Times* was published in *Household Words* from April to August 1854, and *North and South* from September 1854 to January 1855, with both being advertised together almost as companion volumes in the journal).

⁵ Both Daly and Fromer focus on *North and South* in making their argument about the foundational link between class, shawls (Daly) and tea (Fromer) in the mid-Victorian novel. Daly, *The Empire Inside*; Julie Fromer, *A Necessary Luxury: Tea in Victorian England* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008).

fugitive meanings of apparently nonsymbolic objects' in the mid-Victorian novel by engaging in strong metonymic readings.⁶ For Freedgood, as well as Plotz, Daly, and Fromer, such readings open up the novel to repressed imperial histories. However, I would like to suggest that these objects are not just signifying a past but also a future, imagined entirely in utopian terms that seem at odds with Gaskell's practical, rooted and very material prose. This possibility of futures, which is also a possibility of a hybridity-to-come, a sensibility and an aesthetics-to-come, is not something Freedgood explores.⁷ This essay will attempt to unearth some of the possible futures that are stored up in these objects, jostling with the past. Margaret Hale is embedded in a narrative where the past, the present, and the future co-exist, and readers glimpse this simultaneity through her fantasises, her desires, and her day dreams. But crucially, it is through these oriental luxuries that she 'acquire[s] an other body, only a bit more beautiful, better decorated, more easily recognizable'.⁸ The shawls and the moments around tea, 'place the body in communication with secret powers and invisible forces' and into 'an other space'.⁹ The invisible forces are those futural powers that double or are carried by the material and affective qualities of these objects, for such objects always hold within them not just their pasts but also the implications they have for future transformations. They transmute Margaret's body into another body that is more permeable without being contaminable, and transport her body somewhere else, an imagined space of greater flexibility and community. These are of course Orientalist moments that endorse or enact a plebiscite on the colonial project, ratifying it by consuming its products and using them for the consolidation of a national identity. But, in spite of acting as props of the empire, they are also incisions that make the body and its habitation other (otherwise, elsewhere), making a small tear in the domestic space, resisting its categorical

⁶ Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things*, p. 4.

⁷ Note, for instance, Freedgood's assertion that metonymic connections 'continue to hold out the promise of semiotic and psychic fulfillment'. Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things*, p. 17.

⁸ Foucault, 'Utopian Body', p. 231.

⁹ Foucault, 'Utopian Body', p. 231-232.

confinement.

I. 'Dressed in splendour': shawls

North and South examines the tensions between masters and men, between the industrialised north and the more agricultural, romanticised south, eventually suggesting a resolution of the class conflict not through the example of domestic harmony, as it has often been read, but through the creation of a potent, sexualised heroine.¹⁰ Margaret's bodily presence is crucial to the novel – she is austere and dignified but also possesses an obvious, irrepressible sexuality that she struggles to understand, contain and come to terms with. Gaskell does not secrete her away in the crevices of public life, in the underside of social surfaces, but makes her an active participant of that life, the focal point of all attention; she is voluptuously displayed in the text. Possessing an intensely visual presence, she is sexualised by her restrained, Junoesque body that is rendered even more appealing by the accompanying unconsciousness of the desire it induces. Tall, full-figured, and unconventionally independent, Margaret's simple clothing is a choice that is meant to display her innate dignified grace and the absence of feminine fripperies. All of these qualities combine to shape a spectacularly dignified, handsome and intelligent middle-class woman.

In the realist Victorian novel clothes are saturated with meaning, being a key descriptive device in creating naturalistic characters, while also making them legible to the reader. Much of Victorian realism relies on detailed descriptions of outward appearances, the physiognomies of the characters being intrinsically linked to their 'real' inner selves, read as the externally interpretable signs of a private, perhaps subconscious, self. It is no accident then that one of the first descriptions of Margaret in *North and South* takes place at the very beginning of the novel and introduces Margaret's body into the text, while also distinguishing her from her cousin Edith, with her pretty,

¹⁰ Daly too continues the critical tradition of reading *North and South* as uniting 'north and south, land-based and manufacturing wealth, the Establishment and the worthy newcomer'. Daly, *The Empire Inside*, p. 32.

kittenish charm. While Edith lies on the sofa taking an after-dinner nap, ‘a soft ball of muslin and ribbon, and silken curls’, her mother, Margaret’s aunt, calls upon Margaret to model some Indian shawls for her friends which are meant to be part of Edith’s trousseau.¹¹ By the mid-nineteenth century, Indian shawls had become highly coveted objects, popular both because of their current fashionability and their Eastern allure, and this is a scene reverberating with meaning:

Margaret’s tall, finely made figure, in the black silk dress that she was wearing as mourning for some distant relative of her father’s, set off the long beautiful folds of the gorgeous shawls that would have half-smothered Edith. Margaret stood right under the chandelier, quite silent and passive, while her aunt adjusted the draperies. Occasionally, as she was turned round, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror over the chimney-piece, and smiled at her own appearance there – the familiar features in the usual garb of a princess. She touched the shawls gently as they hung around her, and took a pleasure in their soft feel and their brilliant colours, and rather liked to be dressed in such splendour – enjoying it much as a child would do, with a quiet pleased smile on her lips.¹²

This is an unusual scene where Margaret delights in being dressed up, luxuriating in the ‘spicy Eastern smell’ of the shawls and their soft, multi-hued fabric.¹³ The texture of the textile, its soft feel, the way it falls and drapes her body, presents this as a vivid experience, an experience that suggests an authentic, unmediated enjoyment of the materiality of the cloth that is based on its sensory perception and its tactile qualities. As the art historian Anne Hollander declares, ‘Clothes exist to remind the self of the body, and to create a worldly body for each person’.¹⁴ This description creates a palpable sense of Margaret’s body, and she physically inhabits the space of the

¹¹ Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, ed. Patsy Stoneman (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2002), p. 5.

¹² Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 9.

¹³ Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 9.

