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Reconsidering the Victorian Angel in the Light of Butler's Concept of Performativity

By Dr. Monia Chouari¹

Abstract

Amid the fast changes and repercussions of the French and Industrial Revolutions in the 19th century, women's critical status in the transitory period in Britain stimulated the Victorian elite, namely women novelists like Elizabeth Gaskell, to raise the complex issue of femininity and womanhood to establish femininity as an agency. Interrogating the predominant concept of a woman as an angel, this study sets forth to examine the mechanisms of the building-up of women characters wrestling with the Victorian ideal of the angel for a sweet home that has been established by leading figures and theorists of domestic ideology such as C. Patmore and J. Ruskin. The investigation of Gaskell's fictional narratives reveals the authorial discourse that represents a rebellion to transcend the deep-seated established norms of traditional femininity in contradiction with masculinity. This argument is corroborated through three analytical angles while applying J. Butler's theory of performativity. While the first section presents the socio-cultural background of women as angels, the second one analyses the female characters' performance within the theoretical framework of Butler's concept of "performativity" through which gender identity is 'enacted,' i.e., a *doing*. Thus, the third section scrutinises the role of the language used by the female characters in the selected corpus of *Mary Barton* and *North and South* to validate the subversive discourse that initiated the pattern of the New Woman in resistance to the patriarchal ideals.

Keywords: Gender; discourse; femininity; performativity; rewriting the stereotypes

Introduction

Socio-Cultural Background and Problematic Issue

The myth of the angel, according to the literary and gender criticism from diverse theoretical approaches, is deep-seated in the patriarchy-oriented cultures. The examination of the socio-cultural background of the conceptualisation of women as angels in the Victorian times builds upon writings by key figures, namely, Coventry Patmore (1854)ⁱ and John Ruskin (1865)ⁱⁱ. Women's critical status in the transitory period compelled the Victorian elite, including Elizabeth Gaskellⁱⁱⁱ and her contemporaries, to raise the question of the image of the angel in their writings. As this paper argues, Gaskell's discourse across her writings represents an attempt to transcend the mythical stereotype of womanhood that was endorsed by the established Victorian norms of femininity in contradiction with masculinity.

Contextualisation of the theorisation of the angel of a sweet home comprises a depiction of the specificities of the Victorian mindset mirroring the signs of the time. This age was transitory and paradoxical on many levels during the historical post-industrial revolution period. The landmark of this period is marked by incongruous characteristics showing progress, social reforms, and stability on the one hand; social upheavals, poverty, and injustice, on the other hand. During these critical times, the polemic issue of "The Woman Question"^{iv} whose advocates desired to promote women's rights in the private and the public spheres was in the zenith among two opposite parties: the conservative versus the

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liberal intellectuals.

The outcome of the controversy on “The Woman Question” entailed the flourishing of the Social Problem Novel or the industrial novel which devote a narrative space to rewrite the dominant pattern of the stereotypical femininity of the Victorian angel. The selected realistic novels, *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, by Elizabeth Gaskell, draw upon the historical context to underpin the social status of women. Critically responding to the gender-based issues, the author tackles the complicated conceptualization of Victorian femininity across its bewildering double-standard pattern of sexuality.

The challenging issue lies in the interrogation of the prevailing concept of the Victorian woman as an angel, inexperienced, docile, and domesticated being. In line with this question, this study sets forth to examine the mechanisms of the building-up of women characters belonging to the middle-class as well as the working-class and wrestling with the Victorian ideal of the angel in contradistinction with theories of femininity. These theories have been established by advocates of domestic ideology, namely C. Patmore, J. Ruskin and other authors of conduct books.

Objective: Revisiting the Paragon of the Victorian Angel

The main objective of this paper is to analyse the performance and performativity of both heroines, Mary Barton, and Margaret Hale in two Victorian narratives by Gaskell. The analytical tools of the characters' performance and performativity will disclose how gender identity construction transcends the traditional archetype of femininity as fantasized by normative masculinity. The aim of this study is also to crystalize the gender-based assumptions in Gaskell's fiction that disclose education and class as substantial elements in the process of a woman's gender identity construction. Through performance and performativity, each heroine subverts the traditional ideal of the angel and asserts a new gender identity disclosing the paragon of the angel as a myth, an illusory ideal, and a far-reaching fantasy.

