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Sex and the Provincial Girl: Desire and Time in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* and *North and South*

By Mary A. Armstrong, Lafayette College

I. Introduction

<1>For novelist Elizabeth Gaskell, fluctuating material, social and psychic nineteenth-century landscapes are always at least partially managed by considering the provinces vis-à-vis evolving urban spaces. It is well established that her fiction often focuses on social and ideological tensions between past and future, conflicts around traditionalism and progress, shifts in kinds of wealth and kinds of poverty, and changing understandings of work and class. Avoiding what Raymond Williams has famously termed “the simple backward look and the simple progressive thrust,” Gaskell’s novels reach for complex and unstable moments of interface between “the country and the city” (Williams, *Country*, 37).

<2>So why return once again to what Alan Shelston has perhaps justifiably called “the old industrial-provincial polarity that has dogged Gaskell criticism” (Shelston 3)? Because, although the framework of the country and the city has dominated Gaskell studies since the mid-twentieth century, important gender-related work remains. Specifically, while it is widely recognized that Gaskell’s fiction regularly grapples with female sexual purity, vulnerability, victimization, betrayal, and/or rescue, the field of Gaskell studies has not attended to the dynamics of female heterosexual *desire*, or to the ways female desire intersects with Gaskell’s deployments of narrative time.¹ Despite the significance that “the provinces” have had in thinking about Gaskell’s work, provincial female desires—that is, the present and absent longings of provincial women, their somatic and psychic (un)availabilities, their yearnings and/or refusals to respond to the yearnings of others—remain largely unexamined relative to the vital chronotopes of the country and the city.² This absence has persisted despite the fact that, as McDonagh notes, the provincial itself is a category “closely and specifically aligned to women’s writing” and thus a genre that frequently engages with gender issues (McDonagh 401). This essay aims to address these omissions, to think originally and carefully about if and how female desire maps onto the provincial woman in Elizabeth Gaskell’s fiction, and to open a new line of inquiry relative to “the country and the city.”

<3>The texts I will examine are *Cranford* (published in serial form in *Household Words* 1851-1853) and the chronologically close but structurally dissimilar *North and South* (published briskly in *Household Words* between late 1854 and early 1855). These novels are rarely paired together, and no wonder: traditional ideas about the provincial novel (*Cranford*) and the industrial novel (*North and South*) have all but banished them to different kingdoms within the Gaskell oeuvre. However, when considered together these novels offer differently calibrated but illuminating lenses through which to explore Gaskell’s deployment of the literary provincial relative to female sexuality. *Cranford*, famous for its “Amazons” and absent romance plot,

exploits the processes of personal memory and nostalgia—crucial elements of the provincial form—to enable and structure the presence of female desire. An additional layer of “social nostalgia” in the form of affect-based, pre-industrial class relations further enables the provinces to express desire. The more traditionally structured *North and South* uses a linear realist narrative to splice together a romance plot with a “classic” industrial narrative. Yet while that novel sends familiar signals regarding both romance and the sexualized dangers of urban spaces, it struggles to write desire upon the necessarily innocent but stubbornly resistant provincial female body. Milton-Northern proscribes rather than generates the desires of the provincial woman. Together, *Cranford* and *North and South* suggest that female desire emerges more forcefully within *Cranford*’s provincial narrative spaces. The sexualized streets of Milton-Northern, meanwhile, stand largely empty of female desire.

II. Feeling in Reverse: Nostalgia and Desire(s) in *Cranford*

<4>Emerging from the form crafted by Mary Russell Mitford in *Our Village* (1823), where time stands still within the boundaries of provincial life, *Cranford* is now recognized as engaging with new ground as it places the provinces “in dialectical response to, rather than denial of, the crisis of historical change” (Duncan 330).³ Although it offers time as a non-variable (time has no effect in *Cranford*, and nothing alters), modernization is a driving force behind the narrative. *Cranford*’s cheerful duplicity around the effects of industrialization anchors its “open secret” approach: concealment in *Cranford* is a form of representation, and the novel winkingly maintains certain fictions while producing evidence to the contrary (Miller).⁴ This narrative shell game is insightfully described by Deirdre d’Albertis’ as Gaskell’s “poetics of narrative dissimulation” (d’Albertis 2). D’Albertis argues that this approach characterizes many of Gaskell’s works, supporting the paradoxes that often characterize her fiction, particularly her affinity for conforming to social boundaries while actively testing their limits. Using d’Albertis’ line of thinking, I want to argue that Gaskell’s deft deployment of the provincial in *Cranford* to simultaneously repudiate and exemplify historical change goes beyond an engagement with modernization. Gaskell’s strategy of comic dissimulation also establishes middle-class provincial women as desiring subjects, even as female middle class desires surface within a framework of denial—much as the town dynamically responds to social change even as the narrative protests it is unaffected by time.

<5>It would be difficult to find a nineteenth-century novel that begins with a more stylized refusal of the romance plot. In its celebrated opening, the stage is painstakingly set not only for the absence of heterosexual desire but for the impossibility of its presence. Like a strangely toxic planet, the town of Cranford seems literally unable to sustain (middle class) male life:

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 at Cranford. What could they do if they were there? (5).⁵

Like its (inaccurate but oft-repeated) dismissals of “change,” *Cranford* elaborately situates middle class (“above a certain rent”) women of Cranford as cut off from men and disinterested in them. No image could be more effectual than the Amazon, a mighty figure who raises a laugh

when juxtaposed with the timid ladies of Cranford while also efficiently conveying the impossibility of relationships with men.

