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English Honours

01 March 2023

The Oriental and Small-Town 'Outsider' in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*

In Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1853), the women's sheltered community, united around an adherence to old-style etiquettes, is threatened in two different ways by forces of social change in Britain: Britain's domestic transformation due to industrialism, and Britain's imperial identity, specifically concerning Orientalism. Both of these threats prove impossible to keep at a distance, and form two kinds of 'outsiders' within the novel. The increasingly industrial world of greater Britain, with its steam-powered train and unstable bank structures, represents a world that is rapidly changing and leaving the beloved little town of Cranford behind. The Cranford ladies respond to their alienation by forming their own versions of gentility and aristocracy that strengthen their sense of community. Meanwhile, the forms of Orientalism within the novel create a much different 'outsider', such as Signor Brunoni and Peter "Aga" Jenkyns. These men are othered during their time as English soldiers in India because of their Orientalist perception of the land as strange and different. When the men return to England, they problematically don personas of this strange and different Orient to appeal to the Cranford masses. The two men are othered again because of the differences they themselves promote. It is only when Signor Brunoni and Peter's facades of Oriental extravagance and wealth are revealed to be false that the men can open up to community healing by the Cranford women. Within both scenarios, the town of Cranford and the 'outsiders' are made vulnerable to changes brought on by British expansion and intrusion,

and yet the Cranford women's autonomy, sympathy and community strength overrides alienating social factors.

Cranford is a novel surrounding the titular made-up town in nineteenth-century England. While the novel has a variety of eccentric characters that come and go within the episodic plot, the main protagonists include the narrator Mary Smith, the elderly and kind Miss Matty, and the perpetually-grumbling Miss Pole. The novel follows the misadventures of the rotating cast of characters as they navigate their lives. For the most part, this essay addresses the Cranford women as a whole, reflecting the novel's emphasis on community engagement. Most existing scholarship focuses on the women of Cranford's ability (or inability) to adapt to the changing social atmosphere of the mid nineteenth century. Knezevic calls *Cranford* an "industrial novel" (406), and Croskery calls it a "novel of sympathy" and a "novel of reform" (199). Scholars largely agree on Cranford's alienated nature as a small town, for the majority occupied by single women, in relation to broader Britain. Croskery has considered how the form of the novel reflects its content as defying popularized notions of romanticism, Shor has discussed how *Cranford* uses the consumption of literature by its characters to convey its ideals, and Mulvihill and Knezevic have argued how the Cranford women's economic means of living reflect the larger economic pressures on their town. A recurring theme can be seen in these scholarly sources: the scholars focus on the expanding system of industrialism, and largely leave the forms of Orientalism as they relate to the expanding British Empire till the latter parts of their arguments, so that the consequences of Orientalism are shoved behind fantasies of the Cranford women's autonomy. I want to argue that Orientalism and industrialism occur simultaneously within *Cranford*, and have consequences that intertwine in intriguing and significant ways.

The women of Cranford live in juxtaposition to increasing industrial expansion and economic instability that swept Britain in the nineteenth-century. Established early in the

novel with the "neighbouring commercial town of Drumble," the town of Cranford exists as a venue of bygone forms of gentility, isolated from the quickly industrializing communities nearby (Gaskell 3). Piep sees the ladies' plight as a world in which "new modes of industrial production, mass transportation, global communication, and social organization exert pressures against which the aged townspeople must define themselves" (243). Captain Brown is a gentleman who arrives to the town of Cranford with his daughters after finding work on the nearby railroad (Gaskell 6). The women strongly object to the train's intrusion into their town, and so the arrival of Captain Brown as an extension of that railroad represents a dangerous industrial threat that they cannot accept easily.

