

The End of the Novel: Gender and Temporality in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*

By **Jacob Jewusiak**, University at Buffalo

<1>Since *Cranford*'s publication (1851-3), critics have had difficulty reconciling the novel's modular storytelling with the teleological arc of a conventional novel narrative. A reviewer in *Graham's Magazine* (1853) writes that while *Cranford* inspires "pleased attention" from the reader, "there is hardly any thing that can be called a plot" (448); similarly, the *Athenaeum* (1853) unflatteringly refers to Gaskell's novel as a "collection of sketches" where "there is hardly a solitary incident which is not of every-day occurrence" (Chorley 765). In contemporary Victorian studies, Andrew Miller addresses this concern by suggesting that *Cranford* displays a "conventional teleological structure" that coexists "with a cyclical movement, an alternative narrative form which emerges out of and represents the routines and material culture of everyday life" (93). Reference to circular, cyclical, or static models of time appear consistently in *Cranford* criticism addressing a wide variety of issues such as memory, sympathy, and narrative repetition. (1) While metaphors like linearity and cyclicity are useful for thinking about the problematic relation between plot and time in *Cranford*, they do not address fully the temporal complexity that links the novel's unusual form to Gaskell's gender concerns.

<2>As Barbara Adams points out, a *mélange* of different times structures any individual's temporal experience—"time-frames, temporality, timing, tempo, a relation to the past, present, and future and...clock and calendar time" (37). Adams suggests that the complexity and imbrication of these times "cannot be expressed through the dualisms of cyclical and linear time" (37): "cyclical time is neither the opposite of linear time nor separable from moments passing and recurring" (23-4). The emphasis on linear time in Western culture, Adams argues, has caused us to lose "touch with our own cyclicity" (41). As a result, we project cyclicity onto the object of investigation as "other time" (41). When we think about the temporal experience of men and women according to dichotomy of linear and cyclical time, women's time is typically collapsed into "other time." In *Doing Time*, Rita Felski further critiques this tendency, deriding the assumption that men are "encouraged to think of their lives in linear terms" while women's lives consist "of a series of fragments, not a carefully choreographed upward ascent" (21). These categorizations elide obvious similarities between how men and women experience time: "the realm of everyday life simply *is* repetitive, being largely defined by monotony, routine, and habit" (*Doing Time* 20). Thus, "the perception that cyclical time is a uniquely female province is highly misleading" (20).

<3>Instead of thinking about *Cranford*'s temporality strictly in terms of linearity or cyclicity, I suggest that we look at how Gaskell's novel cannibalizes the temporalities of other literary forms. Genres such as the story and the newspaper, both of which appear frequently throughout *Cranford*, provide us with a more constructive way of discussing Gaskell's experimentation with novelistic temporality that is vested in the mid-nineteenth-century climate of textual production and gender politics. A form of media imported from the masculine sphere outside of Cranford, the newspaper represents invasive modern temporalities that the women of Cranford recontextualize for the sake of mediating conversation and reinforcing the bonds of the community. In addition to newspapers, Cranford life is structured around the dilatory practice of storytelling. Coded as feminine, storytelling forms the bedrock of Cranford's community even as it threatens to alienate the women from the world beyond its borders. As gendered literary forms in the textual economy of *Cranford*, the temporalities of the newspaper and the story are irreducible to either linear or cyclical models. Moreover, the two forms contribute to practices that culminate in what I call "Cranford time": the aspiration to construct an alternative temporal zone outside of the forces of modernization through the attempt to displace the desire for ends with an interminable desire for more stories. A response to the masculine temporalities of modernization that would render their community obsolete, Cranford time is modeled after the mutual survival of different temporal forms in the literary marketplace.

<4>In the first line of the novel, the narrator claims that Cranford is "in possession of the Amazons" (5). An "aggressively female world" (Schor 89), Cranford is engaged in a quiet and yet fierce battle with the invasive temporalities of modernization that signal an end to the distinctiveness of Cranford's feminine society. Arguments regarding *Cranford*'s feminist intervention usually pivot on the perceived success or failure of Cranford's community in relation to the masculine world that threatens it. Critics like Patricia Wolfe and Nina Auerbach celebrate the closed community of Cranford as an alternative, feminine space that challenges the dominant ideology of the male sphere. Other critics, such as Martin Dodsworth, Audrey Jaffe, and Patsy Stoneman, are more skeptical of Cranford's autonomy, suggesting instead that the women form a "supportive sub-culture delimited by the dominant group" (Stoneman 61). To read *Cranford* as a fantasy of feminine empowerment that—successfully or unsuccessfully—is set against a male dominated world is to approach the novel from a predominantly spatial standpoint. Readings of *Cranford* that emphasize space tend to draw starkly gendered divisions; for example, Tim Dolin suggests that: "It carries the Victorian orthodoxy of the separate spheres to its logical conclusion by imagining a world in which sexual division is so absolute as to be experienced as *geographical segregation*" (202, my emphasis). While Cranford is an emphatically feminine *place*, it is one that represents a much more complex approach to the way *time* is manifested by men and women. Its Amazonian exclusivity from the rest of England merely serves to bring into relief the way different times influence Cranford's way of life, and the manner in which the women adapt, or fail to adapt, to these new rhythms. The text that results—in all of its episodic, fragmented, and anecdotal irregularity—does not merely reflect the domestic work and feminine pursuits of Gaskell's characters, but also the dramatic, disjunctive, and inevitable intersection of masculine and feminine times in the wake of modernity.

Cranford Time and the Newspaper

<5>In *The Gender of Modernity*, Rita Felski defines modernization as “the complex constellation of socioeconomic phenomena which originated in the context of Western development but which have since manifested themselves throughout the globe in various forms: scientific and technological innovation, the industrialization of production, rapid urbanization, an ever expanding capitalist market, the development of the nation, and so on” (12-3). The technologies of modernization require the importation of new temporalities into places unaccustomed to the paces and rhythms of modernity. For example, Wolfgang Schivelbusch has shown the wide-ranging consequences of the railroad for the temporality of local communities: “The regions lost their temporal identity in an entirely concrete sense: the railroads deprived them of their local time...the temporal foreshortening of the distances that was effected by trains forced the differing local times to confront each other” (43). As the technologies of modernization shrink time, they also put pressure on local communities to adopt an increasingly homogeneous and rationalized discourse of time. Yet this process was not consistent. Even in the process of standardizing time in the 1840s, the decade between when *Cranford* was published and the events of the novel likely take place,⁽²⁾ Schivelbusch notes that railway companies worked independently to institute “a new time on its own line” (43).⁽³⁾ The resulting temporal complexity—a patchwork of local times crisscrossed by a variety of individually standardized railway times—suggests that the temporality of local communities was challenged by modernity in at least three ways: by the acceleration or shrinking of time, the imperative to homogenize or standardize time, and, disorientingly, a growing multiplicity of different times.