¹⁴ Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), p. 12.

drawing room, the focus of the admiring attention of the women, and her own appraising glance in the mirror. Curiously, even as Margaret is surrounded by these other women, this becomes an intensely intimate moment.

This is quite an extraordinary episode for many reasons; not only is it one where Margaret enjoys the feminine business of dress and finery that she usually mocks, condemns or dismisses, but it is also made all the more resonant by its focus on the Indian shawls. Acted out against the background of mourning clothes worn for a dead, distant relative who is never mentioned again, this is a licit moment of innocent vanity that is permissible partly because the sumptuous, expensive shawls are not her own and partly because of their exotic and alien nature. The social setting demonstrates Margaret's intermediary position, just as the lingering scent of these shawls recalls their foreign origin, while simultaneously turning them into enchanting objects that seem to exist outside of time. Nupur Chaudhuri reminds us that the admiration and desire for shawls of a genuinely Indian provenance was so great in the period that there are frequent mentions of it in popular women's magazines like *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* and *Queen*.¹⁵ One correspondent writing to the editor of *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* specifically asks about the Eastern fragrance that clings to Indian shawls. The all-knowing editor confidently replies:

It is well known that the real India shawl possessed a peculiar and agreeable odour, which was new to European noses as the shawls were to European eyes. This odour pertinaciously clung to the fabric, and a genuine 'India' unfailingly advertised it as such by its perfume. The cause of this odour was fully inquired into, and it was found to be

¹⁵ Chaudhuri provides numerous examples of references to shawls in articles on fashion, 'exchange columns', and readers' correspondence in women's magazines in the mid-nineteenth century. Nupur Chaudhuri, 'Shawls, Jewelry, Curry, and Rice in Victorian Britain', in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, ed. by Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992).

given to the shawls by contact with a herb known to the Hindoos as putcha, pat, or patchouly, as it is more commonly called.¹⁶

In his authoritative tone, the editor combines this common knowledge on the 'odour' of Indian shawls with the language of scientific enquiry, and declares its origin to be a herb specific to India. What is notable about this extract from 'The Englishwoman's Conversazione' is the emphasis on authenticity: 'the *real* India shawl', 'a *genuine* "India"'. This unfamiliar yet agreeable smell discloses the authenticity of the article, while also encapsulating within it all of India itself. The nature of that distant, exotic land of spices and riches can be captured within a fabric and a scent that can then be possessed by the discerning and indeed properly deserving English woman.

The shawls that Margaret models are definitely the genuine article for we, along with Mrs Shaw's friends for whom the viewing is being performed, are specifically told that it is the deceased General Shaw who had given these to his wife, who in turn is passing them on to her daughter in the manner of valuable heirlooms. By the nineteenth century, shawls had gained further cultural associations as expensive, opulent artefacts imported from colonial India, or more usually brought home by returning brothers and husbands 'in a move that symbolizes the fitting and desired conclusion to a man's career in India: coming home wealthy, bearing the spoils of the East even as he reenters domestic space'.¹⁷ These coveted shawls become even more meaningful when they are presented as gifts, their authenticity somehow augmented by the giving.¹⁸ However, even buying the shawls oneself would be a significant investment and a show of social status because of their exorbitant prices. As Mrs Gibson, one of Mrs Shaw's friends, remarks that Edith was 'a lucky girl' to be inheriting this treasure, for she had to refuse an Indian shawl that her own daughter had set her heart on because of its extravagant price. Interestingly, Alison Lundie's work on Elizabeth Gaskell

¹⁶ 'The Englishwoman's Conversazione', *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* 14.154, 14 February 1873, p. 112.

¹⁷ Daly, *The Empire Inside*, p. 13.

¹⁸ In *Cranford* too, 'a large, soft, white India shawl' is sent from Peter in India to his mother, arriving the day after her death. Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford*, ed. Dinah Birch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 58.

and shawls has revealed that there are four shawls still in existence that belonged to Gaskell and are now in possession of her descendants, much in the manner of the shawls that punctuate her own novels.¹⁹ As Lundie points out in her article, whether these were gifts, like the shawls in *North and South*, or whether she had purchased them herself is impossible to say, but it is clear from her letters that she enjoyed shopping for shawls, and she described one of her shopping expeditions to her daughters Marianne and Meta: '[going] to look at black shawls for you, MA & Meta, at Moore and Butterworth's – silk barège scarf shawls, 35s – grenadine shawls ditto – (like E. Marslands) cashmeres embroidered 3 guineas – I inclined to the barèges much; but we left it for you to choose'.²⁰ There is a quickened enthusiasm in this description of the shawls, an excitement about the choice to be made in the second shopping trip that is to follow. While these are not Indian shawls (barège is a light and silky fabric, and grenadine is a loosely woven silk or silk and wool textile), there is a detailed attention here, a calculation that takes into account the type of fabric and its price, and that once again attests to the significance of the shawl as a garment.

Indian shawls in particular figure in quite a different way from other items of clothing in most nineteenth century literature. As Reynolds and Humble point out, 'The Indian shawl is too important a garment to be merely frivolous, it echoes the strength and passion of the woman that wears it'.²¹ It is also a garment that 'betokens female power and agency', and it is no coincidence that it is the defining sartorial item of many an authoritative woman in Victorian literature – for instance, Madame Beck in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) often wears an Indian shawl, as does Mrs Gibson in Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (1862-1866).²² But *Villette* also features Madame

¹⁹ Alison Lundie, 'Elizabeth Gaskell and Shawls: Creative Artistry and Identity', *The Gaskell Society Newsletter* 56 (Autumn 2013): 6-12.

²⁰ 'Letter 487, 23 May 1861', in *The letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, eds. by John A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), p. 652; also quoted in Lundie, p. 9.

²¹ Kimberley Reynolds and Nicola Humble, *Victorian Heroines: Representations of Femininity in Nineteenth Century Literature and Art* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 60.

²² Reynolds and Humble, *Victorian Heroines*, p. 60. Indeed, Mrs Gibson knows fully the economic and social value of her scarlet Indian shawl for she repeatedly tries to use it as a tool of negotiation with her daughter and step-daughter.