Previous nineteenth-century authors viewed the train with caution, but more importantly, awe, a notion that is rejected in Gaskell's work. Hsu states that in Wordsworth's poetry, "machine [...] becomes an endearing product of both Nature and 'Man's art'" (47), and further, that steam-powered technologies become awe-inspiring figures of the "conquering of space and affirmation of productivity" (48). Such romanticization of steam-powered technology is shut down in Gaskell's work, where anxieties towards industrialism are only confirmed through the dangers it poses. Captain Brown, the original harbinger of the railroad, is killed by a train (Gaskell 17). In fact, he dies saving a child from being run over by the very train that kills him, an honourable act that seems to definitively redeem his otherwise intrusive personality to the Cranford ladies and ultimately places the blame of his death on the dangerous industrial project (18). Scholars largely agree on the episode of Brown's death; Cass, Knezevic, and Shor see it as representative of the swift economic changes that the Cranford ladies and even Gaskell herself is cautious of. Within the contexts of this essay, Captain Brown's role as an 'outsider' additionally has connotations for his death. After their initial hesitation, the women of Cranford become good friends with Captain Brown (12). The fact that he becomes a beloved member of Cranford society

illustrates the women's adaptability to change, which will be important for maintaining the women's autonomy against larger economic pressures. Further, I want to suggest that Captain Brown being killed by a train represents the breaking of community bonds through the process of industrial expansion.

Another influencing factor restricting the women of Cranford's autonomy is the unstable bank structure in Britain. Miss Matty's reliance on a failing bank alienates her from Mary's father, who "objected very much" to her sister's buying shares in it (119). Miss Matty is alienated further when the bank falls through, shoving her astray into a world of uncertainty that even she has trouble seeing positively (126). Shor suggests that the ladies' relationship to the economic sphere is indicative of one of the novel's themes that suggests the "inability of women to realize their intentions in the market" (293). Contrastingly, Hunter places the blame on the shaky economic scene of the nineteenth-century, stating that British economics "[expose] moral weaknesses brewing beneath a society marked by rapid industrial progress, economic growth, and social change" (138). Hunter goes on to view the bank failures in a more positive light, however, arguing that Victorian bankruptcy narratives can serve as a "powerful rhetorical mechanism for promoting social and economic change, in terms of supporting women's widening engagement in the public sphere" (138). Hunter focuses on the gendered connotations of father-daughter bankruptcy narratives; while this type of story typically "condemns the commercial enterprises of the father," it also allows the daughter to make her own financial decisions and form community bonds in response to her father's ruin (138). Miss Matty, interestingly, fits into *both* of these roles. While Miss Matty may have participated in her own downfall, trusting an obviously floundering bank, the episode more so exposes the instability of English economics. Fitting in with Hunter's arguments, this episode also strengthens the community bond of the Cranford women, allowing Miss Matty to trust her peers, who come to her financial rescue, more deeply.

The women of Cranford respond to industrialism and failing economics by forming their own alternative versions of gentility. The narrator Mary acknowledges how much of the women's habits are in response to the broader economic sphere of England that suppresses them, saying "we none of us spoke of money, because that subject savoured of commerce and trade, and though some might be poor, we were all aristocratic" (Gaskell 4). The women's strict system of etiquettes forges a feminine space that only the women of the town understand how to navigate. Given such habits as "rules and regulations for visiting and calls" (4), it appears difficult for outsiders to the town to understand the internal politics governing the community. The women's more eccentric approaches to problem-solving also create a space that is difficult for outsiders to penetrate, showcased in episodes such as Miss Betty Barker's cow, which she dresses up in "dark grey flannel" for warmth after it falls in a "lime-pit" (7). Even Mary has to comment ironically, "do you ever see cows dressed in grey flannel in London?" in response to this episode (7). In the same way, the women have difficulty understanding the types of etiquette that do not align with their own; when Miss Matty attempts to arrange her house for visitors, she exclaims all in a fluster, "Must I put razors in his dressing-room? Dear! dear! and I've got none" (Gaskell 28). The ladies' communal approaches to etiquette illustrate their close ties with one another in response to an economic world that alienates them.

