The Byronic Heroine of *North and South*

Den Byronska Hjältinnan i *Nord och Syd*

Stina Lisnäs
Abstract

This essay argues that the protagonist of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855), Margaret Hale, is a Byronic heroine. The counter argument that any such comparison is impossible because of her sex is refuted and examples are given of how Margaret is not portrayed like the other young women of the novel. She rejects the female stereotype of the time and it is furthermore proved that she steps out of the passive role considered best suited for a female, and takes on the active one, becoming the heroine of the piece. Finally, traits of Margaret’s character are compared to that of the archetypical Byronic Hero, and it is shown that she shares most of the defining character traits. It is concluded that certain discord in the comparison is needed for the concord to be visible, but rather than being idealized, Margaret is portrayed as a flawed character that rebels against the rules of society for the sake of those she loves. This makes her a Byronic heroine.
Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855) is a novel which presents the conflicts between many different worlds: the world of the rural south and of the industrial north, the world of mill owners and the world of workers, and also the private world of women and the public world of men. The novel’s protagonist Margaret Hale transgresses the lines between these worlds on many occasions, and in this essay I will focus on Margaret’s transgression of the line between the worlds of women and men. Margaret Hale is a character who more than once contradicts the traditional female stereotype of Victorian England. My aim is to show how Gaskell uses her female protagonist to challenge this stereotype, by comparing her to the archetypical character of the Byronic Hero. The character was named after its creator, the 19th century English poet George Gordon Byron, a man famous for his tumultuous personal life as well as his epic poetry in which many examples of his eponymous hero appear. The character is in many ways an antihero, passionate, arrogant, rebellious, brooding, haunted by the past, violent, manipulative, and typically male. Famous examples include Mr Rochester from *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights* (1847). The obvious approach to *North and South* would be to say that John Thornton, the owner of Marlborough Mills, and Margaret Hale’s main love interest, is the Byronic hero of the piece. Nancy D. Mann even claims that Margaret is a part of Mr Thornton and represents “his capacity for objectivity and his conscience” (37) She calls Margaret an “idealized Victorian maiden” (38), but in this essay I will argue against that perception, and show that even though Margaret Hale does not embody the full list of Byronic traits, she embodies enough of them that the Byronic hero of *North and South* can in fact be considered to be a heroine.

The main body of this essay, the arguments for Margaret Hale’s classification as a Byronic Hero, will be divided into three sections. The first section argues that Margaret does not fit into and actively rejects the stereotypical female role of the Victorian era. The second part argues for her role as the hero of the piece, and the last section demonstrates the Byronic traits of Margaret’s heroism and character.

Before the first section of the essay is presented, in order to categorise Margaret Hale as a Byronic Hero, a definition of the term is needed. Atara Stein explains that the Byronic Hero is rebellious; he “creates his own rules and his own moral code, and while he may break the law in pursuit of his goals, he takes responsibility for his actions” (1). In his definition, Stein quotes another scholar, Peter Thorslev, who argues that the character personifies the revolt of the independent man and his personal values against society (172). Stein goes on to describe the character’s arrogance and egotism, concluding that the character is not one to be viewed as a role model (2-3), but is rather a person with a “quick temper and a brooding angst, or
both” (8). This heroic archetype is not calm or passive, but rather one who can lash out in anger or fits of passion, not seldom violently. He is neither perfect nor idealised, but flawed and imperfect, and this is the essence of the character. Most important, however, is that the source of his arrogance and cynicism comes from somewhere deep inside, a place in which a passionate heart beats fiercely for what he loves. The Byronic hero itself can be expanded on and further analysed as the list of character traits embodied by him is extensive. I will, however, not be mentioning all of them in this essay, nor will I be analysing the hero further. My focus will be on Margaret Hale, and the fact that even though she does not embody all of the traits mentioned above, I believe that she embodies enough of them to be considered a Byronic hero in her own right.