<6>Given this framework, it is not surprising that there is a general concurrence that the novel is not marked by the longings of middle class women, the precise group through which the romance plot of any Victorian novel is expected to circulate. Critics take *Cranford*'s opening denials at face value—even if they disagree on the effects. Classic feminist readings such as those of Nina Auerbach and Elaine Showalter have shaped one trend, in which seemingly powerless provincial female communities are transformed by Gaskell's proto-feminist tendencies. The middle class women of Cranford are seen as empowered relative to Victorian gender hierarchies, and disassociation from restrictive heteronormativity is one aspect of that empowerment (Auerbach, Showalter). Inheritors of this feminist perspective argue that erotic desire is pushed aside for the larger effect of illuminating the social value of women who exist outside of a system of patriarchal exchange (Fenton-Hathaway 246-47).

<7>A second critical strain sees female desire as a (regrettable) casualty of other textual interests, noting “how rigorously [hetero]sexuality is denied in Cranford” and claiming the “narrative excises sexualized women” (Allen 64, 68). The novel's apparent elision of the romance plot indicates that Gaskell “regretfully but doggedly blows up romantic desire” and forces the reader to “laughingly forgo the pleasures of a romance narrative” (Croskery 215-16). And *Cranford* is often considered simply too weighted by convention to be liberatory, a place where empowered female subjectivity is “imaginable—even in fiction—only in fictional terms” (Jaffe 47). Whether it is considered a liberation or a loss, there is general agreement that middle class female heterosexual desire is not present in *Cranford*.

<8>Agreement about this absence of desire is, I would argue, partly a response to disappointed readerly expectations: the linear, forward-moving narrative of courtship is indeed missing from the novel. It is “understood” at the beginning of the novel that unmarried middle-class women of Cranford will remain so, and the marriages that do take place parody rather than propel the romance plot: women who marry are minor characters, they are always visitors, and they are swept away by men who dash into the narrative and disappear. In the turn of a page, new resident Miss Jessie Brown (long-suffering daughter of the ill-fated Captain Brown) is married to an unknown suitor who, the narrative blithely announces, has waited forty years. Lady Glenmire, visiting sister-in-law to the local Mrs. Jamieson, unexpectedly marries the (unseen) surgeon Mr. Hoggins in equally quick time. In addition, middle-class marriages are understood by the protagonists to be both distasteful and ridiculous:

“Mister Hoggins is going to marry Lady Glenmire!”

“Marry!” said we, “Marry! Madness!”

“Marry!” said Miss Pole with the decision that belonged to her character, “I said Marry! as you do; and I also said, “What a fool my lady is going to make of herself” (135).

While the novel slyly invites us to read the “undesirability” of marriage as resentment felt by women who regret their unmarried state, active avoidance of the traditional romance plot shuts down readerly expectations before they can gain traction. Courtships are absent, marriages happen in the space of a sentence, and feelings regarding men range from bemusement to outright exasperation. Middle class marriages in *Cranford* do not involve protagonists and have

minor effects. They are simply astonishing events-to-be-noted, like the appearance of a cow in flannels or a mysterious conjurer in the Assembly Rooms. There is no “courtship” in *Cranford*, and the narrative makes it clear we would be foolish to expect it.

<9>But the absence of romantic narrative conventions does not mean female desire is absent. The desires of these middle class provincial women move forward by moving backward, emerging from two intertwined versions of nostalgic longing. The first of these is the retrograde desires of middle-class, middle aged women, cordoned off from the narrative yet entirely visible as (open) secrets; the second is the real-time, heavily policed but unrelenting erotic desires of female domestic servants, desires managed through a complex provincial fantasy of pre-industrial class relations. Moving with and against the grain of the “missing” romance plot, middle class female desire in *Cranford* is structured by *personal* nostalgia while working class female desire is managed through the ingenious manipulation of *social* nostalgia. Both paradigms emerge from provincial tropes in the provincial setting, function under the cover of *Cranford*’s deployment of open secrets, and exist in conversation with each other.

<10>In his work on *Cranford*, Andrew Miller notes that the novel contains several versions of time. He recognizes both a “propulsive, linear plot” that aligns cause-and-effect events in a way that is familiar and comfortable to readers and another kind of time (a “cyclical movement, an alternative narrative form”) that conveys something elusive, unconventional, and closely linked to the novel’s “representation of female subjectivity” (Miller 93). His distinction between temporalities is valuable for teasing apart the dynamics of desire that circulate around women and the provincial. Miller’s feminized, circular time, which is not progressive but rather embedded in the personal and quotidian, recognizes a multi-directional time-space that infuses the provincial characteristic of backward-lookingness with new possibilities. Rather than perceiving a non-linear relation to time as a failure of plot or the source of narrative dead-ends (both familiar criticisms of *Cranford*), Miller’s framework helps us usefully reimagine provincial time-space as a two-way temporal street that creates openings for female desire.⁶ Where memories and reminiscences circulate into the present and occupy the narrative, a recursive revision of temporality opens up possibilities for rethinking what is often dismissed as the provincial novel’s bad habits of pointlessly meandering in reverse. As a freer and more flexible version of chronology, the non-linear time of *Cranford* connects past-actions to the narrative present, establishing a distinctly provincial pathway for female desire through the dynamics of nostalgia. What John Plotz has neatly summarized as one of the provincial novel’s distinguishing characteristics—“nostalgia-inducing comparative backwardness”—functions, in Miller’s circular time, as fresh narrative space (Plotz 409).

