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The Issue of Centrality in Elizabeth Gaskell’s Cranford

In Cranford, Elizabeth Gaskell depicts a quiet English village governed by a strict code of gentility. This code contains numerous repressive regulations on speech and manners, and enjoins silence upon poverty, emotions or any difficulty not wholly genteel. Polite strictures cast a long shadow on Cranford’s inhabitants, seeming to dictate all that they do, think or say. As the narrator tells us, the “rules and regulations for visiting and calls . . . were announced to any young people, who might be staying in the town, with all the solemnity with which the old Manx laws were read once a year on the Tinwald Mount” (2). However, willful subversions of authority recur throughout the text in a regular cycle of disobedience to these rules. The characters pay nominal homage to their social code while constantly contravening its strictures, never completely setting aside or changing the rules but merely going around them. Thus Gaskell provides a vision of a community wherein the pattern of life is circular but never hopeless, overtly governed by the strict rules, but shot through with a disobedient humanity who never dismantle their social system or revolt against it, but continually repeat the process of subversion.

Martin Dodsworth, in his article “Women Without Men at Cranford,” discusses the book as “a kind of trimmed and tidied dream, in which Mrs. Gaskell’s unconscious hostility to the male struggles with her awareness of the pointlessness of such hostility in the predominantly masculine society of her day” (138). Dodsworth construes Cranford as a work that begins on a burst of male-killing rage with the death of Captain Brown and ends with a subservient, defeated whimper as the author apologizes for her homicide by replacing Captain Brown with Peter Jenkyns as the vital new patriarch of the community. Dodsworth therefore suggests that the book progresses
from incoherent rage to sane submission, with gradual atonement as the work's unifying structural principle.

Inevitably, numerous critics have challenged this view, all of them women who argue that Gaskell's work actually moves from an origin in a strictly ordered "code of gentility" to a more humane, individualistic community concerned with the emotional needs of its members. These arguments, while refuting Dodsworth's claims, repeat his attempt to construct a progressive development in *Cranford*, making linear progression essential to understanding the work. Hence Margaret Tarratt, Patricia Wolfe and Nina Auerbach all hinge their discussions on the book's displacement of patriarchal authority by positing a communal development centred, in the words of Patricia Wolfe, on "Miss Matty, . . . the champion of Christian ethics and the paragon of all feminine virtues, [who] determines the progression of *Cranford* by her willingness to develop as a human being" (162). This tendency to focus on Matty as the exemplar of Cranford's social change is criticized by Patsy Stoneman in her recent book on Gaskell. Stoneman argues that the passive, confused Matty cannot provide the strong centre that these critics seek in *Cranford*. Unfortunately, Stoneman still insists that *Cranford* follows a developmental pattern. She merely posits a different centre by substituting Peter Jenkyns for Matty.

However, two other scholars undermine this idea of development while discussing Gaskell's narrative strategies in the book. Rowena Fowler, in "*Cranford*: Cow in Grey Flannel or Lion Couchant?" views the work as a lampoon on "male claims to centrality" (719) and notes that "the style and pace" of the book "accommodate themselves easily to a female world of talk and letters, the telling and retelling of news and reminiscences and stories" (722). Barbara Weiss, in "Elizabeth Gaskell: The Telling of Feminine Tales," discusses the "domestic concerns, gossip [and] trivia of human connectedness" which, she says, reveal "a world of domestic concerns, human relationships, and inner needs which could scarcely have been attained from a masculine literary perspective" (279). These insights show a truly subversive narrative technique that undermines patriarchal authority. This idea can also be taken one step further. In *Cranford*, not only is the narrative formed by feminine issues, but the narrative, far from progressing linearly, often moves circuitously as the characters repeat actions of subversive disobedience to the social rules that they themselves construct. The text abounds with recurrent incidents of this type which deny the traditional notion of development through experience. In a text which Fowler and Weiss convincingly argue embodies the
principle of feminine decentralization, I believe there is a correspond-
ing vision of societal subversiveness reflected in a pattern of recurrent
disobedience. Just as women may represent themselves in circuitous,
non-linear prose, so too can their attitude to authority become not the
confrontational path of open revolt and revolutionary change, but
instead that of persistent, quiet subversion.

Scholars such as Tarratt, Wolfe, Auerbach and Stoneman, in order
to build their paradigm of development, tend to polarize the characters
in relation to the strict code of gentility. The Rector usually appears in
their studies as a close-minded, tyrannical patriarch who embodies the
social regulations that govern Cranford, repressing and warping his
children, and by extension, the community. Similarly, Deborah Jen-
kyns, his eldest daughter, is frequently viewed as the enforcer of her
deceased father’s rules, or as Patsy Stoneman puts it: “she has assimi-
lated the conditions of her own subordination. Her intellect and the
’strict code of gentility’ have become a means by which the dead father
rules the community of women” (89). In opposition to this slavery to le
nom du père, these critics hold up Matty, the younger Jenkyns sister,
who has, in Nina Auerbach’s view, “a savage mission in her meekly
feminine domesticity” (83), a mission to dismantle this law of the
father and replace his memory with her own ever-present kindness.