J. Butler's Gender Performativity Theory

This research adopts the qualitative method that combines descriptive and interpretive analytical tools. The current study proceeds through the text-based analysis and through the application of the theoretical concept of performance overlapping with performativity to investigate the gendered portrait of Gaskell's heroines. According to the American poststructuralist philosopher, Judith Butler, “Gender performativity is a schematic repetition of norms of behaviour as prescribed in the prevalent cultural conventions of femininity. Butler's concept of performativity underpins that “gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” (Butler, 1990, p. 24). This definition elucidates that what a woman does defines her being that is enhanced by her doing or her performance (Butler, 1990, p. 25). As such, gender is a social construct that comprises verbal and nonverbal interactions, like dressing, walking, talking, arguing, reacting, and asking that serve to build up gender identities. Gender is a fluid and flexible concept that enables the act of a critical reading of the Victorian norms of femininity.

Butler's theory of gender performativity underpins that “Gender” “is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 1988, p. 519). This statement accentuates the vitality of the act of rewriting the clichés of Victorian stereotypes of the woman as an angel. The gender theorist elucidates that gender performativity is an “accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, comes to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (Butler, 1988, p. 520). In the mainstream, Butler further explains that “the various acts of gender create the

idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all" (Butler, 1990, p. 140). Accordingly, performativity implies that the biological determinants by birth, i.e. anatomy, hormones, physiology of male or female, do not entirely determine people's mannerisms. It is the society that prescribes its set of established norms of behaviour to define gender as an act, a performance, or a doing. In the light of this argument, performativity entails the discussion about the concept of language as a deed, an action, a performance, a motif, a catalyst, and an achievement.

The Cultural Conceptualisation of the Victorian Angel

Thomas Gisborne, Sarah Stickney Ellis, and Sarah Lewis:

The socio-cultural conceptualisation of the Victorian angel of a sweet home refers to the early writing of Thomas Gisborne (1758–1846) whose publication of *The Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1801) initiated the publication of conduct books later on by Sarah Stickney Ellis (1842) and Sarah Lewis (1839). For example, Ellis's assumption that "like a ministering angel ... is the woman" (Ellis, 1842, p. 163) is endorsed by Lewis's statement that "the chief object of [women's] education is not so much to fit them to adorn society as to vivify and enlighten a home" (Lewis, 1839, pp. 119-20). By such a discourse, they contributed to the consolidation of the stereotypical ideals of Victorian femininity and represented by the angel. Gisborne established a conduct script foregrounding the substantial importance of women's behaviour that conforms to religious virtues. Being a clergyman of the Church of England, Gisborne believed in the utility of formulating and articulating a set of norms to orient and normalize the expected feminine morality. He, therefore, conceptualises female sexuality from an orthodox religious viewpoint.

Contrary to their gender, Ellis and Lewis drew women as beings desiring marriage to be devoted to domesticity for the sake of assuring comfort while performing roles to create happiness for everybody, except for themselves. Lewis's "woman's mission" is in advocacy of masculine power inside the domestic sphere, the so-called womanly sphere, where the ideals of femininity are required to serve manly comfort. From this perspective, a woman's commitment to the paragon of morality is a duty prescribed in the column of the ideals of the angel whose entire mission aim at maintaining comfort at home.

Transcending the female gender, some Victorian women advocated the double-standard of Victorian sexuality that underpins the angelic paragon of women, to their social detriment. Women were aggrandized as queens whose love of their family's sustainability is based on self-denial, self-abnegation, and all the derivatives of women's self-sacrifice; however, readers do not observe attributes valorized in women for the sake of their happiness and pleasure. Ellis postulates that what "increases [her] admiration of those noble-minded women who are able to carry forward, with exemplary patience and perseverance, the public offices of benevolence, without sacrificing their home duties, and who thus prove to the world, that the perfection of the female character is a combination of private and public virtue,—of domestic charity, and zeal for the temporal and eternal happiness of the whole human race" (Ellis, 1842, pp. 40-41). These attributes highlighted to beautify life in the Victorian hearth are not meant to enhance leisure or pleasure to the advantage of women whose happiness as a human concept is gratuitously denied.