<11>Nostalgia drives this chronological dynamic. More than a synonym for memory, nostalgia is a specific affective experience related to both recollection and desire, and it mixes lost times and places with pleasures that are both current and local. The phenomena of nostalgia is characterized by melancholy but it is also an emotional state where the past becomes both the source and location for profound gratification. As Susan Stewart notes, “nostalgia wears a utopian face, a face that turns towards a future-past” and the nostalgic subject is connected to “the absence that is the very generating mechanism of desire” (Stewart 23). Nostalgia, that mainstay of the provincial narrative, can be more than a wish for the lost past. It can also be understood as an inherently desiring non-linear conduit between past and present. Nostalgia does

more than bridge fixed moments in time. It defies and collapses linear time itself, offering a new model for the expression of longing.

<12>Provincial nostalgia and its pleasures most plainly play out in Cranford's "hidden" romance plot, Miss Matty's courtship narrative (37). In the chapter "A Love Affair of Long Ago," Miss Pole reveals that in her youth Matty was courted by Miss Pole's "once or twice removed" cousin Mr. Holbrook, but the two did not marry due to family objections (37-38). Soon after, a chance encounter reconnects them (Matty now "not yet fifty-two," Holbrook "about seventy") (38). After the meeting, Matty goes "straight to her room" and emerges later looking "as if she had been crying" (46). Invited (with Mary Smith and Miss Pole) to Holbrook's country house for luncheon, Matty is overwhelmed by "silent agitation" (40). Obvious hiding, conspicuous silence, unsuccessful concealment—these are the familiar failed deceptions of Cranford, strategies that rely on the reader's "catching on" to narrative desires that are not disguised.

<13>When Matty and her friends visit Holbrook for lunch ("A Visit to an Old Bachelor"), the elderly Holbrook is the perfect provincial suitor, living according to "old-fashioned ways" and quoting his parents' rules for dinner (42-43). The shared temporality of Holbrook and Miss Matty is clear, and the narrative offers a version of what flirting looks like when nostalgia frames romance:

"I don't know whether you like new-fangled ways."

"Oh! not at all," said Miss Matty.

"No more do I," said [Holbrook] (42).

The luncheon itself is a humorous tableau: the ladies of Cranford listen to literary opinions and poetry that they cannot understand while they are served food they cannot eat. In a Cranfordian burlesque, peas cannot be corralled by two-pronged forks and Miss Matty and Miss Pole are too genteel to eat them with a knife, as Holbrook does (43). The open secret of the lunch is the poignant longing of Miss Matty, who nonetheless promptly falls asleep during Holbrook's reading *Locksley Hall* (a perfect reference to the current pains of past love).⁷ Adding to the joke of peas that cannot be eaten and beloveds who cannot stay awake, Gaskell stokes the humor around the matter of desire and age. Indeed, I would argue that part of what has kept Matty's desire unacknowledged is the "joke" of older people feeling desire—an ageist inclination we might do well to examine more carefully in ourselves as readers and critics.

<14>Running under the twin covers of denial and humor, *Cranford* deftly mobilizes memory and desire so that the longings of the past become the longings of the narrative present. Mary Smith does her work as revealer of the obvious: "it was only by a sort of watching, which I could hardly avoid ... that I saw how faithful [Matty's] poor heart had been in its sorrow and its silence" (46). After the luncheon, *Cranford* hints at the beginnings of courtship: as Holbrook departs for Paris, he stops by Miss Matty's, gives her a book of poems, and calls her "Matty," just as he "used to do thirty years ago" (46-47). The "Love Affair of Long Ago" is not, as Hilary Schor argues, "a romance that cannot narrate itself" (101). It is a provincial romance clearly narrated through provincial tropes, structured by nostalgia and the past.

<15>Because *Cranford*'s unique version of a romance plot is driven by nostalgia, "the desire for desire," action must conclude so that nostalgia-driven desires can continue (Stewart 23). The linear movement of traditional courtship would remove Matty's desire from the framework that

forms it— and thus Holbrook dies after returning from France. But the end of Holbrook is not the end of the narrative’s engagement with female middle class desire which—having surfaced through the romance with Holbrook—becomes fixed as yet another “secret” in the past. Matty’s longings are reflected in her grief and her attempts to conceal it, and Mary Smith (alerted by the servant Martha that Matty has been “very low and sadly off her food,”) returns to learn that Holbrook’s death has triggered Matty’s illness (47). The embarrassment Mary Smith feels in “uncovering” another obvious fact confirms Matty’s desire, made permanent by its enshrinement in the past. Mary commits to keeping the open secret: “I felt almost guilty of having spied too curiously into that tender heart, and I was not going to speak of its secrets – hidden, Miss Matty believed, from all the world” (48). But never hidden, of course, from readers of *Cranford*.

<16>In the town of Cranford, middle class desire flies under cover of provincial nostalgia, much as worldliness takes refuge within claims of provincial isolation. Single ladies, not despite but because of their “old-fashioned ways,” can become surprisingly desiring subjects—but the humorous absurdity of middle-aged Cranford spinsters in love, like the humorous absurdity of small town Cranford ladies engaged in the wider world, sustains the delicate ambiguity of a narrative’s engagement with both female desire and that same wider world. Shaped by circular, provincial time, middle class female desires circumvent the anticipated linear trajectory of courtship, surfacing instead through nostalgic processes. Middle class female desire is a part of a past that is part of the present in *Cranford*.

<17>Middle class women are not, however, the only desiring females in town, and the absence of men is a class-based phenomenon:

If gentlemen were scarce, and almost unheard of in the ‘genteel society’ of Cranford, they or counterparts—handsome young men—abounded in the lower classes. The pretty neat servant-maids had their choice of desirable ‘followers’” (33).

