Reading Women Writing

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Nobody's Angels

MIDDLE-CLASS WOMEN AND DOMESTIC IDEOLOGY IN VICTORIAN CULTURE

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Elizabeth Gaskell’s Wives and Daughters share with Dickens’s novels a tension between the boy/man/son romance plot and the corollary drive of the loving couple toward solid, middle-class respectability. The different ideological positions of Dickens and Gaskell reflect and intensify the twin measures of tangible income and intangible status. Gaskell’s novels extend to the construction of the domestic arts as a key to successful pursuit of the middle-class respectability. In part, their different positions within the Victorian home hold only in exaggerated acknowledgment of the rise to bourgeois respectability. The different ideological positions of Dickens and Gaskell reflect and intensify the twin measures of tangible income and intangible status. Gaskell’s novels extend to the construction of the domestic arts as a key to successful pursuit of the middle-class respectability.
creative arts. 1 Damned with faint praise by Henry James, who remarks the dependence of her art on “modest domestic facts,” Gaskell has represented precisely how realities are constructed out of quotidian “feminine” details, a significance that has escaped many readers in addition to James. In this regard, Elizabeth Gaskell declares literary allegiance with Sarah Ellis, who was emboldened to write The Women of England by her conviction that the “apparently insignificant detail of familiar and ordinary life” bears out the “often-repeated truth—that ‘trifles make the sum of human things’” (1).

Fort though it may be, the notion continues to meet stubborn resistance. 2 In her book on the subject, Naomi Schor helps to explain the detail “as negativity” because it participates in a “larger semantic network, bounded on the one side by the ornamental, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the everyday, whose ‘prosiness’ is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women.” In short, “the detail is rendered and doubly gendered as feminine” (4). Gaskell is working to disrupt the ideological script that encodes the detail as trivial because of its association with the feminine. Her narrative procedures suggest that we should heed Michel Foucault, who recognizes behind “minute material details” the presence of “alien strategies” of power and knowledge (Discipline 30).

Elizabeth Gaskell’s letters and novels reflect the primary importance of details as the basis for generating meanings and social order. Fundamental to Gaskell’s conception of herself is the imbrication of her housekeeping and literary arts. The “Gaskell” represents in and by the letters is a woman who throws amid domestic demands. Her correspondence reveals a woman deeply engaged in day-to-day life: minitiae on dress, visitors, child care, servants, accounts, and household arrangements pepper her narratives. Although Gaskell consciously grounds her labors within a rhetoric of “natural” duties as a way of authorizing whatever activities might appear outside the frame of conventional expectations, she portrays herself as a woman who worked to construct her social and domestic life even as she worked to construct her novels. 3

The house, as base for social organization, represents not bourgeois woman’s isolation but her class privilege and economic power. In an early letter, Gaskell confesses to Eliza Fox her guilty delight in getting a house: compunction that so many people cannot afford one, joy in the context it provides for her varied talents (Letters 108). Its purchase provokes Gaskell’s speculations on her various “mes”:

“I have a great number, and that’s the plague. One of my mes is, I do believe, a true Christian ... another ... is a wife and mother, and highly delighted at the delight of everyone else in the house. ... Now that’s my ‘social’ self I suppose. Then again I’ve another self with a full taste for beauty and convenience which is pleased on its own account” (Letters 108). What to many may have seemed a fragmentation of personality produced by divergent claims, Gaskell celebrates as a multiplicity of selves. Although she speaks of being plagued by her “mes,” the letters present a picture of a woman comfortable with the concept of multiple selves, with the fluidity of identity and subjectivity to which her life gives rise.

The literary Gaskell, too, emerges out of the household maelstrom. Gaskell’s letters brim over with domestic details, and she appears to delight particularly in corresponding with those individuals, like Charles Eliot Norton, who appreciate the representation of her “social self”: “My dear Mr Norton, if I could write you short letters I should write to you much oftener; but you see I can’t dash off the minute Gaskell-family-detail letters I know you like all in a minute. I am sitting here by myself in the dining room by the light of one candle,—half disturbed and half-amused by the chatter of the children’ in the next room” (Letters 643). She characteristically emphasizes her physical position in the house—the center from which she directs affairs—as a strategy for ordering her letter: “Now

3 For example, Gaskell confesses her gratitude to “Him that I am a wife and a mother and that I am so happy in the performance of those clear and defined duties.” She pitied women “deprived of their natural duties as wives & mothers,” who had to look out for other duties if they wished[a] to be at peace” (Letters 118, 117).
I shall go into detail. I am sitting in the dining-room, (It is a comfort to think you know our rooms and our people,) Elliott taking away breakfast things, Meta taking Julia to school, Mr Gaskell in bed with a cold . . . and I myself in a doleful mood because some Chrysanthemums I have been nursing up into bloom this past summer were carelessly left out-of-doors this past night & have been frozen to death" (Letters 579). For Gaskell, the discursive practices of the social self—etiquette, dress, dining, household management—constitute knowledge of an individual and for an individual. The social self, then, grounds meaning.

