

## ABSTRACT

“Forms and Ceremonies To Be Gone Through”: Performance and Self-Knowledge in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford*, *North and South*, and *Wives and Daughters*

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This thesis looks at blatant and subversive performances in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford*, *North and South*, and *Wives and Daughters*. Referencing studies of nineteenth-century performance theory, I will argue that Gaskell, aware of her contemporaries’ obsession with theatricality, created works that are ultimately concerned with authentic performances of societal roles. These roles, Gaskell paradoxically argues, have the dualistic potential of either initiating self-knowledge or trapping the individual in a self-annihilating existence. Seeking to navigate this duality, Gaskell acknowledges the integral part the community plays in a self’s development but ultimately privileges individual integrity in accomplishing positive societal change.

“Forms and Ceremonies To Be Gone Through”: Performance and  
Self-Knowledge in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*, *North and South*, and  
*Wives and Daughters*

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A Thesis

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>C</i>	<i>Cranford</i>
<i>L</i>	<i>The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell</i>
<i>NS</i>	<i>North and South</i>
<i>WD</i>	<i>Wives and Daughters</i>
<i>CH</i>	<i>Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage</i>

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## DEDICATION

To my parents  
for their faith in a daughter who “can’t write,”  
and to my siblings  
who will always be my best friends.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

In the last half of the twentieth century, Elizabeth Gaskell, an author that had been dismissed as merely one of the popular lady novelists of the Victorian era, has begun to receive serious critical attention. With the value that the ever-increasing number of feminist critics placed on works that dealt with women's spheres, Gaskell's successful career in a predominantly male-driven profession and her works, with their strong domestic realism and prominent female characters, naturally drew attention. But Gaskell herself was somewhat of an enigma to the early feminists. To all appearances a happily married wife and devoted mother, Gaskell seemed the embodiment of the "angel in the house." Her position as one of the most widely respected and popular authors of her generation demanded the feminists' respect, but her conformity to the role projected on women by her culture left them uneasy.

With time, however, Gaskell gradually became heralded as a subversive radical. In her "feminist re-vision" (2) of Elizabeth Gaskell, Patsy Stoneman recognizes her work "seed[s] of repressed anger" (98) over the Victorian expectations and prescriptions for women. Frequently hidden under a genial and humorous tone, this repressed anger led to ideological ambiguities that undermined the texts' surface conformity to societal mores. Speaking for most feminists, Robin Colby claims that Gaskell ultimately "challenge[s] widely held assumptions about the nature of women their proper sphere" because her novels reveal the inconsistencies of the "dominant ideology" of "separate roles for men

and women" (1-2). Gaskell's traditionalism melted away upon close scrutiny by feminists into a "[grim] view of the romance plot and its goal of domestic union" (Krueger 220), and, as Eileen Gillooly observes, her gentle humor became the mask behind which she expresses the pain felt by individuals marginalized by society solely because of their sex (126). For feminist critics, Gaskell is no longer a woman "who accepted the values of [her culture] . . . and exemplified many of its fundamental attitudes and beliefs," but an author who resisted society's narrow definitions of women and their place in the world (Brodetsky 12).

Perhaps it was only fitting that Gaskell should be so violently championed by critics after being ignored and dismissed, but as Gaskell noted in her own works, there is often great danger and always unanticipated consequences for sudden reactions. The zeal with which Gaskell was painted as an iconoclast of patriarchy led to a distortion not only of her works but also of her significance as an author. With gender-focused criticism, every theme in Gaskell became a metaphor for the interaction between the sexes, and this skewed vision ironically defined and limited Gaskell as rigidly as earlier critics' dismissals.

In the past fifteen years, however, Gaskell studies have begun to expand beyond arguments on Gaskell's definition of gender roles to probing examinations of the artistry in her works' construction. These examinations include a growing number of critics who are analyzing Gaskell's psychological realism. For example, Kristina Deffenbacher scrutinizes the "psychic architecture" that Gaskell creates for her heroines, constructions, Deffenbacher contends, Gaskell uses in an attempt to reconcile the discrepancies in her society's ideals of womanhood (123). Also on the rise in Gaskell criticism are historical approaches that seek to contextualize her works in nineteenth-century

political and theological controversies. Valerie Wainwright compares Gaskell's depiction of work relations with the nineteenth-century debates between liberal and paternalistic ideologies and argues that Gaskell "is complex and discriminating" in her response, challenging and transforming both "systems of belief" (150); and John Wyatt reveals a dialogue between Gaskell's conceptions of duty and conscience and the pervasive philanthropy in her Unitarian husband's teaching. These studies, along with the works of Hilary Schor, Terence Wright, and Jenny Uglow among others, have done much for the growing critical appreciation of Gaskell not just as a women's writer but as a Victorian novelist who engaged as fully and competently with the issues of her day as her male counterparts.

It is in this expansionary vein that I have sought to write this thesis. I have chosen to focus on the theme of performance in Gaskell's work because I see it as particularly adroit for addressing both the cultural context in which Gaskell was writing as well as an underlying unity throughout the novels. It is my belief that nineteenth-century performance theories provide an illuminating interpretive framework for Gaskell scholars. In her book *Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity*, Lynn Voskuil summarizes the dramatic theories of the early nineteenth-century critic William Hazlitt, who advanced the theory of "natural acting" (3). For Hazlitt, "acting should not be recognizable as such . . . but should instead produce a virtual reality so convincingly mimetic that audiences cannot distinguish between players and their parts" (Voskuil 29). To perform believably, the actors must employ "their own passions" and "imaginative powers" (Voskuil 32). With this dependence on emotion and

imagination, Hazlitt's "notion of action clearly required the actor to draw on a well-developed and expressive sense of self" (Voskuil 35-36).

With Hazlitt's theory in mind, readers will appreciate Gaskell's play with her characters and their fulfillment of societal expectations. *Cranford* reveals that Gaskell had the utmost affection for the roles constructed by society but she longed to see performances characterized by personality and imagination. Captain Brown's personality resonates with readers but his lack of imagination in performing distanced him from the community and led to his tragic end. In contrast, Peter Jenkyns develops his sense of imagination after his expulsion from Cranford. His travels temper his humor so that when he returns to the small village he can creatively perform in the role constructed for him. His imaginative storytelling allows his own personality to shine through the fabricated script of the prodigal son returned home, and his sparkling performance exposes the internal inconsistencies of community protocol. By harnessing his individuality, Peter eventually reconciles the warring factions of Cranfordian society. With Peter's achievement, Gaskell symbolizes the potential that creative play with societal roles has to effect positive change.

With *North and South*, Gaskell continues to stress the importance of performance, altering, however, from her focus on society's response to characters' performances to the internal dilemmas facing the characters as they seek to balance their communal responsibilities with their private desires. Mirroring Hazlitt's belief "in the theater's capacity to improve society" (Voskuil 33), Gaskell creates an industrial setting rampant with ethical and temporal problems against which her characters can act and, thereby, ultimately effect the betterment of the community. With the motif of bravery, Gaskell argues that

characters must fearlessly and wholeheartedly embrace their performances, if they are to be successful in the community. Thus both Margaret Hale and John Thornton must bravely meet temptations and trials if they are to succeed in their domestic and social roles.

Gaskell's examination of performance gradually matures, and in her last novel she quietly pushes its boundaries with the silences of her characters. To develop as performers, the characters must resist rote scripts and sentiment, yet they must not do so to the imperilment of the roles they play. Molly provides a depth and originality to her role as dutiful daughter as she uses silence both as a protest and as a reaffirmation of her bond with her father. Never does Gaskell suggest that Molly abandon this role. Rather her taciturnity enables her to come to fuller self-knowledge, which as Hazlitt would suggest, uses her "own passions to make a new thing" (Voskuil 32).

The critical lens of performance has already been frequently utilized to examine many of Gaskell's contemporaries: Dickens, Brontë, Eliot, and James with overt references to theatrics in their works or personal ties to the theater have all received attention from performance theorists. The pervasiveness of the performance motif should not be surprising because, while the Victorians might seem at first glance overtly anti-theatrical, the "widespread social network of vigilance and visibility—of looking and being looked at—renders them inherently, if covertly, theatrical" (Litvak x).

The covertness of Gaskell's performances renders them all the more potent. In contrast to the brazenness of Dickens's and the emotionality of Brontë's, Gaskell's characters perform quietly against the pressures and stereotypes the community seeks to impose on them. Yet these quiet

performances aim not at the overthrowal of the community but the amelioration societal ills and enrichment of individual lives. To use a theatrical metaphor, Gaskell advocates different interpretations and methods for acting the parts scripted by society; never does she promote the jettison of society's play.

Joseph Litvak argues in his book *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth Century English Novel* that the novels of the nineteenth century conceal their performances under the guise of their preoccupation with "domesticity, subjectivity, and psychology" (Litvak ix). Gaskell was intensely aware of her culture's obsession with performance, an obsession that stemmed in part from the rise of a middle class that sought to validate itself by creating and adhering to strictly defined roles. This awareness is most obviously apparent in one of her letters to her frequent correspondent Eliza Fox in which she identifies her several "Mes":

One of my mes is, I do believe, a true Christian – (only people call her socialist and communist), another of my mes is a wife and mother, and highly delighted at the delight of everyone else in the house. . . . Now that's my 'social' self I suppose. Then again I've another self with a full taste for beauty and convenience wh[ic]h is pleased on its own account. How am I to reconcile all these warring members? I try to drown myself (my *first* self,) by saying it's W[illia]m who is to decide on all these things, and his feeling it right ought to be my rule, And so it is—only that does not quite do. (L 108)

Gaskell recognizes the tension not only between the multiplicity of roles enforced by society but in the very act of performance, for societal roles are not merely external actions but integrally part of the fabric of the individual self.

Personally seeking a method that would enable her to successfully perform in these roles condoned and constructed by society, Gaskell creates a theatrical experience in her novels that allows readers to watch as characters

navigate the dichotomy of performance and authenticity. The works examined in this thesis reveal a progression and maturation not only in Gaskell's artistry but also in her understanding and depiction of performance. *Cranford* blatantly acknowledges the inescapability of performance and its significance in shaping the community. *North and South* is subtler in its analysis of performance. While Gaskell still recognizes the necessity of societal roles, her concern with internal and external motivations of performance and their corresponding effects on the individual self becomes the focal point. Finally in *Wives and Daughters*, her last and, perhaps, greatest achievement, Gaskell most fully engages with the paradox of performance with its dualistic potential for self-development and self-annihilation.

Focusing on the performances in Gaskell's text is not just a critical exercise, nor is it merely a new angle in the endless discussion of separate spheres and gender tensions. Though certainly concerned with the aforementioned issues, the construct of performance in Gaskell's works is at the heart of understanding both her and her work. For the Victorians "the performative self entails not role reversal—the exchange of authenticity for theatricality, or theatricality for authenticity—but a logic of self-construction that authenticates theatricality, that sees the self as spectacular to its very core" (Voskuil 11). With this argument in mind, it is possible to see how Gaskell could give meaning, significance, and even power to those who lived prescribed lives. Using "natural actors" for her heroines and heroes, Gaskell suggests that performing one's role, when done with humility, passion, and bravery, does not abrogate the self; rather it gives individuals the ability to come to self-knowledge while meaningfully interacting with their community. With her readers as

spectators, Gaskell offers them a glimpse of worthwhile performances, thereby giving them hope of their own significance as they transverse the stage of life in the roles society has given them.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Performing Against Type: Men in *Cranford*

Elizabeth Gaskell first writes of the small village of Cranford in a short story that appeared in Charles Dickens's *Household Words* in December 1851. Though she originally intended the story to stand alone, the quiet hamlet with its assortment of quaint characters caught its creator's imagination and resonated with its readers, begging for more attention. Gaskell gave it that attention, writing a total of seven more stories over the next year, and in 1853 these tales were collected together in a single volume. John Ruskin hailed *Cranford* as a delightfully "finished little piece of study of human nature" (CH 198) and it was Gaskell's own personal favorite (CH 199). Subsequent generations of readers and critics deemed the novella the crowning achievement of Gaskell's canon.