Svini, or Mrs. Sweeny, who is able to gain access to Madame Beck's establishment as a nursery governess, in spite of her coarse tongue, on the strength of her suspiciously acquired 'real Indian shawl', '*un véritable cachemire*'.²³ Every insistent mention of the authenticity of a shawl then is trailed by the ghostly presence of a copy, a cheap imitation, either of the article itself or, more worryingly, the woman who wears it. While in *Villette*, this reveals itself as a straightforward anxiety about lower-class infiltration, in *North and South*, this question of rightful ownership becomes more complicated. The shawls we see on Margaret seem entirely unsuited to their real owner as the tiny Edith, unable to carry the actual weight and the length of the fabric or the expectations of majesty it created, is swamped in it. Writing to Margaret after her wedding, Edith describes herself at a picnic, trying vainly to wear her Indian shawl but: 'I was like mamma's little dog Tiny with an elephant's trappings on; smothered, hidden, killed with my finery; so I made it into a capital carpet for us all to sit down upon'.²⁴

The Victoria and Albert Museum possesses numerous Indian shawls from the period, held in a closed store, stacked in drawers between layers of paper or enfolded in white cotton to protect them from natural deterioration. Most of these are either donated by private individuals or are part of the textile collection brought back by Purdon Clarke from his expedition to India in 1882, which included over 140 examples of Kashmiri shawls.²⁵ Figure 1 is a shawl belonging to the museum, and its dimensions give an indication of its weight and the skill required to drape it. The sheer proportions of the shawl tested the endurance of the wearer and the appearance of effortlessness, an ability that Gaskell consistently gestures towards in reference to Margaret. With the fashion for large crinolines and wide-skirted dresses, large shawls were worn over dresses instead of a coat and

The lending or holding back of the prized shawl marks her pleasure and displeasure in the novel. Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters*, ed. by Frank Glover Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 224, p. 401, and pp. 502-503.

²³ Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, ed. Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 70.

²⁴ Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 235.

²⁵ For more on Purdon Clarke's project, see Felix Driver and Sonia Ashmore, 'The Mobile Museum: Collecting and Circulating Indian Textiles in Victorian Britain', *Victorian Studies* 52.3 (2010): 353-385.

were regularly displayed in the fashion plates of women's magazines (see Figure 2). Both the actual quality of the shawl and the manner of wearing it were indicators of the refinement and taste of the wearer; the long description of Margaret modelling the shawls places clear emphasis on her ability to carry them with a natural grace.²⁶

As a flowing piece of fabric, the shawl is evocative of the loose drapery of classical forms, which is meant to reveal the body, its movements and its contours, suggesting elegance, sexual allure, power and austerity all at once. But as Hollander has pointed out, this appeal to a classical aesthetic is not a reference to the actual garments that might have been worn by the ancient Greeks, but to how they appear on Greek statues and paintings of drapery: 'The desired effect is the breathtaking tactile beauty generated by a harmonious movement of flesh and fabric together, a counterpoint that looks both natural and perfect; and only representations in art can achieve this'.²⁷ The unstitched piece of cloth that drapes the statuesque body only brings it closer to art, and this sense of Margaret's body as a work of art is kindled by Gaskell's descriptions as Margaret becomes the cynosure of all eyes, including her own. The sense of Margaret as an artist's model is explicitly evoked when she is compared to 'a sort of lay figure,' but this comparison also brings her disconcertingly close to a mannequin displaying commodities in the plate-glass windows of Britain's new department stores. While a 'lay figure' primarily refers to the jointed wooden figures that are used by artists as models for the arrangement of draperies, it also suggests here the risk of Margaret's own commodification as she becomes connected metonymically with the material goods that adorn her.²⁸

²⁶ Marjorie Garson also provides a perceptive reading of this opening scene, connecting the focus on shawls in the novel to the discourse of taste where, she argues, 'simplicity' in dress and demeanour become aestheticised ways of dealing with larger social, economic and political issues. Marjorie Garson, *Moral Taste: Aesthetics, Subjectivity, and Social Power in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

²⁷ Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes*, p. 50.

²⁸ Anne Longmuir, 'Consuming Subjects: Women and the Market in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 34:3 (2012), 237-252, p. 246.

The spell of the scene is broken by the entrance of Henry Lennox, and interrupted in their sartorial rapture, the women draw back ‘half-ashamed of their feminine interest in dress’.²⁹ Margaret alone stands in the centre of the room, still the shawl-bearer, ‘with a bright, amused face, as if sure of his sympathy in her sense of the ludicrousness at being thus surprised’, confident in the knowledge that he would set her aside from others of her sex, aligning her with the ‘masculine’ qualities of good sense and intelligence.³⁰ Instead of acknowledging the pleasure she felt, and allowing herself a moment of female camaraderie, she sees this incident in the same light as Henry Lennox, as ‘ladies’ business’: ‘Playing with shawls is very different work to drawing up settlements’.³¹ Margaret responds by insisting that while they might have been ‘occupied in admiring finery’, this particular kind of finery stands apart for ‘Indian shawls are very perfect things of their kind’.³² While Margaret is speaking about the rich beauty and magical quality of the textile, Henry interprets it through its economic value: ‘Their prices are very perfect, too’.³³ This off-hand remark is a stark reminder that women’s clothing incontrovertibly signals their class, but at the same time, it punctures the mythologising of the shawl that takes place in this scene and, like Mrs Gibson’s comment to Mrs Shaw, it reinserts the shawl into the realm of commodities.³⁴ In her analysis of shawls in mid-century novels, and specifically in reference to this scene from *North and South*, Daly argues that Indian shawls are consistently removed ‘not only from the cash nexus, or the realm of commodification, but from their place of origin as well’.³⁵ Yet, this is not borne out by the text, for there are constant reminders of the economic worth of the shawl, as well as its Indian

²⁹ Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 9.

³⁰ Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 9.