Indeed, Gaskell's expressed regrets at frequent interruptions of her literary labors seem more a concession to convention than a reflection of impatience with her life. Rather than bemoan her lack of literary leisure, she seems rather to revel in the reach of her organizational powers. She writes to Charles Eliot Norton:

I am sitting at the round writing table in the dining-room . . . If I had a library like yours, all undisturbed for hours, how I would write! Mrs. Chapone's letters should be nothing to me! I would outdo Rasselas in fiction. But you see every body comes to me perpetually. Now in this hour since breakfast I have had to decide on the following variety of important questions. Boiled beef—how long to boil? What perennial will do in Manchester smoke, & what colours our garden wants? Length of skirt for a gown? Salary of a nursery governess, & stipulations for a certain quantity of time to be left to herself.—Read letters on the state of Indian army—lent me by a very agreeable neighbour & return them, with a proper note, & as many wise remarks as would come in a hurry. Settle 20 questions of dress for the girls, who are going out for the day; & want to look nice & yet not spoil their gowns with the mud &c &c—See a lady about an MS story of hers, & give her disheartening but very good advice. Arrange about selling two poor cows for one good one,—see purchasers, & show myself up to cattle questions, keep, & prices,—and it's not 1/2 past 10 yet! (Letters 487–90)

This is a representation not of a frustrated, distracted individual but of a competent, energetic, practical, and successful manager. Gaskell's net effect is not to lament the lack of a library but to point to her extraordinary reach and range of accomplishments.

"It is interesting here to contrast Gaskell's representation of domestic life with the more famous negative depiction that Florence Nightingale provided in Cassandra. We might account for the difference in two ways. First, Gaskell is far from "idle," and she does not share Nightingale's assessment of "useless" and time-wasting etiquette practices. Second, the difference may reflect the distinction between the mother's and daughter's positions in the household. There could be only one manager, and thus daughters were often raised in idleness because they were deemed too fine to perform the functions of upper servants. Nightingale's reflections also serve as tendentious arguments for her own extraordinary career. The submerged text there is that this great nursing administrator learned and honed her talents in the home.

The Sufficient Ladies of Cranford

Cranford the novel and Cranford the place are, quite simply, worlds structured by women's signifying systems: calling and visiting, teas and dinners, domestic economies, charitable activities, and management of servants. Cranford, with its cultural capital, con-
trasts explicitly with the neighboring city of Drumble, a world marked by expanding material capital based on factories and production, money and investments. The former appears at first glance to be stagnant, even moribund. The aging spinsters and childless widows who populate the town must eventually die. Given our conventional understanding that such lives are empty and trivial, the novel should tell a gloomy tale. Or, if it instead strikes a jocular note, it seems it must do so at the expense of the ladies. Yet those who know the novel can attest that its author finds its subjects neither risible nor morbid. They are, however, humorous; Gaskell herself confessed, ‘Whenever I am ailing or ill, I take Cranford and—I was going to say, enjoy it! (but that would not be pretty) laugh over it afresh!’ (Letters 747). That humor arises from the fullness of meaning invested in the smallest details of daily life. Cranford brims over with engaged life; everything matters intensely because meanings are fluid, emerging moment by moment, producing valuable cultural capital for the ladies who are society’s semioticians. The only cynic in the book, Mary Smith’s father, represents the commercial world of Drumble, and the economic capital he stands for seems curiously unproductive.

The critical literature on Cranford stresses its “charm,” “delicacy,” and “fragility.” The novel, Peter Keating argues, presents a “rigorous exploration of a dying way of life” (10). But such an analysis is too simple. Is Cranford dying? Brief reflection suggests that it is surprisingly resilient and self-sustaining. Although their way of life seems destined to die with the current crop of old ladies, in fact, it has already maintained itself through a couple of generations. Matty remembers of her girlhood: “There were many old ladies living here then; we are principally ladies now, I know; but we are not so old as the ladies used to be when I was a girl” (94). The wonderful malapropos logic of the recollection suggests that, in the case of Cranford at least, plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose. There have always been old ladies in Cranford; there will always be old ladies in Cranford. Even the group currently assembled ranges in age from sixtyish Miss Matty to thirtyish Mrs. Fitz-Adam, an arriviste in Cranford society. The acceptance of Fitz-Adam stems from the death of one of the staunch old guard, Miss Deborah Jenkyns: “With her, something of the clear knowledge of the strict code of gentility went out too. As Miss Pole observed, ‘As most of the ladies of good family in Cranford were elderly spinsters, or widows without children, if we did not relax a little, and become less exclusive, by-and-by we should have no society at all’” (109).