<6>In *Cranford*, the railroad makes an appearance to murder the beloved Captain Brown, who sacrifices himself while saving the life of a child from an oncoming train (22). The asymmetry between the time of modernity and that of Cranford cannot be better expressed than by the fatal speed of the locomotive as it hurtles through the village. The railway represents a violent imposition of modern temporalities that Cranford is both unprepared and unwilling to confront, one that registers a masculine threat to the local community of women whose affiliation is primarily to family, friends, and the people in their immediate proximity.

<7>Yet modern temporalities are not always violent, nor are they always coercive. A literary technology of modernization, the newspaper registers the trauma of modernity in a way that is not unlike the railroad: as Hilary Schor notes, “Change in this novel is the world of the railways, and the railways mark not only a change in the ways of life but a change in ways of publication as well” (85). Unlike their response to the railway, however, the women of Cranford are able to recontextualize the paper as a platform for the vitalization of local concerns. Indeed, the steady rhythm of the periodical press contributes to Cranford’s highly regimented local temporality, even as the women are economically removed from its subject matter and temporally uninterested in the newspaper’s aspiration to contemporaneity. Using the newspaper in a multiplicity of different ways—including sharing a subscription, reading aloud to each other, blocking out the rays of the sun, and protecting a new rug from the feet of guests—the Amazons stake out a temporal zone that serves as an alternative to the encroaching homogenization of masculine temporalities. As Rita Felski argues, “women’s interests cannot be unproblematically aligned with dominant conceptions of the modern, neither can they simply be placed outside of them” (*Gender* 16). Mediating conversation and shaping the way the women of Cranford experience time, the way the newspaper is consumed and repurposed crystallizes Cranford’s ambivalent relation to the temporalities of modernization.

<8>The pervasive *St. James's Chronicle* is not only the reading of choice for the women of the village, but also serves as a significant means by which their community is stratified, held together, and cut off from the world beyond. Reporting on the actions of the aristocracy, the *Chronicle* was intended for the elite of England, even though, as Patricia Ingham notes, such reading also attracted groups outside the upper class such as the clergy (243). While it may appear out of place for a group of poor, elderly women to turn to the *Chronicle* for entertainment, the newspaper appeals to the way that Cranfordians imagine themselves as—what the narrator sets off in quotations—a “genteel society” (33). The narrator’s gentle sarcasm and the reality of the economic conditions in Cranford render the women’s preference for the *Chronicle* noticeably ironic. In fact, because the women of Cranford lack the money for individual subscriptions, they share the fees and trade the newspaper amongst themselves according to an established social hierarchy.⁽⁴⁾ Though Miss Jamieson is the first to receive the paper, her servant Mr. Mulliner consistently hijacks the *Chronicle*, thus delaying its dissemination among the Amazons:

This very Tuesday, the delay in forwarding the last number had been particularly aggravating; just when both Miss Pole and Miss Matty, the former more especially, had been wanting to see it.... Miss Pole told us she had absolutely taken time by the forelock, and been dressed by five o'clock to be ready, if the 'St. James's Chronicle' should come in at the last moment... (90)

Suggesting that part of the *Chronicle*'s appeal is in the timeliness of its information, Miss Pole and Miss Matty are consistently disappointed by the staggered delivery of the newspaper. Forced to share a subscription, the socio-economic limitations of Cranford suggest that the temporalities of the newspaper, such as the aspiration to contemporaneity, comes with a prohibitory price tag.

<9>The delay of the *Chronicle* serves as a reminder of the material conditions that privilege the immediacy of personal contact over the imagination of community. Benedict Anderson claims, for example, that newspaper reading “is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he had not the slightest notion” (35). For Anderson, the newspaper not only reports information about other people and events, but more importantly transforms the isolated experience of reading into the platform where membership in the national community is not proscribed by the loss of personal interaction. In Cranford, however, reading the *St. James's Chronicle* is sometimes a communal activity; for example, Mary Smith reads the *Chronicle* aloud to Miss Matty just before Miss Pole reveals the news of Lady Glenmire's engagement (134). Far from the solitary experience of reading that we associate with contemporary newspapers, the *Chronicle* tends to bring together the community through a network of sharing and communal interaction. As Matthew Rubery observes, this was not uncommon in the early nineteenth-century: “News reading at the beginning of the century had been a largely communal activity by which a single issue was estimated to reach upwards of twenty readers through coffeehouses and public assemblies...Private reading would have been out of reach for all but the wealthiest individuals until the repeal of the stamp duty ushered in a century long progress by which the listening public became a reading public” (6). In the multiplicity of ways that the Cranfordians

use newspapers, the tendency is not to imaginatively integrate with a larger national community, but rather to strengthen the local ties that bind the individual to her immediate group.

<10>Rubery further points out that the daily newspaper would not become a routine part of everyday life until 1880 (7). The *St. James Chronicle*, for example, was published three times a week. As Mark Turner suggests, this delay between installments organizes the time of readers and serves as “a form of social bonding”: “During a weekly or monthly pause, readers were looking back at events that had occurred in previous installments and were projecting forward, thinking about the future of the narrative, and they were doing this together” (125). The rhythm of the *Chronicle*’s publication plays a significant role in structuring the economy of conversation in Cranford.(5) As Miss Matty observes, recalling the elderly women from her childhood, the *Chronicle* serves as a springboard for conversation: “They had the ‘St. James’s Chronicle’ three times a-week, just as we have now, and we have plenty to say” (64). Striking the balance between having too much to say and not having enough, the *Chronicle*’s publication scheme not only provides the content for conversation, but also provides enough time between installments to talk about it.