³¹ Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 10.

³² Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 10.

³³ Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 10.

³⁴ Kerri Hunt suggests that Lennox’s patronising comment about ‘ladies’ business’ and ‘real’ business ‘also reproduces the stereotyped opposition between women’s writing, which played prettily with life’s decorative accessories, and men’s, which dealt with the “real true” springs of human endeavour’, but Gaskell’s narrative shows how these two opposed realms have far more in common than might first appear. Kerri E. Hunt, ““Nouns that were signs of things”: Object Lessons in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*”, *The Gaskell Journal* 26 (2012), 3-X.

³⁵ Daly, *The Empire Inside*, p. 30.

origins, as is evident in this moment. Indeed, the financial value of the shawl is of particular significance in this novel because it is crucially linked to the characterisation of its heroine who must negotiate the problematic incongruity between her superior taste, her class status as a clergyman's daughter, and her family's precarious economic position in their newly changed circumstances.

Just as Margaret is introduced to the readers through this tableau where she is surrounded by the Indian shawls, a similar atmosphere of elegance and majesty is called up in the scene where Margaret and Thornton meet each other for the first time. She is described as wearing a 'very plain' dress that is adorned by 'a large Indian shawl, which hung about her in long heavy folds, and which she wore as an empress wears her drapery'.³⁶ The adjectives used to describe the shawl are almost identical. Again, it is the shawl's mystique, its powerful allure and its connotations of a timeless, classical refinement that is called up in this scene. Margaret's unexpectedly regal attitude, intensified by the naturalness with which she wears the shawl, disconcerts Thornton precisely because it complicates his reading of Margaret as an unmarried woman of uncertain class. The erotic and the economic connotations of the Indian shawl are closely intertwined here.

This scene where Margaret gives an impression of haughtiness, and the luxuriantly described moment where austere Margaret is turned into an unlikely mannequin are akin to what Homi Bhabha terms the 'unhomely moment,' an idea that is also partially rooted in Freud's notion of the uncanny, or *unheimlich*. This self-consciously awkward formulation is something that captures for Bhabha 'the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place'.³⁷ This idea of unhomeliness evokes disorientation and displacement; it is the recognition, slow and surreptitious, that the home is not a secure place, for the border between the home and the world is soluble. It is a moment when the known world suddenly transforms into

³⁶ Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 58.

³⁷ Homi Bhabha, 'The World and the Home', *Social Text*, 31/32 (1992), 141-153 (p. 141).

another world, a moment that relates ‘the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence’.³⁸ In transforming Freud’s notion of the *unheimlich* into the unhomely, Bhabha is opening up the terrain of the psychological, the private, and the internal, to the workings of the political. Bhabha’s unhomely is a return of the repressed, the return of something that was once known and then suppressed. With the coming of this realisation, the familiar turns itself inside out and becomes startlingly, unsettlingly foreign. Interestingly, all the literary examples of unhomely individuals that Bhabha gives are women, for it is clear that they are synonymous with the private space of the household, which is always being penetrated by the political world outside.

But apart from drawing on Freud, Bhabha’s unhomely also has something in common with the Derridean ‘hauntology,’ another concept referring to the paradoxical states of being and absence, and to spectrality that looking backwards seems to suggest that ‘the living present is scarcely as sufficient as it claims to be’.³⁹ In different, though related, ways the unhomely moment, the *unheimlich*, and the hauntological become techniques for transcending the repressions of realism, its formal neatness and order, to revive and retrieve something that is altogether more interesting, imaginative, and fecund. This close reading of the commodities in the novel, unpicking the seeming unremarkability of these objects in domestic spaces, exposes the period’s most disturbing currents and unsettling ideas about the empire, ideas that the realist text tries to cover up with its formal control. In *North and South* then, these episodes exist almost as interludes, as interstices where vestiges of a concealed colonial present leave their traces. The moment of deep absorption in the heady aroma and the sensuousness of the Indian shawls, transforms the plainly

³⁸ Bhabha, ‘The World and the Home’, p. 144.

³⁹ Fredric Jameson, ‘Marx’s Purloined Letter’, in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx*, ed. by Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1999), p. 39.

dressed Margaret into a stately Eastern princess and the closed walls of the sheltered home open up to a world of colonial connotations.

But what also makes the shawl so fascinating is that it functions both as a marker of foreignness and of domesticity, and it is this hybrid identity that gives it its mystique. Seen as timeless, their designs based on the patterns of an unchanging Eastern aesthetic, and their fineness created on a handloom by weaving together wool of the most delicate kind, shawls were effectively dehistoricised and relocated outside a market driven economy.⁴⁰ But in fact, by the time Gaskell writes her novel, Indian shawls were being replicated in mechanised British mills and those that continued to be produced in India were losing their quality and variety because of the excessive demands of a growing European market.⁴¹ However, the shawls that adorn Margaret are stately garments, not cheap reproductions. They are inherited heirlooms rather than easily purchasable commodities, and the fact that they are not Margaret's own patrimony hints at Margaret as their true inheritor instead of the dainty Edith.

Gaskell's imaginative investment in representing these shawls and the effect they produce – visual, erotic, tactile, and textual – seems even more vivid when we look at painterly representations of shawl-clad women in the period, for they too recognise the power of this garment. Paintings like William Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* (1853; Figure 3), and Alfred Stevens' *Departing for the Promenade (Will you go out with me, Fido?)* (1859; Figure 4)

⁴⁰ In 1852 Harriet Martineau writes, 'If any article of dress could be immutable, it would be the shawl; designed for eternity in the unchanging East; copied from patterns which are the heirloom of a caste, and woven by fatalists, to be worn by adorers of the ancient garment, who resent the idea of the smallest change'; Harriet Martineau, 'Shawls', *Household Words* 5.127 (August 1852), 552-556 (p. 553). While Martineau makes this typical claim, in the same article she writes about the changing textile industry both in India and Britain, and the popularity of British manufactured shawls. Making a larger point, Cannadine argues that India functioned as an analogue of the hierarchy found in Britain, and adjectives like 'timeless' and 'traditional' were celebrated because India could then more easily be imagined as an 'ordered and ornamental regime'. David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), p. 56.