Cranford’s many “lower class” tradesmen (i.e., “the joiner, or the butcher, or the gardener”) are “obliged, by their callings, to come to the house.” (33). Abundant, intersecting daily with private life, and “generally handsome and unmarried,” provincial working class men do not represent sexual danger to maids—but they are a threat to the maids’ employers. Middle class women feel “anxious, lest the heads of their comely maids should be turned,” and they recognize that the available paid labor of domestics will shift to the unpaid labors of lower class wives if their female servants marry (33).

<18>The middle class women of Cranford do a great deal of fretting about the sexual desires of their female servants, the very women upon whom their “genteel” status depends, and surveillance of female servants is a pronounced theme. Mrs. Jamieson, for example, will not go on a trip without installing Lady Glenmire in her house to “ensure that the maid servants did not pick up followers” (113). In Miss Matty’s home, the matter is formalized: all domestic servants are expressly “forbidden, by the articles of [their] engagement, to have ‘followers’” (33). And while there is nothing new in middle class attempts to control working women’s sexuality, the novel makes a radical turn when—without moral judgement or the invocation of any sexual peril—it makes working class female desires forcefully explicit. Mary Smith offers these observations of Matty’s first servant Fanny:

[A] vision of a man seemed to haunt the kitchen. Fanny assured me that it was all fancy; or else I should have said myself that I had seen a man’s coat-tails whisk into the scullery

once, when I went on an errand into the store-room at night; and another evening ... there was a very odd appearance, singularly like a young man squeezed up between the clock and the back of the open kitchen-door (33).

The obvious presence of Fanny's "followers" sets the stage for her successor Martha, a significant actor in *Cranford*. Martha starts out as a country servant who upends the formalities of the genteel classes; "blunt and plain-spoken to a fault," she is "well-meaning but very ignorant" (34). Martha is also the kind of desiring maid about whom middle class women worry. When she replaces Fanny, Mary Smith and Matty hasten to explain to her how to wait table at a formal dinner:

"And mind you go first to the ladies," put in Miss Matilda. "Always go to the ladies before the gentleman, when you are waiting."

"I'll do it as you tell me, ma'am," said Martha; "but I like lads best" (36).

This sentence is Martha's first in the novel, and her declaration stands as an emblem of her character: she will obey her employer, but her obedience does not diminish the fact she "likes lads" (a phrase that neatly encapsulates her desires and her class). Unlike the deceitful Fanny, Martha is true to her articles of employment—yet her trustworthiness renders her so frustrated that her self-restraint only provides more evidence of desire. After her arrival at Miss Matty's, she unburdens herself to Mary Smith:

"Why, it seems so hard of missus not to let me have any followers; there's such lots of young fellows in the town ... Many a girl as I know would have 'em unbeknownst to missus; but I've given my word, and I'll stick to it; or else this is just the house of missus never to be the wiser if they did come: and it's such a capable kitchen – there's such good dark corners in it – I'd be bound to hide anyone. I counted up last Sunday night –for I'll not deny I was crying because I had to shut the door in Jem Hearn's face; and he's a steady young man, fit for any girl; only I had given missus my word." Martha was all but crying again (48).

The comic effect of Martha's thwarted erotic energies, which find release in counting the number of kitchen corners in which she might potentially hide men, shift to something more meaningful as Gaskell maneuvers Martha into the sphere of Matty's own longings.

<19>Trajectories of female desire connect as soon as Matty's nostalgic love story begins: once she loses "sight of [Holbrook's] old house among the trees, her sentiments towards the master of it were gradually absorbed into a distressing wonder as to whether Martha had broken her word and seized on the opportunity of her mistress's absence to have a 'follower'" (45). When Holbrook dies there is a sharp turnaround in Martha's erotic fortunes as Matty (now unwilling to "grieve any young hearts") gives Martha conditional permission to have followers:

"Perhaps, Martha, you may some time meet with a young man you like, and who likes you ... and if you meet with such a young man, and tell me, and I find he is respectable, I have no objection to his coming to see you once a week" (50).

Martha promptly suggests Jem Hearn, whose physical and social attributes—"six foot one in his stocking feet" with "a character for steadiness"—are already familiar to her (50). Typically, Matty's change of heart is dismissed as "the price of sexual repression" or the moment where desires are "displaced onto ... Martha and Jem" to allow for her "vicarious satisfaction" (Allen 66, Jackson-Houlston 22). Indeed, there has been a telling critical resistance to reading Martha's working class female desires *as* desire because her desires are overshadowed by the assumed

primacy of middle class female longings—longings that are themselves then discounted as a laughable parody of a normative courtship plot.

<20>However, a careful reading suggests that Martha's working-class desires are more than middle-class projections. When Matty and Martha meet at the intersection of female desires (the loss of Holbrook and the gaining of Jem), they connect across class boundaries, bringing forms of desire into conversation with Gaskell's concerns about the shifting nature of mid-century class relations. From this point, Martha escalates in narrative significance until she ultimately rescues Matty from emotional and financial ruin, emerging at the center of the radically reconstituted structures of domesticity, family and labor with which the novel concludes. The narrative intertwining of her desires with Matty's deploys female provincial desires to generate a uniquely Gaskellian vision of provincial class relations. As Matty's nostalgic plot takes root as desire-in-the-past, and Martha's sexuality is freed to move forward, the novel radically rewrites the social order—under cover of a particularly provincial form of *social* nostalgia.