Ironically, *Cranford*'s popularity also led to the critical dismissal of Gaskell as a mere ladies' novelist. Though Gaskell's scope, in terms of subject matter, is perhaps the broadest of all Victorian women writers, many critics argued that "the depiction of manners in a small English town . . . [was] a task far more appropriate to Mrs. Gaskell's talent than the analysis of urban social conditions" which she attempts in other novels (Ganz 132). This estimation of Gaskell arises from not only from a dismissal of her other works but also from a trivialization of *Cranford*, which in these critics' eyes lacks the distracting and insupportable contradictions between Gaskell's "emotional leanings to social reform and her reluctance to challenge the existing order" (Ganz 132).

However, with the rise of feminism in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the basis of this dismissal came to be the very reason Gaskell received recognition. Feminists saw in *Cranford* a “feminist utopia” that defied patriarchal ideology and constraints and “establish[ed] itself as an alternate community,” empowering its female citizens to live full lives in spite of their perceived disadvantages of spinsterhood, penury, and naïveté (Rosenthal 73). They recognized that “Gaskell’s apparent shift in focus from the industrial mode, which foregrounds social issues, to the domestic mode, signals not an abandonment of the public world, but a more intensive engagement with its problems, which she comes to see as inscribed within the private sphere” (Colby 65). The village of Cranford is not a place where the Victorians could escape from the problems and troubles facing their culture, but rather a site where these controversies could be engaged, where domestic roles intersect public performances, and where tradition meets progress. Upon a close examination, *Cranford*’s picture of idyllic English country life reveals itself as a complicated evaluation of the effects the community has on individual performances and the interaction and reciprocity between individuals and the community in accomplishing positive changes in each other.

*Cranford*’s description of the small village and its residents in its opening paragraph has been called “a piece of masterly scene-setting . . . having just a touch of irony to give aesthetic distance . . . [and] pervaded with . . . sympathetic humour” (Sharps 131):

In the first place, Cranford is in possession of the Amazons; all the holders of houses above a certain rent are women. If a married couple come to settle in the town, somehow the gentleman disappears; he is either fairly frightened to death by being the only man in the Cranford evening parties, or he is accounted for by being with his regiment, his ship, or closely engaged in business all the week in the great neighbouring commercial town of Drumble,

distant only twenty miles on a railroad. In short, whatever does become of the gentlemen, they are not in Cranford. (C 165)

The emphasis placed on this opening paragraph has dictated much of criticism. For her contemporaries, it led to an appreciation of Gaskell's charm. For modern scholars, such as Coral Lansbury and Rae Rosenthal, it has resulted in an almost total focus on the interpretation of "Amazonian" domination of Cranford society; and these studies have yielded fruitful evidence of Gaskell's artistry as well as her engagement with the women's question—what to do with the ever growing number of extraneous women—of her generation. But to focus solely on the female characters is to forget that Cranford is not just populated by women; in fact, the intrusion of men into the narrative actually creates the story. Audrey Jaffe notes that "Cranford grants the few men who do appear an unusual degree of importance, and the story draws much of its narrative energy from the very intrusions of which 'the ladies of Cranford' despair" (50). Inverting the plight of women with her creation of a society that disappreciates men, Gaskell impresses on readers the disadvantages of closed societies, which lead to repression and stagnation, and subtly suggests alternative practices, which embrace the shared humanity of all.

To give their way of life a sense of purpose, the ladies of Cranford create rigid roles which must be followed at all times. For themselves the ladies circumscribes a sphere where

keeping the trim gardens full of choice flowers without a weed to speck them; . . . frightening away little boys who look wistfully at the said flowers through the railings; . . . rushing out at the geese that occasionally venture into the gardens if the gates are left open; . . . deciding all questions of literature and politics without troubling themselves with unnecessary reasons or arguments; . . . obtaining clear and correct knowledge of everybody's affairs in the

parish; . . . [and] keeping their neat maid-servants in admirable order (C 165)

encompasses the extent of their duty to each other. While banal, these duties unite the ladies of Cranford, ordering their lives while strengthening their sense of self-importance. Their sphere has no place, however, for men, who are, therefore, relegated by the indomitable ladies to the role of an annoyance that should be avoided, overlooked, and ignored at all times.

Fiercely circumscribing their own spheres, the ladies of Cranford have no compunction in dictating to their neighbors: “there were rules and regulations for visiting and calls; and they were announced to any young people who might be staying in the town” (166). Cranfordian rules not only apply to actions but also to speech. For example, the general poverty of Cranford’s leading ladies cannot be acknowledged because it might call into question their “aristocratic” standing” (166). The discretion necessary for this charade demands a careful use of speech, resulting in singular phraseology where “economy . . . [is] always ‘elegant,’ and money-spending always ‘vulgar and ostentatious’” (167). While the narrator good-naturedly humorizes the ladies’ adherence to their self-imposed paradigms, she recognizes that these constructed roles perpetuate Cranford’s way of life by maintaining a connection with the past, a connection which all of the ladies feel to be not only appropriate but also necessary for survival.

It is into this rigid state of being that Gaskell introduces her first character, the very manly Captain Brown. Captain Brown’s arrival in Cranford with his two daughters is perceived as an “invasion” (167), for his frankness and manners assault the ladies’ genteel sensibilities. Cleverly introducing the Captain through

the eyes of the Cranford ladies, Gaskell lets her readers know immediately the obstacles that the Captain faces as he attempts to enter the closed community. It is not so much the fact that he is a man that offends the ladies—after all they have dealt with men quite effectively in the past—it is the fact that he will not conform to their model of masculinity. Instead of quietly disappearing, Captain Brown “openly spoke about his being poor—not in a whisper . . . [but] in a loud military voice” (167) in the open street and publically carried a “poor old woman’s dinner . . . one very slippery Sunday” (173). For these transgressions the ladies send the Captain “to Coventry” (167); but “blind to all the small slights and omission of trivial ceremonies with which he had been received” (168), the Captain misses the cues given by the ladies and continues to perform kind acts out of the goodness of his heart.

The irony of the Captain’s oblivious interactions with Cranford society is twofold. First, his blindness to the disapproval of his new neighbors mirrors their own blindness to the true state of their circumstances. The pervasive practice of “elegant economy,” the narrator acknowledges, “blinded [Cranfordians] . . . to the vulgar fact, that . . . [they were] people of very moderate means” (167). Since they are accustomed to attributing worth to individuals based on their role, the ladies at Cranford must not only deny their own reduced circumstances but also prevent others from accepting or acknowledging a similar decline. Miss Jenkyns illustrates this paranoia when she attempts to keep Jessie Brown from informing everyone that her uncle “was a shopkeeper in Edinburgh” by faking a “terrible cough” (170). Miss Jessie’s frankness might be charming to readers, but to the ladies in Cranford, it threatens their willful ignorance of the true state of thing. The other side to the irony of the Captain’s

position in Cranford is that he both offends the ladies and is oblivious to their disapproval because of his goodness, but it is this very goodness that will eventually gain his entrance into their lives and endear him.

When their punishments of Captain Brown prove ineffective, the ladies of Cranford give up on conforming Captain Brown to their original mold for men, and instead circumscribe a new role for him, a role of practicality. The Captain's "excellent masculine common-sense, and his facility in devising expedients to overcome domestic dilemmas, . . . [gives] him an extraordinary place as authority among the Cranford ladies" (168). It seems for a time that the utilitarian drive of the ladies at Cranford will allow them to permit Captain Brown's oddities and to break their own customs; they can now admit him "in the tabooed hours before twelve . . . [so he might] discover the cause of a smoking chimney, before the fire was lighted" (168), a cause "which he . . . cured by some simple alteration in the flue" (169). But this practical role does not encompass the Captain's place at social functions, for at them he speaks beyond practical advice.

At first the Captain seems to be doing quite well:

He immediately and quietly assumed the man's place in the room; attended to every one's wants, lessened the pretty maid-servant's labour by waiting on empty cups and bread-and-butterless ladies; and yet did it all in so easy and dignified a manner, and so much as if it were a matter of course for the strong to attend to the weak, that he was a true man throughout. (170)

This behavior coincides quite nicely with the ladies' idea of the practical help of Captain Brown, but the Captain is not content to just be an aide that serves their needs. The other men in Cranford at this time were effectively silenced by virtue of their non-existence, but the Captain, inserted as he is into their society, makes free to speak not only "in a voice too large for the room" (168) but also of taboo

subjects (i.e. poverty). To the feigned but self-preserving nescience of the women, the Captain's frank, good-humored, and loud admission is jarring.

But it is his disagreement with Miss Jenkyns that will again strain his relationship with the ladies. Thinking to introduce to the conversation something besides cards, Captain Brown asks for the ladies' opinion of the *Pickwick Papers*, which "were then publishing in parts," exclaiming that he finds it a "capital thing!" (171). Miss Jenkyns, the authority on literature in Cranford, seeks to enlighten the Captain by explaining that "the great Doctor [Johnson]" is the model of all that is excellent in literature (171). This claim provokes a volley of readings between the two and the debate is never resolved satisfactorily. Miss Jenkyns would seem to have the last word, but the narrator alerts readers that "it is said . . . that Captain Brown was heard to say, *sotto voce*, 'D—n Dr. Johnson!'" (172). While readers are amused by this ending touch, Gaskell highlights the frustration that can arise from the limits of societal roles, for both Miss Jenkyns and Captain Brown are hampered by the constructed roles given to them whether they choose to perform in them or not. Miss Jenkyns cannot deviate from her role as guardian of Cranfordian protocol and Captain Brown refuses, consciously or not, to adhere to the part assigned him.

Unfortunately, Captain Brown does not survive his time at Cranford. However, his death is befitting of his character, for he dies a hero, saving a child from an oncoming train. Miss Jenkyns receives this news with sorrow, relenting from her disapproval of the Captain for the first time since their argument over the *Pickwick Papers*. After listening to the newspaper's "full account of the fatal accident," which reports that Captain Brown "was deeply engaged in the perusal of a number of 'Pickwick,' which he had just received," Miss Jenkyns will hold

till her dying day that “poor Captain Brown was killed for reading” it (179), a notion that mingles humor with the tragedy.

The death of Captain Brown is perhaps the most lamented episode in *Cranford*. Ruskin complained to Gaskell over her decision and she herself acknowledges that she was reluctant to do away with the character (*CH* 198-99). It has been frequently suggested the Captain’s death, occurring at the end of the first story of *Cranford*, only happened because at the time Gaskell did not intend to write again of *Cranford*. While there is probably some truth to this suggestion, I would argue that this tragedy is at the heart of Gaskell’s message in *Cranford*, advocating interaction and integration not only between the sexes but between classes and individuals.

The Captain’s death is not, as some critics would argue, an admirable repulsion of patriarchy on Gaskell’s part. If anything, it is a validation of the Captain’s values of sincerity and ubiquitous kindness, for it readmits those values into *Cranford*. At the time of his death, the Captain was out of favor with the leader of *Cranford* society, Miss Jenkyns. The coolness between the Captain and Miss Jenkyns arose from their “literary dispute,” and though “it was the only difference of opinion they had ever had . . . that difference was enough” (176) and affects all of the ladies. Gaskell humorously illustrates the severity of this estrangement when she relates the following incident. After almost being knocked down by Captain Brown while he perused Mr. Boz, the author of *Pickwick*, in the street, Miss Jenkyns tells Mary Smith that “she had rather he had knocked her down, if he had only been reading a higher style of literature” (176). While critics are right in emphasizing the importance of this seemingly small aside, I would argue that this incident is not a condemnation but a

commendation of the Captain and his values. Unlike Miss Jenkyns who cannot truly see the Captain and his virtues because of her prejudices, Captain Brown is not blinded to the presence of others by his likes and dislikes. Though he almost knocks her down, it is important to note that he does not: he may only see her at the last moment, but he still sees her. This scene gains significance in light of the circumstances of his death. Though again engrossed in the writings of Boz, Captain Brown is still able to notice the little girl on the train tracks. He is the one knocked down by, not because of his reading choice but because he could recognize the need of another human being and was willing to give of himself to meet that need.