⁴¹ For more on the history of the Indian shawl see Daly and Chaudhuri; also see Sherry Rehman and Naheed Jafri, *The Kashmiri Shawl: From Jamavar to Paisley* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors' Club, 2006), and Suchitra Choudhury, "'It was an Imitation to be Sure': The Imitation Indian Shawl in Design Reform and Imaginative Fiction", *Textile History*, 46.2 (2015), 189-212.

represent these Indian shawls in all their opulence. Hunt's painting shows a kept woman, rising from her lover's lap, at the very moment of a spiritual revelation. Knotted about her waist, its folds replicating the lines of the girl's hands clasped in agitation, the deep red and richly embroidered shawl reveals the wealth of the lover, but also the troubled, exploitative and painful nature of that relationship. As the girl stands up, the loosening of the shawl also signifies the possibility of escape from this crowded and smotheringly luxuriant interior. In a painting where every detail is symbolic of the moral struggle that is being enacted, the shawl becomes another object that narrates meaning.⁴²

Stevens' painting too shows a large, closely woven shawl worn by the fashionable woman who, dressed to go out, turns back and addresses her lapdog with a playful, coquettish air. A painter who specialised in depictions of fashionable women in expensive interiors, Stevens pays meticulous attention to the details of dress in this picture. The rich, dark velvet of the dress is perfect to set off the heavy folds of the dense paisley motif, not unlike Margaret's plain black mourning dress. This prized possession is worn by the girl with an easy elegance and a consciousness of her own charms. The bright and brilliantly patterned shawl here is the focus of the painting, and offers a vision of glamorous femininity along with a trace of oriental exoticism.

In both paintings, as in Margaret's modelling of the shawls, there is not just a recording but also a perpetuating of desire. The hothouse ambience of femininity and luxury suggest both its fashionability, as well as its exotic, sensual aura. Such representations of the female consumer and her desires in domestic novels help to bridge the gap between the domestic and the foreign, the home and the world. In a period of growing global markets, the fantasy of consumerism is both

⁴² Responding to criticism of the painting, Ruskin wrote a letter to *The Times* in 1854, defending the painting in a way that sheds light on its careful, almost overwrought, symbolism: 'There is not a single object in all that room, common, modern, vulgar (in the vulgar sense, as it may be), but it became tragical, if rightly read. [...] [T]he very hem of the poor girl's dress, which the painter has laboured so closely, thread by thread, has story in it, if we think how soon the pure whiteness may be soiled with dust and rain, her outcast foot failing in the street'; John Ruskin, 'Letter to the Editor', *The Times* 21.733 (25 May 1854), p. 7.

satisfied and perpetuated in these depictions. These women are shown to be consummate consumers of oriental luxuries, able to turn them into easy signifiers of a tamed exoticism and a confident and readable middle-class identity. But this signification is more troubled than these paintings or Gaskell's portrayal of Margaret imply, for the kept woman in Holman Hunt's painting is as much consumed as consuming, and Margaret's exquisitely regal demeanour is part of her desperate attempt to project a stable class identity at a time when her family is plunged into a precarious financial future. Though Margaret might be the 'natural' inheritor of the shawls, they are not hers to consume.

II. 'The grateful flavour of the Indian leaf': tea

In her household manual for young married women, Isabella Beeton writes, 'The beverage called tea has now become almost a necessary of life'.⁴³ The illustration from *The Ladies' Treasury* (Figure 5) is typical of the way in which the social space of tea is depicted in mid-century popular periodicals. Supposedly an illustration 'accurately copied' from a Dutch copper-plate of the seventeenth century, the three ladies are the wives of Dutch merchants, talking to each other over tea: 'A curious plant has been brought over, which, steeped in boiling water, produces a refreshing aromatic liquor, called tea; and the ladies are passing on that very singular production an impartial criticism'.⁴⁴ The increasingly growing import and incredible popularity of tea from the nineteenth century onwards incontrovertibly showed the close connection between consumption and empire. However, the trade in tea underwent a sea change from the beginning of the century to its conclusion, as the cash crop from China was replaced by the plant cultivated on British-owned plantations in the hills of Assam. What is striking though is that as tea and its associated

⁴³ Isabella Beeton, *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management*, ed. by Nicola Humble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 346.

⁴⁴ 'Dutch Ladies at Tea', *The Ladies' Treasury* 3.1.1859, p. 2.

paraphernalia became central to English domestic life and literary representations in the period, its foreign origins and its alien character were systematically eroded. The everyday and pervasive presence of this colonial product paradoxically also made invisible its source, for the extremely complex and exploitative structures of trade, labour and imperial power remained obscure. It was only in the aggressive advertisement campaigns devised to shift customer loyalty from Chinese tea to Indian tea that the origin and process of production was emphasised and mythologised. But this was only because India, along with Ceylon, was seen as an integral part of the empire, located within its expansive terrain, rather than as a foreign country. Even though the advertisements that announced these products in the pages of popular periodicals, or the paper that wrapped the individual packages, proclaimed where the tea came from, once it entered the English home, it seemed to lose its foreign qualities. And in fact, as various articles written about tea in mid-century periodicals demonstrate, it was the combination of the domestic (the rich English milk) with the colonial (the dried tea leaves; and of course sugar from the West Indies) that had cultural impact, bringing together ideas of patriotism and exotic pleasure.⁴⁵

A significant, and much-remarked, tea table scene takes place in *North and South* at the Hales' residence, and is another moment where Margaret's body is put on display in the text. Invited for tea at Mr Hale's residence, that most ladylike of all meals,⁴⁶ Thornton cannot take his eyes off the drama played out between Margaret's hands and her truant bracelet as she pours out the tea:

⁴⁵ For more on the history of tea, besides Fromer, also see James Walvin, *Fruits of Empire: Exotic Produce and British Taste, 1660-1800* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Erika Rappaport's 'Packaging China: Foreign Articles and Dangerous Tastes in the Mid-Victorian Tea Party', *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World*, ed. Frank Trentmann (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 125-46, and 'Object Lessons and Colonial Histories: Inventing the Jubilee of Indian Tea', *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*, <http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=erika-rappaport-object-lessons-and-colonial-histories-inventing-the-jubilee-of-indian-tea> [accessed on 21 March 2016]; Anandi Ramamurthy, *Imperial Persuaders: Images of Africa and Asia in British Advertising* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

⁴⁶ Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 15.