Furthermore, in order to categorise Margaret as a Byronic hero one has to deal with one of the most common misunderstandings about the Byronic hero: that the character has to be male. Jessica Ray Lymberopoulos comments that to categorise Margaret Hale as a Byronic Hero may be difficult, simply for the fact that Margaret is a woman (77). After all, the word hero refers to a man, and the most famous examples of the character are male, even the ones provided by Byron himself. Manfred, Childe Harold and Don Juan are all men. However, not all scholars agree on this point. Gregory Olsen argues that “this assumption of exclusive masculinity needs revising, as does the conflation of the Byronic Hero with the Dark Hero, of which the former is but a subset: the Byronic Hero is not always a he, and not only a rebel” (464). According to Olsen there are in fact several instances in Byron’s work of female characters who, though her “designated sex has been used to categorize her among the heroine characters, her behaviour and her role are coherent not with the other women, but with the Byronic Heroes” (464). Gender is not a sufficient obstacle in the categorisation of a character as a Byronic Hero, so long as other criteria are fulfilled. In this essay I will thus argue that Margaret Hale steps out of the passive, feminine stereotype, and into the active, male one.

A natural starting point for the analysis of North and South is to point out that the portrayal of its protagonist, Margaret Hale, is different from that of any of the other young women of the same social class in the novel. Gaskell singles her female protagonist out, and portrays her unusually. This is particularly striking when one compares her to her cousin Edith, and is apparent in the very first pages of the novel. It begins with a description of a young woman’s physical appearance. However, it is not the appearance of the main protagonist Margaret that is described, but that of Edith: “If Titania had ever been dressed in white muslin and blue ribbons, and had fallen asleep on a crimson damask sofa in a back
drawing-room, Edit might have been taken for her” (Gaskell 1). Edith is here likened to Titania, the queen of the fairies from Shakespeare’s play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a paragon of female beauty. The first mentioning of Margaret’s appearance does not occur until page four, and the only account Gaskell provides of the looks of her protagonist in this passage is that she is a “tall, stately girl of eighteen”. We can thus see that from the very start, Gaskell introduces the contrasting images of Edith, the beautiful soon to be soldier’s bride, and Margaret, the tall, single parson’s daughter. However, the contrasts between the two do not stop at the way in which their physical appearances are described.

The contrast between Edith and Margaret become especially apparent in the depiction of their attitudes to Edith’s upcoming wedding. Preparations have been going on for the past six weeks, “in which Edith had been busied as supreme authority” (Gaskell 7). After a conversation between Edith and Margaret, the topics of which have consisted of “wedding dresses, and wedding ceremonies”, “what (captain Lennox) had told Edith about their future life”, “the difficulty of keeping a piano in good tune” and “what gowns (Edith) should want in the visits to Scotland”, Edith falls to a peaceful sleep, content and tired (Gaskell 1). Margaret on the other hand, although happy for her cousin, has been filled with an “indescribable weariness” (Gaskell 7) from the wedding preparations. When speaking to Edith’s brother in law Henry Lennox, in the same chapter, about the preparations for the marriage, Margaret wonders: “are all these quite necessary troubles?” (Gaskell 7) She expresses a wish of a simple wedding for herself when the time comes, of going her own way, and thus rejects the trends and norms set by society. While Edith seems to be almost the quintessence of the young, light-hearted female, Margaret is portrayed as her opposite.

Like Margaret’s cousin Edith, Fanny Thornton, the younger sister of the mill owner John Thornton, is similarly portrayed as very much adhering to the norms of society for young women. The discussion between Edith and Margaret about “the difficulty of keeping a piano in good tune” (Gaskell 1) is alluded to when Gaskell describes someone in the Thornton’s residence playing the piano, and not very well (Gaskell 77). This someone is Fanny, and in having her practising her piano play Gaskell creates a link between the three young women, telling us that Fanny is anxious to follow the norms of society too. As Fanny and Mrs Thornton arrive at the Hales’ for tea, Fanny addresses Margaret with the comment: “I suppose you are not musical […] as I see no piano” (Gaskell 99). Margaret’s answer is that the piano has been sold. Even though she enjoys music, she is not a well enough player. Fanny remarks: “I wonder how you can exist without one. It almost seems to me a necessity of life” (Gaskell 99), and continues to talk about the concerts hosted in Milton and how fashionable they are,
though Margaret shows no interest in them. This passage again shows that Margaret does not care much for the norms of society, of which Fanny seems to be very fond, and shows Margaret as not fitting into the stereotype of the typical young woman, showing an independent streak that is not apparent in either Edith or Fanny.