<21>Martha is not an industrial worker, she is a provincial servant, and in *Cranford* the link she has to the class that employs her is also a relational one, structured by emotional work as well as physical labor and wages, and fueled by personal relationships. Martha's desire for Jem Hearn results in a new domestic structure that shelters Miss Matty from penury and homelessness when the Town and Country Bank fails. The resulting "happy ending" of *Cranford* is a vision of positive, mutually loving class relations and the blending of work and private life—and one that resonates with Gaskell's well known belief that servants can be "friends" and part of their employers' families (Uglow 262-64).⁸ The relationship between mistress and maid that shapes the end of *Cranford* can be read as a socially nostalgic, deeply provincial vision of pre-industrial class relations in which Gaskell turns to the past to find solutions for the present.

<22>Yet, like the novel's *seeming* disconnect from industrialization and female desires, the novel's *seemingly* regressive move here is more than looking backward. Gaskell does offer working class female devotion to middle class women, and postulates a fantasy of pre-industrial, harmonious blending of labor, money, class position and social place—all of which ease her signature concerns about how modernization pits workers against employers and worsens class divisions. However, like its crafty engagement with modernity, *Cranford* only mimics a socially nostalgic, pre-industrial fantasy of provincial class stability and communal satisfaction. Operating within the "tradition of utopian discourse, [as] a nexus of the social, the political and the imaginary," Gaskell unites mistress and servant in a funhouse mirror version of a love/work relationship that is both wishful version and a parody of the provinces as the apex of imagined pre-industrial class harmony (Dolan 195). Working class women remain emotionally bound to the middle class women whom they continue to support and serve, but the funhouse mirror also reveals that the former housemaid now owns the house and that she is no longer a domestic worker but the possessor of domesticity itself. Now Matty is the dependent, the inept keeper of a tea and candy store reduced to "working" for her former servants—who nonetheless are still working for her. Nostalgia's double function relative to female desire becomes apparent as *Cranford* welds servant class sexuality into a uniquely Gaskellian version of pre-industrial class relations, a version that is at once both a conformist fantasy of affect-based, pre-industrial class harmony and, simultaneously, a radical collapse of the class and social order. The organizing

factor is the erotic life of female domestics, an erotic life that is at first policed by middle class women yet finally relied upon by them, as well.

<23>*Cranford* engages with more than the “outside” world. Its provincial location opens narrative spaces for female longing, asking us to think about how provinciality shapes those longings. Personal nostalgia creates a quintessentially provincial romance plot even as the narrative protests there is none; forms of social nostalgia radically revise and adjust the social order. Together, these connected provincial forms of female desire enrich *Cranford*’s delicate balance between looking backwards and energetically engaging with the future. In leaving *Cranford*, we should consider Walter Benjamin’s famous comments on nostalgia, which, as Jameson notes, connects it not to convention but to a generative forward-looking motion that offers repair for the present (Jameson, *Walter Benjamin*). *Cranford* gestures backwards but looks ahead as well, utilizing the provincial mode to explore both modernity and female desire.

IV. *North and South*: “I took no trouble to conceal my indifference”

<24>In contrast to *Cranford*, the traditional middle class romance plot plays a pivotal role in *North and South*, where it stabilizes the novel’s myriad intertwined social divisions: the industrial north and the rural south, the country and the city, provincial Helstone and urban Milton-Northern, devoted pre-industrial work relations and hostile industrial class conflicts. Long considered a “classic tale of class conflict,” scholars have traditionally seen Gaskell’s use of courtship to both mirror and resolve social conflicts as emblematic of the industrial novel itself, a genre that “is anxious to demonstrate how public issues are susceptible of treatment ... by the domestic romance” (Gilbert 134, Dolan 198).⁹

<25>One way to begin to understand the role of provincial female sexuality in *North and South* is to revisit the novel’s over-simplified genre status. As Maria Damkjær suggests, the novel becomes “richer” if we cease to consider it as “belonging to only one type of fiction, such as the recognizable industrial novel” (Damkjær 88). Indeed, as Martin Dodsworth notes, *North and South* actually “starts three times—in Harley Street, in Helstone and in Milton” (12). For a short but important while, Gaskell writes several novels, including a provincial one. Helstone is earnestly idyllic, and Margaret Hale is not only “at home” there but idolizes it: “More like a village in a tale than in real life,” she rhapsodizes, “Helstone is like a village in a poem—in one of Tennyson’s poems. But I won’t try to describe it any more. You would only laugh at me” (42-43).¹⁰ Laughter, of course, is key to *Cranford*’s provincial design: humor helps make space for actively desiring middle-aged spinsters and amorous maids, and ultimately allows the narrative to conclude with a radical social reconfiguration. But the provinces are no laughing matter in *North and South*—as London suitor Henry Lennox learns when he teases Margaret about her love for them.

<26>*North and South* uses the provincial frame to set the character of its heroine, emphasizing her complete sexual unawareness and placing her in a state of non-desiring innocence that will frustrate the narrative’s later work of using bourgeois romance plot as a model for social harmony. When Henry Lennox visits Helstone, he proposes marriage and is promptly rejected. Margaret’s “abrupt and unhesitating dismissal” establishes her as sexually innocent but also actively disinterested: “I was startled. I have never thought of – you, but as a friend; and please, I would rather go on thinking of you in that way. I don’t like to be spoken to as you have been

doing” (Schor 120; 62). Sincerely shocked at the idea of herself as desirable and desiring, Margaret is more than oblivious, she dislikes the idea of desire. Shaped by the Edenic world of Helstone, a paragon of not simply virtue but also of unknowing, she is insensible to the longings of others and dismayed when those longings are made known to her. It is this extreme provincial innocence, a compound of obliviousness to desire and a discomfort with it when it appears, that Gaskell will struggle to simultaneously maintain and overcome when she moves provincial Margaret to the city—and to the center of the all-important romance plot.