By granting Captain Brown the status of hero in his death, Gaskell both commends his interaction with the community to her readers and suggests that his attitude towards others is not only correct but also contagious. His death jolts Miss Jenkyns from her own preoccupation with performing correctly and on cue. She breaks Cranford tradition to attend Jessie Brown as she accompanies her father's body to the graveyard and more importantly, contrary to her former opinions of men, to encourage Major Gordon's suit for Jessie's hand. When Miss Matty discovers the Major's arm "round Miss Jessie's waist," Miss Jenkyns, the "model of feminine decorum," replies that it is "the most proper place in the world for his arm to be in" (182). These changes in Miss Jenkyns's behavior indicate that she, at least in Gaskell's eyes, is progressing to a more acceptable view of the world. However, the rest of Cranford society still has prejudices and preconceptions that must be changed.

While Captain Brown's death may suggest the complete rejection of society with its destructive definitions of the roles that must be played, the

introduction of the second male character will counter that assumption. Mr. Holbrook, cousin to Miss Pole, has lived in the vicinity of Cranford for his entire life, but, content to be one of the banished men of Cranford, he has avoided interaction with the ladies of the village. Readers and Mary Smith, the narrator, learn, however, that he once forgot his place in his youth and attempted to woo Miss Matty, Rector Jenkyns's daughter. Deemed unsuitable by Miss Jenkyns, his suit was discouraged. This dismissal is based in pride, but the pride is not just Miss Jenkyns's. Mr. Holbrook's strong sense of pride prevents him from promoting himself. "Four or five miles from Cranford," Mr. Holbrook's

property was not large enough to entitle him to rank higher than a yeoman; or rather, with something of the 'pride which apes humility,' he had refused to push himself on, as so many of his class had done, into the ranks of the squires. He would not allow himself to be called Thomas Holbrook, *Esq.*; he even sent back letters with this address, telling the postmistress at Cranford that his name was *Mr. Thomas Holbrook, yeoman.* (188)

Except for his singular pursuance of Miss Matty many years ago, Mr. Holbrook obstinately adheres to the role he inherited. He "[despises] every refinement" which the ladies in Cranford put great value on (189), but he is not insensitive to and unappreciative of beauty, nor is he dismissive of the feelings and needs of others.

Mr. Holbrook re-engages with Cranford after unexpectedly meeting Miss Matty in a shop soon after the death of her sister. Coming over to express his sympathy for her loss, he invites Miss Matty, Mary Smith, and Miss Pole to visit him for the day. His home, a typical bachelor's establishment, surprises the ladies with its extensive collection of books. Mr. Holbrook's pride and joy, the books give him an alternate way to engage with the surrounding world. Mary Smith notes Mr. Holbrook was always "repeating apt and beautiful quotations

from the poets" (192), and in one particularly telling exchange, he tells her that Byron has given him the ability to appreciate the simple things of Nature, like the color of "ashbuds in March," which he had never noticed until "this young man comes and tells me . . . [though] I've lived all my life in the country; more shame for me not to know" (194).

While Gaskell's choice of poet seems particularly apt—Byron notoriously defied societal roles—she does not exalt a view of the world which separates the individual from the community. After hearing an excerpt from Byron, Miss Matty naively associates his work with Dr. Johnson's. At the time, this evaluation seems to be a purely humorous commentary on Miss Matty's simplicity, but further events suggest that Gaskell might actually be doing something deeper. Mr. Holbrook's passion for the beauty that the Romantic poets exult in gradually overwhelms his social responsibilities. When the ladies visit, they choose to sit in

what Mr. Holbrook called the counting-house, when he paid his labourers their weekly wages at a great desk near the door. The rest of the pretty sitting room—looking into the orchard, and all covered over with dancing tree-shadows—was filled with books. They lay on the ground, they covered the walls, they strewed the table. (192)

At first, the room's description seems to picture geographically that Mr. Holbrook has achieved a happy harmony, harnessing his appreciation of the beauty of the world with his responsibilities, but subtly there is the threat that Mr. Holbrook's love of beauty will overwhelm his sense of communal responsibility.

This threat is realized when Mr. Holbrook decides to go to Paris. Having "always had a wish to go" (196), he schedules his visit between haying and harvest-time. He promises to see Miss Matty when he comes back, but when

Mary returns to Cranford in the fall she finds that Miss Matty is ailing. Searching for an explanation, she turns to Miss Pole, who informs her that Mr. Holbrook is ill. "The journey to Paris was quite too much for him. His housekeeper says he has hardly ever been round his fields since, but just sits with his hands on his knees in the counting-house, not reading or anything, but only saying what a wonderful city Paris was!" (197). Always a secluded man, Mr. Holbrook's ultimate retreat from the world and his responsibilities proves fatal. His death is Gaskell's argument that complete separation from the community, however flawed it might be, is just as dangerous as actively acting against its strictures. While granting the great good that an appreciation of beauty and art does in providing recourse to those distant from a community, Gaskell suggests that it cannot ultimately establish a positive alternative to a life of interaction and participation in a community, and that it is the community alone which can provide the framework necessary to support this appreciation.

Like Captain's Brown's death, Mr. Holbrook's death is not pointless for it accomplishes a positive alteration. Deeply affected, Miss Matty tries to conceal from the whole world her sorrow, but those who are closest to her recognize her silent grief. Unconscious that her close friends are even aware of her old romance, she erects personal monuments to Mr. Holbrook's memory: "the book he gave her lies with her Bible on the little table by her bedside," and she takes to wearing widows' caps (198). Miss Matty's sorrow, though touching to the reader, frees her from the binds of past traditions. She now permits her servant Martha to have a follower, for "God forbid! . . . that I should grieve any young hearts" (198). Just as Miss Jenkyns relented from previously held truisms on relationships between men and women, Miss Matty recognizes that "Fate and

Love" must be submitted to if life is to go on (199). Miss Matty's virtues of generosity and kindness make her fit to be of the forbearer of the coming changes in Cranford.

To help Cranford's ladies to a more utopian society, Gaskell brings onto the scene three men who will catapult all of Cranford forward past their prejudices and small-minded adherence to past rituals to a new order: Signor Brunoni the magician, Mr. Hoggins the surgeon, and Peter Jenkyns the storyteller. A conjuror, Signor Brunoni creates quite a fervor in the sedate Cranford with his arrival. Miss Matty writes to Mary asking her to visit specially so that she might enjoy the exhibition of magic. Cranford creates personas for its visitors and Signor Brunoni is no different. Miss Pole, "always the person . . . [who] had adventures" (236), goes herself to the inn where the act is staying to gather information for the other ladies. Her story reveals as much about Cranford as it does about the Brunoni.

I was going on behind the screens, in my absence of mind, when a gentleman (quite a gentleman, I can assure you) stepped forwards and asked if I had any business he could arrange for me. He spoke such pretty broken English, I could not help thinking of Thaddeus of Warsaw, and the Hungarian Brothers, and Santo Sebastiani; and while I was busy picturing his past life to myself, he had bowed me out of the room. But wait a minute! You have not heard half my story yet! I was going downstairs, when who should I meet but Betty's second-cousin. So, of course, I stopped to speak to her for Betty's sake; and she told me that I had really seen the conjurer—the gentleman who spoke broken English was Signor Brunoni himself. Just at this moment he passed us on the stairs, making such a graceful bow! in reply to which I dropped a curtsy—all foreigners have such polite manners, one catches something of it. (237)

This encounter wraps the Signor in a veil of respectability in the ladies' opinions, a respectability that is tinged by the exotic. Most of the ladies are confirmed in their estimation of the conjuror at their first sight of him

The curtain quivered—one side sent up before the other, which stuck fast; it was dropped again, and with a fresh effort, and a vigorous pull from some unseen hand, it flew up, revealing to our sight a magnificent gentleman in the Turkish costume, seated before a little table, gazing at us . . . with calm and condescending dignity, “like a being of another sphere.” (240)

But Miss Pole cannot accept the stage persona of Brunoni, for “Signor Brunoni had not got that muffy sort of thing about his chin, but looked like a close-shaved Christian gentleman” (240). Both Mary Smith and the readers are amused by Miss Pole’s steadfast insistence that the “Grand Turk” is an imposter because both recognize that it is her inability to reconcile the persona she created with the persona that the Signore creates for himself on stage. Her disbelief creates the confusion and threatens to disrupt the show. The Signor cannot respond in words to Miss Pole’s accusation for his English is “so broken that there was no cohesion between the parts of his sentences; a fact which he himself perceived at last, and so left off speaking and proceeded to action” (240). And his actions do amaze and astonish the ladies to the extent that some are worried about the sanctity of their souls in watching such unearthly proceedings. While the ladies are somewhat assured by the presence of the rector, the sense of bewilderment and uncertainty raised by Signor Brunoni’s performance continues and gives rise in the following weeks to a panic on the perceived invasion of the neighborhood by criminals. Signor Brunoni becomes a dark and threatening figure in their minds, responsible not only for attempted break-ins but for the death of Mrs. Jamieson’s beloved pet, Carlo.

Ironically, Miss Pole is correct in her claim that the magician is an imposter just not in the way she thinks. In reality the Signor is not some “foreign gentleman” but Samuel Brown, an ex-sergeant who had at one time been

stationed in India. Cranford discovers this only after many weeks of thinking the Signor responsible for bizarre happenings in the neighborhood. But he had been injured in a carriage accident and was an invalid for the entire time. At once the ladies of Cranford forget their fears of “murderous gangs” and superstitions of “headless ghosts” and proceed to deluge Sam Brown, his wife, and daughter with Christian charity. The knowledge of the Browns’ background makes this good-will possible, for it demystifies the mysterious. Confronted by reality, Cranford can give up their preoccupations with their overwhelming fears of danger. And while they will continue to call the Browns the Brunonis because “it sounded so much better” (254), their knowledge and acceptance of the true nature of things enables their village to return to a normal life.

The advent of the Browns does truly signal a change in Cranford. For the first time the ladies forget their petty distinctions of rank and station to unite and tend to the needs of this struggling family:

it was wonderful to see what kind feelings were called out by this poor man’s coming amongst us. And also wonderful to see how the great Cranford panic, which had been occasioned by his first coming in his Turkish dress, melted away into thin air on his second coming. (255)

This charity is in sharp contrast to their reaction against Captain Brown’s act of carrying the poor woman’s dinner, and it is also much greater, for the ladies do not stop at the temporal needs of the Browns but welcome and adopt them into a community.

The advent of the “Brunonis” into Cranford sets into motion events that will bring the other two men into the story. Mr. Hoggins has been the town’s surgeon for many years, and though the ladies “disliked the name and considered it coarse” (219), they “were rather proud of our doctor at Cranford, as

a doctor" (254). A practical and forthright man, Mr. Hoggins will not play word games with the ladies. When the ladies try to relate him to the "Marchioness of Exeter whose name was Molly Hoggins, . . . the man, careless of his own interests, utterly ignored and denied any such relationship" (219). And when an outbreak of neighborhood "robberies" takes place and the ladies identify him as a victim, he tells Miss Pole that she "must have heard an exaggerated account of some petty theft of a neck of mutton, which, it seems was stolen out of the safe in his yard last week," a theft that he personally attributes to a stray cat (248). The ladies are quite scornful of his manly pride, which prevents him from being forthright about the incident, and relish in their own superior candor.