Coventry Patmore and John Ruskin

Tracing the history of the concept of the angel in Victorian culture conducts us to the aesthetically written poem of Patmore to his beloved wife. Patmore's *The Angel in the House* (1854) presents a man's vision of a woman whose femininity must reign only inside the

domestic setting to provide comfort for everybody within that sphere. She is idolised but not for her identity assertion. This is relevant to the status of Victorian women whose archetype was the angel, the clichéd feminine ideal that was initiated by Patmore (1854) and endorsed by Ellis (1842) and Ruskin (1865).

The social critic, Ruskin, developed the theory of docile femininity. His perfectionist vision of women as angels finds space in the rhetoric of *Sesame and Lilies* (Ruskin, 1865) that have been a catalyst of diverse critical approaches about the ideal of femininity. Throughout one of his Lectures, "Of Queens' Gardens" (Ruskin, 1865) Ruskin appraises feminine attributes epitomizing masculine desire to draw the portrait of his angel. The same fictitious attributes serve to reinforce the Victorian desire to draw a mythical seraph in an attempt to shield society, its men, and women from the repercussions of the risks of the changing power relations under the dynamics and mechanics of the rising industrialized economy.

Being wives, daughters, or sisters, women are trapped in the mythical schema of the angel. What further enhanced this masculine vision are conduct books that outline or prescribe and design a set of norms of feminine behavior. Modern critics can see the image of the angel as a mindset, a cultural dimension, and a mythical portrait rather than a human-like behavior. The gender-biased domestic role assigned to females during the development of the industrial economy of mid-nineteenth-century England encouraged men to monopolize the business world in the public sphere. These paradoxical scenes entailed a theorization of the two spheres, the private for women while the public was for men. In line with this theory, speaking about the public arena implied speaking about the financial authority of men while leaving women behind struggling with unpaid boring house chores.

Elizabeth Gaskell's Alteration of the Victorian Angel

The Victorian conception of femininity offers an already formulated schema of the commonplace norms that were preached by Patmore (1854), Ruskin (1865), and their disciples. Gaskell is one of the few Victorian authors whose literary efforts show a determined wrestling to rewrite Patmore's angel and Ruskin's queen. Although critics, like Lord David Cecil, claim that Gaskell does not contribute to the literary culture of social writing, her work has been revived to accentuate her bravery in questioning the deep-seated patriarchal norms. Nevertheless, stating that Gaskell shakes the ground of long-established standards does not imply that she entirely subverts the dominant discourse. But whatever the reasons, such as publication requirements, or the lack of an innovative feminine discourse, Gaskell's bravery in rewriting the mythical angel is prominent within the dominant structure of power relations.

The act of rewriting the structure of power relations framed between the working-class and middle-class members is première among her contemporaries. Therefore, Gaskell's reaction against social injustice invites readers to access women's internal desire to develop another dimension of femininity that breaks with the myth of the angel. The Victorian author rejects the sham desire to please the orthodox masculine society. Accordingly, Gaskell's thoughtful elaboration on the strategies of complex characterization illustrates the systematic paradoxes of femininity as performed by her characters and conventional femininity as theorised by Victorian culture. Therefore, we deduce that the paradigm of the angel is a mindset that has disconnection with factual reality.

Gaskell's writing about the stereotypical women characters emanates from her personal experience as a Unitarian and Dissent woman who contributed to the social scene amid the fast changes and repercussions of the French and Industrial Revolutions during the mid-Victorian period. During the times, women's critical status in the transitory period of

Britain stimulated the Victorian elite, of both genders, to raise the complex issue of femininity given the deconstruction of the paragon of the angel.