However, the text itself does not always support such convenient
binary oppositions. Almost all of the characters in Cranford contra-
vene or set aside the code when its suits their purposes to do so. Both
the Rector and Deborah alter their stance toward the social code that
they so allegedly typify, showing that no one, either in Cranford’s past,
such as the Rector, or in the present, such as Deborah or Matty, fully
obey the laws that they construct to govern their behavior. Disobe-
dience, Gaskell implies, is inevitable and even desirable. Deborah
despises Captain Brown, a new resident of Cranford, for his deluded
preference of Dickens over her father’s favorite, Dr. Johnson; a taste
which Deborah valiantly and unquestioningly carries on. The Captain
persists in his error openly, thereby breaching the code of silent sub-
mission to the voice of authority, causing Deborah to shun the entire
Brown family publicly. But the narrator, Mary Smith, comes to learn
that Deborah, in spite of her public fury with the Browns, actually
renders them numerous secret acts of kindness to ease their poverty.
After the deaths of the Captain and his eldest daughter, Mary, the
draconian Deborah melts quickly toward full, caring humanity. She
actively supports the remaining daughter, Jessie, in her sorrow and
eventually arranges Jessie’s marriage to Major Gordon, an unlikely
thing for the previously inflexible Deborah to do, since she seemed to
despise both marriage and men who were not her father, and certainly
despised the weak, vain Jessie Brown. Deborah obviously retains her
domineering personality, but now seems capable of acts of great
kindness and acute perception as well. These traits hint at a complex,
humane character underneath backward-looking rules and unreason-
able strictures, a character quite willing to break her own rules in the
interest of serving others in need.

Similar changes of heart occur in both Matty Jenkyns and, in a tale
related through a flashback, the Rector himself. In both cases, as in
Deborah's, the loss of a valued person causes a submerged humanity to
surface, showing the code of gentility to be no more than a thin social
veneer, as we see first Deborah, then Matty and finally the long-dead
Rector break the rules that each of them constructs in moments of
arrogant pride. Matty, when she engages her servant Martha, strictly
admonishes the girl against having any "followers" in accordance with
the established practice of most Cranford ladies. Matty then experien-
ces the death of her long estranged lover Mr. Holbrook, whom she was
prevented from marrying because of his inferior social class. She
reverses her stricture saying, "God forbid . . . that I should grieve any
young hearts" (40), thus completely changing her position when its
injustice becomes clear to her through personal tragedy.

The Rector, as we see him through old letters to his wife, appears as
an eager and passionate man in his youth, but changes from "dearest
John" to "my honoured husband" as he ages (45), until he becomes a
Latinate, pompous creature who seals his letters with an ostentatious
coat of arms meant to incite reverence rather than love. The Rector,
though, loses his son Peter through an excessive exercise of paternal
authority, instigated largely by wounded pride. After this loss, due to
his own self-aggrandizement, he becomes "so humble,—so very gen-
tle" (57), and Matty tells us, would "speak in his old way—laying down
the law, as it were—and then . . . he would come round and put his
hand on our shoulders, and ask us in a low voice if he had said anything
to hurt us" (57). The Rector becomes aware, once again, of the human
feelings and emotions around him.

In both the characters normally associated with blind obedience to
the social code and the one usually placed in opposition to it, we see
similar movements from an obedience to inherited codes of behavior
to a forgiving accommodation of present circumstances. None of these
characters can be firmly polarized; they continue to uphold their laws
and then to break them when shown the harmfulness of such rigidity,
revealing not a consistent movement within the text toward laxity, but
a constant cycle of subterfuge and rebuilding. These characters merely
go around the social code when they must, revealing the subversive
nature of the feminine viewpoint toward authority in this text: claims
of human interaction are privileged over the usefulness of a social
system which nevertheless remains intact.

This cyclical process continues on a wider scale throughout the
second half of the book as Gaskell re-enacts the see-saw movement of
Deborah, Matty and the Rector on a societal scale. She uses a series of
social crises, rather than personal ones, to demonstrate the fictionality
of patriarchal authority over the human impulse to interconnected
ness, undermining in the process the very notion of strict authority.