She stood by the tea-table in a light-coloured muslin gown, which had a good deal of pink about it. She looked as if she was not attending to the conversation, but solely busy with the tea-cups, among which her round ivory hands moved with pretty, noiseless, daintiness. She had a bracelet on one taper arm, which would fall down over her round wrist. Mr Thornton watched the re-placing of this troublesome ornament with far more attention than he listened to her father. It seemed as if it fascinated him to see her push it up impatiently, until it tightened her soft flesh; and then to mark the loosening – the fall. He could almost have exclaimed – ‘There it goes, again!’ There was so little to be done after he arrived at the preparation for tea, that he was almost sorry the obligation of eating and drinking came so soon to prevent his watching Margaret.⁴⁷

Charmed by Margaret’s tasteful elegance, Thornton’s consuming gaze follows her every movement, lingering on her arms, which become a highly eroticised synecdoche for her statuesque body. The sole focus of his attention, her arms, her wrists, her hands and her fingers, are all fetishistically gathered by his quiet watchfulness, which is not unlike Lennox’s sexual gaze upon Margaret in the opening scene with the shawls. That the tea ceremony provides the occasion of this sensual display of arms and graceful dexterity of fingers for Margaret, and the discreet commodification of the same by Thornton is not exceptional, for by the mid-nineteenth century tea was seen as an essentially feminine beverage and the tea table the domain of the woman.⁴⁸ This scene then signifies the tea table as a space where women could flaunt the elegance of their hands and their equipage as well as a site of domestic felicity, enacting a tableau of Englishness, tradition, and a shared sense of community.

⁴⁷ Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 79.

⁴⁸ In Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1861-62), it is this meal that the narrator comments on, eulogising and parodying it in the same turn: ‘Surely a pretty woman never looks prettier than when making tea. The most feminine and most domestic of all occupations imparts a magic harmony to her every movement, a witchery to her every glance [...] At the tea-table she reigns omnipotent, unapproachable [...] To do away with the tea-table is to rob woman of her legitimate empire’; Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, ed. by Jenny Bourne Taylor (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), p. 222.

The passage conveys a series of qualities associated with the rituals of the tea table, that are also recognised as markers of taste and class – femininity, delicacy, and refinement.⁴⁹ Kowaleski-Wallace argues that scenes like this in *North and South* and the one in *Lady Audley's Secret* are part of a process of 'disciplining and normalizing' the upper-class female body that began in the early decades of the eighteenth century, but reached its apotheosis in fictionalized nineteenth-century scenes like these. However, to read these scenes as confidently middle-class, even though this is what the narrative itself is steering us towards, is to be blinded to the work of class consolidation that Margaret is purposefully undertaking in the novel or to be fooled by Lady Audley's adept performance. This scene in *North and South* is as theatrical as the one in *Lady Audley's Secret*, and shows Margaret's skilled staging of the tea ceremony, a setting where her ritualised behavior is clearly meant to be a sign of her disciplined middle-class female body. Indeed, Thornton is especially enamoured of Margaret because of her ease at the tea table, much like earlier in the novel he was astonished as well as discomfited by his first view of Margaret where she stood, adorned in her own shawl, like an 'empress'. It is this poise that marks her as separate from women of his own class for the calico manufacturer. The elaborate choreography of the slipping bracelet sends an erotically charged message and further provokes his longing. Oddly then, when this sexual subtext between Margaret and Thornton is transferred to Margaret's father when he takes hold of her hand, using her fingers as sugar tongs in a practiced pantomime, the ritual of the scene is even further enhanced:

She handed him his cup of tea with the proud air of an unwilling slave; but her eye caught the moment when he was ready for another cup; and he almost longed to ask her to do for him what he saw her compelled to do for her father, who took her little finger and thumb in his masculine hand, and made them serve as sugar-tongs. Mr. Thornton saw her

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 20.

beautiful eyes lifted to her father, full of light, half-laughter and half-love, as this bit of pantomime went on between the two, unobserved, as they fancied, by any.⁵⁰

Even as Margaret hands Thornton his cup of tea, she remains apart from him, caught up in the playful game she enacts with her father thinking herself unobserved. In regarding this curiously drawn out moment, almost in a kind of reverie, Thornton is outside of that filial ritual but longing to be part of it, longing for Margaret's 'beautiful eyes' to include him in that fellowship. While she is observant of social niceties in never neglecting to refill his empty cup, she never really looks at him. The tea table here plays on the notions of inside and outside, where not only does it become a haven of domesticity, cut off from the brutish industrial city outside, but also a familial circle that even as it includes Thornton as a guest, keeps him outside. Furthermore, it becomes a space where Margaret can inhabit her full-figured sensual body, in an embodied experience that is linked with the strong affective qualities of tea and its equipage: its flavour (referred to in both Barbauld's quote that forms the title of this section and the quote from *The Ladies' Treasury*) and its tactility.

Julie Fromer in her comprehensive study of tea in Victorian England looks at how tea could signify both exoticism and luxury on the one hand, and domesticity and ordinary necessity on the other. While *North and South* is one of the novels she examines at some length, she reads the scenes situated around tea as liminal moments where cross-class exchanges become possible and a sense of community can be established. In this particular scene, by providing a 'shared cultural experience that soothes differences,' the tea table also 'unravels the binaries of masculine and feminine, public and private', allowing Margaret and Thornton to discuss class conflict in the domestic sphere.⁵¹ This shared homely moment domesticates the tensions between the north and the south that the novel centres around, making the conflict one of misunderstanding, like the one between Thornton and Margaret. Even though the episode ends with disagreement, it becomes firmly embedded in the

⁵⁰ Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 75.