Mr. Hoggins might have continued to be an indulged side character, but for the arrival of Mrs. Jamieson's sister-in-law, Lady Glenmire. "A bright little woman of middle age, who had been very pretty in the days of her youth, and who was even yet very pleasant-looking," Lady Glenmire is not at all what the ladies of Cranford expect the widow of a peer to be, yet her good-nature, practical common-sense, excellent card-playing ability, and modest circumstances win the their respect and friendship (230); indeed they grow to prefer her company to the pretensions of Mrs. Jamieson. While the austere Mrs. Jameison is away, Lady Glenmire and Miss Pole find the "Brunonis" at a small public-house. Recognizing the conjuror's need for immediate medical attention they send for Mr. Hoggins (254). Thrown together by these circumstances, Mr. Hoggins and Lady Glenmire fall in love. The announcement of their engagement shocks the ladies of Cranford; Mary Smith tells of their reaction.

We wished to ignore the whole affair until our liege lady, Mrs. Jamieson, returned. Till she came back to give us our cue, we felt that it would be better to consider the engagement in the same light

as the Queen of Spain's legs—facts which certainly existed, but the less said about the better. This restraint upon our tongues—for you see if we did not speak about it to any of the parties concerned, how could we get answers to the questions that we longed to ask?—was beginning to be irksome, and our idea of the dignity of silence was paling before our curiosity. (266)

The walls of Cranford elegance and discretion are beginning to topple, but for their complete overthrowal an old resident of Cranford must return home.

The brother of Miss Deborah and Miss Matty, Peter Jenkyns has been absent from Cranford for over three decades. A mischievous boy, Peter never lived up to the plans that others had for him, delighting instead in pranks and “vulgar” hoaxing. Miss Matty tells Mary that “he seemed to think that the Cranford people might be joked about, and made fun of, and they did not like it; nobody does” (208). Though he is the apple of his mother's eye, his pranks disappoint his father, who pulls him from school so that he can personally supervise his son's education. While Peter performs well for a time, his impetuosity combined with sense of humor leads him to play against the role constructed for him by the community. Peter, Miss Matty tells Mary Smith, deceives his own father “by dressing himself up as a lady that was passing through the town and wished to see the Rector of Cranford, ‘who had published that admirable Assize Sermon’” (209). The joke backfires on Peter, however, for his father “kept him hard at work copying out all those Buonaparte sermons for the lady—that was Peter himself, . . . [for] he was the lady” (209).

While this episode does temper Peter's actions for a time, he will return to this trick, a return that precipitates a family crisis. Never appreciative of his older sister Deborah, who continually criticizes his performance, and ever willing to provoke the “old ladies . . . [who] would believe anything,” Peter takes

advantage of his sister's absence to dress up in her clothes while pretending to carry a newborn infant (209). This jest does more than just assault Cranfordian protocol but calls into question the reputation and character of his sister. Furious, his father publically whips Peter. Peter's response is very revealing; he "turned to where the people outside the railing were, and made them a low bow, as grand and as grave as any gentleman; and then walked slowly into the house" (210). Peter's bow does more than play off the whipping as a charade. It identifies Cranford not only as a society obsessed with performance but of consisting only of performances. In other words, Reverend Jenkyn's castigation is no less of an act than Peter's cross-dressing. Recognizing that his performances deviate from the mold and refusing to conform to community expectations, Peter runs away and joins the Navy, breaking his family's hearts.

Having heard Peter's story from Miss Matty, Mary Smith is immediately intrigued when she hears from Mrs. Brown, the wife of Signori Brunoni (i.e. Mr. Brown), of the "good, kind Aga Jenkyns" in India (260). Mary wonders if this might be the long lost Peter and, of her own initiative, secretly writes a letter to Aga, informing him of the changes in Cranford and his sister's financial plight. Aga Jenkyns turns out to be the long lost Peter and he returns to Cranford to the joy of Miss Matty and the fascination of the other ladies.

Peter's return has been subject to different critical interpretations. Some critics, such as Alyson J. Kiesel, see Peter as the savior, who swoops in to rescue his sister from a life of hardship and restore peace and goodwill between the members of Cranford society (1003). But Rae Rosenthal argues that Peter is "but another invader from the outside" (86) on the feminine society that is managing quite well without masculine interference. After all, Miss Matty survived with

the help of the community and even made a small profit with her tea shop, which makes Peter's superior attitude both insensitive and offensive. I would suggest, however, that Peter is neither a savior nor an intruder but an example of how to navigate the shoals of a closed community while being an instrument of change.

Gaskell describes Peter's return from India as that of a hero, and all "the ladies vied with each other who should admire him the most" (297). This admiration is due primarily to Peter's wonderful story-telling, in which he rivals "Sinbad the Sailor" and surpasses the "Arabian Nights" (297). These stories vary, however, according to the members of the audience; the ones told to his sister and the rector are "tamer" than those directed at the other ladies, who liked them "the better, indeed, for being what they called 'so very Oriental'" (297). In Peter, the ladies embrace the same "vulgarity" that they had formerly abhorred in other men, as seen in the following scene.

One day at Miss Pole's, Mr. Peter said he was tired of sitting upright against the hard-backed uneasy chairs, and asked if he might no indulge himself in sitting cross-legged, Miss Pole's consent was eagerly given, and down he went with the utmost gravity. . . . I could not help thinking of poor Simon Jones, the lame tailor, and while Mrs. Jamieson slowly commented on the elegance and convenience of the attitude, I remembered how we had all followed the lady's lead in condemning Mr. Hoggins for vulgarity because he simply crossed his legs as he sat still on his chair. Many of Mr. Peter's ways of eating were a little strange amongst such ladies as Miss Pole, and Miss Matty, and Mrs. Jamieson, especially when I recollected the untasted green peas and two-pronged forks at poor Mr. Holbrook's dinner. (297)

Mary's tone indicates her uneasiness with this double-facedness, and she is quite alarmed when gossip begins to link Peter with Mrs. Jamieson, for she realizes that such a marriage will threaten the happiness of Miss Matty as it reinforces all of the old prejudices. Her fears seem to be confirmed when she observes Peter

and Mrs. Jamieson in close conversation on the evening of the Gordons' party. However, upon moving closer, she hears Peter, with a "funny twinkle" in his eye, telling Mrs. Jamieson a fantastic story about how he shot a cherubim once during his world travels, a story that Mrs. Jamieson accepts with good faith. Peter later tell Mary not to be "shocked. . . at all my wonderful stories," for he "consider[s] Mrs. Jamieson fair game" and argues that his stories are "the first step" to reconciling her to the Hogginses and the other outcasts of Cranford society (302). And when he leads Mrs. Jamieson and Mrs. Hoggins into the room one on each arm, Mary acknowledges that "somehow or another" he succeeds in re-establishing "the old friendly sociability" (302), which is not so "old" for it has been expanded to include outsiders. Ending *Cranford* with social reconciliation, Gaskell suggests the redemptive power of stories told by performers who recognize the faults of their community but seek with charity and "goodwill" to effect change.

Gaskell's examination of performance in *Cranford* is not only her most obvious engagement with societal constructs but also her simplest depiction of individuals navigating the seeming division between self and participation in the community. Though she hints at the potential for self-abnegation in the performing, Gaskell refrains, for the most part, from dealing with the internal conflicts that stem from the external demands of following protocol. But Gaskell is not immune to the struggle to balance duty and desire, and it is in *North and South* that she will return again to the motif of performance and amplify it by appraising the motivations of individual actors as they perform in various and often conflicting roles.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### “Face Difficulties Bravely”: Evaluating Performances of Duty in *North and South*

Set predominantly in the industrial center of Milton-Northern, Gaskell's third novel, *North and South* is in stark contrast with *Cranford* with its frenetic energy and outright engagement with the current political, ethical, social and religious debates of the day. Expanding the theme of conflict between labor and capital, which she addressed in her first novel *Mary Barton*, Gaskell creates a love story in which the heroine and hero must navigate the divide between faith and religion, conscience and desire, reflection and action, and civic duty and individual rights. Because it is an industrial novel, *North and South* has frequently been seen as a response to *Mary Barton*, but I would agree with Felicia Bonaparte when she argues that “*North and South* is more a sequel to *Cranford*” (169), for with all its themes *North and South* is predominantly concerned with the way an individual performs when faced by the challenges of life.

In April 1854, Gaskell wrote a letter to John Forster telling of the new story she was writing (L 281). That September *North and South* began appearing in *Household Words*, almost immediately after Charles Dickens, the chief editor, had concluded his own morality tale of industry, *Hard Times*. The two writers had worked successfully, though uneasily, together before, seeing *Cranford* and several short stories into publication; however, *North and South* became the impetus for an outright battle of artistic wills and sparked a resentment that never fully dissipated. Gaskell's difficulties in meeting deadlines and her tendency to ignore length requirements fueled Dickens's impatience and his

manipulative and patronizing flattery and dictatorial editorship irritated her. This tension arguably affected Gaskell's artistic and social vision of the novel: "compelled to hurry events with an improbable rapidity towards the close," Gaskell was dissatisfied with the original publication and inserted "various short passages" and "several new chapters" before the novel appeared in volume form, hoping to remedy the perceived deficiencies (NS 9).

In spite of the hostility with Dickens and her own insecurity over attempting her biggest and most complicated work to date, most critics agree that *North and South* is where "Mrs. Gaskell became artistically aware of herself" (Sharps 207). While critics will acknowledge "an increase in her artistic proficiency," they are divided in their estimation of the novel (Ganz 79-80). Margaret Ganz sees Gaskell's restrained depictions of social evils and the traditional happy ending to be a "moderateness" which diminishes *North and South's* "potentialities as a work of art" (Ganz 83). Suvendrini Perera acknowledges that "*North and South* manages to combine its various conflicting groups into some semblance of unity," but she finds it "less [than] successful . . . [because of] the strikes, murders, and mutiny that erupt throughout the narrative, . . . [which] suggest the inability of the marriage plot to absorb any longer the contradictions and tensions of imperial and capitalist expansion" (51). On the other hand, Catherine Gallagher argues that though Gaskell "seem[s] to lose sight" of "social themes" at the end, she "do[es] so, paradoxically, because of the specific social remedies" she is advocating (70).

Critics are even more diverse in their evaluation of the extent of Gaskell's success in incorporating her novel's themes and her representation of women. Pamela Corpron Parker suggests that "Gaskell's final fantasy is one of real

financial power for women, not only the power to direct their resources towards the objects of their desire but to benefit themselves and their wider communities”

(3). In a similar vein, Robin Colby observes that, “given the constraints of Victorian culture, Gaskell’s novels may in fact be seen as radical because they challenge widely held assumptions about the nature of women, their proper sphere, and their participation in labor” (1). However, other critics argue that Gaskell reinforces cultural stereotypes of women with her ending, noting that

for the novel to end ‘happily’—for the marriage to take place—Margaret must resign herself to a woman’s traditional role as the incomplete half of a whole—Thornton—who himself has become strikingly independent of women. She must be converted from women’s duties as she had redefined them early in the novel to those acceptable to a male-dominated society: the angel of mercy, the wife and mother. (Krueger 218)

These widely divergent views of *North and South* reveal its complexity and an ambiguity that weaves its way through the text.

Interpreting such a complicated work is daunting, but I believe John Wyatt’s observation that “the emphasis in Elizabeth Gaskell’s novel is not on contractual obligations or visions of social order . . . [but on] the individuals’ stories” (111) provides a lens which brings into clarity the key to deciphering Gaskell’s message. The decisions that the characters make with the corresponding actions, words, and thoughts are at the heart of the novel and Gaskell employs the motifs of bravery and cowardice to unite as well as inform their performances. Every character in this novel, whether minor or major, faces the temptation of cowardice, and only by analyzing these moments, can readers understand and appreciate Gaskell’s vision for society.