Despite the women's attempts at framing their own set of rules to govern their town, they are constantly reminded of their place as lower middle-class in an increasingly consumer-based society. The ladies' response to the financial restrictions that inhibit their consumption prioritizes their own type of aristocracy, which serves to increase their feelings of community amongst each other. This fact is established in Mary's account that

> if we walked to or from a party, it was because the night was *so* fine, or the air *so* refreshing; not because sedan-chairs were expensive. If we wore prints, instead of

> summer silks, it was because we preferred a washing material; and so on, till we blinded ourselves to the vulgar fact, that we were, all of us, people of very moderate means. (6)

Often, the ladies do not have the funds to keep up with ever-changing fashion or home-styling trends. Without ever discussing it, there is a general rule of acceptance among the ladies to save on items whenever possible. This is clear in Miss Matty's habit to burn candles one at a time so as not to waste any (42). This type of living is perfectly summed up in Deborah's saying, "we have always lived genteelly, even if circumstances have compelled us to simplicity" (59). Interestingly, Mulvihill sees the Cranford ladies' practice of a "frugal" (346) kind of society as coinciding with "the same business principles that apply in Drumble and elsewhere" (354). I want to argue that the Cranford ladies' sense of gentility does not operate under larger economic principles, however, because the image falls apart when the ladies are confronted with signs of wealth they cannot afford. Lady Glenmire is a source of anxiety for the modest ladies, who struggle to comprehend what titles she should be addressed by, unused as they are to such positions of wealth (Gaskell 69). The only factor keeping the ladies' sense of gentility intact is their collective belief in it. Following this line of argument, Langland suggests that "instead of letting themselves become pawns to society's signifying practices, women manipulate these tools to achieve their own wishes" (299). Within their version of aristocracy, the ladies rely on one another to uphold the communal image; Mary aids Miss Matty in continuously shifting the newspapers covering the new carpet to keep it untouched by sunlight (Gaskell 15), the women altogether act as if a clue into Mrs. Forrester's poverty is "the most natural thing in the world," helpfully ignoring an event that might break their sense of aristocracy (5), and the women are constantly trying to keep up with fashion that they may not have financial access to, but want to remain aware of for the sake of their own image, as when Miss Pole purchases a trendy "India muslin gown"

(111). These actions and countless others within *Cranford* suggest that the women form bonds in and around their lack of privilege.

This being the case, the women of Cranford still hold a level of income that allows them maids, landing them in places of power that reproduce the very kinds of economic superiority they stand opposed to. Mary states that the ladies "were pretty well suited with servants" (12); her syntax of "pretty well" suggests that the ladies are well-off owing to their having servants, but also that the servants "suit" them, suggesting that it is within the ladies' right to have servants. The word "suit" also suggests the reverse, that the servants are suited to the ladies, which slightly justifies their having maids in the first place. Langland argues that in Victorian household narratives, the wife becomes a symbol of power because she manages a household, but this is at the expense of the servants she presides over (291). A similar image is being produced in *Cranford*; the women, most of them unmarried and childless, take control over their own lives and homes in part because they are able to manage servants. However, the relationships between the ladies and their servants often illustrate the ladies' morality and sense of community rather than expressing a need for control. Certainly, the ladies and Miss Matty especially do not treat their maids as lesser human beings. Miss Matty, after coming to terms with her own failed romance, allows her servant Martha a 'follower' (which was initially "the cause of much grievance" (Gaskell 26)), seeing a passion in Martha that she never allowed herself (41). Such an exchange of care allows Martha to later come to Miss Matty's aid when Miss Matty goes bankrupt, illustrating that a relationship of mutual care is present between the ladies and their maids (132). Contrastingly, the ladies have fearful and fascinated responses to the Oriental servant, which displays their negative responses to outsiders to the town, as will be discussed. The ladies, then, use their servants not to flaunt power but to express their compassion and uphold the form of gentility they have made for themselves.

The ladies' reaction to Miss Matty's bankruptcy illustrates their care and sense of community with one another. The ladies swoop in to care for Miss Matty in what ways they can, agreeing on a "contribution" of financial means to aid her while she sets her feet back on the ground (135). Though Mary's father serves as an intermediary of the economic world and the town of Cranford, it is largely the women of Cranford's contributions that help Miss Matty regain her footing. The ladies' willingness to part with their own financial and economic means to help Miss Matty break down their perceptions of gentility; Miss Pole admits that she is "not poor exactly," although she is not "what you may call rich" (136). Admitting their lesser financial means allows the women to bond closer together. The ladies and Mary immediately break down crying when they agree to help Miss Matty (136); an emotional display such as this reminds them of their "love and regard" for Miss Matty and one another (137). This sentiment follows Croskery's thinking that *Cranford*'s emphasis on "sympathy" is "crucial to reform on both the personal and social level" (220). The breaking down of financial borders to initiate genuine relationships of care is a theme that will be explored in the episodes with Signor Brunoni and Peter Jenkyns later on.