Even without comparing Margaret to the other women of the story one can easily find examples of her not fitting into the female stereotype. Her own character traits and behaviour serve as good examples as well. In the second chapter Gaskell explicitly writes that Margaret is more like her father than her mother (13). Her life outside of the parsonage could not be better; she enjoys devoting herself to active and public philanthropy and to accompany her father on visits around the parish, and on walks, having conversations with him. In contrast, she believes that her mother has grown all too used to a life indoors, and is certain that she does not want that sort of life for herself (Gaskell 14). Margaret often stands up for herself and does not shy back from confronting people whom she feels have offended her. She tells Henry Lennox that she does not like the way in which he speaks to her, directly after he has proposed marriage to her (Gaskell 26). Similarly, when Mr Thornton speaks of the South with its “aristocratic society” and “slow days of careless ease”, she swiftly points out his mistake and ignorance about the life in the South, which she claims is less unjust than the harsh North (Gaskell 82). Neither does she hesitate to ask him if he believes that “all who are unsuccessful in raising themselves in the world” are his enemies. Mr Thornton reacts to this, noting a “haughty disapproval” in her countenance (Gaskell 85). Here we see Margaret’s propensity for standing up for her own opinions and feelings, without much consideration for the point of view or feelings of the character she is addressing. She is evidently very proud, a characteristic not uncommon amongst women, although, not as openly expressed either. She is out-spoken, and at times rather inconsiderate. These traits were both most unfeminine at the time.

Margaret’s lack of characteristic feminine traits seems to be one of the most prominent attributes of her character, and according to some scholars, her greatest weakness. Nancy D. Mann claims that Gaskell has “chosen to portray a woman whose intelligence is used opposite to those decreed by the conventions of her time, at the cost perhaps of a fuller and more self-conscious humanity in her heroine” (37). Margaret is not portrayed as other literary heroines of the time, as writers would “normally” give their heroines intelligence about personal matters and relationships, a “feminine” intelligence, an intelligence Margaret is not given (Mann 24). Mann seems to say that by not being portrayed as feminine characters of the time, Margaret is portrayed as less of a woman, and thus, less of a person. It is Mann’s meaning
that Gaskell rectifies this by the end of the novel, by unifying Margaret with Mr Thornton (Mann 37). Mann sees Margaret as a part of Mr Thornton, as his “better half”, a representative for his objectivity and conscience. In their union, the “idealized Victorian maiden” is transformed into a “mature, self aware, and integrated character” (37-38). However, I disagree with this interpretation on two counts. Firstly, Margaret is flawed: to call her “idealized” is not only an unmistakeable contradiction, but also a brushing aside of all the consequences that inevitably follow Margaret’s actions. Examples of these are her brother endangering his life on her request, and the discord arising between her and Mr Thornton when she refuses his proposal of marriage. Margaret follows her own path, she makes impulsive decisions, and positive outcomes are not certain. Secondly, I disagree with the view of Margaret as less of a person, simply because she is flawed and has “unfeminine” traits. If anything, her flaws make her into a fuller character, and her union with Mr Thornton is not the prime factor in her character development. Their union rather serves as a symbol for the changes that have already happened. Changes have occurred, throughout the novel, within and around both of them as they have opened up their minds to hear voices other than their own, and have started to see things from other people’s perspectives. Margaret has matured and reached self-awareness prior to the declaration of love between her and Mr Thornton, and Mann’s analysis belittles Margaret’s role in the text, in centring it on him. Mann’s alleged ideal union seems to have ignored what was so eloquently put by Sarah Wootton as “the exquisitely ambivalent ‘gentle violence’ that transfers to Margaret in the closing lines of the text, indicating a continuing and evolving power struggle after marriage” (32). Margaret’s “unfeminine” character is not subdued in marriage, but rather maintained.