<11>Though not specifically mentioned as the cause, the *Chronicle*’s thrice weekly rhythm of publication helps to explain the otherwise arbitrary social rules that pace the everyday lives of the women of Cranford. Cranford time is defined early in the novel when the narrator explains the “rules and regulations of visiting and calls” (6) by imagining a conversation that might occur for a young initiate in the community:

‘I dare say your mamma has told, you dear, never to let more than three days elapse between receiving a call and returning it; and also, that you are never to stay longer than a quarter of an hour’

‘But am I to look at my watch? How am I to find out when a quarter of an hour has passed?’

‘You must keep thinking about the time, my dear, and not allow yourself to forget it in conversation.’ (6-7)

When considered in the light of the *Chronicle*’s publication scheme, the draconian rule that no more than three days may pass before returning a call makes more sense: three days ensures that enough time passes so that conversation can be enabled by a new influx of content from the newspaper, but not too much so that the articles lose their relevance. Even the brevity of the visit—a mere fifteen minutes—suggests that the length of conversation is determined in a way that is similar to the regimented and consistent length of a newspaper article. If the newspaper plays a role in structuring Cranford’s experience of time, it also helps to construct a time that everyone in the community thinks about in the same way: “We kept ourselves to short sentences of small talk, and were punctual to *our* time” (7, my emphasis).

<12>However, while the newspaper serves as a medium through which the Cranfordians share time, the time that they share is not the one that is represented in the newspaper. The women of Cranford do not read the *Chronicle* because they identify with the aristocracy—they are too poor

for that. And as I have already shown, the staggered delivery of the *Chronicle* forbids the illusion of simultaneous consumption that Anderson argues serves as a basis for imagined membership in the modern community. Instead, Cranford's desire for the paper hinges on its ability to mediate conversation and police the boundaries of their community. This is made clear when Miss Matty and Mary Smith transform the newspaper into paper walkways to defend Miss Jenkyns's new rug from the feet of her guests:

We were very busy, too, one whole morning before Miss Jenkyns gave her party, in following her directions, and in cutting out and stitching together pieces of newspaper, so as to form little paths to every chair, set for the expected visitors, lest their shoes might dirty or defile the purity of the carpet. Do you make paper paths for every guest to walk upon in London? (20)

Miss Matty and Mary Smith ignore the content of the newspapers as they deconstruct and reassemble the texts into something that has a new and very different significance from the paper's original composition. The *content* of the paper transforms: from an account of things happening elsewhere and to other people, the newspaper takes on a *material* meaning as a pathway for Miss Jenkyns's guests. The narrator's gently antagonistic question—"Do you make paper paths for every guest to walk upon in London?"—underscores the fact that the newspaper's reportage of others has been subordinated to the immediate concerns of the Amazon's dirty shoes. The newspaper does not import a normative time into Cranford, so much as form the basis of a competing, local temporality that is dictated by the members of the immediate community instead of being influenced from social centers outside of Cranford.

<13>Though the Cranfordians reject the normative temporalities of the newspaper—specifically the aspiration to contemporaneity and simultaneity that forge imagined links between the individual reader and the modern community—the temporality that obtains in Cranford does not merely regress to cyclical patterns of non-socialized time. Attempting to protect Miss Jenkyns's new rug from the discoloration of the sun, Miss Matty and Mary Smith dismantle newspapers and place the leaves of paper upon the carpet:

Oh the busy work Miss Matty and I had in chasing the sunbeams, as they fell in an afternoon right down on this carpet through the blindless window! We spread newspapers over the places, and sat down to our book or our work; and, lo! in quarter of an hour the sun had moved, and was blazing away on a fresh spot; and down again we went on our knees to alter the position of the newspapers. (20)

Seemingly unable to predict where the beams of the sun will fall, Miss Matty and Mary Smith exclaim in naïve wonder at the natural rhythms of the earth: "lo! in quarter of an hour the sun had moved." Such naïveté not only destroys the assumption that Cranford is a place uniquely connected to the cyclical rhythms of nature, but also suggests that it is a place that operates according to the rationalized time of the clock: as Mary Smith retrospectively observes, a quarter of an hour passes between the application of the newspapers.(6) Using the newspaper as a prophylactic against the sun, the women dramatize their appropriation of competing temporalities to suit the demands of their immediate environment.

<14>In Gaskell's short novel *Cousin Phillis* (1864), the newspaper also plays a central role in negotiating the confrontation between modernity and local communities. Representative of modernity and the railroad, Mr. Holdsworth—a railway engineer—is the narrator's superior and "hero": a cosmopolitan gentleman, he is rootless, handsome, and intellectual, "a young man of five-and-twenty or so...he had travelled on the Continent, and wore mustaches and whiskers of a somewhat foreign fashion" (12). Holdsworth—described as a "restless, vehement man"—also embodies a masculine threat to small communities (92). Gaining an invitation to Hope Farm—a sort of rural utopia presided over by the minister and farmer Holman—Holdsworth seduces the narrator's cousin, Phillis, only to leave abruptly for a new assignment in Canada. Devastated by his departure, Phillis becomes gravely ill when she learns news of Holdsworth's impending marriage to Lucille Ventadour. The disruption staged by modernization is hinged to the newspaper when Phillis offers Holdsworth an old edition: "She brought out the last week's country paper (which Mr. Holdsworth had read five days ago), and then quietly withdrew; and then he subsided into languor, leaning back and shutting his eyes as if he would go to sleep" (99). For Holdsworth, the newspaper is out of date—though the fact that he is in the process of recovering from a major illness no doubt contributes to his drowsiness, the narrator makes a point of linking the *belatedness* of the newspaper to Holdsworth's lack of interest and slumber.

<15>On the other hand, for the Holman family the newspaper's function is not exclusively tied to the timeliness of its information:

Cousin Holman gave me the weekly county newspaper to read aloud to her, while she mended stockings out of a high piled-up basket...I read and read, unregardful of the words I was uttering, thinking of all manner of other things; of the bright color of Phillis' hair, as the afternoon sun fell on her bending head; of the silence of the house, which enabled me to hear the double tick of the old clock which stood halfway up the stairs...The tranquil monotony of that hour made me feel as if I had lived forever, and should live forever droning out paragraphs in that warm sunny room, with my two quiet hearers, and the curled-up pussy cat sleeping on the hearth-rug, and the clock on the house-stairs perpetually clicking out the passage of the moments. (58-9)

Serving as the medium through which these individuals are brought together, the newspaper accomplishes multiple social functions. Whereas it is implied that Holdsworth reads his newspaper alone, the tempo of the narrator's shared reading articulates the rhythm by which Phillis and her mother mend stockings. "[U]nregardful of the words," the content of the newspaper becomes secondary to a reading practice that is identified with time itself: "the double tick of the old clock," "the tranquil monotony of that hour," and the "clock...clicking out the passage of the moments." After some time, the narrator notices that cousin Holman has "fallen fast asleep" (59). Unlike Holdsworth, however, the cause of her drowsiness is not from a tranquilizing lack of relevant and engaging information, but from the soporific rhythms of reading the newspaper aloud and domestic work. For the Holman family, as for the women in *Cranford*, the newspaper is not used for its timeliness but for its ability to mediate time, an appropriation of genre that is also a revision of modern—and masculine—temporalities.