Miss Matty's new occupation, which she achieves with the help of her friends, represents the modes of Orientalism that constantly penetrate Cranfordian life. Knezevic argues that "selling tea from India, Matty finds herself at one end of a worldwide system of trade whose incursion the community has dreaded all along" (414). In deciding to sell tea as her major source of income, Miss Matty contributes to this "system of trade" (Knezevic 414) that indeed the ladies have been shunning by forming their own forms of gentility, but Miss Matty's tea business is also importantly a source of community engagement for her. The way in which Miss Matty runs her store keeps in line with the town's eccentricities; she sneaks children more "almond-comfits" than the price allows (Gaskell 146), and approaches a rival tea shop owner to make sure they are on good terms (147). Miss Matty incorporates her own

'genteel living' into her tea shop, grounding her business in the economics of Cranford rather than in the larger imperialist trade. However, an argument for the opposite could also be made, since in establishing her business in Cranfordian economics, Miss Matty ignores the implications that she is part of a larger imperialist trade that seeks to dominate Indian independence.

Figures like Signor Brunoni and Peter Jenkyns rely on Orientalist narratives to craft personas of wealth and intrigue, so it is integral to define what is meant by the term Orientalism and Orientalist narratives. As described by Edward Said who foregrounded modern research into nineteenth- and twentieth-century interest in the East, the Orient was a concept created by British imperialists to describe "Asia or the East, geographically, morally, culturally" (31). The Orient, then, became an amalgamation of any and all conceptualizations of the East by the British Empire. Importantly, this distinction characterized the British as "always in a position of strength, not to say domination" (40). The Oriental, in relation, became seen as "irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, "different"" (40). Essentially, Said states, "Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the strange (the Orient, the East, "them")" (43). Gaskell is not exempt from playing into Orientalist narratives, as her characters often judge peoples from the East with equal parts fear and fascination that quickly discerns those peoples as 'other'. Figures like Signor Brunoni and Peter, too, problematically don personas reflecting Orientalist narratives that characterize India as strange and mystical, 'other' again.

Most scholarship on *Cranford* operates under the notion that Britain, by the nineteenth-century, was moving past traditional Orientalist narratives. While Bulamar argues that *Cranford* embodies India as "dark and strange," "unknown and eerie," he also argues that the novel does not present England as the safe alternative, since "industrialism ironically

brings death" (220). Objects from the Orient and external cultures become symbolic of a world that is merging different cultures through consumerism: "the novel does not endorse Orientalism but instead questions the association of modernization with Westernization as the Ottoman turban becomes popular in Victorian England" (Bulamar 223). Piep, too, focuses on the Orient in the Cranford women's lives, seeing the Indian goods in the ladies' domestic lives as representative of the town's constant relations to the British Empire and colonialism (244). Similarly, Cass suggests that the ladies "adorn Cranford with oriental fashion and suffuse it with oriental literary tastes, but they do not internalize a new ideology or advocate a politics of change" (426). Cass makes perhaps the most coherent of scholarly arguments about the influence of the Orient on the Cranford women's lives, arguing that the women's domesticating of Orientalism removes its threat but also dissolves the town's borders against the outer world (428). In all these arguments we see an understanding of the Orient in *Cranford* as bridging divides between cultures. While these scholars believe that Gaskell is largely criticizing Orientalist notions by having her Cranford be in close connection to the East, the ladies' consumption of goods from the Orient reproduces harmful modes of Orientalism since the ladies do not understand their role as consumers within imperialist agendas.