Not only does Margaret Hale not fit into the female stereotype, she also actively rejects the norms for women set by society on several occasions. This criterion would certainly make her eligible to be a Byronic Hero, as it concurs with Thorslev’s notion of the revolt of the independent, in this case woman, and her personal values against society (172). An example of this occurs early on in the book, when Margaret rejects Henry Lennox’s proposal of marriage. Margaret is completely unaware of Henry’s feelings towards her, viewing him as nothing more than a good friend (Gaskell 26). Henry finds this curious, pondering that any other girl would understand what he is implying when he flatters and compliments her (Gaskell 23). Nonetheless, Margaret does not, and this would suggest that the prospect of marriage is far enough from her mind that she does not even consider the possibility of marriage being the motive for Henry’s attention to her. When Henry then proposes marriage, she is surprised. She senses it when he starts to appear anxious and hesitant, something very
unlike him (Gaskell 25). When he takes her hand she is nonetheless surprised. With utmost calm and respect, she refuses his offer, definitely. Henry at first believes that she does so out of love for someone else, but the reader knows for a fact that this is not the case. Margaret does not love Henry, and therefore she cannot marry him. Instead of obeying the rules of society and marrying a respectable lawyer, she chooses to follow her own path and do right by herself and her perception of marriage, which is a union between two people who love each other.

A second example of Margaret rejecting the female norm that society has set up for her is that she decides to share the chore of house hunting with her father. Margaret becomes an active figure in the new course of life for the Hales earlier on in the novel, when she is the first person that her father confides his spiritual doubts and decision to leave Helstone to (Gaskell 30). She takes charge of the move from the parsonage, believing that she has no choice, since “if she gave way, who was to act?” (Gaskell 52). She evidently views herself as capable of the task. When the family arrives in Milton, it is decided that Margaret will help her father in finding a new house. In doing so, Margaret very much steps out of the passive female stereotype that her mother embodies, and joins her father in the active, male one. When her father goes to call on a prospective landlord, Margaret receives Mr Thornton for him, and Mr Thornton is very surprised, as: “he was in habits of authority himself, but she seemed to assume some kind of rule over him at once” (Gaskell 61). Margaret is so unlike any women Mr Thornton has ever met that he even starts to dislike her. “Her quiet coldness of demeanour he interpreted as contemptuous, and resented it in his heart […]” (Gaskell 62). It would seem that Margaret’s rejection of the female norms of society is leaving quite an impression with the other characters.

The final example of rejection is arguably the most poignant of the novel, the moment when Margaret steps in front of Mr Thornton to protect him from being attacked by his rioting workers. She urges Mr Thornton to speak to the workers, and observes him doing so, from a window, along with the rest of the female residents of the house. When she sees the tension down below building and notices some of the workers arming themselves with their heavy clogs she runs down to place herself in between Mr Thornton and the rioters (Gaskell 185-186). Her motive for doing this is to avoid violence, to protect both Mr Thornton and the workers, who will surely be ridden down by the called upon soldiers who are imminent. She pleads with the workers, asking them to disperse, but when Mr Thornton starts arguing with the crowd, “the storm broke” (Gaskell 186). Out of fear for Mr Thornton’s safety and guilt that she was the one who made him go down and meet the rioters, Margaret shields him with her
own body. This does not however calm the storm. He shakes her off, but Margaret is
determined to protect him. Margaret has no ulterior motive for acting this way, only a fierce
belief that it is the right thing to do. She is adhering to her own personal values, as a Byronic
hero would, according to Thorslev (172). However, those who witness the event seem to view
the incident differently. Having carried an unconscious Margaret inside to safety, Mr
Thornton finally reveals to the reader what he feels about her: “Dead – cold as you lie there,
you are the only woman I ever loved!” (Gaskell 189). While tending to the concussed
Margaret, one of the Thornton maids tells Fanny Thornton exactly what happened, as told by
another servant, and Fanny is shocked. “I don’t believe she’d be so bold and forward as to put
her arms around his neck,” she says (Gaskell 191). Mrs Thornton sees no other possible
reason for Margaret’s actions than that she must be in love with her son. He is evidently in
love with her too. Mrs Thornton sees Margaret’s rescue as a clear sign of affection: “what
proof more would you have, I wonder, of her caring for you?” (Gaskell 197). From these
reactions it is clear that Margaret has not acted according to their expectations, like a
stereotypical female would. Through actively making the choice of protecting Mr Thornton,
she has rejected a norm set for her gender by society.