<27>When Margaret is wrenched from the provinces and relocated to the cityscape of Milton—and of course she goes unhappily—she appears to be hermetically sealed off from the well-known sexualized dangers of urban space. As is well documented, the Victorian novel typically offers the new urban spaces of industrialization as places of highly sexualized threat for middle-class women, and as locations where such women are at risk from new kinds of physical proximity and new forms of threatening sexual economies. As Deirdre D’Albertis succinctly sums up, “If an intrepid women did not lose her life on the city streets, so the story went, surely she would lose her honor” (47).¹¹ But what happens when the desirable but undesiring, entirely ingenuous provincial girl comes to the sexualized city, heads out on the streets alone and does not “fall” from provincial purity?

<28>Partially, that self-contained provincial girl offers Gaskell an opportunity to explore new modes of female agency. As critics have noted, Margaret Hale enters public space in ways that can be understood as pioneering. Gaskell tests exciting possibilities around female autonomy as Margaret independently traverses the city of Milton-Northern on its dangerously sexualized but also potentially liberating paths (Harman 364). But while Gaskell provides her heroine with new opportunities to move as a female subject through threateningly sexualized urban public space, the question of Margaret’s desire, the possibility of her as a desiring subject, remains open—and this is because, despite the centrality of the romance plot, Margaret Hale’s own desires remain essentially absent. *North and South* struggles to render sexual—that is, to make a desiring subject of—a provincial woman in the city while maintaining the sexual obliviousness with which she has been fundamentally associated. Hence, the narrative must work both “privately” (via the romance plot) and “publically” (via the industrial plot) to inscribe desire upon the person of Margaret Hale—while ensuring that Margaret herself is largely uninvolved in the process. The body of the provincial woman in Gaskell’s city becomes the reluctant surface upon which others’ desires are projected, a project made urgent because positive social transformation relies on “successful” romance between individuals. The affective limits of the heroine are shaped by *North and South*’s version of the provincial as a place of sexual obliviousness and disinterest, and those limits explain the novel’s struggle to make Margaret’s desire for Thornton “convincing.” The innocent provincial woman in the city serves as a legible surface upon which others’ desires are written—desires that are constructed by the narrative as emphatically *not* her own.

<29>In the context of the romance plot, the novel’s concentration on Margaret’s physical self is exceptional for a mid-century novel. *North and South* dwells on her body with a detailed intensity matched by an equally precise articulation of her total disinterest. Margaret’s body attracts the longings of others while signaling that she herself is both removed and unmoved:

[The] short curled upper lip, the round, massive upturned chin, the manner of carrying her chin, her movements, full of a soft feminine defiance, always gave strangers the impression of haughtiness. She sat facing him ... her full beauty met his eye; her round white flexile throat rising out of the full, yet lithe figure; her lips ... not breaking the cold serene look of her face with any variation from the one lovely haughty curve; her eyes with their soft gloom, meeting his with quiet maiden freedom ... she looked at him with proud indifference ... Her quiet coldness of demeanor he interpreted as contemptuousness (100-101).

Repeatedly referred to as “proud,” “haughty,” “indifferent,” and a “queen,” *North and South* eroticizes Margaret through Thornton’s eyes while concurrently amplifying her chilly disinterest. While the objectification of a Victorian heroine is certainly not unusual, Margaret’s emphatic detachment is offered as a complex space available for both the desire of others and a space of independent female agency (e.g., her removed “maiden freedom”). Gaskell’s carving out of this sexually disinterested space gives Margaret Hale the liberty that expands her “range beyond the confines of the romance plot” (Harman 164; Stevenson 80). Sexual disinterest is linked to female independence, rendering both the romance plot and the social progress that relies on it more difficult to persuasively achieve. This independent female subjectivity explores new possibilities for women in the city yet also amplifies Margaret’s awkward role as a non-sexual provincial woman in a narrative that requires her sexualization. In a romance plot where the “construction of her sexuality by those who observe her ultimately *becomes* her sexuality,” Margaret Hale has new forms of agency in the city street but remains a non-agent when it comes to desire (Nord, author’s emphasis, 177).

<30>Unsurprisingly, the most famous public scene in *North and South* is also the most overtly sexualized.¹² When angry strikers assemble and surround Thornton’s home and factory, he confronts the mob because Margaret (coincidentally visiting the Thornton residence) urges him to abandon his plan of waiting for the police and “Go down and face them like a man ... Speak to your workmen as if they were human beings” (232). Provoked by the blow to his masculinity as much as the appeal to his decency, Thornton’s decision exposes him to attack. He is saved when Margaret, ashamed for “goading and urging him to this perilous place” runs outside: “She threw her arms around him; she made her body into a shield from the fierce people beyond” (234). Soon after this rash act, she is knocked unconscious by a stone meant for Thornton. Her rationale for her action, like her provoking of Thornton, is a gendered one: “any woman, worthy of the name of woman, would come forward to shield, with her revered helplessness, a man in danger from the violence of number” (253). Yet while gender is her guide, sexuality steps in: she is transformed, through the medium of her physical contact with Thornton and the public space in which it happens, into a ready surface for the inscription of desire. Hence, Margaret is “sexualized” by this event, but it is a proscriptive process generated by the industrial city and, in a sense, for the city. She is transcribed by the sexual will of an industrial class struggle that is imposed (without her consent, agreement or even interest) upon her body. The most remarkable thing about this “sexualized” scene of her desire is, in fact, the relative *absence* of it.