⁵¹ Fromer, *A Necessary Luxury*, p. 11.

narrative of their courtship. However, like Kowaleski-Wallace, Fromer too misses the class performance that is taking place here; while she recognises Thornton's shadowy class position, she fails to take into account the implications of Margaret's successful bluff, which relies on her ability to put into service the products of empire that she finds at her fingertips.

Paradoxically then this domestic tea pouring ritual also reveals itself as another 'unhomely moment' where the colonial background makes inroads into the Victorian home. In its position as 'a necessary luxury,' it collapses the geographical distance between colony and coloniser, bringing the foreign empire into the English drawing room. The rituals of the tea table then have a similar purpose as the Indian shawl in gathering up the empire, transforming it into an extension of Britain, and imperialism itself into a daily necessity of English life. It also subsumes within it the sensed boundary between the public and the private that Gaskell addresses throughout the novel. The public here enters the private, not as threat but as difference, becoming domesticated and naturalised. But even this attempt at domestication raises inevitable questions, showing the project to be pricked by discontinuities and disjunctions that even the confidence with which Gaskell writes these objects into her narrative cannot fully subdue.

This scene is also interesting for two other reasons: one is the phrase used to describe Margaret's manner, 'the proud air of an unwilling slave,' when she is serving tea to Thornton; and the other is the focus on her hands. Usually described through metaphors of majesty, this contrary reference to Margaret as a slave brings a strange and uneasy valence to the scene.⁵² On the one hand, this tea table is her domain yet, on the other, she is being forced to do something that she would prefer not to. The tea table is simultaneously her empire, displaying produce from other parts of the world (tea, coconut cakes, oranges, and 'ruddy American apples') and she is its empress, as

⁵² This connects in part to Julia Sun-Joo Lee's argument about the role of Frederick in bringing a transatlantic dimension to the novel by locating it in the global textile trade and the antislavery movement. Frederick, she argues, 'is metonymically linked to slavery'. Julia Sun-Joo Lee, 'The Return of the "Unnative": The Transnational Politics of Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 61.4 (2007), 449-478 (p. 454).

well as a site where her labour is expended in ways that are socially sanctioned and sexually appealing.⁵³

By extension, the persistent and eroticised focus on her hands becomes a reminder of the work that goes into this performance, but their reiterated whiteness and smoothness clearly exhibits Margaret's class position as well as the Victorian fetish with hands, for marked and rough hands would betray menial work. In this sense, this scene parallels a previous scene in the novel that focuses on Edith, who gradually and not entirely negatively emerges as Margaret's foil:

Mr. Henry Lennox stood leaning against the chimney-piece, amused with the family scene [...]. He thought it a pretty sight to see the two cousins so busy in their little arrangements about the table. Edith chose to do most herself. She was in a humour to enjoy showing her lover how well she could behave as a soldier's wife. She found out that the water in the urn was cold, and ordered up the great kitchen tea-kettle; the only consequence of which was that when she met it at the door, and tried to carry it in, it was too heavy for her, and she came in pouting, with a black mark on her muslin gown, and a little round white hand indented by the handle, which she took to show to Captain Lennox, just like a hurt child, and, of course, the remedy was the same in both cases.

Margaret's quickly-adjusted spirit-lamp was the most efficacious contrivance [...].⁵⁴

Another male gaze shapes this scene as we see the two women through Henry Lennox's perspective. While Margaret is able to manage her tea table with grace and dignity, as well as some playfulness, Edith comes across as being too small, too feminine, too childlike, to be up to this task. While Margaret's hands, though unmarked by the traces of actual labour, are capable of fulfilling her duties at tea, Edith's hands are *too* delicate, *too* easily marked by the strain of lifting the kettle

⁵³ It is interesting that when Thornton shakes Margaret's hand for the first time at his ball, he is again mesmerized, at this first touching of hands, by her round white arms, her taper hands, and the 'pretty attitude' in which they are lightly laid across each other; Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 151.

⁵⁴ Gaskell, *North and South*, pp. 13-14.

which is far too heavy for her. While she retreats to her betrothed for comfort, Margaret takes over, efficiently completing the tasks Edith is unable to. Fromer provides a detailed reading of this scene, but her categorisation of Edith's attempts as 'ineffective display' misses the fact that this is indeed the *most* effective display of feminine fragility.⁵⁵

McClintock has remarked that 'the domestic labor of women suffered one of the most successful vanishing acts of modern history', and so the Victorian wife's 'parlor game – the ritualized moment of appearing fresh, calm and idle before the scrutiny of husbands, fathers and visitors – was a theatrical performance of leisure, the ceremonial negation of her work'.⁵⁶ Interestingly, in *North and South* there is both a performance of middle-class identity but also glimpses, brief but crystal clear, of the work that goes into constructing this façade of beauty, ease and passivity. Margaret may be naturally superior but she is still able to engage in manual work as much as intellectual work. Following the Thornton ball where she makes such an impression, she remarks to her father: 'I felt like a great hypocrite tonight, sitting there in my white silk gown, with my idle hands before me, when I remembered all the good, thorough, house-work they had done today'.⁵⁷ This focus on the hands of Margaret and Edith at moments that centre around tea are a reminder of this erased labour and unwittingly form a connection with the workers or 'the hands' who form the other crux of the narrative, and more significantly become ghostly traces of the labour that went into producing this commodity.

What is notable as well about this representation of tea is the fact of its Indianness. From the 1830s the tea trade was shifting from Chinese to Assam or Ceylon tea, but in 1855, when Gaskell's novel was published, it was still Chinese tea that dominated the market. In 1833 the East India Company had lost its monopoly over trade with China, and there was a stronger impetus for finding

⁵⁵ Fromer, *A Necessary Luxury*, p. 127.