Storytelling and the End of the Novel

<16>Whereas the Amazons' appropriation of the newspaper registers their attempt to gain mastery over the masculine temporalities of modernization, storytelling is a literary practice that is organically woven into the everyday lives of the Cranfordians: as Hilary Schor puts it, *Cranford* "conjures up a different (older) kind of storyteller: the anecdotal, intimate, immediate storyteller of village life" (86). Storytelling plays a very specific role in *Cranford* as a way of imagining a temporal zone outside the "linear or cataclysmic" models of historical transformation that Rita Felski argues "have been conventionally coded as masculine" (*Doing Time* 82). By attempting to displace the "end" toward which narrative moves, Gaskell draws attention to the masculine assumptions that inhere in the novel's conventionally propulsive narrative. This is not to say that Gaskell eschews ends altogether or that such an ambition is even possible, but that she experiments with a narrative temporality which aspires to displace the reader's desire for the end with the desire for more *story*. Such displacement occurs at two different levels. At the structural level, Gaskell uses techniques of storytelling to constitute a uniquely dilatory form that displaces the reader's teleological desire in favor of a periphrastic mode of reading. Within the narrative itself, this displacement is figured through the role that storytelling plays in the social networking that happens in the village, helping to consolidate the community around a shared temporal zone that sets them apart from everyone else.⁽⁷⁾ The temporal displacements enabled by storytelling allow the women of Cranford a kind of ownership over their time that is not possible while under the unilateral and masculine coercion of an ending.

<17>In his essay "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin analyzes the tension between the story and the novel. Benjamin likens the art of the storyteller to the "way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel" (92): an "artisan form of communication" (91), the story bears the traces of the storyteller herself, and develops meaning from the unique context in which it is told. In contrast, the novel's "essential dependence on the book" liberates the author from the requirements of immediacy (whether figurative or literal) while obscuring the craftsman-like trace of the author's impression (87). The notion of proximity is at the heart of the distinctions that Benjamin notes between the two forms: "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience — his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual..." (87). One of the major differences between the story and the novel is how they configure the individual within (or without) the community, a claim that is corroborated by Benjamin's later observation that: "A man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller; even a man reading one shares this companionship. The reader of a novel, however, is isolated, more so than any other reader" (100). While the story unfolds during the immediacy of the shared moment, the novel facilitates an individual and abstracted response to narrative.⁽⁸⁾

<18>Benjamin's observation that reading a novel and listening to a story situate the individual in different ways to others corresponds with the reader's temporal experience of narrative. Of crucial importance here is the fact that the end (or lack of one) toward which each form is directed shapes the reader's temporal expectations. As Benjamin argues, the "novelist...cannot hope to take the smallest step beyond that limit at which he invites the reader to a divinatory

realization of the meaning of life by writing ‘Finis’” (100). However, the story’s structural open-endedness suggests that, “there is no story for which the question as to how it continued would not be legitimate” (100). A story “does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time” (90). Quoting the multiple and yet irreconcilable interpretations of a story from ancient Egypt, Benjamin concludes that the story “resembles the seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the chambers of the pyramids shut up air-tight and have retained their germinative power to this day” (90). In other words, a constitutive difference between the story and the novel pivots around the way each form structures the reader’s expectations of time. The open-endedness of the story denies the comfort of an ending to the reader, replacing a revelatory conclusion with the long pause—the “germinative power”—of indeterminacy.

<19>The dynamic that Benjamin represents between teleological and periphrastic modes of narrative production maps onto the different role that the novel and the story play in shaping the community of Cranford. In *Cranford*, characters that are associated with the novel and written texts in general are propelled to their own death; the deaths of these characters metaphorically stand in for the violence of “ends” in general and propulsive narrative specifically. When the avid reader of Charles Dickens, Captain Brown, is run over by a train while saving the life of a little girl, it is as if his act of heroism is of secondary importance to the fact that he was reading a serial before his death: as the obituary emphasizes, the “gallant gentleman was deeply engaged in the perusal of a number of ‘Pickwick’, which he had just received” (24). Even Miss Jenykyns confuses the Captain’s cause of death, substituting “that book by Mr Boz” for the train (29). Though *The Pickwick Papers* is only associatively implicated in the Captain’s death, Nina Auerbach points out that Dickens’s *Dombey and Son*, specifically the scene where Carker meets his death by locomotive, also plays an allusive part (Auerbach 81). Not unlike the propulsiveness of a train, Dickens’s novels are teleologically organized in a way that *Cranford* is not. It is fitting, therefore, that Gaskell would later acknowledge in a letter to Ruskin that “The beginning of ‘Cranford’ was *one* paper in ‘Household Words’; and I never meant to write more, so killed Capt Brown very much against my will” (*Letters* 748). Prematurely meeting his end, Captain Brown’s death symbolically registers the danger of propulsive narrative to hasten ends that would be better off postponed.

<20>The characters that are associated with reading figure the uniquely masculine characteristics of propulsive narrative: it is not only that Captain Brown is associated with novel reading and dies, but also that he is a man. Mr. Holbrook, too, is “a great reader” (43) and is immediately associated by the narrator with texts. Looking like her “idea of Don Quixote,” he takes Mary Smith on a tour of his estate:

My request evidently pleased the old gentleman; who took me all round the place, and showed me his six-and-twenty cows, named after the different letters of the alphabet. As we went along, he surprised me occasionally by repeating apt and beautiful quotations from the poets, ranging easily from Shakspeare [sic] and George Herbert to those of our day. (41)

Proud owner of cows named after the letters of the alphabet, Holbrook has a corresponding authority over the English language. Nevertheless, he lives an isolated and eccentric life that

distorts the kind of understanding that comes from social interaction. Living “in a secluded and not impressive country,” Holbrook is so out of touch with others that he mispronounces certain words—like Byron or Goethe—by saying them “strictly in accordance with the English sound of the letters” (41). When he reads Tennyson aloud to the group of women, Miss Matty falls asleep and Miss Pole uses the time to “count her stitches without having to talk” (45): though Holbrook’s recital assumes that the group will share in the metered time of poetry, the women occupy very different temporalities. Surrounded by people, it is as if Holbrook reads alone. If Captain Brown is the unwitting victim of propulsive narrative, Holbrook represents the other fate allotted to those characters of *Cranford* that spend too much time reading: he is isolated from those around him and, by extension, the community of Cranford.