Furthermore, the scene is not only poignant in that Margaret acts very contradictory to
how a female of the time was expected to act, but it is also here that she literally and
figuratively steps in front of Thornton and takes over the active role of their relationship and
indeed of the rest of the novel. Emily Jane Morris calls it the beginning of Thornton’s
“episode of demasculinization” (36). When Margaret first attempts to step between Thornton
and the rioters, he stands to the side “as if jealous of anything that should come between him
and danger” (Gaskell 186). However, Morris points out that before Margaret makes him go
downstairs by challenging his bravery, he has no objection to staying safely indoors (37). He
faces the workers in hopes of regaining his bravery, but when Margaret steps in front of him
he is “further feminized” (37). Margaret’s subsequent rejection of Mr Thornton’s proposal, on
the grounds that she does not like him, cements his role as passive love interest. He suffers
from her refusal, but is determined to “not change one whit” (Gaskell 216). He tells her that
he will never express his feelings to her again, but refuses to stop loving her, in spite of his
pain. As Morris so neatly puts it: “It is a proud, stubborn, masculine resolution – to do
nothing” (37).

Like Gulnare in Byron’s poem The Corsair (1814), Margaret takes over the part of the
hero. Morris credits Margaret’s ability to act when Mr Thornton stands passive to her lack of
pressure to be economically responsible, but also from the need of immediate action in the
world of philanthropic work, a private sphere outside of which women were not expected to be effective (Morris 26). Margaret’s effectiveness, her ability to “perform personal, individual acts out of friendship and sympathy”, translates to the ability to perform public acts of heroism, acts that are essential to the well being of others (26). It is during these acts then that Margaret particularly demonstrates her heroism. Thus, she displays immense heroism in aiding the struggling Higgins family, not only by supplying them with food, but also friendship, support, and advice. She is a friend and confidant to poor Bessy, who is slowly dying from consumption, and equally a friend to the Higgins family patriarch, Nicholas. Though they are still highly aware of each other’s differences, in terms of gender and class, they address each other as intellectual equals. As she did when she stepped in front of Mr Thornton, Margaret not only performs an act of heroism, put places herself as the equal of the person she seeks to help.

Yet another example of Margaret’s heroism, one that because of its consequences can be questioned, and therefore bears distinct Byronic traits, is her act of writing to her brother Frederick, asking him to come home. Frederick was once involved in a mutiny and has since been hiding on the continent. Should he be discovered in England, it would lead to his arrest, trial and almost certain execution. His family has not laid eyes on him for many years. But as Mrs Hale lies dying, Margaret is struck by a forceful compassion and decides to write to him. Her mother consents and even encourages her in doing so, but when her father finds out about the letter he states that perhaps it was not such a good decision. However, he does comfort Margaret in her doubts, saying that he is glad that she did it, as he would not have dared himself (Gaskell 215). There is no doubt about the danger that Frederick will be in should he decide to heed to his sister’s request, but equally little doubt of the comfort it will bring to the Hales if they can see him again. Therefore, this personal act of sympathy may certainly be viewed as heroic, as well as Byronic.

Margaret’s letter to her brother sets off a chain of events that demonstrate not only Margaret’s unconventional heroism, but also serve as a clear example of her Byronic qualities. Frederick’s arrival and subsequent stay at the family home requires absolute secrecy at all times, particularly at the time of his departure, when he can no longer be safe in the confines of the house. Margaret accompanies him to the train station, where the siblings are spotted by Mr Thornton. Fredrick is later recognised by a man named Leonards. A scuffle ensues between the two men, but Frederick makes it aboard the train as the drunken Leonards falls from the platform onto a piece of grass after Frederick pushes him (Gaskell 274). Frederick leaves Margaret anxious that Leonards recognised her, and that he will expose
Fredrick. Her anxiety turns out to be misdirected however, as she is soon visited by a police officer informing her that Leonards has died in the infirmary. An eyewitness has told the police that he fell from the platform, that another man who was accompanied by a young woman pushed him, and the witness believes the young woman to be Margaret. She flatly denies having been anywhere near the station. The evidence against her claim is vague, and she repeats herself after the inspector explains the case further. She was not there (Gaskell 283). She stays true to the view she expresses earlier in the book when speaking to her mother about Frederick: “Loyalty and obedience to wisdom and justice are fine; but it is still finer to defy arbitrary power, unjustly and cruelly used – not on behalf of ourselves, but on behalf of others more helpless” (Gaskell 113). What Margaret does here perfectly adheres to Atara Stein’s definition of the Byronic Hero who “creates his own rules and his own moral code” (1). Instead of telling the truth, as any law-abiding citizen should, Margaret believes that the circumstances around her brother entitle her to make an exception. This moral code is not that of society, but Margaret’s own, which she creates and follows for the great love she bears her brother.