<31>Her response to Thornton’s declaration of love, post-riot, is not coded as coy: “[What I did] was only a natural instinct; any woman would have done just the same” and “You seem to fancy that my conduct of yesterday ... was a personal act between you and me” (252-53). The winks, “obvious” hiding and open secrets of *Cranford* are not detectable here, and the narrative offers

no hint that Margaret is a hypocrite. Her denials are sincere, without a hint of disingenuousness, and no confounding narrative voice undercuts her or exposes other conflicting feelings. Of course her denials are pointless: she is gossiped about by servants (“Miss Hale with her arms about master’s neck, hugging him before all the people”), as well as by Thornton’s sister (“she’d give her eyes if he’d marry her”) and mother (“And what proof more would you have, I wonder, of her caring for you?”) (239, 242). Widely perceived as intentionally throwing herself at a wealthy capitalist, a chorus of voices proclaims Margaret as avidly desiring across sexuality and class. Yet while the secret of desire *seems* to be exposed, the secret is not actually hers and not actually true. What *North and South* offers is not the emergent desire of a provincial woman but the expanding projection of that desire across multiple realms. This leaves a gap between what Thornton, the city and the plot want from Margaret Hale, and what she desires for herself (mostly, to return to Helstone).

<32>The temporal dynamics that circulate around with this gap are meaningful. Dodsworth’s observation that the novel “starts three times” hints at what Mary Mullen has identified as the narrative’s resistance to an entirely unified sense of time. *North and South* is characterized by “different temporal orientations”—that is, by multiple simultaneous chronotopes (Mullen 107). Although Mullen’s argument focuses on how the novel resists capitalism’s demands for a unified national time, she also helpfully notes that the novel does, in the end, “ultimately embrace a shared national time” (108). This struggle for multiplicity and eventual surrender to unity dovetails with the novel’s chronotopes of female (non)desire. If *North and South* follows a Gaskellian “pattern of narrative daring followed by a retreat to familiar ground,” that advance-and-retreat from dissonance and multiplicity towards uniformity and convention takes place at both the level of time-space and relative to the female longings with which chronotopes intersect (Zemka 799).

<33>Within the arc of the journey to unified (that is, linear industrial) time and compulsory romance, Gaskell organizes an elaborate narrative pivot point to do the work of shifting Margaret away from the provincial past and towards a future that is both metropolitan and heterosexually engaged. In the aptly named chapter “Then and Now” (volume 2, chapter 21) the novel briefly circulates Margaret back into the provincial chronotope via a short country tour with her father’s friend, the benevolent Mr. Bell. This nostalgic journey was not included in the original serialized version of *Household Words* and only added later. But why take Margaret back to the provinces when “the provincial” has thus far functioned as the very time-space of *resistance* to both urban capitalism and love? As Damkjær has observed, the novel’s fast-moving, choppily serialized pace allows for a process of constant revision, which in turn enables a pattern of “forgetfulness that allows the past to be rewritten” (101). Rewriting the provincial is critical to breaking the intolerable obstruction it represents for the romance plot, and Margaret’s tacked-on journey to the provinces drives the removal the blockage. During her visit to the very countryside where she was raised, the dark side of the provinces is exposed—grinding poverty, ugliness, ignorance in the form of a women superstitiously roasting a cat—and the novel compromises the peaceful charm and idyllic beauty of the provincial with as much force as it can muster in a single day trip. In addition, Margaret witnesses alterations that force her to realize that the timelessness of the countryside is also subject to change via small-scale kinds of “progress” (“the ruinous cottage” she had romanticized and sketched while living in Helstone “had been pulled down, and a new one, tidy and respectable, had been built in its stead”) (475).

<34>The “new provincial episode” demonstrates to Margaret that she has become an anachronism within provincial time and her cherished past can then be actively disremembered and replaced with an updated—and decidedly less ideal—version of the country. Because the provincial-urban binary is a tight inverse correlation, the diminishment of the provincial can only elevate the appeal of the city. Further, because the industrial plot is welded to the romance plot, a rise in Margaret’s opinion of the city automatically opens spaces for desire. In an almost perfect demonstration of the intersection of chronotopes and desire, Gaskell orchestrates Margaret’s disillusionment with the provinces and the past with an increased appreciation for life in the forward-facing city of Milton—along with a growing interest in that city’s most eligible capitalist. The chapter “Then and Now” re-deploys the provincial chronotope in order to close it down, rewriting “Then” in the service of a new “Now.”

<35>However, despite Gaskell’s addition of the “Then and Now” chapter, the dissonance between the Margaret Hale’s desires and the romantic conclusion of *North and South* remains jarring. Scholars and readers have long struggled with the strained nature of the novel’s denouement, and there is a nagging sense that “something” is missing, of a persistent emptiness in the character of Margaret and in the novel’s ending. In the 1970s, P.N. Furbank expressed irritation with Gaskell’s “duplicity” and her coyness in hiding Margaret’s true (that is, assumed by Furbank) romantic feelings for Thornton (Furbank 52). Since then, approaches that are more sophisticated have further speculated on the matter. Catherine Stevenson, for example, observes there “is an essential evasion, a silence, at the heart of Gaskell’s text. The mechanism of repression, however, is not the subconscious, and the repressed content is not female lust.” Hilary Schor broadly notes how the happy-marriage ending of *North and South* struggles to fulfill a weak romance plot and “testifies to the tremendous power both of the marriage plot and to [readers] quest for union(s)” (145).