<21>Gaskell represents the written text—and the novel specifically—as a form that marries the desire for ends with isolation and death; conversely, storytelling’s open-endedness plays a mediating role in the preservation of Cranford’s community. When the women of Cranford are finally invited to visit Mrs. Jamieson’s aristocratic—though poor—sister-in-law Lady Glenmire, the greatest sign that intimacy has been established between them is through the relation of “an anecdote known to the circle of her intimate friends”: “As proof of how thoroughly we had forgotten that we were in the presence of one who might have sat down to tea with a coronet, instead of a cap, on her head, Mrs. Forrester related a curious little fact to Lady Glenmire” (94). In the story, Mrs. Forrester’s cat eats the lace she had been soaking in milk. Desperate to retrieve the item, she puts the cat inside of Mr. Hoggins’s top-boot and feeds it tartar emetic until it vomits. For those critics that attempt to account for this story, most tend to push it embarrassingly aside. Martin Dodsworth, for example, suggests that it represents the “triviality” of a “village society” that lacks the “true vitality” of the male (140). Taking a materialist approach, Christina Lupton argues that the anecdote signifies “that textiles reward a closer look precisely because they are both texts and subjects of their own histories” (248). Such accounts ignore Mrs. Forrester’s intention in telling the story, which suggests that the stakes of her anecdote do not concern cats and lace, but rather storytelling itself, insofar as the content of the story takes a secondary role to the fact that it enables the incorporation of Lady Glenmire into the circle of “intimate friends” that comprise Cranford. Displacing the meaning of the story in this way also disables the teleological thrust of her narrative, as the point is no longer to reach the end of the story—the story ends where it started, with Mrs. Forrester in possession of her lace—but to enjoy the immediate and shared experience of the story itself.

<22>The incorporation of Captain Brown’s daughter, Miss Jessie, into the community of Cranford is similarly mediated through an act of storytelling where time loses its regimented and directional qualities. Left alone after the death of her father, she receives support from Miss Jenkyns, who provides Jessie with a place to live and begins the discussion of her “qualifications for earning money” (27). When Miss Jenkyns finally leaves Jessie in the care of Mary Smith, the narrator says: “Miss Jessie began to tell me some more of the plans which had suggested themselves to her, and insensibly fell into talking of the days that were past and gone, and interested me so much, I neither knew nor heeded how time passed” (27). While the practical generosity of Miss Jenkyns is met with antipathy or framed as overbearing, the real comfort for Jessie comes from her own storytelling. The narrator’s observation that she “neither knew nor heeded how time passed” emphasizes that through storytelling the two women are abstracted from a conventionally linear and propulsive experience of time’s passage. In contrast, the

practical minded Miss Jenkyns moves too fast. Her breathless concern for Jessie's well being functions according to the temporal mandate of the world at large: like the teleological trajectory of a conventional novel, Miss Jenkyns suggests that one must progress toward a certain end.

<23>The kind of strategic delays that mediate entry into the community of Cranford also serve as temporal zones of narrative production. In the love story between Miss Matty and Holbrook, for example, the story is broken up into two parts: the event of Holbrook's proposal and dismissal that occurs in the past, and the romance that the narrator recounts between the two elderly lovers in the present. The amount of time that has passed from the original story to the contemporary one has rendered the continued romance unable to end conventionally in marriage. When Holbrook sees Miss Matty in a fabric shop, the narrator observes that "He kept shaking her hand in a way which proved the warmth of his friendship; but he repeated so often, as if to himself, 'I should not have known you!' that any sentimental romance which I might be inclined to build, was quite done away with by his manner" (39). Moreover, when Mary Smith learns Holbrook's age from Miss Pole she claims again that the romance is destroyed: "'He must be about seventy, I think, my dear,' said Miss Pole, blowing up my castle, as if by gunpowder, into small fragments" (38). Outside of the conventional marriage plot (Miss Matty and Holbrook are now too old to marry), the romance continues to generate narrative because the end has ceased to matter as much as the story itself. A marriage plot without the possibility of marriage, the love story between Miss Matty and Holbrook can take place because it follows a set of rules that originate from within Cranford rather than conforming to temporal conventions, regarding age and romantic love, from outside the community.

<24>The temporal disparity at the heart of Miss Matty's love story is formally embodied by the way that the narrator relates the story. Early on in the chapter titled "A Love Affair of Long Ago," the narrator introduces "One of Miss Pole's stories" that "related to a shadow of a love affair that was dimly perceived or suspected long years before" (32). Instead of following this declaration with more explanation regarding the love affair, the narrator launches into a number of unrelated narratives that cross the span of twelve full paragraphs. Stories about the problem of servants keeping lovers around the house, the manner in which Miss Jenkyns and Miss Matty eat an orange, and the visit of Miss Matty's cousin Major Jenkyns all intervene between the announcement of the love affair and its elaboration, signaled by the narrator's statement: "And *now* I come to the love affair" (37). The narrator's italicization of "*now*" signals her awareness of the effects that withholding the story will have on the reader. This example of periphrasis, which occurs continually throughout *Cranford*,⁽⁹⁾ recalls the kind of aberration that occurs when, to quote Frank Kermode, "the end comes as expected, but not in the manner expected" (53). The reader is kept at a distance from the story he or she is intent on reading through the narrator's self-conscious deferral of desired information. In *Cranford*, the practice of storytelling is a sustained attempt to displace the "hunger for ends and for crises" (Kermode 55) that propel conventional novel narratives, subverting the reader's assumptions about how the time of narration relates to the end of the narrative. Circumventing the coercion of a propulsive narrative, storytelling gives the women of Cranford autonomy in managing their own time.