Margaret’s heroism takes on a distinctly Byronic edge at this point in the text. She lies to the police, and is aware of the fact that her lie may very well be found out. But she believes that she may have bought her brother time to escape and so is determined to “brave shame, and stand in bitter penance” (Gaskell 288). She thus fulfils the other part of Stein’s definition, which is that a Byronic Hero “while he may break the law in pursuit of his goals, (…) takes responsibility for his actions” (1). Margaret also displays a propensity for brooding. In the beginning of the novel she broods about the fact that she is about to leave her aunt and cousin in Harley Street and move back to Helstone. She is not sad about going back to her childhood home, but rather about leaving the house that has been her home for the past ten years (Gaskell 10). She also broods over her brother, his actions, his fate and the fact that a veil of sorrow has been placed over the entire family for not having seen him for so long (Gaskell 11). After Leonard’s death, Margaret broods over the fact that Mr Thornton, aware of her lie to the police, must think less of her (Gaskell 294). In fact: “whenever this idea presented itself to her at the end of a long avenue of thoughts, she turned away from following that path” (Gaskell 295). The thought repeats itself to her; it almost torments her. But it is also in her brooding over this particular subject that she realises that Mr Thornton is a much better man than she thought, and that she actually has feelings for him. Lymberopoulos sees another strikingly Byronic trait in Margaret, that being her arrogance, which contrasts her generous spirit (78). Most apparently this trait is visible in Margaret’s conversations with Henry
Lennox. In anticipating Henry’s proposal “the strong pride that was in her came to conquer her sudden agitation” (Gaskell 25). She is determined “to put an end to it with her high maidenly dignity” and she does (Gaskell 25). In this case however Margaret’s dignity is not strictly maidenly, but also Byronic.

Aside from a Byronic propensity for brooding and a passionate and arrogant nature, Margaret is also a character that is haunted by the past. The source of her distress is the same as for much of her brooding: her brother Frederick. He is ever present in the minds of all his family, like a ghost would be, and Margaret struggles to fill the space he left behind. She is constantly reminded of him, most often by her parents and the family housekeeper, Dixon. When Margaret and Mr Hale start discussing the move from Helstone, Frederick is one of their main concerns, as he has always received financial support from his father (Gaskell 35). Mrs Hale’s greatest wish on her deathbed is to lay her eyes on her son one more time. However, when Margaret obliges her, she is not made any happier, but tells her daughter that she regrets her writing to him (Gaskell 233). This outburst of her mother’s is also a source for Margaret brooding, as the thought of Frederick being in danger when he comes home is awakened (Gaskell 234). As much as Margaret loves her brother, he haunts her throughout the novel.

When comparing Margaret Hale to the Byronic Hero it is, as we have seen, possible to find concord between character traits. However, despite this being the case, certain discord is inevitable. For instance, even though Margaret can be proved to be passionate, out-spoken and impulsive, she cannot be described as violent in any way. In fact, one of her main motives for stepping between Mr Thornton and the mob of incensed workers is to prevent violence from erupting (Gaskell 186-87). Neither is she ruthless or manipulative. Margaret is quite honest with both her feelings and thoughts, when the case is such that she is actually aware of them. On the two instances she is proposed to, she is utterly unaware of any amiable feelings being directed at her. She does not realise that her selfless act of trying to save Mr Thornton may be interpreted as being fuelled by romantic feelings, even though every member of the Thornton family, including a couple of servants, draw this conclusion. She is shocked and offended by his confessing his love for her, and he is equally offended by her frank outspokenness and harsh refusal (Gaskell 204-05). However, even though this trait, i.e., Margaret’s lack of self-awareness, does not fit into the Byronic stereotype, it does pave they way for one trait that does, and that is her unconventional outspokenness. The misunderstanding that stems from this lack of hers creates necessity for correction, which Margaret does not hesitate to provide. It also shows how she does not want to be placed into
the traditionally female mould, and serves as an example of her wish to reject society’s role for her. She is understandably offended by these men, when they choose to interpret her wish to be treated as an equal as her expressing feelings of romantic love. It would seem that a certain discord is needed in the comparison, in order for the concord to become perceptible.