<36>Schor’s comment reflects an important awareness of the power that particular narrative forms have to help readers clamor over textual dissonances and gaps. Furbank’s irritated impatience with Gaskell’s “coyness,” above, is just such a readerly investment. In this vein, it is important to heed Fredric Jameson’s warning that “interpretation in terms of . . . master narratives remains a constant temptation” (*Political Unconscious*, 34). In resisting this critical temptation, I want to argue that the silence “at the heart of Gaskell’s text” is, in fact, a silent heart. As *North and South* struggles to create a desiring female subject, there is a silence far louder and a secret far deeper than the (neither silent nor secret) desires of *Cranford*, a gap opened by the conundrum of a publically independent, undesiring provincial woman in a narrative that requires both dependence and interest in romance. In *North and South*, where the romance plot is deployed to stabilize a shakily emergent urban capitalist order, the presumption of desire stands in for the lack of interest displayed by the sexually unconscious provincial heroine. Objectification of the female body, class conflicts and readerly expectations work together to fill the empty space, forcibly writing desire on the indifferent middle class provincial woman in the city.

V. Conclusion

<37>This essay has explored how the desires of provincial women intersect with the chronotopes of the country and the city in two decidedly different works by Elizabeth Gaskell. In *Cranford*,

the characteristics of the provincial are deployed in a provincial setting in ways that produce creative spaces for the expression of female desire; in *North and South* the desires of others are projected upon the dislocated provincial heroine in the city. In each case, the specific chronotopes of each novel shape the relationship of the “provincial” to female desire. The nostalgic, desiring dynamics of the provincial that unfold in *Cranford* are only possible in a town like Cranford, and the romantic demands of the industrial novel and the relocation of the innocent, provincial Margaret Hale combine to confound the relationship between a provincial woman and desire.

<38>Across Gaskell’s body of work, the city is in line with the Victorian trope that urban places are spaces of sexual danger for women; provinces are places of female sexual innocence or at least relative safety. Yet it is instructive to ask how “the provincial” is specifically deployed across the familiar provincial/urban binary relative to female desires. When we do so, we see female desire may more closely align with the provincial novel as it engages with and exploits mid-century shifts in class and social conditions. The past is not only desired, it is also a place *for* desire, and nostalgia allows its articulation. In the “classic” industrial novel *North and South*, provincial female sexuality in the city is not desire at all. It is a largely imagined variable, written by others on a disinterested female body, its relative absence masked by master narratives brought to the novel by the reader. There may be sex in the city, but perhaps unexpectedly, desire lives out of town.

Notes

¹ Throughout this essay, my use of the term “desire” is consciously in reference to heterosexual longings and erotics. My focus on heterosexuality is determined by the narrative form I am primarily exploring, specifically, the traditional courtship/romance plot. In using the word “desire” generically from this point, my intent is neither to reinforce heterosexual desire as the default setting for all narrative erotics, nor to imply that queer readings of Gaskell’s work are impossible or undesirable.

² The project of this essay is, in several ways, influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of the *chronotope*, a concept that “expresses the inseparability of space and time” in literature (Bakhtin 84). In the two novels I examine, it is the tightly fused relationship between (circular or linear) time and (rural or urban) spaces that shape the (non)expression of female desire. These genre-based connections also reflect Bakhtin’s claim that “the chronotope in literature has an intrinsic *generic* significance” (Bakhtin, author’s emphasis, 84-85).

³ While some scholars, such as Franco Moretti, consider *Cranford* a “wax museum” version of Mitford’s work (“*Cranford* is Madame Tussaud’s idea of a village story”), there is broad and convincing agreement that *Cranford* in fact engages across many social issues contemporary to it, ranging from new modes of transportation to colonialism to global trade (Moretti 63).

⁴ I reference D. A. Miller’s seminal concept of the “open secret” to shorthand the dynamic wherein realist narratives illuminate (often transgressive) desires in ways that both foreground and return to control them.

⁵ All further references to *Cranford* will be from this edition.

⁶ *Cranford*’s status as a novel has been debated since its publication. Miller helpfully reviews the debates, highlighting early criticisms such as an 1853 review in *Graham’s Magazine*, which states *Cranford* has “hardly any thing that can be called a plot” (Miller 92, *Graham’s Magazine* 448). Niles’ reference to the novel’s “generic instability” is a more current expression of uncertainty regarding its genre (Niles 294).

⁷ Tennyson’s *Locksley Hall* (1842) is a dramatic monologue in which the male speaker ruminates over separation from his beloved due to her family’s objections. The poem is ideal for Holbrook and Matty, and for a nostalgic provincial novel concerned with sustained love relative to passing time.

⁸ Gaskell's close relationships with her servants—including personal kindnesses to them and personal dependence on them—is a matter of record. Jenny Uglow's biography traces many of those relationships, as well as Gaskell's reflections on domestic servant relations. Elliot also discusses these connections, linking them to Gaskell's Unitarian beliefs regarding the status of servants as friends. Elliot notes that joiner Jem Hearn is likely to have gotten his last name from Ann Hearn, lifelong servant and deeply attached member of the Gaskell household (see pp. 119-120).

⁹ Beginning with Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* (see pp. 87-109) there is a long history of criticism addressing the "Condition of England" novel's deployment of the romance plot to resolve social problems. Hilary Schor provides a summary of some of these (see pp. 224-25).

¹⁰ All further references to *North and South* will be to this edition.

¹¹ See Walkowitz and Nord for comprehensive explorations of the connections between urban spaces, sexuality/sexual danger, and women.

¹² See David (pp 41-43) for a close examination of the sexualized language associated with the strike scene.

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