<25>In the 1850s what women did, or did not do, with their time became a political issue that was channeled through public debates about the "redundant woman." Following in the wake of

the 1851 census, which revealed a statistical surplus of women in England (Dreher 3), the “problem” of the redundant woman (and what to do with her) became a major concern in the mid-century. As Mary Poovey observes, responses to this problem took the form of scathing public outcry and even plans to facilitate the emigration of women to the colonies (4-5). Another response, supported by writers like Barbara Bodichon and Florence Nightingale, addressed this concern by making the case for the training of women for work outside the home. In *Cassandra* (1852), Nightingale writes: “Women often long to enter some man’s profession where they would find direction, competition (or rather opportunity of measuring the intellect with others), and, above all, time” (210). The problem of redundant women is solved when women have something to do; however, as Nightingale points out, in order to open the sphere of work to women there must be some radical changes in the way temporality is qualified according to gender. According to Nightingale, women have no choice but to “play through life”:

Yet time is the most valuable of all things. If they had come every morning and afternoon and robbed us of half-a-crown we should have had redress from the police. But it is laid down, that our time is of no value. If you offer a morning visit to a professional man, and say, ‘I will just stay an hour with you, if you will allow me, till so and so comes back to fetch me’; it costs him the earnings of an hour, and therefore he has a right to complain. But women have no right, because it is ‘*only* their time.’ (214)

Lamenting the inability of women to cultivate a profession, Nightingale singles out compulsory idleness as the primary cause of women’s inferiority to men. By ceding ownership of time back to women—by giving them the opportunity of using their time for purposes other than polite conversation—Nightingale argues that the redundancy of idle spinsters might be mitigated.

<26>In contrast to the picture that Nightingale paints of women denied ownership of their time, the spinsters and widows of Cranford seem to have more time than they know what to do with. Even when Miss Matty is financially ruined by the failure of a joint stock bank and forced to open a tea shop, her time is spent in much the same way that it was before she entered into business: “Miss Matty sat behind her counter, knitting an elaborate pair of garters: elaborate they seemed to me, but the difficult stitch was not weight upon her mind, for she was singing in a low voice to herself as her needles went rapidly in and out” (172-3). Instead of showing how temporal proprietorship allows women to excel at masculine professions, Gaskell makes the even stronger argument that the sphere of work can be fashioned around the temporality of domestic practices and communality. When Miss Matty first opens her business, she solicits her competition to “inquire if it was likely to injure his business” (169); the narrator’s father reacts to Miss Matty’s un-capitalist like behavior by wondering: “how tradespeople were to get on if there was to be a continual consulting on each others’ interests, which would put a stop to all competition directly” (169-70). Through the way that Miss Matty runs her business, Gaskell shows not only how control over one’s time facilitates a woman’s entry into business, but also how she can make business function according to her own time. Gaskell’s response to the problem of the redundant woman is not that women need to be offered an opportunity to excel in the realm of men, but that women can interlace work with the structure of domestic experience. Miss Matty does not open her business in a commercial space, but in the small dining-parlour of

her home where a “very small ‘Matilda Jenkyns, licensed to sell tea’ was hidden under the lintel of the new door” (169).

<27>Early in the novel Mary Smith connects storytelling and domestic work when she says: “There was all the more time for me to hear old-world stories from Miss Pole, while she sat knitting, and I making my father’s shirts. I always took a quantity of plain sewing to Cranford; for, as we did not read much, or walk much I found it a capital time to get through my work” (32). Later in the novel, Miss Matty shows how commercial enterprise can take on the character of domestic work, linking the temporality of storytelling with that of her business practice. While for Nightingale idleness is something to be conquered, for Gaskell it is the time that underwrites both the practice of storytelling and the success of Miss Matty’s business venture. It is not that the women of Cranford have nothing to do, or that they spend their time doing meaningless things; rather, their idleness is part and parcel of the social networking that takes place in their community. Moreover, Nightingale’s scathing portrait of an idle woman easily serves as a positive endorsement of Gaskell’s project in *Cranford*:

But, in general, a ‘lady’ has too many sketches on hand. She has a sketch of society, a sketch of her children’s education, sketches of her ‘charities,’ sketches of her reading. She is like a painter who should have five pictures in his studio at once, and giving now a stroke to one, and now a stroke to another, till he had made the whole round, should continue this routine to the end. (Nightingale 222)

Like Miss Matty, Miss Pole, and Mrs. Forrester, who spend most of their time telling stories, Gaskell structures *Cranford* around the surprising productivity of idleness: her novel works *because* it is composed of a series of vignettes that draw attention to the time of the telling rather than the anticipation of the end. By rerouting desire through the process of narrative production instead of cultivating anticipation of the end, Gaskell formally reproduces Miss Matty’s success in the business world, which has less to do with the value of her commodity than with the way she goes about selling it.

Mary Smith and Narrative Time

<28>Through the roles that the newspaper and the story play in shaping Cranford’s community, Gaskell suggests that the women of Cranford stake out their place in the world by establishing an alternative temporal zone to the temporalities of modernization, one that attempts to displace the desire for ends with an interminable desire for more stories. Gaskell’s experiment is in some very obvious ways impossible: the story *must* end just as the community of Cranford will eventually pass out of existence. But what *Cranford* draws attention to is the fact that any conclusion is arbitrary, a construction that does not fulfill the reader’s desire so much as reroute it. As Peter Brooks argues:

Any final authority claimed by narrative plots, whether of origin or end, is illusory.... It is the role of fictional plots to impose an end which yet suggests a return, a new beginning: a rereading. Any narrative, that is, wants at its end to refer us back to its middle, to the web of the text: to recapture us in its doomed energies. (109-10)

Describing herself as ‘vibrating’ between the industrial town of Drumble and Cranford (180), the narrator Mary Smith embodies the notion that any departure implies a return, and that any conclusion suggests a “new beginning.” Registering Cranford’s transience even as she celebrates the persistence of the community in the wake of inexorable modernization, Mary Smith’s narrative celebrates the contingency of an ending even while asserting that such an end is inevitable. Therefore, rather than read *Cranford* as about overcoming the finality of an ending or as a community of women that triumph over the stranglehold of masculine norms, it is more accurate to suggest that the novel contributes to destabilizing the gendered assumptions that inhere in narrative temporalities. What this allows us to see is that the way meaning is “construed over and through time” (Brooks 35) is not a universal, formal phenomenon, but one that is deeply embedded in the social and cultural configurations of how gender informs one’s experience of time.