In the twenty-first century, Gaskell's critics posit that the author interrogates gendered conventions through the complex portrayals of her female characters' manners. Throughout their interactions, both working-class and middle-class women disclose dissatisfaction with the prescribed set of stereotypical manners. In the light of this assumption, the present study scrutinizes female characters' performances and performativity that reveal their wrestling with social and cultural norms of stigmatized passivity.

Gender-specific construction of a Victorian Female Performer

In line with Butler's concept of gender performativity, Helga Kotthoff (2002) explicated the meaning of gender as doing by focusing on the framed constructions of language and talk among women. Given this argument about gender as a cultural construct that identifies gender roles from the societal perspective, this study takes the working-class protagonist Mary Barton and the middle-class heroine, Margaret Hale as two cases of study that serve to analyse women's performances and performativity as indicators of their gender identity.

In most cases, modern critics claim that Gaskell's female characters are fashioned in ways that comply with conventions. This claim is a fallacy because supporters of this claim do not uncover the layers of meanings behind the seemingly docile personae in Gaskell's industrial novels, as a selected corpus for study. Only through thorough text-based readings of Gaskell's complex construction of female characters could the readers' conclusions be plausible and persuasive. Added to her Unitarian background, Gaskell's sustainable scholarship lies in her thought-provoking design of non-conformist women characters' performances.

Mary Barton's Performance and Performativity a Key Indicator of Gendered Identity

Mary's thoughts, emotions, aspirations, fears, and expectations derive from her poor background as an orphan. Although she could be dreamful, after becoming acquainted with her father's wishes, "she had engaged herself as an apprentice (so-called, though there were no deeds or indentures to the bond) to a certain Miss Simmonds, milliner, and dressmaker" (Gaskell, 1848, p. 39). Caught in the space of Miss Simmonds' dressmaking site, Mary's actions will vary according to assigned roles in different challenging conditions.

An apprentice archangel: Readers encounter Mary's spontaneous performance as a working-class girl, indulging in fantasies of a Princess dreaming of meeting with a Prince who falls in love with her and quickly brings her to the world of dreams to join the upper-class society of ladies and gentlemen. However, after the fire attacked the Carson's Mill, "Mary forgot all purposed meeting with her gay lover, Harry Carson; forgot Miss Simmonds' errands, and her anger, in the anxious desire to comfort the poor lone woman" ((Gaskell, 1848, p. 116). Mary's performance in dire circumstances compels her to join reason to heart. The narrator comments that:

"Never had [Mary's] sweet face looked more angelic, never had her gentle voice seemed so musical as when she murmured her broken sentences of comfort. "Oh, don't cry so, dear Mrs. Davenport, pray don't take on so. Sure, he's gone where he'll never know care again. Yes, I know how lonesome you must feel; but think of your children. Oh! we'll all help to earn food for 'em. Think how sorry HE'D be, if he sees you fretting so. Don't cry so, please don't." And she ended by crying herself as passionately as the poor widow."

(Gaskell, 1848, pp. 116-117).

Mary's performativity, the repetition of tender expressions, the emphasis on her natural goodness, and the emotional reactions to comfort Jem's mother are emblematic of gentility and goodness. Simultaneously, in line with the paper's argument, the same performance could not be a sign of weakness, fragility, and powerlessness of females. On the contrary, the quoted excerpt represents a scene, among others throughout the narrative, epitomizing Mary's self-constructed gender identity; strong and determined femininity.

Interrogating working-class romances as to Mary's apparent love of Harry Carson's flirtations may sound logical. However, when readers reach the scene while the female protagonist "quietly, noiselessly, [...] watched the unchanging weathercock through the night" (Gaskell, 1848, p. 555) a kind of positive attitude toward her performance is established. This scene comes before "The Trial and Verdict" of the arrested cousin, Jem, who is accused of the murderer. The role Mary takes upon herself is to prove him "not guilty" (Gaskell, 1848, p. 555). Performing this role adds another dimension to the construction of Mary's subversive gender identity. Every expression, verbal or non-verbal, every action, in line with Butler's performativity concept, enhances the reconsideration of the Victorian angel towards the establishment of gendered identity.