The first of these crises repeats the changes originally focussed on
the Jenkyns family for Cranford as a whole. The women of the village
must accept the aristocratic Lady Glenmire’s marriage to the decidedly
plebian Mr. Hoggins, which echoes Deborah’s surprising encourage-
ment of the marriage between Jessie Brown and Major Gordon. Just
as Deborah recognizes the human need that necessitates Jessie’s mar-
riage and allows the romance to progress under her roof, so too do the
women of Cranford refuse to censure Lady Glenmire’s compound sin
of a drop in station through so vulgar an institution as marriage. Their
knowledge of her genuine charm and lack of ready alternatives tri-
umphs over shocked propriety, and Mary Smith admits that “we all
liked Lady Glenmire . . . she was bright, and kind, and sociable, and
agreeable” (115-16). Later the Honourable Mrs. Jamieson uses the
social code as a weapon of punishment, refusing to sanction the
Hoggins marriage while allowing Cranford society to visit Miss Matty,
who has been humbled by a financial reversal. The position of the
women vis-à-vis Mrs. Jamieson’s strictures becomes abundantly clear:

she had some little idea of mortifying Lady Glenmire by the decision she
gave at last; which was to this effect: that whereas a married woman
takes her husband’s rank by the strict laws of precedence, an unmarried
woman retains the station her father occupied. So Cranford was
allowed to visit Miss Matty; and, whether allowed or not, it intended to
visit Lady Glenmire. (143)

This subversive stance of seeking the established opinion and then
happily contravening it does not differ radically from the earlier
actions of Deborah, Matty and the Rector; it merely echoes them in a
more general fashion. The code remains strong here, as it did in
Deborah’s day, but so too does the disobedience seem as deliberate
and justified as hers was.
In the case of Signor Brunoni, the community encounters an apparent foreigner and practitioner of magic, who threatens the genteel world of Cranford with his mystery and arcana. Despite the new rector's presence at the magic show, and the cynical Miss Pole's fervent denunciations of magic as little more than sleight-of-hand, the threat posed by such exoticism sends all of Cranford into an unthinking state of panic centred on the fear of invasion and robbery. When Mary Smith, Lady Glenmire and the highly suspicious Miss Pole hear of a man (who is in reality Signor Brunoni) lying destitute and seriously ill at a farmhouse, Miss Pole's cynical suspicion reaches new bounds, imagining him as another robber or worse. However, this unreasoning attitude evaporates when confronted with the actual human pathos of the situation:

Miss Pole came round with a swing to as vehement a belief in the sorrowful tale as she had been skeptical before; and, as proof of this, her energy in the poor sufferer's behalf was nothing daunted when she found out that he, and no other, was our Signor Brunoni, to whom all Cranford had been attributing all manner of evil this six weeks past! Yes! his wife said his proper name was Samuel Brown—'Sam,' she called him—but to the last we preferred calling him 'the Signor'; it sounded so much better. (102)

Cranford, along with Miss Pole, immediately reverses itself, welcoming the Signor and his wife, thereby setting aside prejudices against foreigners (apparent or real), marriage and children, so that Mary reports "it was wonderful to see what kind of feelings were called out by this poor man's coming amongst us" (104). Once again, crisis precipitates a shift in behavior in those governed by the strict social code of gentility. The code does not disappear after this, but it is shown to be unreasonable and easily set aside, as it was with Deborah's overreaction to Captain Brown's literary tastes, the Rector's rage at his jovial son or Matty's strictness with her amorous maid.

The last of these changes occurs with the return and reintegration of Matty's brother Peter after his long exile. This fairy-tale return of the long-lost brother concludes the narrative with a moment of communal forgiveness that echoes many of the previous ones. Peter, like Signor Brunoni, is a retired military man with connections to the mysterious Orient; he repeats the outrageously assertive openness of Captain Brown, the strange table-manners of Mr. Holbrook and Mr. Hoggins, and was, in the Rector's day, exiled for a breach of conduct strangely reminiscent of Lady Glenmire's. The aristocratic Scotswoman crossed class boundaries by exchanging her high station for a lower one. Peter,
to rebel against his father's excessive authority and pomposity, public­ly donned women's clothes and lampooned his sister Deborah, thereby crossing the gender boundary and humiliating both the father and the obedient daughter as well. Both Peter and Lady Glenmire obtain forgiveness for their cross-dressing (or cross-classing) from the Cranford community. But Peter, once the greatest interloper against the code of gentility and the only one exiled for breaking it, finally upholds the fiction of Mrs. Jamieson's social precedence in order to coax her into forgiving Lady Glenmire. Thus does Gaskell show that even those who do not believe in the strict code of gentility will use it for the humane end of kindness. In welcoming him back, the women repeat the earlier acts of forgiveness, repealing Peter's long sentence of exile. Thus rather than unifying or finishing off the previous acts of the book, Peter's return and social unity it elicits represent merely the latest in a long line of such moments of concerted forgiveness and good feeling.

Like the echoing tone of a bell, Cranford contains numerous scenes and actions that reflect one another without necessarily providing any advance in plot or structure. It is a seemingly endless ebb and flow of related events, subversion and reconstruction occurring infinitely through past, present and undoubtedly future as well. To say that the Cranford community progresses from one code to another, from a patriarchy to a matriarchy, robs the work of its truly anti-authoritarian nature as a decentred text wherein social codes are endlessly subverted by the very people who construct them.

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