<29>As both character in *Cranford* and narrator of it, Mary Smith begins the novel anonymous and almost disembodied, a mere reporter of the events that take place in the small town. As the novel progresses, her character develops a personality and agency: it is not until chapter fourteen, when she takes Miss Matty’s financial crisis into her own hands and sends a letter to Peter in India, that Mary Smith is finally named. Her protean character and unique perspective of Cranford grounds Boris Knezevic’s claim that Mary Smith is an “amateur reporter” (408): “the crucial fact about Mary’s position relative to Cranford is that, with her economic grounding in Drumble and her gendered place in the domestic circles of Cranford, she is equipped to assume the roles of both observer and participant in the visited culture” (411). As a sort of proto-anthropologist, Mary Smith is invested in her portrayal of Cranford life even as she represents it with an ironic distance that jars with the sincerity of her subjects. During a solemn dinner party with the elite of Cranford society, she narrates: “Peggy came in once more, red with importance. Another tray! ‘Oh, gentility!’ thought I, ‘can you endure this last shock?’” (82). Participating in the draconian code of social events, Mary Smith also mediates them for the reader in a way that fundamentally transforms the meaning: for the women of Cranford, to provide too much food at a party violates social codes that protect their fragile incomes; for the reader, the arbitrariness of these codes is brought into relief with the narrator’s exasperated exclamation of “Oh, gentility!”

<30>Similarly, even as Mary Smith narrates how storytelling enables Cranford to set itself apart from the rest of the world, she suggests that this practice ultimately fails to sustain the community. When Miss Pole retreats to Miss Matty’s house in fear that she might be robbed by a gang of vagabonds terrorizing Cranford, the women do not comfort each other with kind words but draw “out of the recesses of their memory, such horrid stories of robbery and murder, that I quite quaked in my shoes” (110). Miss Pole and Miss Matty continue to trade stories, capping “every story with one yet more horrible” until it reminds the narrator “oddly enough, of an old story I had read somewhere, of a nightingale and a musician, who strove one against the other which could produce the most admirable music, till poor Philomel dropped down dead” (110). The terror that the women feel is transferred into the act of storytelling, whereby they can master their fears in a safe environment. However, unlike the horror stories of Miss Matty and Miss Pole, Mary Smith’s “old story” about Philomel does not assuage her fear by imagining it away through a fiction, but rather imagines violence done to the storyteller herself: in the narrator’s account, it is the surrogate for Miss Pole and Miss Matty—Philomel—who drops down dead. (10) Thus, against the seemingly innocuous background of the exchange of narratives, Gaskell

figures a highly ambivalent relation to storytelling. For Miss Pole and Miss Matty, storytelling is a therapeutic means for dealing with threats from the world outside of Cranford. However, the narrator's allusion to Philomel suggests that the practice of storytelling ultimately results in the very thing that it was meant to displace: death. Mary Smith's mediation between the realms of the written and the oral destabilizes the hard distinction that Benjamin draws between the novel and the story: if the surrogate for the storyteller—Philomel—dies from telling too many stories, then storytelling begins to look a lot like the novel that “kills” Captain Brown. Both literary practices lead to the end of (a) narrative, but they proceed along very different tracks to get there.

<31>The significance of Gaskell's intervention in narrative temporality is not that *Cranford* avoids ends entirely, but that it draws attention to the role that gender plays in texturing duration, making legible how the production of meaning is contingent upon one's temporal assumptions. Mary Smith exhibits such awareness of her own narration when she interrupts moments of protracted description with statements like the following: “But I am getting on too fast, in describing the dresses of the company” (89); or, “I have wandered a long way from the two letters that awaited us on the breakfast-table that Tuesday morning” (141). The whole of *Cranford's* narration might be described as a reaction against “getting on too fast,” of passing over those important details—what the narrator calls “fragments and small opportunities” (22)—that become legible only when some time is taken to recognize that they exist in the first place: “the rose-leaves that gathered ere they fell, to make into a pot-pourri for some one who had no garden; the little bundles of lavender-flowers sent to strew the drawers of some town-dweller, or to burn in the chamber of some invalid” (22). By adopting a periphrastic style, Mary Smith confers meaning on submerged actions (like the act of gathering potpourri) by lingering upon them. Thus, the pace of *Cranford's* narrative serves a specific function in showing how gender and time dynamically structure the way a text produces meaning.

<32>Sensitive to the dynamic between gender and time, Mary Smith registers Gaskell's anxiety about the reception of her own stories. At the beginning of the chapter titled “Old Letters,” the narrator observes that: “I have often noticed that almost everyone has his own individual small economies—careful habits of saving fractions of pennies in some one peculiar direction—any disturbance of which annoys him far more than spending shillings or pounds on some real extravagance” (51). Mary Smith's “small economy” is string: “My pockets get full of little hanks of it, picked up and twisted together, ready for uses that never come” (51). As Eileen Gillooly observes, the narrator's economy of string stands in for the way that Gaskell conceptualizes her own storytelling: like the many narratives that compose *Cranford* itself, the narrator twists together pieces of string that she has “picked up” over the course of her life (903). If Mary Smith's economy of string is Gaskell's economy of stories, then the narrator's complaint that “I am seriously annoyed if anyone cuts the string of a parcel, instead of patiently and faithfully undoing it fold by fold” (51) suggests that changes in temporal norms affect the way stories are produced and consumed. Change, as Rita Felski notes, “is often imposed on individuals against their will,” and the persistence of “everyday rituals may help to safeguard a sense of personal autonomy and dignity, or to preserve the distinctive qualities of a threatened way of life” (84). The disruption of Mary Smith's routine way of opening the parcel—a radical cutting of the string instead of patient unfolding—represents this specific anxiety: how the imposition of temporal changes interrupts not only the daily lives of women, but also her ability to communicate, insofar as changes in time are also changes in the way that meaning is expressed.(11)

<33>The invasions, revisions, and implementations of temporalities—ranging from technologies of modernization like the railroad to literary forms like the newspaper and the story—have wide ranging effects for the way gender is performed and interpreted. I have suggested that the Cranfordians respond to the imposition of modern temporalities in at least two ways. By recontextualizing literary forms from outside of their community—such as the newspaper—they exchange the “timeliness” of the genre for its ability to mediate domestic time. And by preserving older forms of communication such as storytelling, the Amazons explore alternative trajectories of time that displace the reader’s desire for the end of the story with an interminable desire for more stories. If time informs the way gender is understood in *Cranford*, the reverse is also true: the fact that gender is already mapped onto cultural practices suggests that it plays a significant role in the way that time is experienced and perceived. Though Miss Pole’s knitting shares the same rhythm as Mr. Holbrook’s recital of Tennyson, these two individuals appear to occupy two very different, very gendered, worlds. Gender and time form two parts of *Cranford*’s hermeneutic: while the way we experience and perceive time is already colored by gender expectations, these expectations are made legible insofar as they are practiced in time.

