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The Issue of Centrality in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*

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

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

from incoherent rage to sane submission, with gradual atonement as the work's unifying structural principle.

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

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

principle of feminine decentralization, I believe there is a corresponding vision of societal subversiveness reflected in a pattern of recurrent disobedience. Just as women may represent themselves in circuitous, non-linear prose, so too can their attitude to authority become not the confrontational path of open revolt and revolutionary change, but instead that of persistent, quiet subversion.

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

However, the text itself does not always support such convenient binary oppositions. Almost all of the characters in *Cranford* contravene or set aside the code when it suits their purposes to do so. Both the Rector and Deborah alter their stance toward the social code that they so allegedly typify, showing that no one, either in Cranford's past, such as the Rector, or in the present, such as Deborah or Matty, fully obey the laws that they construct to govern their behavior. Disobedience, Gaskell implies, is inevitable and even desirable. Deborah despises Captain Brown, a new resident of Cranford, for his deluded preference of Dickens over her father's favorite, Dr. Johnson; a taste which Deborah valiantly and unquestioningly carries on. The Captain persists in his error openly, thereby breaching the code of silent submission to the voice of authority, causing Deborah to shun the entire Brown family publicly. But the narrator, Mary Smith, comes to learn that Deborah, in spite of her public fury with the Browns, actually renders them numerous secret acts of kindness to ease their poverty. After the deaths of the Captain and his eldest daughter, Mary, the draconian Deborah melts quickly toward full, caring humanity. She actively supports the remaining daughter, Jessie, in her sorrow and eventually arranges Jessie's marriage to Major Gordon, an unlikely

thing for the previously inflexible Deborah to do, since she seemed to despise both marriage and men who were not her father, and certainly despised the weak, vain Jessie Brown. Deborah obviously retains her domineering personality, but now seems capable of acts of great kindness and acute perception as well. These traits hint at a complex, humane character underneath backward-looking rules and unreasonable strictures, a character quite willing to break her own rules in the interest of serving others in need.

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

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

In both the characters normally associated with blind obedience to the social code and the one usually placed in opposition to it, we see similar movements from an obedience to inherited codes of behavior to a forgiving accommodation of present circumstances. None of these characters can be firmly polarized; they continue to uphold their laws and then to break them when shown the harmfulness of such rigidity,

revealing not a consistent movement within the text toward laxity, but a constant cycle of subterfuge and rebuilding. These characters merely go around the social code when they must, revealing the subversive nature of the feminine viewpoint toward authority in this text: claims of human interaction are privileged over the usefulness of a social system which nevertheless remains intact.

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

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

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

This subversive stance of seeking the established opinion and then happily contravening it does not differ radically from the earlier actions of Deborah, Matty and the Rector; it merely echoes them in a more general fashion. The code remains strong here, as it did in Deborah's day, but so too does the disobedience seem as deliberate and justified as hers was.

In the case of Signor Brunoni, the community encounters an apparent foreigner and practitioner of magic, who threatens the genteel world of Cranford with his mystery and arcana. Despite the new rector's presence at the magic show, and the cynical Miss Pole's fervent denunciations of magic as little more than sleight-of-hand, the threat posed by such exoticism sends all of Cranford into an unthinking state of panic centred on the fear of invasion and robbery. When Mary Smith, Lady Glenmire and the highly suspicious Miss Pole hear of a man (who is in reality Signor Brunoni) lying destitute and seriously ill at a farmhouse, Miss Pole's cynical suspicion reaches new bounds, imagining him as another robber or worse. However, this unreasoning attitude evaporates when confronted with the actual human pathos of the situation:

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

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

The last of these changes occurs with the return and reintegration of Matty's brother Peter after his long exile. This fairy-tale return of the long-lost brother concludes the narrative with a moment of communal forgiveness that echoes many of the previous ones. Peter, like Signor Brunoni, is a retired military man with connections to the mysterious Orient; he repeats the outrageously assertive openness of Captain Brown, the strange table-manners of Mr. Holbrook and Mr. Hoggins, and was, in the Rector's day, exiled for a breach of conduct strangely reminiscent of Lady Glenmire's. The aristocratic Scotswoman crossed class boundaries by exchanging her high station for a lower one. Peter,

to rebel against his father's excessive authority and pomposity, publicly donned women's clothes and lampooned his sister Deborah, thereby crossing the gender boundary and humiliating both the father and the obedient daughter as well. Both Peter and Lady Glenmire obtain forgiveness for their cross-dressing (or cross-classing) from the Cranford community. But Peter, once the greatest interloper against the code of gentility and the only one exiled for breaking it, finally upholds the fiction of Mrs. Jamieson's social precedence in order to coax her into forgiving Lady Glenmire. Thus does Gaskell show that even those who do not believe in the strict code of gentility will use it for the humane end of kindness. In welcoming him back, the women repeat the earlier acts of forgiveness, repealing Peter's long sentence of exile. Thus rather than unifying or finishing off the previous acts of the book, Peter's return and social unity it elicits represent merely the latest in a long line of such moments of concerted forgiveness and good feeling.

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

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