Gaskell's language to express her character's performativity articulates the womanly gender whose thoughtfulness as a rare virtue is an attribute:

"She sat on the little window seat, her hand holding back the curtain which shaded the room from the bright moonlight without; her head resting its weariness against the corner of the window-frame; her eyes burning and stiff with the intensity of her gaze. The ruddy morning stole up the horizon, casting a crimson glow into the watcher's room. It was the morning of the day of trial" (Gaskell, 1848, p. 555).

The female performance is endorsed by the gloomy tone of the silent actions and symbolic reactions such as weariness, burning eyes, and the deep gaze. In short, reference to the opening chapters of the novel and the quoted scenes allow a deduction that Gaskell manages to introduce a misleading stereotype of Victorian angel that has become equipped with gendered performances engraving rebellious femininity. This discourse about cross-gender performance allows another narrative resolution, in the subsequent chapters when Mary interweaves the code of gender with that of class to become a successful player and performer exerting efforts throughout a long passage of the novel (Gaskell, 1848, pp. 420-439) to save the innocent man. She must play the man to provide her cousin with an alibi to rescue him. Performing the role of a dynamic female with indefatigable powers has shifted the female persona from the patriarchy-gendered role to an active, provoking self-empowered woman.

The novel's opening starkly highlights Mary Barton's orthodox father, John Barton, who forbids factory work for his daughter. "His most practical thought was getting Mary apprenticed to a dressmaker; for he had never left off disliking a factory life for a girl, on more accounts than one" (Gaskell, 1848, p. 37). The silenced Mary epitomizes the angelic features of a docile, obedient offspring whose complicity with the Victorian norms of femininity is not an optional dimension. Mary conventionally obeys the rules and cares for her father without any hint at any probable transformation.

What matters in this study is the turning point that testifies to the girls' potential of doing, the gendered performance. The cliché of Ruskin's angel exposing the silently walking young Mary turns out to be embryonic of an active woman whose performance affirms a novel gender identity. Upon the discovery of the murder and, specifically, right after her cousin Jem is charged with the murder of the masters' son, young Wilson, Mary undergoes a serious change of heart and mind.

Despite the abundance of textual clues alluding to Mary's conventional portrait of an

angel, there are abundant textual clues that allow another interpretation of the character's anti-conventional portrait. She daringly rejects "Miss Simmonds' offer" to resume work after firing her for so-called ethical reasons (Gaskell, 1848, p. 631). Mary displays a young woman performing unexpected roles bravely and heroically, albeit they are not spontaneously performed. Doing her gender role compels her to audaciously step into the male world for the culprit, even if he is/ were her father. Although such an altruistic work could be interpreted as relevant to the Ruskinian concept of femininity as an epitome of self-renunciation and self-sacrifice, Mary's mission represents an individual doing in the challenge of the prevalent womanly norms. The narrative perspective keeps enhancing Mary's non-conformist portrayal. She takes risks to save the innocent by walking on the dangerous nights to look for a piece of evidence to save Jem Wilson from the mistaken charge of murder.

In the progress of events, the narrator elucidates that the accused Jem has become "certain that Mary's father was Harry Carson's murderer" (pp. 588-89). Again, Mary's performance throughout the different circumstances endorses a feminine profile that has never been prescribed or appraised within the patriarchal scheme of the Victorian angel. Mary's reaction at hearing about Jem's authentic feelings in the closing scenes of the narrative discloses a conscientious woman whose gender performance "hardened her heart against entertaining any feeling of sympathy" (p. 600). Performing the role of thoughtful woman; she turned away and "coldly she spoke, in those tones which Jem knew and dreaded, even before the meaning they expressed was fully shaped" (p. 600). Such a portrait leaves no doubt of how far Gaskell creates unusual yet persuading gendered features deviating from the Victorian paradigm of femininity. Such a performance disclosing attribute of gendered performance is rarely celebrated within fictional writings.