When it comes to the defining Byronic trait of moral and religious superiority, the comparison again proves difficult. The reason for the Hales’ move to Milton is that Mr Hale’s conscience does not permit him to agree with those above him in the church. He is a dissenter, and must leave his post as minister. Margaret supports her father in this difficult time, but her faith or religion is never questioned. When the question of religion is raised in relation to other characters, for example as Nicholas Higgins doubts his faith after his daughter’s death, Margaret merely comforts him in saying: “We do not reason – we believe; and so do you. It is the one sole comfort in such times” (Gaskell 237). A little more concord can be found when it comes to moral superiority. As has previously been mentioned, like a traditional Byronic hero, Margaret follows her own moral code, one that is grounded in fierce loyalty and love rather than conventional morals, as exemplified by her lying to the police about her presence at the train station the night Leonards died. Although she adheres to “obedience to wisdom and justice” she also believes that one should defy power that is being misused, for the sake of those in need (Gaskell 113). She stands behind this agenda throughout the novel, and takes full responsibility for the repercussions. Whether or not she can be interpreted as feeling superior for this is debatable, as Margaret is an inherently proud character. However, she never expresses this belief to anyone but her mother. On the other hand, Margaret is not hesitant to point out to Mr Thornton what she believes to be wrong with his morals, how he treats his workers for instance: “You consider all who are unsuccessful in raising themselves in the world, from whatever cause, as your enemies, then, if I understand you rightly” (Gaskell 85). This earns her the disdain of Mr Thornton as he remarks to himself that: “a more proud, disagreeable girl I never saw. Even her great beauty is blotted out of one’s memory of her scornful ways” (Gaskell 87). It can then be concluded that Margaret’s pride and beliefs of moral superiority go hand in hand.

It is true that Margaret Hale does not conform to the full list of character traits that Lord Byron assigned to his heroes (a partial list was given at the start of the essay), but I would argue that Margaret in fact cannot conform to the full list of traits. The reason for this is that in order for Margaret to be a functioning female in the role Gaskell assigned her in the story, she cannot bear too many male Byronic characteristics. Had she been depressed and violent, prone to substance abuse or sexual promiscuity, her story would have been very different and
would probably have led to her being institutionalised or locked away in some form. She would most certainly have been treated similarly to Bertha Mason, who can be found in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. For many years Bertha was locked away by her husband, to keep her unstable mental state a secret from the world. Mr Rochester says of his wife, “Bertha Mason, dragged me through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must attend a man bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste” (Brontë 310). It is not far fetched to draw the conclusion that this judgement would fall on other women displaying the same traits. For Margaret to be seen as an equal and be respected by the men of the story, she has to still be identifiable as a female, and therefore she cannot be too Byronic. Furthermore, one must not forget that the Byronic hero comes in many shapes and sizes. Emily Brontë’s Heathcliff is one of the most classic examples, brooding, haunted and violent, he is a true antihero, and is even debatably the villain of the piece. However, Jane Austen’s Fitzwilliam Darcy is also seen as a classic example of he archetypical character, even though he bears as much trace of violence, substance abuse and sexual promiscuity as Margaret Hale does: none.

In conclusion, Margaret Hale is the heroine of *North and South*, but rather than being portrayed as idealised and perfect, she shares many, if not all traits with the Byronic hero: she is a flawed character. She rejects the feminine stereotype of Victorian England and bears many traits that were considered as unfeminine, such as impulsivity and outspokenness. Margaret steps out of the passive, private sphere of the female, taking on the active part of the hero from Mr Thornton, who serves as her passive love interest. She will follow her own moral code before anything else, and goes as far as lying to the police in order to protect her beloved brother Frederick. Margaret is passionate, arrogant, out-spoken, brooding and haunted by the past. These are all traits that she shares with the classic examples of the Byronic Hero, and it is therefore my conclusion that the Byronic hero of *North and South* is in fact a heroine.
Works Cited

Primary source:

Secondary sources: