INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855) is the story of Margaret Hale who leaves the village of Helstone for the grim industrial city of Milton-Northern. Memorable episodes include Margaret’s encounters with the working people, her relationship with a mill-owner, John Thornton, and her confrontation with a mob of strikers. On the opening page of the novel, however, we are introduced to Margaret and her cousin Edith in the genteel setting of London’s Harley Street. Edith is about to be married to an army officer, Captain Lennox, and they will then take up residence in Corfu, where his regiment is stationed. This is the kind of detail that we discard in our reading of the text; Edith and Lennox will disappear from the novel, and can apparently be forgotten. But the insignificance of the detail actually tells us a lot about some of Gaskell’s informing assumptions in *North and South*. Most strikingly, whereas the reader is told basic facts about life in Milton-Northern, as if it is a foreign country, the fact that the army has a regiment at Corfu – something that is likely to surprise the modern reader – is presented without explanation. Some things, it seems, such as the living conditions of the people of England, require Gaskell’s active mediation, while others can be taken for granted.

What the army is doing in Corfu is helping to keep in check any Russian military ambitions to expand into the Ottoman Empire, expansion which would constitute a threat to the Mediterranean and overland routes to India. In a novel published during the Crimean War (1854–6), perhaps this fact did not need explaining to the contemporary reader, but the casual nature of the reference to Captain Lennox remains intriguing. By a stretch of the imagination it could be connected to other army and navy references in the novel; the possibility of calling in soldiers to deal with the strike is
mentioned, and, rather surprisingly in a novel about life in an industrial city, Margaret’s brother, Frederick, has taken part in a naval mutiny. These details contribute to the debate at the heart of the novel about the use of force as against the path of compromise; Thornton, for example, before his conversion by Margaret, would opt for a show of strength in dealing with the strikers. But the reference to Lennox, as with a couple of references to Edith’s father, General Shaw, is never developed sufficiently to become thematically relevant in this way. There is, however, a disturbing dimension to Lennox. Edith is asleep, almost like a baby, for much of the first chapter, and referred to as a ‘Poor child’ by her mother’s friends.¹ There is something alarming about the union between this ‘child’ and someone as manly as an army officer. While this debate about the roles assigned to men and women wilt indeed, prove central in the novel, it is, however, tangential to the information about their posting to Corfu. Gaskell is a radical social critic, and equally radical on questions of gender, but the army and its place in the scheme of things, particularly in relation to defending the empire, can, it seems, go unquestioned.

Gaskell’s stance reflects the view of most Victorians for most of the Victorian period. The novel may be the mirror in which the Victorians consider the state of their nation, but the military dimension of their national life merits little comment. Soldiers might appear, but when they do they are often, as in Gaskell, an almost invisible presence. The empire grew, with a succession of colonial wars, but most of the time nobody gave this more than a moment’s consideration. Indeed, on only four occasions – in response to the Crimean War, the Indian Mutiny (1857–9), events in the Sudan (1882–98), and the Boer War (1899–1902) – did military matters cause more than a ripple of excitement. A book about literary representations of the army in the Victorian period looks, therefore, in some respects unpromising. But it is, in fact, the paucity of the material that makes the subject interesting, for this is a time when values were changing fast, and, a generation after the era of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1793–1815), Britain appears to have re-constituted itself on an almost entirely non-military basis. What makes the story all the more remarkable is that it was the defeat of Napoleon that helped bring into existence this civilian-dominated society.² It would be wrong, however, to suggest that a new code entirely eclipsed the old military code; as we shall see, particularly in relation to Tennyson, Kingsley and Thackeray,