Performativity of female actions revisits the innocent daughter of John Barton. Marrying her cousin, Mary now says to her husband: " 'Jem! you've never yet told me how you came to know about my naughty ways with poor young Mr. Carson.' She blushed for shame at the remembrance of her folly, and hid her head on his shoulder while he made answer" (p. 687). Modesty as one of the male constructs is prescribed as high virtue embraced by Mary, the epitome of a revolutionary model of femininity.

Mary's fast and meticulous discovery of the alibi of the crime represents a womanly performance that has never been assigned for her female gender. The heroine's valiant act raises self-esteem that is compensation mediated by Mary's gendered performance. Upon examining Mary's conscious enactment, the indication of her constructive womanliness would be an imminent reward. Unlike the commonsense appraisal and valorization of male figures' deeds, Mary's deeds do not fall into the column of such expectations. Nevertheless, such a deconstructive reading of the angel in this paper compels an elucidation of the womanly revisited angel.

In the family meeting with Jem and Margaret Jennings, Mary's breaking of the class and gender code is not tolerable within the conservative society of working-class women (a reference to Harry Carson's flirtations). However, the performance of brave womanly deeds while searching for the alibi has made her progress and develop individually as a new woman emotionally and socially gratified. By gender performance and performativity "the structures of power relation and hierarchical discourse patriarchal culture were shaken. The following case study of Margaret Hale in *North and South* will serve to backup this argument.

Margaret Hale's Performance and Performativity: A Key Indicator of Gendered Identity

Discussion of Margaret Hale's Performance and Performativity: an alternation between the imposed roles and the chosen ones.

In line with Mary Barton's gendered performativity, the thought-provoking actions that she accepts in defiance of her class and gender, Margaret Hale's performance is another stage in rewriting the Victorian angel from the perspective of gender performativity. Admittedly, Margaret stands for a rebellious persona. She starts by interrogating the authority of the norms that regulate the life of single women. The choice of her roles as persona or personae implies the range of options of femininity available for her as a protagonist. Being a middle-class and almost a self-educated woman is a key distinction of Margaret that will give her access to worlds of performance inaccessible for working-class characters. In the opening of the narrative, readers start building up a picture of unconventional femininity.

Unlike the common paragon of the angel whose earthly ideal is marriage, Margaret performs the role of a discontent woman whose rebellious mind cannot cope with customs about lengthy wedding preparations. She plays indifferent to detailed routines preparation for Edith's marriage: "I wonder if a marriage must always be preceded by what you call a whirlwind, or whether in some cases there might be a calm and peaceful time just before it" (Gaskell, 1854, p. 12). Such an unfamiliar statement about Victorian marriage sounds evocative for Lennox, p. whose speech expresses Margaret's distinct gender performance.

What substantiated the nonconformist doing of the character is her claim that she "[has] never thought much about [marriage]" (Gaskell, 1854, p. 13) after the sarcastic interrogation of Lennox, the playful lover, whose opinion about Margaret's anti-stereotypical speech (Gaskell, 1854, p. 12) does not mean a lot for the protagonist. Margaret's anti-conventional performance of gender entails disagreement between the characters while negotiating the so-called separate spheres. In the challenge of Margaret's distinct performativity of femininity, Mr. Lennox attempts to underpin his masculine privilege in the business world of finance and management.

While Margaret acts indifferently to his flirtations, he metaphorically depicts marriage preparations as women's business: "I suppose you are all in the depths of business –ladies' business, I mean. Very different to (sic) my business, which is the real true law business. Playing with shawls is very different work to drawing up settlements" (Gaskell, 1854, p. 12). Despite that, Margaret's abstention from having him or another man as a fiancé added to her rejection of succumbing to the commonplace details of Victorian wedding distinguish her prominent performativity of gender. Contrary to this performance, Margaret's cousin Edith "lay curled up on the sofa in the back drawing-room" (Gaskell, 1854, p. 1), while dreaming of the smooth accomplishment of a marriage of the Victorian angel.