The opening of *North and South* does not portend acts of bravery. The flurry of wedding preparations and the return of the heroine, Margaret Hale, to

her small and idyllic country village home seem to foreshadow a comedy of manners rather than an industrial drama. Yet the idyll does not endure for long, for Margaret's father reveals a secret that will alter the family's destiny. Having experienced doubts for many years, Mr. Hale faces a crisis of conscience when he receives word that he is being transferred to a more profitable parish. By accepting the promotion, he will have to reaffirm the common prayer book, an affirmation that is at odds with his current doubts. While these doubts are never clearly explained or articulated in the novel, Gaskell leaves her readers with no doubt of their genuineness. Mr. Hale's conscience triumphs in this temptation, but it does not give him the courage to face his wife and tell her of his decision. He tells Margaret that he has been reading accounts of other Dissenters, "trying to steal some of their bravery; but it is of no use" (36), he admits, for he is but a "poor coward" (38). Mr. Hale begs Margaret to tell her mother of his resignation and decision to move the family to the northern town of Milton. While he does half apologize "for having arranged so much before he had told any one of his family of his intentions," he tells Margaret "I can always decide better by myself, and not influenced by those whom I love, . . . [for] I cannot stand objections. They make me so undecided" (39).

Mr. Hale's bravery in maintaining his convictions is befitting his role as a clergyman even though it causes him to be considered a heretic, but his cowardice in his familial responsibilities jeopardizes his position as a husband and father and damages the integrity of the family unit. As she faces her mother, Margaret recognizes "that whatever her faults of discontent and repining might have been, it was an error in her father to have left her to learn his change of opinion, and his approaching change of life, from her better-informed child" (45).

Mrs. Hale is understandably invidious of Margaret's possession of Mr. Hale's confidence. Mr. Hale's reserve might have "originated in a tenderness" (45), but his pusillanimity adds to the pain and hardship both his wife and daughter experience in this transition.

Personally distressed by her father's decision, Margaret bears the brunt of the work and emotional stress of moving. She both manages the physical tasks of the move and soothes and comforts her father and mother, seeking to alleviate all of their distresses. However, in times of solitude, Margaret reveals her own fragile condition: she gives way to emotion and doubt, both of which threaten to overwhelm her. In spite of this emotional upheaval, Margaret resolves to be brave for others. When her father falters in his convictions upon seeing his family's distress, Margaret bolsters him up reminding him that though heresy is bad, hypocrisy would be worse; and though she finds his doubts insupportable, she defends his tenderness and integrity to her mother.

Given to introspection, Margaret draws valuable lessons from her father's crisis of faith, learning that orthodoxy does not necessarily insure faith. The evening of her father's disclosure, Margaret retreats to her room overwhelmed with despair.

It seemed to her at the moment, as if the earth was more utterly desolate than if girt in an iron dome, behind which there might be the ineffaceable peace and glory of the Almighty: those never-ending depths of space, in their still serenity, were more mocking to her than any material bounds could be—shutting in the cries of earth's sufferers, which now might ascend in that infinite splendour of vastness and be lost—lost for ever, before they reached His throne. (43)

At this moment her father enters, asking to pray the Lord's Prayer with her.

Margaret is rightly rebuked, recognizing that "her father might be a heretic; but .

. . she, in her despairing doubts . . . [had] shown herself a far more utter sceptic” (43). This recognition leads her to resolve thereafter to focus on “the one step needful for the hour” (43), for to dwell on an uncertain future is a temptation to cowardice.

The move to Milton is the true beginning of Margaret’s *bildungsroman*. The foreign customs and strange manners of Milton jar Margaret more than she shows, and her reserve frequently leads others to think of her as proud. Mrs. Thornton informs Margaret that “if you live in Milton, you must learn to have a brave heart” (110). This admonition resonates with Margaret, who wishes to “do . . . [her] best” while confessing that she will “not know whether I am brave or not till I am tried; but I am afraid I should be a coward” (110). Margaret’s temptation will come, but until then, she is a witness to others’ temptations, failures, and triumphs.

Because of her family’s position, Margaret can freely move between the two classes of the industrial town: masters and workers. Prejudiced against “shoppy people . . . who made their fortunes in trade,” Margaret is prone to favor the mill-hands over the masters because she views them as “people without pretence” (23). What Margaret must come to realize is that pretense not only exists in every station but also in her own presuppositions. In her first encounter with Mr. Thornton, she automatically assumes “some kind of rule over him at once,” deeming him her social and intellectual inferior on the basis of his position (60). She makes a similar assumption about the Higginses. Meeting father and daughter while on a walk, she asks for their name and address, intending to play the Lady Bountiful. When asked why she wants this information, Margaret is abashed, realizing the “impertinence” of “offering the

visit without, having any reason to give for her wish to make it, beyond a kindly interest in a stranger" (70). Her pretense of beneficence is just as offensive to the Higginses as the manners of tradesmen are to her.

By acknowledging her presumption and adopting a forthright manner, Margaret develops a special relationship with the Higginses. Drawn to their acceptance of their hard lot in life, Margaret learns some of the many facets of bravery and cowardice. Though dying, Bessy Higgins looks after her father and sister, finding comfort in the Scriptures. Her acceptance of her fate and even outright "longing to get away to the land o' Beulah" (85) disturb Margaret, who is unsure how to respond to Bessy's desire for death. Margaret resorts to urging Bessy not to "be impatient with your life, whatever it is – or may have been. Remember who gave it you, and made it what it is!" (86). While her words are applicable to Bessy, they will be even more applicative to Margaret herself as the novel progresses.

Fascinated by her new friends and their way of life, Margaret comes to recognize that though their situations are different, their temptations are the same. A neighbor of the Higginses, Boucher is a Milton mill-hand. With a wife and eight children, Boucher is consumed by his obligations to his family. His devotion to his family does not give him resolution, however. Described as "a poor good-for-nought," Boucher is weak and malleable and aimlessly follows the directions of stronger minds. A part of the Union because of convenience rather than conviction, Boucher strikes with the other workers, but as the strike continues for week after week, he panics. Margaret witnesses a tense interchange between Boucher and Higgins, in which Boucher desperately pleads for his starving family. Bessy Higgins acknowledges that Boucher's plight is due

in part to being “weak” and unwise, but she speaks for Gaskell and readers when she confesses that she cannot help but feel sorry for him and wishes the Union would let him alone. Crazed by desperation, Boucher becomes a ringleader of the mob that storms Marlborough Mills and, when the ensuing violence breaks the strike, is condemned as a coward by Nicholas Higgins: he “would na suffer in silence, and hou’d out, brave and firm” (214). After days in hiding, weeks without work, with no friend to turn to, and no future to hope for, Boucher commits suicide, leaving his wife a widow and his children orphans. Gaskell urges utmost understanding and sympathy for Boucher’s plight, but she is unflinching in the depiction of the calamities facing those with little or no courage. Mr. Hale may be just as tender and at times as aimless as Boucher, he at least has an inner strength, which motives him and gives him hope even in dire circumstances.

Margaret’s sympathy for the workers combined with her propensity to speak her mind leads her frequently to engage in debates with Mr. Thornton, master of Marlborough Mills and one of the most respected masters in Milton. Though she admires the will power that enabled him to restore his family’s fortune, she resents his “hardness,” viewing it as an avoidance of “duty” (83). Her true view of Mr. Thornton is revealed during the strike. Having gone to the Thorntons’s home on an errand, Margaret is there when the workers besiege the house. Mr. Thornton urges her to have “courage,” for soldiers will soon arrive to disperse the mob, but Margaret greets this news with horror and passionately commands him to “go down this instant, if you are not a coward. Go down and face them like a man. . . . If you have any courage or noble quality in you, go out and speak to them, man to man” (164). Immediately after he accepts her

challenge, Margaret is struck by doubts of the wisdom of her passionate entreaty, and when she sees members of the crowd arming themselves with clogs, she runs to shield Thornton. This incident makes both Margaret and Thornton evaluate their responses to threats.

Though her rash bravery makes her the talk of Milton and precipitates Thornton's unwanted declaration of love, Margaret cannot but approve of her actions:

It was not fair . . . that he should stand there—sheltered, awaiting the soldiers, who might catch those poor maddened creatures as in a trap—without an effort on his part, to bring them to reason. And it was worse than unfair for them to set on him as they threatened. I would do it again, let who will say what they like of me . . . I will walk pure before God! (176)

However, Margaret regrets the uncomfortable consequences that are frequently attendant on such spectacular shows of courage, when her actions are misunderstood as a tacit affirmation of her affection for John Thornton. Ironically, though she will not admit it to herself, Margaret was motivated by her attraction to the stern mill-owner.

The strike incident also affects Mr. Thornton and does more than just encourage his romantic hopes. Even after being rudely refused by Margaret, Thornton will acknowledge that she spoke "truth" when she berated him (180), and though he has lived with the courage to work hard and maintain his principles, his position demands more. He comes to recognize that firmness can be just as much evidence of intractability as it is of bravery.

Both Margaret and Thornton have moments of rash bravery, but these moments are always dictated by the deep convictions of their hearts. The fates of other characters reveal that rash bravery performed without solid principle at its

heart can be just as harmful as cowardice. Frederick Hale was the pride and joy of his family when he went off to join the Navy, but he led a mutiny against the imperious Captain Reid, a decision that exiles him from his family and country. Mrs. Hale tells Margaret that “it was not for himself, or his own injuries, he rebelled” but for the sake of his fellow sailors, most of whom “stuck by Frederick;” she professes that she is “prouder of Frederick standing up against injustice, than if he had been simply a good officer” (103). Margaret affirms this profession, stating that “loyalty and obedience to wisdom and justice are fine; but it is still finer to defy arbitrary power, unjustly and cruelly used – not on behalf of ourselves, but on behalf of others more helpless” (103).

For the most part critics have accepted this immediate judgment of Margaret’s as Gaskell’s own. But a closer examination of the surrounding text and future events reveals a more complicated picture. As Margaret is told for the first time “poor Frederick’s” sad story, Mrs. Hale reveals enlightening circumstances. She tells “how [Frederick] from the very first . . . disliked Captain Reid,” having sailed with him before he was appointed captain (101). Frederick’s promise to “bear with proper patience everything that one officer and gentleman can take from another” foreboded his future rebellion, which was largely fueled by impetuosity and passion. Mrs. Hale seems unaware of the irony of her declaration that he was the “sweetest-tempered boy, [except] when he was vexed” (101), and she and Margaret cannot read between the lines of Frederick’s letter which, though “a statement of Captain Reid’s imperiousness in trifles, [was] very much exaggerated by the narrator, who had written while fresh and warm from the scene of altercation” (102). Frederick’s passion, though

frequently directed to worthy causes, controls him and harms not only his self but also his family.

Though it separated him from his family, Frederick's impetuosity also temporarily reunites them. Secretly returning to England to be at his mother's deathbed, Frederick is an immeasurable comfort to his family. This reunion allows Margaret a better understanding of her brother's character. She notices "the latent passion" in his mood swings, and, while she "fear[s] the violence of the impulsive nature thus occasionally betrayed, . . . there was nothing in it to make her distrust, or recoil in the least" (228). Seeking to comfort his sister, Frederick tells her to "be brave enough to hope" and discourages her contemplation, confessing that "thinking has, many a time, made me sad, darling; but doing never did in all my life. . . . Do something, my sister, do good if you can; but, at any rate, do something" (230). When Margaret questions her brother's precept by asking if it excludes mischief, Frederick unmitigatedly denies this delimitation, saying that he prefers to exclude "the remorse afterwards" (230). "Blot your misdeeds out (if you are particularly conscientious), by a good deed, as soon as you can," he urges (230). If uneasy with the deeper implications of Frederick's "theory," Margaret acknowledges that, at least at home, it leads to a "continual production of kindness" on his part (230).