<34>The hermeneutic between gender and time contributes to the unique conflicts between Cranford and the masculine world that surrounds it: it is why Miss Matty’s late-life flirtation with her old love is both intensely moving and yet impossible, and it is why we laugh when, as Miss Jessie plays a broken piano, “Miss Jenkyns beat time, out of time, by way of appearing to be so” (*Cranford* 12). Moreover, *Cranford*’s episodic, fragmented, and anecdotal chapters suggests that narrative itself serves as the site through which the hermeneutic between gender and time is negotiated. When age prevents Miss Matty’s love story from ending conventionally in marriage, and Mary Smith’s narrative is punctuated by railway trips between Drumble and Cranford, the reader is presented with examples of how the relation between gender and time impacts the way narratives are formally constructed. For both readers in Cranford and readers of *Cranford*, literary form helps to structure an attitude toward time that does not set feminine temporalities against masculine ones. Rather, what emerges is a brave experiment in the openness to adapt, appropriate, and move between gendered forms of time that suggests Cranford is anything but the static place it appears to be.

Endnotes

(1) Joseph Allen Boone suggests that the representation of memories “creates a sense of both circularity and stasis” that overwhelms “the logic of ‘man-made’ time” (287). Jill Rappoport argues that Cranford is sustained by a “closed circuit” (101) of sympathy that “draws imaginatively on cyclical time” in “contrast to the forward-pushing mentality of the mid-nineteenth-century” (105). Alyson Kiesel continues this trend by underlining the recursive

movement of *Cranford's* narrative: "It is exactly this 'simple movement forward' that eludes *Cranford*...The whole narrative consists of a series of these returns and repetitions..." (1013).(^)

(2)Richard Atlick observes that Gaskell "deliberately blurred the time setting" of her novel for the sake of heightening the disparity between eighteenth-century values and encroaching modernization (136). Nonetheless, citing contemporary events represented in the text, Atlick suggests that *Cranford* takes place in a "general sense of the late 1830s and early 1840s" (136).(^)

(3)According to Jennifer Wicke's article on Thomas Hardy and standardization, the years between 1881 and 1901 formed the time when "the notion of a standard is being crystallized in disparate cultural practices and concretized as a cultural concept" (575).(^)

(4)Gaskell deploys the same staggered delivery of the newspaper in her novel *Ruth* (written while she was writing installments of *Cranford*). Mr. Benson, a poor minister, accepts Mr. Farquhar's charity, though it comes with a temporal differential that reproduces the social-economic inequality between them: "Will you allow me to send you over my *Times*? I have generally done with it before twelve o'clock, and after that it is really waste-paper in my house" (199). Moreover, Farquhar's claim that after twelve o'clock the newspaper becomes "waste-paper" shows the same awareness that Miss Matty and Mary Smith have of the newspapers almost magical transformation from timely information to mere matter.(^)

(5)James Mulvihill further argues for a correspondence between "the local economy of *Cranford/Cranford* and the larger fictional economies directing Gaskell's narrative" (356). The same elegant economy that helps to structure the everyday life of Cranfordians also applies to the way that both the characters and narrator manage their stories. Thus, Mulvihill argues, the women "ration their disclosures" (351) and manage their "fictional store" (355) according to the surplus or scarcity of stories available to them.(^)

(6)In addition to ignorance of the sun's passage, Miss Matty also lacks a more general sense of geologic time, expressing disbelief at the very rotation of the earth: "she had told me, she never could believe that the earth was moving constantly, and that she would not believe it if she could, it made her feel so tired and dizzy whenever she thought about it" (96).(^)

(7)Gaskell's interest in the story and storytelling was not only relegated to her printed work, but also formed a significant part in personal and social life. See Jenny Uglow, 239-40.(^)

(8)Revising Benjamin's thesis, Ivan Krielkamp argues that the storyteller in Victorian fiction was an enabling fiction whereby the author might "idealize the speech community it has relegated to the past" (3).(^)

(9)The reader's expectations are continually assaulted by *Cranford's* narrative: Linda Hughes and Michael Lund point out how the narrator acknowledges her "irregular production of tales" by linking the time that passes within the narrative to that that passes between the publication of *Cranford* in *Household Words* (85). Andrew Miller also discusses the "dilatatory manner" in which

Mary Smith sometimes relates her narrative, especially with regard to the financial crisis: “Instead of immediately revealing this information [about the failure of the joint stock bank]—which would direct the narrative towards its crisis—Mary veers into a description of the postman and his relationship to various Cranford characters...we, as readers, must impatiently wait out exactly this delay ourselves” (107).(^)

(10) Though Mary Smith likely derives her story from John Ford’s play *The Lover’s Melancholy* (1628), the allusion also gestures toward the original Philomel myth. In Ovid’s account of the myth, Philomel—a princess of Athens—is raped by Tereus, who later cuts out her tongue when she threatens to reveal his act. Unable to speak, Philomel tells her story by inscribing Tereus’s crime into the pattern of a robe. Mary Smith’s recollection of Philomel, then, conflates the storyteller with the singing nightingale of Ford’s play, which in turn resonates with the mythological Philomel’s act of using embroidery to tell the story of her rape. In each allusive strata of Mary Smith’s recollection, storytelling is conflated with acts of domestic resistance (telling a story through embroidery) or aggression (singing that ends with death).(^)

(11) In a much discussed instance from *Cranford*’s publishing history, Dickens used his authority as editor of *Household Words* to change Captain Brown’s reading of choice from *The Pickwick Papers* to the “Poems of Thomas Hood,” to the great displeasure of Gaskell. The figure of Charles Dickens crystallizes Gaskell’s anxiety concerning the quickening pace of everyday life and the overwhelming authority of male agency, characteristics that have an obvious alternative in *Cranford*’s dilatory style and sympathetic community of women. (^)

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