Another level of Margaret's performance enforces the nonconformist gender identity in North and South. It emphasises the persona's intertwined web that enables the character's interaction with masters and workers and acquiring the language of business that is exclusively a manly domain. These elements are all empowering tools of Margaret's efficient performance in her society to embed a new conception of distinct femininity.

The powerful performance of Margaret to save her persecuted brother through the adoption of masks and marks the heroine's management of critical crises that help her build up strong, indefatigable femininity. The most powerful performance discloses the character's impact, directly or indirectly, on Mr. Thornton's change of mind. Through performances of different moods and utterances of mixed passion and sympathy, the female persona goes through a process of humanization, i.e., shifting role from an angel to a life-like human being. This shift is attained thanks to repeated deeds of stereotypical and non-stereotypical modes of femininity. Margaret's performativity is not an easy-going path. It is a struggle in a challenge of conventions. Margaret's performance of different roles at the same time makes a change in a masculinised mind.

After moving from the agrarian South to the industrial north, Margaret's maturity as a

woman progressively develops to a certain measure to cause alterations in the environment around her. John Thornton's advocacy of laissez-faire economy entailed conflict with Margaret whose sympathy towards the lower class, such as the Higgins' family, causes a change in her heart and mind. After some time of frequent visits to the working-class people, Margaret manages to construct a humane relationship that develops to result in a remarkable shift in her behaviour. Her performance of unusual roles stands as a strategy exposing the potential of a woman's self-development. The creation of an enthusiastic persona endowed with womanly courage enables the novelist to assign uncommon tasks for the young character to accomplish. The way Gaskell presents the heroine 'responsible' for changing Thornton's mind shows an audacious discourse about femininity.

After repetitive attempts, Margaret's roles, imposed or chosen, allow her to make Mr. Thornton avow, after going bankrupt, that his moral change occurs thanks to Margaret's efforts. His assumption: "I have been unsuccessful in business and have had to give up my position as a master [...] My only wish is to have the opportunity of cultivating some intercourse with the hands beyond the mere "cash nexus" (p. 354). His statement adds meaning to the successful performativity and efficient progress made by a woman leader. Margaret who modifies man's social portrait is the objective of Butler's gender performativity. Whether outlined by Gaskell or not, the character's performance initiates another intrinsic dimension in the text, the gender dimension.

It cannot go unnoticed that Thornton's appreciation of Margaret's conversation about the working-class social problem is a Gaskellian hint that there is a predisposition in man's frame of mind to welcome women's share in decision-making about public questions. This deduction is supported by the assumption that the cooperation between Margaret and Thornton is an outcome of the need to establish a new concept of femininity. Although Margaret is not the only case in Gaskell's deconstruction of the Victorian concept of the angel, she remains one of the complex characters representing myriad facets or masks through the performances of a brave woman. Gaskell's invention of the brave persona(e) enables Margaret, like Mary, to freely alternate between two spheres, the domestic and the public, in defiance of the stringent norms fostering the concept of the Victorian angel.

Margaret is acquainted with socio-economic means to develop in ways more advanced than the orphan working-class Mary. The examination of the heroine's performance and performativity allows a better understanding of how Margaret managed to transcend societal expectations of an angel. Her portrait endorses the construction of a new pattern distinct from other female characters within the range of Gaskell's fictional personae. Such a vision of a single woman performing the roles that make her step powerfully into the public sphere is a magnified social image of gendered identity. This envisioned design makes the womanly ideal articulated in logical terms like the manly ideal and even more efficient because women have the intrinsic potential of flexibly perform multilayered personae as conditions require. Accordingly, this recognition of the womanly power remains amongst the key features of Gaskell's vision of the woman as an agency.

Finally, the protagonist of *North and South* stands as a sublime creation of a determined female character whose practices, roles, and performances illustrate the Butlerian concept of performativity. Margaret discloses to the Victorian and post-Victorian readership a pattern of new womanhood containing distinct characteristics that have gradually developed throughout the progress of the storyline and the character's journey of building up distinct gender identity.