However, Gaskell does not allow Frederick's theory to stand untested. After her mother dies, Margaret becomes "a strong angel of comfort;" for Frederick's "theories were of no use to him" and he retreats to his room to cry "violently" (230). With both her father and brother overcome by grief, Margaret alone is "fit to give directions of any kind" for the funeral arrangements (232).

Due to the precariousness of Frederick's situation, there is a price on his head, both Margaret and Mr. Hale urge him to leave before the funeral. The injustice of his situation causes both Frederick and his family to seek, perhaps rashly, for ways to clear his name. Hoping to obtain legal counsel from a family friend, Frederick decides to go to London to consult with Henry Lennox instead of immediately departing from Liverpool for Spain. This delay in England leads to Margaret's own personal crisis with bravery.

Because of the risk of Frederick's capture, Margaret accompanies Frederick to the Outwood station, which is not as busy as the main station, to ensure that he gets off safely. Frederick's train departs at "ten minutes past six; [when it is] very nearly dark," and Frederick wonders at the wisdom of Margaret being out that late, but she professes that she is "getting very brave and very hard" and "was out last week much later" (240). Arriving at the station twenty minutes early due to a misprint in the Railway Guide, the siblings walk in a neighboring field to pass the time only unexpectedly to see Mr. Thornton. Misfortune continues to meet the Hales, for Leonards, a former enemy of Frederick's, is at the station when they return. In the skirmish that results from his attempt to seize Frederick, Leonards is knocked off the low platform. Though Gaskell is unclear to what extent the injuries he received are the cause, Leonards's death a few days later is linked to a "remarkably handsome" lady, who is tentatively identified as Miss Margaret Hale, and the unknown man she was with. When questioned by the police-inspector, Margaret denies being at the station because she has not heard from Frederick and she fears that an admission might further endanger him. Slightly suspicious because of Margaret's strange behavior but undesirous of offending a lady who is probably

telling the truth, Inspector Watson consults the case's magistrate, who happens to be no other than Mr. Thornton. Having seen Margaret with Frederick, Thornton knows instantly that she is lying and attributes her deception to a hidden love affair. However, his love for her and respect for her father causes him to protect her, and he dismisses the case on insufficient evidence. When she learns that Mr. Thornton knows of her falsehood, Margaret is distressed, but it is only when the receipt of Frederick's letter reveals he was out of the country at the time of her questioning that Margaret comes to identify sin as an act of cowardice:

if she had but dared to *bravely* tell the truth as regarded herself, defying them to find out what she refused to tell concerning another, how light of heart she would now have felt! Not humbled before God, as having failed in trust towards Him; not degraded and abased in Mr. Thornton's sight. (261, emphasis added)

Robin Colby argues that "Gaskell clearly intends for the reader to sympathize with Margaret; after all, she does lie to protect a family member, not to protect herself" (55), and it is important to note that this lie is what will eventually bring the heroine and hero together. I would argue, however, that textual clues show that, far from condoning Margaret's choice, Gaskell condemns it and it is this condemnation which most fully illustrates her conception of the duty of an individual, woman or man, to society.

When Margaret finally confesses her sin to her godfather, Mr. Bell excuses her falsehood, deeming it "necessary" considering the circumstances, and instead focuses on the seeming impropriety of Margaret's being alone with a man that late in the evening (360). Margaret brusquely dismisses that concern, saying that "what other people may think of the rightness or wrongness" of her actions "is nothing in comparison to . . . [the] innate conviction that . . . [the lie]

was wrong" (361). Mr. Bell's joking response to Margaret's regret undercuts his role as spiritual mentor and reveals his own deficiencies of character.

I always keep my conscience as tight shut up as a jack-in-a-box, for when it jumps into existence it surprises me by its size. So I coax it down again as the fisherman coaxed the genie. "Wonderful," says I, "to think that you have been concealed so long, and in so small a compass, that I really did not know of your existence. Pray, sir, instead of growing larger and larger every instant, and bewildering me with your misty outlines, would you once more compress yourself into your former dimensions?" And when I've got him down, don't I clap the seal on the vase, and take good care how I open it again. (361)

Though he cannot understand, Mr. Bell recognizes that Margaret values the dictates of her conscience over societal ethics. With his own desire for pleasure and comfort, Mr. Bell is happy to shut his conscience up in the box of proper conduct established by society. Desiring nothing more than to be undisturbed, Mr. Bell cloisters himself at Oxford where he can engage passively with life. He relishes the zest and excitement of others' struggles and admires their courage and fortitude, but never does he seek to engage with troubles himself. His death, brought on by his gout, is befitting his self-indulgence.

Gaskell further criticizes this mindset in her portrayal of Margaret's extended family. Mrs. Shaw, Edith, and Captain Lennox are consummate pictures of London butterflies, neither toiling nor spinning. From the first, readers are struck with the ludicrousness of their worries. Mrs. Shaw laments not marrying for love, but she is quite happy with the easy position in life that it gave her, and she indulges in worrying about her health when anything unpleasant or inconvenient arises. Edith's letters to Margaret in Milton are rays of sunshine to the gloom and dark reality of Milton, filled with the trivialities of parties, baby clothes, and travelling, the extent of Edith's worries. After the

sorrow of losing her parents and the pain of acknowledging she has lost Mr. Thornton's good opinion, Margaret is at first tempted by the ease of a life lived without interactions that might provoke attacks of conscience. But eventually, she is struck with how empty and frivolous their lives are:

Every talent, every feeling, every acquirement; nay, even every tendency towards virtue, was used up as materials for fireworks; the hidden, sacred fire, exhausted itself in sparkle and crackle. They talked about art in a merely sensuous way, dwelling on outside effects, instead of allowing themselves to learn what it has to teach. They lashed themselves up into an enthusiasm about high subjects in company, and never thought about them when they were alone; they squandered their capabilities of appreciation into a mere flow of appropriate words. (369)

Margaret comes to recognize that Mr. Bell's and her family's avoidance of personal hardship and contact with those who might remind them of suffering is of itself an act of cowardice. Eschewing the possibility of temptations is equivalent to performing cowardly.

While Margaret grows in her understanding of duty and how to perform it in London, Mr. Thornton faces his own temptation in Milton. The strike combined with a bad market puts him in financial difficulties, and the failure of a large American firm pushes him to the edge of bankruptcy. In the face of sure failure, he is "sorely tempted" by the chance to invest in a speculation, even though his father was ruined in such a speculation and such a gamble is strictly against his own principles (383). "Full of risk," the speculation "if successful, . . . [will place him] high above the water-mark, so that no one need ever know the strait" (383) he is in, but if it fails "honest men" will be "ruined" by his desperation (384). His principles triumph over "[his] own paltry aggrandisement," but he entreats his mother to speak "brave, noble and trustful words" to strengthen his resolution (384). He will strive to "be always the same

John Thornton in whatever circumstances; endeavouring to do right, and making great blunders; and then trying to be brave in setting afresh," but he acknowledges that "it is hard" to keep a strong heart in the face of these disappointments (384). Thornton meets the end of his business with dignity and respect and greets "with profound humility" the success of his brother-in-law's speculation. Because of his reputation and honor, Thornton is given the opportunity of a new partnership with a man "wholly uneducated as regarded any other responsibility than that of getting money, and brutalised as to his pleasures and his pains" (386). But Thornton refuses to join in a venture that will not allow him to follow the dictates of his conscience, preferring instead "to be only a manager, where he could have a certain degree of power" (386).

Having grown in his understanding of duty from his interaction with Margaret, Thornton recognizes that there is no going back to his previously held assumptions. Gaskell rewards this integrity when she makes Margaret his landlady and brings them together in their zeal to keep Marlborough Mills open. The union of Thornton and Margaret is not meant to be a resolution to conflict, but rather an acknowledgement that the hardships and temptations facing each and every individual are best met with humility and bravery that stem from love. Valerie Wainwright notes that *North and South* is "informed by the belief that the personal developments of individuals are necessarily interdependent, that the clash of ideas is healthy, and that the differing and highly distinctive lives and personalities of members of society complete each other" (164).

In a letter to her friend and frequent correspondent Eliza Fox, Elizabeth Gaskell wrote, "I long (weakly) for the old times where right and wrong did not

seem such complicated matters; and I am sometimes coward enough to wish that we were back in the darkness where obedience was the only seen duty of women” (*L* 109). But Gaskell was enough of a realist to recognize that there was no going back, nor did she truly want to. The growing necessity of following one’s conscience in the midst of opposition and of doing the right thing in spite of conflicting desires and preferences and the ability to rightly appraise one’s own action demanded more of both women and men than had been required before. The conundrum of acting rightly in a rapidly changing world, Gaskell argues, cannot be solved by establishing new set of social mores, for they will no sooner be established than outgrown. Rather the intelligent integrity and humility of individuals, who will perform bravely, following their conscience in the midst of hardship and challenges, must be the basis for successful performances.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Acts of Silence: Passive Performance in *Wives and Daughters*

*Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell's last novel, is universally acclaimed as her masterpiece. Combining the very best of her talents for depicting domestic realism and genuine feeling, *Wives and Daughters* provoked the admiration of Gaskell's contemporaries, an appreciation that was heightened by her untimely death which prevented her from finishing the last chapters. Henry James praised it as "one of the very best novels of its kind" (CH 463), while George Sand is reputed to have said that the novel "could rivet the attention of the most *blasé* man in the world" (qtd. in Ganz 161). Hailed as her return from 'purpose-driven' or 'social problem' novels to the humorous but apt depiction of the small and often trivial concerns of country folk in days gone by, Gaskell's "every-day story" of a country doctor's daughter's maturation from childhood to young womanhood in the small town of Hollingford seems an idyllic relapse from the frenzied spectrum of issues broached in *North and South*.

However, this estimation of the novel misses its cloaked but wide scope. As one critic has observed, "Gaskell's idylls . . . [are] highly complex, multivalent narratives that address fundamental social conflicts and . . . reveal a deep awareness of historical change" (Hughes 91). Robin Colby would argue that, at the heart of her story, Gaskell is critiquing gender roles and "the lack of real opportunities for women to pursue a meaningful vocation" (89). In addition, Shirley Foster notes that the novel "covers a much wider social spectrum than others of Gaskell's work" (167). Perhaps one of the most interesting subtexts of

the novel, however, is the attention given to scientific advances, a subject not too surprising considering that Gaskell was a distant cousin of Charles Darwin. According to Pam Morris, Gaskell uses evolutionary theory as a metaphor to construct national identity and justify imperialist advances (xxv). Maintaining a thematic quietness, *Wives and Daughters* so skillfully interweaves the themes of scientific advances, women's vocations, and class interactions that they blend into the framework of the plot.