The Cranford women participate in imperialism, purchasing goods from India, without understanding the implications of their actions. Miss Matty's insistence on obtaining a turban (Gaskell 81), for example, illustrates her need to keep up with the latest fashion trends rather than a wish to appropriate Indian culture, because she remains ignorant of the cultural significance of the turban. Miss Matty wants to wear a turban "more like" the ones "Queen Adelaide wears" (81), keeping in line with the Cranford ladies' adopting of outer forms of gentility to fit in with their own sense of aristocracy. However, as Bulamar points out, the figure of the turban also represents a kind of threat from external cultures:

"throughout the novel, the turban stands for what is foreign and hence culturally threatening as the headgear of Indians, French, and Turks, who are equally associated with crime and death in the novel" (219). Certainly, the women have frightened reactions to the turban, as Miss Matty "shrunk away" from a turban-bearing Indian servant, and the maid Martha "never ended her staring at the East Indian's white turban, and brown complexion" (Gaskell 29). In the same way, when the Cranford women become fearful of thieves and robbery, they blame Signor Brunoni though there is little evidence to frame him and, in fact, little evidence of any robberies at all (90). These reactions point out the Orientalist fear the women have for cultural differences while simultaneously representing a larger fear of the closing in of cultural borders through advances in trade and technology, a narrative that has continued throughout the characters' interactions with economics.

Signor Brunoni and Peter interact with Orientalism through their occupations in India and their false personas back in England. Both Peter and Brunoni go to India as British soldiers, already standing as extensions of the British Empire. They then find themselves estranged within the land, where Peter settles as an indigo planter and Brunoni travels far on modest means. When Peter describes his life in India, he states that he thought he was "the last of his race," alienating himself from his surroundings (150). Peter's existence as a colonial settler also estranges him from the land he is trying to dominate. Signor Brunoni's wife tells the story of how she lost six children in India, giving her a negative impression of the land, but how she and Brunoni also found kind people to take care of her family there (108). Imperialized India becomes a space where these English folk feel themselves to be outsiders, while it is at the same time a space of familiarity. It is with this paradoxical mindset that we can start to see the nature of Peter and Signor Brunoni's 'otherness'; being stranded from their homeland, they become not quite part of another culture. At the same time, the

Orientalist prejudices the English folk carry against Indian culture play a part in staking themselves as outsiders, as they evidently feel themselves estranged and threatened in India.

When the men appear in the town of Cranford, they exude mystery and riches beyond the ladies' comprehension. Signor Brunoni is talked about between the ladies as a harbinger of "wonderful magic" (Gaskell 81), one of the "foreigners [who has] such polite manners" (83), and is otherwise associated with "conjuration, sleight of hand, magic, [and] witchcraft" (83). Peter, similarly, appears in "clothes [that] had an out-of-the-way foreign cut about them; and his face was deep brown as if tanned and re-tanned by the sun. His complexion contrasted oddly with his plentiful snow-white hair; his eyes were dark and piercing" (147-8). The emphasis on the 'foreignness' of Peter and Signor Brunoni coincides with the view of the "exotic Orient" by "nineteenth-century European writers" (Bulamar 219), and reproduces Said's explanation of the Orient as "strange" in the eyes of the British (43). Signor Brunoni and Peter *intend* to be seen through such a lens, however, in order to appeal to the Cranford women's vanities.

The men rely on Orientalist narratives to paint themselves as wealthy and mysterious in the eyes of the Cranford women. Peter boasts of the riches he gained in India when he tells Miss Matty of his gifts for her, "an Indian muslin gown and a pearl necklace" (Gaskell 149). Even Mary has to wonder at the reality of Peter's riches, as she states that "I don't believe Mr. Peter came home from India as rich as a Nabob" (151). Piep describes Peter's fake persona and "fabulous tall tales" as a way to mediate "the distressing realities of imperialism," whose mention may upset Miss Matty (248). Knezevic, too, sees Peter's storytelling as "a vision of the business of empire without reference to the shunned question of how money is made" (419), suggesting that Peter's tales fail to acknowledge the destruction of imperialism. Signor Brunoni, similarly, puts on a fake French accent, a fake beard, and "Turkish costume" in order to appear as a "magnificent gentleman" that will

astound the Cranford women (Gaskell 86). In a way, the Cranford women are the perfect audience for Peter and Brunoni's extravagance, for they too exist in a narrow sphere that wishes to ignore the socioeconomic advances of the external world. Piep suggests that Peter's tales "[betray] a nostalgic yearning for a return to an age when the East was still mystifying, exotic, unfathomable, and far-away" (248). Both Peter and Signor Brunoni's outward identities are shaped around Orientalist narratives of Eastern wealth and fascination; they aim to be seen as 'outsiders' full of mysterious intrigue but wind up learning that they exist as 'outsiders' in a much different sense. It is only when the men are revealed as common English gentlemen in need of the Cranford women's feminine aid that they recognize their own roles as 'outsiders' to an expanding Empire.