Conclusion

Performance as a key concept is ambiguously intermingled with the concept of

performativity. However, applied in this paper and interpreted concerning the building up of almost non-conformist characters allows a deduction that unconventional performances of female characters aim to achieve a sublime goal in society. The analysis and interpretation of the characters' performances and performativity endorsed by the language used, the narrator's comments, the characters' actions and reactions, and their verbal and non-verbal utterances, all of which disclose gender as doing or as a deed. Butler's concept of gender performativity serves to examine layers of characters' potential to develop and be more efficient for society as well as for one's progress. The portraits of both protagonists, Mary Barton and Margaret Hale validate the New Woman's identity construction through performativity.

Breaking with the patriarchy-oriented concept of the angel, this paper concludes that Mary Barton and Margaret Hale, to varying degrees, managed to display the conceptualisation of performativity as the key indicator of gender identity construction that underpins the new mode of femininity. The different roles played by the personae serve to evoke that the deep-seated concept of the angel is an illusion invented and performed to maintain the subjugation of women in society and other thriving areas in the public sphere. And although the angel is a fabricated myth, its sustainability serves to keep the manly structure of power relations intact. So, the concept of the angel that is deconstructed by Butler's gender performativity represents a mindset that has been a tool, a set of mechanics and dynamics attributing gender-biased social roles, and a set of standardised behaviour to reinforce the politics of gender that privileges men and subjugates women.

The main finding of this paper shows that being a male or a female, biologically speaking, the social and cultural construct of one's femininity is bound to be measured by one's performance, actions, action plans, that count more in terms of social achievements. Hence, the concept of the angel flourished in the industrial society to make women settle in the domestic sphere and leave financial and business matters for men to dominate in the public sphere. The findings of this paper unfold a close connectedness between literary creatures and social personae that mirrored their time.

The conceptualisation of the performative gender is closely related to the doing or undoing of gender, the actions and expressions of change, progress, and individual identity assertion. The angel for a sweet home remains a catalyst for scholarship in Victorian studies. The in-depth textual analysis of Gaskell's meticulous construction of her female characters as docile, submissive, silent, long-suffering, deferential, obsequious, and obedient has enabled an objective interpretation of the performance of females who subverted the classical readers' expectations. For instead of responding to the mythical representation of the angel, they turned out into rebellious women whose active deeds in their families as well as in their society stand for the key indicators of an anti-stereotypical gender identity construction. Such a sublime goal maps a literary revisiting of the Victorian angel for the sake of embedding the status of the vigorous woman as a full human being; a sublime target in the flourishing academic field of gender studies. In line with this deduction, Victorian fiction remains a repository of social reflections that most critics, in the twenty-first century, are bound to revisit, renovate, and reconsider to make Literature serve the needs of developing societies worldwide.

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ⁱ Coventry Patmore (1823-1896) wrote the narrative poem *The Angel in the House* (1854) that presents his vision of a woman whose femininity must reign only inside the domestic setting to provide comfort for everybody within that sphere. She is idolised but not for her identity assertion.

ⁱⁱ John Ruskin's conception of the Victorian ideal of the "angel in the house." The literary motif of the angel of the house is a key issue that we attempt to scrutinise in the subsequent chapter devoted to the exploration of the Victorian conception of femininity and masculinity as social constructs.

ⁱⁱⁱ The best quote to illustrate the relevance of interpreting Gaskell's fiction from Butler's concept of performance and performativity that imply the diversity and plurality of personae is: "while so many are wanting—that's the haunting thought to me; at least to one of my 'Mes,' for I have a great number, and that's the plague"

^{iv} The assumption is developed by Elizabeth K. Helsing, Robin Lauterbach Sheets, and William Veeder in *The Woman Question Social Issues: 1837-1883*. The authors study the social problems and investigate the issue from many perspectives, such as the legal (3-55), the scientific (56-108), the economic, including women's right to work outdoors (109-64), and the religious one (156-211).

^v The feminist scholar and gender theorist, J. Butler, consecrates within her erudite critique *Gender Trouble*, a section in which she elaborates on the argument of "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions" (128-41).