⁵⁶ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), p. 164, p. 162.

⁵⁷ Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 156.

new sources of tea that could be more directly managed. Later in the century, when tea from India and Ceylon, both British colonies, began to be produced on a larger scale and compete with Chinese tea, it was marketed to the British public as ‘British’ tea, and therefore pure, unadulterated and wholesome.⁵⁸ While it was not until 1887 that the consumption of black Indian tea matched that of Chinese tea, and it was only at the end of the nineteenth century that it came to dominate the tea trade, ‘the *idea* of tea grown in India by the English gained currency before the enterprise itself had stabilized’.⁵⁹ In *North and South*, Gaskell deliberately identifies the tea consumed in the novel as Indian, and the chapter that begins the tea table scene examined above, starts with an epigraph from Mrs. Barbauld that refers to the ‘flavour of the Indian leaf’ that will be gladly received in a beautifully made China cup. Here, then, an intimate moment of family life merges with the public world of consumer goods, free trade, and imperial power. While the use tea is put to almost entirely disregards its complex global history, the focus on the hands of Margaret not only serves to saturate the moment with sexual suggestion, but also recalls the labour that underlies this quintessentially British commodity. Its process of production included not just scientific advances and modern technology, but also enslavement, violence, and repression. Daly claims that the novel ‘thus succeeded both in incorporating India and making its concerns irrelevant’.⁶⁰ Similarly, Lee emphasises how it is through Margaret that ‘the foreign is safely domesticated or, more accurately, deracinated’.⁶¹ Fromer’s argument also follows the same course in asserting that Gaskell’s novel privileges the national over the foreign, the cosmopolitan, the global. But I want to suggest that these objects bring in both ghosts and visions, repressed histories of subjection along with utopian

⁵⁸ For more on contemporary debates around tea adulteration, and the way in which they led to an identification between the private consumption of ‘British’ tea and moral edification, see Judith L. Fisher, ‘Tea and Food Adulteration, 1834-75’, *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History* <http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=judith-l-fisher-tea-and-food-adulteration-1834-75> [accessed on 1 June 2015].

⁵⁹ Daly, *The Empire Inside*, p. 87.

⁶⁰ Daly, *The Empire Inside*, p. 96.

⁶¹ Lee, ‘The Return of the “Unnative”’, p. 456.

possibilities. Indeed, it is because of these secreted histories and the carefully plotted present that the speculative futures the novel gestures towards become possible, and Margaret's mobile, penetrable, expressive, class-crossing body is central to these potentialities. The shawls that drape Margaret give her a utopian body that transcends sexual containment and exclusion while maintaining sexual appeal (based on a sense of taste that is contradictorily connected to class). The utopian space that the tea table sets up transcends class difference but does so by installing a gendered body at its centre. They then hold out the promise of resolving the differences of the present through this imagined bodily potency.

In this essay, I have attempted a reading that brings into relief the oddly enigmatic and troubling moments where Margaret is imagined as a 'proud' queen, an 'unwilling' slave, a woman 'compelled', and above all a woman on display, along with those moments that tug at the 'ideas in things' – spicy smells, classical drapery, hidden labour. In doing so I have shown how the economic and erotic associations evoked by these Indian commodities, even as the novel shrugs off their foreignness and ensconces them within the home, propel Margaret's narrative. A strong metonymic reading of shawls and tea unearths a fuller understanding of the novel's subtexts as well as the histories and futures that lie outside the covers of the book. Metonymy allows for the expression of desire and the unconscious, but is unstable and contingent, and significantly is often elucidated in spatial terms, using the metaphors of space: Freedgood writes about the places metonymy pins down and disguises, Plotz lays bare the portable metonyms of national identity, Lee too talks of deracination. But metonyms in this sense are not just about the here and the now, but also about there and elsewhere. Just as they open up trapdoors into the past, they also place ladders to the future. While *North and South's* conclusion has usually been read in terms of a resolution that is based on domesticating the public, it in fact threatens to disrupt the very categories of public and private, revealing that which is hidden just below the surface and by opening up other possibilities.

The scenes around shawls and tea are disruptive moments of renewed engagement and negotiation. Margaret's bodily presence, indeed her palpable sexuality, emerges here as impossibly, unmanageably potent. She can enter the public realm, be penetrated by it (in the form of the mill girls who touch her clothing, the workers who comment on her appearance, and more directly by the stone thrown by the enraged worker that grazes her forehead and draws blood) but without becoming irrevocably, paralytically contaminated by it.⁶² The novel then presents the possibility of a utopian body that can escape containment and stigmatisation as well as a utopian space where this body's desires can be played out without being reduced to a tidy romantic resolution.

As these Indian objects enter Gaskell's text, and the Victorian parlour, they bring a host of meanings that leave reverberations through the novel, but also become models for imagining a more connected world and a more adaptable female identity with a perceptible sexual awareness. The exotic shawls as well as the quotidian brew that dominate the scenes of domestic life suggest an awareness of the ways in which the outside is consistently and necessarily a part of the inside, and in following the intricate patterns of their ingress, one can perhaps find an analogical pattern for entering the public realm in a manner that is as encompassing. In these uses of shawls and tea, familiar patterns take on special intensities and the tensions that the novel evokes are not simply the result of imperial and domestic negotiations but rather the product of long accretions that show an intimate and extended link with India. The cultural echoes of this moment dismantle and reorganise the boundaries between the domestic and the foreign, the private and the public, the psychic and the social.

⁶² Jessie Reeder's article on the novel focuses on this border crossing, but argues that this movement between the private and the public is problematized, rather than celebrated, by the way in which the female body is consistently depicted as fragile, afflicted, and fundamentally permeable. Jessie Reeder, 'Broken Bodies, Permeable Subjects: Rethinking Victorian Women's 'Agency' in Gaskell's *North and South*', *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 9.3 (2013) <<http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue93/reeder.htm>> [accessed 1 June 2015].