While these foci have dominated the realm of criticism on *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell's use of silence in the text has largely been ignored. Focusing on the psychological portraits in *Wives and Daughters*, Margaret Ganz notes that what Gaskell's characters "feel and say invariably provides us with far greater insights into human nature than what they do" (164), but she fails to note the importance of their taciturnity. While Patsy Stoneman has commented on Gaskell's use of silence, she sees it as a negative characteristic, arguing that it is primarily imposed on women by men and "promotes not only dutiful self-suppression but deviousness and evasion" (180). For Stoneman, silence is tantamount to lying because it is a "refusal of emotion" (180). The most extensive discussion of silence in *Wives and Daughters* occurs in Terence Wright's study of Gaskell's oeuvre. Wright briefly examines unspoken communication in his discussion of secrecy in *Wives and Daughters*, but like Stoneman, he sees primarily its negative connotation. These evaluations of silence are certainly applicable in select cases, but I would argue that there are reasons to view silence as more than just evidence of Gaskell's critique on societal constructs but rather as an evidence of her progression in understanding and reconciling the self and performance. First, silence affects and is practiced by both the women and men

of the novel, and while it may at times be imposed on them by others, more frequently characters employ it as a form of passive action. Second, characters use silence as a space in which not only to evaluate the acts of others but also to weigh their own performances. Finally, Gaskell's implicit critique of the society can be discovered in an analysis of judicial and injudicial uses of silence by her characters. Indeed in *Wives and Daughters*, silence seems to be not only a performative act but metaphor for the quandary of performance itself, which can positively enhance self-knowledge or negatively numb the individual to personal responsibility. Only by closely analyzing the moments of taciturnity in the text can readers tease out Gaskell's pertinent yet paradoxical message.

One of the main functions of silence in this text is to reveal both the failures of speech and character. With the character of Mrs. Gibson formerly Kirkpatrick née Clare, Gaskell condemns artificial language:

her words were always like ready-made clothes, and never fitted individual thoughts. Anybody might have used them, and, with a change of proper names, they might have served to describe any [thing]. . . She repeatedly used the same language in speaking . . . , till Molly knew the sentences and their sequence even to irritation. (249)

A master of manipulating speech to her advantage, Mrs. Gibson convinces others in her "soft and plaintive" (12) voice of the sincerity of her "flow of easy talk" (15), but it is her omissions of certain facts that Gaskell uses to frequently condemn. When Molly first meets her at the outing at the Towers, she is impressed with her kindness, but after Mrs. Kirkpatrick devours the lunch sent to Molly and silently allows Lady Cuxhaven to think that Molly consumed it, Molly as well as readers come to distrust her sincerity. Later as she prattles along to Molly as she tidies up for the evening, Mrs. Kirkpatrick has some

revealing slips in her conversation. Defending herself to the young Molly after forgetting to wake her, Mrs. Kirkpatrick displays her true character: "I really have been as busy as can be with those tiresome—those good ladies, I mean, from Hollingford—and one can't think of everything" (15). This slippage, which betrays her true feelings, combined with her thoughtlessness alerts reader that the genuineness of her professions of goodwill and generosity are suspect.

Patsy Stoneman argues that Mrs. Gibson has been forced into her duplicitous performance by "masculine silence" and the limitations that society placed on women vocationally. While it is undoubtedly true that she is critiquing the limitations placed on women by society and that she does make Mrs. Gibson out to be a product of that society, Gaskell is straightforward in her condemnation of Mrs. Gibson for her laziness, vanity, and selfishness. After all, the economic relief and social advancement of becoming Mrs. Gibson in no way changes her character. Indeed, the relative ease of her new position as the well-off doctor's wife only allows her to be more creative with her verbal manipulation. Margaret Ganz claims that "there is an absence of a sustained moral judgment" of Mrs. Gibson on Gaskell's part (162). I would counter this claim, for while Gaskell does not kill her off or heap catastrophe on her head, she presents her as unsatisfied with her lot in life and constantly striving to have what she cannot.

Ironically, Mrs. Gibson's character flaws, which lead her in a ruthless if veiled pursuit of pleasure, will only allow for a very slight kind of transient happiness. She can expect no better of others than she knows herself to be; therefore she cannot but help to grow jealous when Lady Harriet expresses a liking for Molly. This jealousy is displayed when she conveniently arranges

circumstances to keep Molly out of Lady Harriet's way, but it is receives readers' full condemnation when "Mrs. Gibson did not give Molly the message of remembrance that Lady Harriet had left for her" (223). Mrs. Gibson's actions reveal the inescapability of performance, for whether one actively engages with the rote script of society or avoids speaking altogether there will always be a corresponding affect on the other players that will influence their performance.

Most tragic of all is the fact that Mrs. Gibson is constantly trying to live up to her rhetorical creation of reality. When she is invited to lunch at the Towers, she has a rather unpleasant time as she is first ignored then ordered around by the Lady Cumnor. Gaskell concludes her description of the visit by saying, "such were the facts, but rose-colour was the medium through which they were seen by Mrs Gibson's household listeners" (225). Her creative retelling of the visit is less dependent on invention than omission. Strictly speaking, Mrs. Gibson adds no fictional occurrences to the visit, but by deleting the particular words of Lord Cumnor's "kind and civil speech" and Lady Cumnor's "questions," she can convince her listeners of the veracity of her interpretation (225). This selective withholding of facts is why she struggles with and resents her own daughter Cynthia, who recognizes her mother's disregard of the whole truth and calls attention to it with gentle mockery.

Ironically, Mrs. Gibson's duplicity is revealed because of her propensity to always be talking. Though her garrulity is evident at the very beginning of his relationship with her, Mr. Gibson dismisses it as inconsequential, for, after all, "it's hardly to be expected that our thoughts would run in the same groove all at once. Nor should I like it . . . , [for] it would be very flat and stagnant to have only an echo of one's own opinions from one's wife" (88). This dismissal of Mrs.

Gibson's character flaw will come back to haunt Mr. Gibson. When Cynthia gets engaged to Roger Hamley, she enjoins both Molly and her mother, who she "especially beg[s]," to keep it a secret (304). However, Mrs. Gibson cannot keep this trust and tells Mr. Gibson betraying not only Cynthia, but also her prior knowledge of Osborne's ill health. When asked by Mr. Gibson on how she came by this knowledge she begins to cry, but "the sight of the door into the storeroom gave her courage" and she boldly states that Mr. Gibson himself revealed the secret by speaking loudly, for she could not help overhearing him discussing it with Dr. Nicholls when she had to visit the storeroom (309). Unsatisfied, with her half answers, Mr. Gibson presses her until she admits not only to listening in but to later researching Osborne's suspected condition. Her confession is a masterful depiction of silence as an act of performance. Mr. Gibson has to draw a confession from her point by point, for she will only say what is absolutely necessary to answer his questions. This interchange opens Mr. Gibson's eyes to his wife's utter lack of moral scruples. Ironically, Mrs. Gibson attributes their disagreement not to her silence on certain issues but her virtue of "unfortunate frankness," which prevents her from keeping a secret from those she loved (312).

Gaskell's portrait of Mrs. Gibson is one of her best. While there is an indulgence of her folly, there is also a strong disapproval of her character flaws. Indeed, the true evil of her pretty words and obliging confession with its loud omission of key details impresses itself upon the readers as they see the extent of its damage. Nowhere is this damage seen so clearly as with Cynthia herself, who has no relationship with her mother and whose life can be traced back to this want of character.

But Mrs. Gibson is a mere representative of society at large in her tendency to discuss selectively certain events. Hollingford and Ashcombe natives are the best illustrators of the destructiveness of ill words and damaging quietude when they stir up scandal against Molly. Molly's interaction with Mr. Preston, Lord Cumnor's land agent, on Cynthia's behalf compromises her in the eyes of the small town. Though they profess they "wouldn't wish to do the girl an unkind turn," they cannot but malign her lack of propriety, and when nothing comes of the interlude with Mr. Preston, they view her as quite tainted to the extent that they snub her in the street (409). Ironically, it is not the fact that Molly has met "her sweetheart here and there and everywhere" that they object to, but to the fact that "she is talked about," for "women should mind what they're about, and never be talked of; and if a woman's talked of, the less her friends have to do with her till the talk has died away the better" (413). Of course, they themselves are the ones perpetuating the scandal with their own talk. Eventually their talk makes its way to Mr. Gibson's ear, whose reaction is much of what Gaskell would theoretically advocate herself: "I wish I'd the doctoring of these slanderous gossips. I'd make their tongues lie still for a while. My little girl! What harm has she done them all, that they should go and foul her fair name" (418). When he confronts Molly, she encourages him not to heed the rumors for "it is best and wisest to take no notice of these speeches" (421), for the scandal, though "it's like tooth-drawing, it will be over some time" (423). For all of the sanguine confidence found in this response, Molly is not immune to privately despising the presumption behind the rumors. When Mrs. Browning hints at a relationship between Molly and Mr. Preston, saying that "a little bird told" of

their involvement, Molly reflects that she “knew that little bird from her childhood, and had always hated it, and longed to wring its neck” (358).

In the end, Molly’s belief is proved right; the scandal does die down eventually with the help of Lady Harriet. Yet the interfering ladies of Hollingford will again threaten Molly’s happiness by speaking of what they should not. Just before she is to visit Hamley Hall, Molly overhears Mrs. Goodenough speculating over her designs on Roger’s affections. Ashamed by these conjectures, Molly treats Roger quite coolly, so as to discourage any thought on his part that she might be pursuing him. This alteration in Molly’s behavior causes Roger to despair of her love and, but for his straightforward willingness to confront her, would have ended their friendship and prevented their romance.

These instances of inappropriate communal utterances frequently distract from the implicit silence that surrounds scandal. For one thing, silence is the punishment for daring to break the boundaries erected by the community.

There came a time—not very distant from the evening at Mrs Dawes’—when Molly felt that people looked askance at her. Mrs Goodenough openly pulled her grand-daughter away, when the young girl stopped to speak to Molly in the street. (413)

While Molly is still invited into society, “there was a tact and under-hand protest against her” that shows itself in small slights and snubs (424). Never is Molly engaged in conversation with the purpose to discover the truth. Nor are Molly’s virtues of kindness and compassion dwelt on by the community. The Misses Brownings are quickly convinced of their young friend’s indiscretion, and their silence on what they know of Molly’s character is just as damaging to her reputation as the speculations on her perceived fall.

While Gaskell illustrates how speech can often conceal silence for both the community and individual, she also presents the destructive side that the silence of secrecy can have on relationships. At the heart of *Wives and Daughters* are secrets, kept by both men and women. The first secret that readers are aware of is that of Osborne Hamley. Osborne has secretly married against his parents' wishes a Frenchwoman, who is Roman Catholic and was a servant. Though he informs his brother of his secret, he is unwilling to follow Roger's advice to disclose his marriage. His steadfast adherence to his secret restrains his interaction with others, especially on his father. Already distant from his son due to personality differences, the Squire is hurt by Osborne's aloofness, and when he discovers Osborne's extensive debts have led him to borrow against his expectations, the Squire is outraged. Osborne's refusal to answer his father's demands for an explanation causes their relationship to deteriorate quickly and leaves them with nothing to say to each other. Though Roger will endeavor to bring them together, they both steadfastly adhere to the rightness of their own position and will not bend in their icy resolve to wait until the other yields. As a friend of the family and his medical advisor, Mr. Gibson urges Osborne to speak to the Squire:

Osborne, whatever scrapes you may have got into, I should advise your telling your father boldly out. I know him; and I know he'll be angry enough at first, but he'll come round, take my word for it; and, somehow or another, he'll find money to pay your debts and set you free, if it's that kind of difficulty; and if it's any other kind of entanglement, why still he's your best friend. It's this estrangement from your father that's telling on your health, I'll be bound. (262)

Mr. Gibson echoes this advice when he consults with Squire Hamley: "Speak out, but speak gently to Osborne, and do it at once. . . . If you speak gently to him, he'll take the advice as from a friend" (299). However, the reunion cannot come

about, for Osborne will maintain his secret till death. The physical toil of Osborne's alienation from his father shows serious consequences of secrecy, and Gaskell forcibly reminds her readers of the unhealthy side of silence.