When the facade of Signor Brunoni comes tumbling down, the women of Cranford come to his and his family's aid with all the eccentricities with which they approach every part of their lives. The ladies find out that Signor Brunoni is actually an English gentleman, Samuel Brown, who at the time of their discovery has sustained an injury. The women of the town do their best to care for him in what ways they can:

> Miss Pole looked out clean and comfortable, if homely, lodgings; Miss Matty sent the sedan-chair for him; and Martha and I aired it well before it left Cranford [...] Lady Glenmire undertook the medical department under Mr. Hoggins's directions; and rummaged up all Mrs. Jamieson's medicine glasses, and spoons, and bed-tables [...] Mrs. Forrester made some of the bread-jelly, for which she was so famous, to have ready as a refreshment in the lodgings when he should arrive. (Gaskell 103)

Bulamar describes this episode as a way that "the novel mocks the fear of foreigners, for the turbaned conjurer turns out to be an English sergeant" (221). Again, however, I think it important to remember the Orientalist biases still existing within *Cranford*; this episode also

affirms the ladies' fear of foreigners for the very reason Bulamar presents. Beyond that, Brunoni's injury breaks down the barriers he attempts to build, of intrigue, fantasy and magic, reducing him to the sad and desperate man of Signora Brunoni's stories who takes up conjuring because it is the only profession that will keep him out of absolute poverty in England (Gaskell 109). Brunoni's identity is dismantled to remind him that he exists as an outsider to life in India, and to life in England. It is the women's care and aid that allows Signor Brunoni to prosper again in England; he is able to achieve a "rapid recovery" because of the women's rush to his aid (112). As in Miss Matty's case after her bankruptcy, the breaking down of economic and social barriers allows community help to arise, in opposition to the alienating economic world of larger Britain.

Peter too has an extravagant Orientalist facade that crumbles under closer speculation. Between remarks about Peter's extravagant tales, Mary has "doubts" of the authenticity of his stories, and notices that the way he tells them changes depending on his audience, which doubly questions the reality of Peter's adventures (152). Interestingly, Peter's storytelling becomes "quiet" when he talks to the Rector (152). Such is the way Peter's role as an 'outsider' is recognized: when scrutinized by patriarchal institutions, Peter's extravagance dissolves and he is reduced to a man talking quietly, much different from the "wonderful traveller" he claims to be in front of the Cranford ladies (152). Similar to Signor Brunoni, Peter exists in an isolated sphere where he feels he has to impress English audiences to keep himself elevated from the loneliness of his position, not quite belonging in India and not quite belonging in Britain. Through his positive relationships with Miss Matty and the Cranford women, however, Peter becomes a beloved member of the community and is able to fit into their ways of living.

Inevitably, the social and economic changes, as well as the rising recognition of external cultures, find their way into the small town of Cranford. The women of Cranford are

able to adapt to the shifting tides of an industrializing Britain by forming their own versions of gentility, and being able to trust the close-knit community they have created with one another. Visitors like Signor Brunoni and Peter Jenkyns, though they identify themselves through the aging conceptions of the exotic, extravagant, and magical intrigue of the Orient, are opened to community healing when their false facades of immense wealth are broken down. These two types of 'outsiders' point to the unstable and rapidly changing atmosphere of mid-nineteenth-century Britain as they understand their place within a world that is becoming smaller and more easily accessible through technological advances and trade. Ultimately it is the Cranford women's ability to retain a united community space of sympathy and care that distinguishes them apart from their changing world, and which opens doors to visitors who require that community space to grow and feel comfort.

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