These serious consequences are further confirmed by the outcome of the other big secret of the text. Cynthia Gibson engaged herself to Mr. Preston when she was sixteen, agreeing to marry him when she turned twenty-one. Though she seeks to extract herself from this agreement, Mr. Preston blackmails her with letters containing slighting remarks on her mother. Independent in part due to her upbringing, or lack thereof, Cynthia tells no one of this great secret. This secrecy affects her relationships, for "her real self was shrouded in mystery" (336), and it creates a "constant uneasiness about her which made her more cowardly than before" (337). Molly distinguishes between her own reticence and Cynthia's silence: "Cynthia withheld from her more than thoughts and feeling. . . ; she withheld facts" (365). Eventually, Molly discovers by accident Cynthia's secret relationship with Mr. Preston, when she happens upon one of their trysts. Molly's knowledge is necessary for the role she will play in extricating Cynthia from her predicament. Though her own standing in the community is called into question with her actions, the result of Molly's actions reveals the importance of open and honest communication. The examples of Osborne and Cynthia might tempt readers to think that silence and secrecy are equated solely with negative outcomes. But this would be a failure to look at the small "everyday" actions of the heroine and hero, which tell another story about silence.

Molly Gibson is at the center of *Wives and Daughters*, and it is her maturation from a young child into a strong, beautiful, and independent woman that concerns readers. At the heart of Molly's journey into womanhood is

learning when to speak and when to be silent. Though critics have made much of Molly's outspokenness, they have overlooked her silences, except as contrasts to, what they see as, as her eventual emancipation. However, Gaskell is not so rigid in her estimation of silence. More often than not Molly chooses silence as an active form of communication, indicating the depth of character capable of great feeling, passion, discretion, and principle.

During her visit to Hamley Hall, Molly engages in her first defiant act of silence. Roger Hamley returns home to tell his parent that his older brother, Osborne, has scraped by in his university examinations. Having enthroned Osborne as a romantic hero, Molly is "indignant" with, what she sees as, Roger's mean-spirit in telling his parents of his brother's failure (69). At dinner that evening, she resolves to demonstrate her displeasure. Roger, innocent of any malice, seeks to engage Molly in conversation to distract his parents from Osborne's situation, "but she would not" (70). When the squire orders Osborne's favorite Burgundy to be brought to the table, Molly performs in "mute opposition," refusing to take any wine by covering her glass with her hand even though she never took wine (71). This "quiet vehemence of action," though unjustified, reveals Molly's great heart and her firm sense of morals (70).

But silence for Molly is not always a conscious, willful performance. The news of her father's engagement overwhelms her.

She did not answer. She could not tell what words to use. She was afraid of saying anything, lest the passion of anger, dislike, indignation--whatever it was that was boiling up in her breast—should find vent in cries and screams, or worse, in raging words that could never be forgotten. It was as if the piece of solid ground on which she stood had broken from the shore, and she was drifting out to the infinite sea alone. (90)

Stemming from emotion, Molly's silence is mistaken by her father as "impassiveness," but, in fact, it is a protest (90). However, her father refuses to interpret accurately her muteness, leading Molly to bitterly accuse Mr. Gibson of backhandedness in arranging her visit to Hamley Hall. The bitterness in her response is not due just to her dissatisfaction with her father's decision to remarry, but to the fact that their bond, which previously had allowed them to rightly interpret each other's silence, has been broken. When Mrs. Gibson and Cynthia go to London to visit relatives, Molly confesses how happy she is to have Mr. Gibson to herself. They both recognize the unhappiness brought to both of them by Mrs. Gibson's quietly destructive and deceptive ways but know that "it was better for them both that they should not speak out more fully" (324). While they have recovered some semblance of their previous rapport, they will never be as close or as open with each other again.

As Molly's maturation progresses, so does the complexity of her quietness. After learning of Cynthia's secret relationship with Mr. Preston, Molly sits silently at breakfast "watching and wondering" at Cynthia's composure (387). While she sympathizes with her stepsister's plight, Molly rightly understands the gravity and impropriety of Cynthia's actions in engaging herself to two men at once. This instance of silence is not a sign of naivety or weakness, but discretion, a discretion that give Molly the ability to extricate Cynthia from Mr. Preston's clutches.

Molly's discretion not only gives her the strength and discernment to meet the challenge of disentangling Cynthia from her troubles, but also the capacity for empathy. When Osborne Hamley dies suddenly, Molly rushes to comfort Squire Hamley.

She did not speak, for she did not know what to say. She felt that he had no more hope from earthly skill, so what was the use of speaking of her father and the delay in his coming? After a moment's pause, standing by the old man's side, she slipped down to the floor, and sat at his feet. Possibly her presence might have some balm in it; but utter of words was as a vain thing. (450)

Molly recognizes that in this situation words are insufficient. Her taciturnity bespeaks the depth of her feeling and sympathy for the Squire.

But Molly's most potent experience of silence occurs during her conversations with Roger Hamley. When Roger discovers Molly weeping broken-heartedly after her father announces his engagement. Roger is unsure of how best to respond to Molly's rampant emotion but feels that he should help her. His willingness to give her space and time to recover from her distress speaks of his thoughtfulness. Instead of pressing for her confidence, he silently sees to her physical wants, fetching her some water in "an impromptu cup" he makes of a little green leaf (93). When she finally confesses that her distress arises from her father's plans to remarry, Roger resorts for a time to silence, for "his thoughts did not come readily to the surface in the shape of words; nor was he apt at giving comfort till he saw his way clear to the real source from which consolation must come" (93). The wisdom and efficacy of a few well-chosen words is illustrated in Molly's response to Roger's "severe brevity" (94). As Roger recognizes Molly's attempts to be strong, he reassures her of his sympathy:

I never can manage to express what I feel, somehow I always fall to philosophizing, but I am sorry for you. Yes, I am; it's beyond my power to help you, as far as altering facts goes, but I can feel for you in a way which it's best not to talk about, for it can do no good. Remember how sorry I am for you! I shall often be thinking of you, though I daresay it's best not to talk about it again. (95)

Roger's silent sympathy allows Molly to recognize the genuineness of his concern and makes her more receptive to his following exhortation, from which she gains the strength to accept her circumstances and the discernment to see things as they truly are.

While many critics have deplored Roger's exhortation to Molly as a male discourse on female subservience and sacrifice, they ignore the fact that Roger practices his own philosophy. The second son to parents who favor their firstborn, Roger endured many slights. "Clumsy and heavily built," Roger's feelings and intellect are dismissed by his mother:

When he caressed his mother, she used laughingly to allude to the fable of the lap-dog and the donkey; so thereafter he left off all personal demonstration of affection. It was a great question as to whether he was to follow his brother to college after he left Rugby. Mrs. Hamley thought it would be rather a throwing away of money, as he was so little likely to distinguish himself in intellectual pursuits; anything practical--such as a civil engineer--would be more the line of life for him. She thought that it would be too mortifying for him to go to the same college and university as his brother, who was sure to distinguish himself--and, to be repeatedly plucked, to come away wooden-spoon at last. (34-35)

In spite of his parents' disregard, Roger quietly demonstrates love and understanding to each member of his family and in their coming sorrows and difficulties is the bulwark of their hopes.

Urged on not only by Roger's "lecture" but also by his example, Molly employs silence to deal with her new stepmother, a step that justifies her emotions to readers. When Squire Hamley requests Molly's presence at Hamley Hall for his sick wife's sake, Mrs. Gibson refuses to let her go immediately. This act understandably angers the Squire and when Molly finally arrives to visit, she is aware of the Hamleys' dissatisfaction with Mrs. Gibson's petulant behavior. Though she objected to her stepmother's decision, "Molly resolutely kept silence,

beating her brains to think of some other subject of conversation” rather than engaging in a critique of her father’s wife (154). However, as time progresses, Molly begins to wonder

if this silence was right or wrong. With a girl's want of toleration, and want of experience to teach her the force of circumstances, and of temptation, she had often been on the point of telling her stepmother some forcible home truths. But possibly her father's example of silence, and often some piece of kindness on Mrs. Gibson's part (for after her way, and when in a good temper, she was very kind to Molly), made her hold her tongue. (293)

This quiet zeal to behave well and restrain her temper validates Molly’s assessment of her stepmother’s actions and indicates that she truly grasps uselessness of trying to change her character.

Perhaps the best indication of the power of silence is when it is combined with speech, and nowhere is this better seen than in Molly’s interactions with Lady Harriet. Meeting Lady Harriet for the first time at the wedding of her father and Mrs. Gibson, Molly does not know at first how to interact with a grand lady. Lady Harriet takes a liking to Molly, an inclination that increases to respect when Molly rebukes her. Promising to visit Molly while she stays with the Miss Brownings during her father’s wedding trip, Lady Harriet jokingly refers to those admirable ladies as “Pecksy and Flapsy,” professing a desire “to see the kind of *ménage* of such people” (129). Molly’s first response is silence, but then she musters up the courage “to speak out” against Lady Harriet’s attitude (129). Interspersing her rebuke with “moments” of quiet, she accuses Lady Harriet of viewing her “class of people . . . as if it was a kind of strange animal” and requests that she not visit the Brownings if she is going to continue to call them names (129). Lady Harriet attempts to defend herself by arguing that “after all, it is only a way of speaking” and that the ladies of Hollingford likely speak in

the same way about the poorer people, yet she cannot help but feel rebuked by Molly's "simple and truthful" reprimand (130). Molly's courage in speaking combined with the sincerity of her concern impresses Lady Harriet so much that when rumors start circulating about Molly and Mr. Preston she immediately discredits them and sets out to restore the reputation of her friend, a restoration that is not accomplished through talk but through the social performance of calling cards and errands.

*Wives and Daughters* is indeed a quiet novel, and nowhere is the latent ambiguity of Gaskell's art more clearly illustrated than with her use of language in her last novel. The complex and multivalent meanings not only of all the characters' words but also of their silences reveals Gaskell's recognition that performing rightly will oftentimes be in defiance of the expectations of the community, not because it is a grand and glorious act of rebellion but because it is the quiet resistance to the failures and viciousness of those who cannot apprehend the depth of feeling and true empathy that discretion brings. In Gaskell's hands, reticence is no longer a retreat from commentary and critique, but rather an implement that most deftly exposes the problems inherent in both private and public spheres.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion

This conclusion seems inappropriate because, if anything, this thesis raises more questions than it answers; indeed, it would be completely fair to argue that the unifying feature of this thesis is the work yet to be done. I am intensely conscious of the many gaps in this examination of Gaskell's work, and if the scope of my analysis might be considered too ambitious, it must be attributed to an ardent respect for an author who herself attempted formidable subjects. And so I will end not with definite claims or a conclusive summary but rather with suggestions and comments on where Gaskell criticism might go in the future.

To begin with gaps in my own study, I would argue that there are many layers of performances in Gaskell's work that need to be addressed more fully. Gaskell's letters reveal that she had contact with some of the most respected actors and actresses of her day and that she regularly corresponded with dramatists and dramatic critics. Scholarship that attempts to trace these theatrical influences on her ideas of societal roles and the difficulties facing individuals who are attempting to perform promises to be rewarding. With a more complete and thorough study of nineteenth-century performance theory, analyses of Gaskell's interaction with her culture will be broadened and the troubling ambiguities in her texts have the potential to be more clearly explained.

But perhaps most important work to be done is the performance of Gaskell herself as a novelist. The ending of *Cranford*, with the reconciliatory power of Peter Jenkyns's performative storytelling, suggests that Gaskell was

inherently aware of the paradoxical requirements of authorship, which necessitates both the participation in the performance as well as the distance of a spectator, and perhaps it is this awareness that complicates Gaskell's vision of the relationship between the community and the individual, a relationship that mirrors that of an audience with an actor.

While I look forward to the diverse avenues that future criticism will take to interpreting Gaskell, I sincerely hope that it will acknowledge the performativity inherent in her writing. For it is only with this acknowledgment that readers can recognize the quiet didacticism and strong moral purpose of Gaskell's works that invite spectators and readers to abandon the artificial separation of viewer and performer and embrace their participation in both the artificiality and authenticity of the play of life.

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