The ladies achieve remarkable success in reproducing themselves in Cranford, a kind of parthenogenesis that gives a sharper ironic point to their observation that “a man . . . is so in the way in the house” (39). And we already glimpse the generation to come. Mary Smith, the young narrator, passes through several seasons of nuptial eligibility during the novel without finding a husband. Indeed, she does not seem to want one. Warned by one of the spinsters, Miss Pole, that it “argued great natural credulity in a woman if she could not keep herself from being married,” Mary Smith can keep her own opinion (157). She confesses, “If I had been inclined to be daunted from matrimony, it would not have been Miss Pole to do it”; then she adds, “it would have been the lot of poor Signor Bruni and his wife” (159). Their story of privation and the death of six of their seven children stands as a cautionary tale even to those women with some “credulity.”

Cranford, “in possession of the Amazons,” far from being rigid and moribund, finds ways to renew itself (39). And, tellingly, the world of men, the world represented in part by the distant rumble of Drumble, is figured through images of sterility: the bankruptcy of the Town and Country Bank, the chicanery that costs Mr. Smith “upwards of a thousand pounds” in one year, and Mr. Jenkyn’s public flogging of his son, Peter, which “killed” the boy’s mother (201, 101). Gaskell’s great triumph in Cranford lies in her ability to take the apparently trivial and make it productive, while reevaluating the apparently productive world of commerce and suggesting its emptiness. The novel, in this way, serves as both exemplum and elaboration of Virginia Woolf’s comment in A Room of One’s Own that

the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally, this is so. Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are “important”; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes “trivial.” And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room. A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop—everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists. (76–77)

Yet, my point here comprehends much more than an examination of the differences between male and female worlds and the hierarchiz-
ing of values that inevitably occurs when we speak of separate spheres. I argue not only that Gaskell depicts a woman’s world, which she informs with significance, but also that she represents reality as a construction. Woolf seems to hint at such a process in claiming that “since a novel has this correspondence to real life, its values are to some extent those of real life” (76), but she does not press the issue of “reality” itself, arguing instead for woman’s vision as a correction and expansion of reality as it is dominantly presented through a male point of view. I do not want to claim, then, as in a traditional oppositional dialectic, that the women defeat the men, the feminine displaces the masculine. Rather, Gaskell suggests the way in which reality itself is always contested, an expression of the values of a dominant group.

Gaskell represents, as does Dickens, the process by which middle-class women emerged as makers of meanings and shapers of class in mid-Victorian England. Gaskell’s mystifications are not Dickens’s, however. Nobody would think of terming Miss Matty, or Miss Pole, or Mrs. Jamieson an “Angel in the House.” That epithet is reserved for blooming, blushing youth, for the virginal maiden and tender mother. For Gaskell, the mystifications of “angel” give way to the mystifications of “spinster,” a term, like “angel,” that implies remoteness from concerns of the “real world.” The current of life flows on, but an old maid, so the cultural encoding suggests, has drifted into the backwater. Gaskell plays with these connotations, both confirming and counterventing them, so that Cranford is at once about the transience of a way of life and about the emergence of a world whose meanings are controlled by middle-class women.

This is a world made up of fragments but, significantly, not a world in fragments. Cranford is socially cohesive and conservative. The very fragmentary, seemingly ephemeral “work” the ladies do defuses its potential threat. Yet it is enormously productive. Cranford is both so interesting and so telling partly because middle-class men play only a tangential role in the novel. Although the ladies have all inherited monies from husbands or fathers, those funds are now entirely in their hands along with the ideological and semiotic work—women’s work—of managing the class question and displaying middle-class status.

Cranford is finally a novel about economies: explicitly domestic and implicitly national. Economy functions in the novel in three major senses: as a system of national resource management; as the thrifty use of material resources; and in an archaic sense, as household management itself. The women’s practical, conservative economies are shadowed by speculative national economies, whose unscrupulous management threatens their well-being, as in the collapse of the Town and Country Bank that bankrupts Miss Matty. The conjunction of the ladies’ fixed incomes—their lack of economic productivity—with their productivity of social meanings generates a different economy in Cranford, one they term “elegant” in contrast to a vulgar money-getting-and-spending one.

The principle of elegant economy enters into a chain of social signifiers but also has substantial immediate effects in allowing women to marshal scarce resources toward particular ends. The narrator articulates the economic principle at work: “I had often occasion to notice the use that was made of fragments and small opportunities in Cranford; the rose-leaves that were 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. Things that many would despise, and actions which it seemed scarcely worth while to perform, were all attended to in Cranford” (54). The narrator carefully saves pieces of string and wonders “how people can bring themselves to use India-rubber rings, which are a sort of deflection of string” (83). Miss Matty is “charity of candles” and, in addition, saves old notes and receipts to make into candle-lighters (84). Instead of the conspicuous consumption and waste of a “vulgar” economy, the “elegant” economy bases itself on recycling resources: old dresses, fragments of flowers, pieces of string, ends of candles, old notes and receipts. It privileges exchange over consumption: the newspaper circulating among the ladies early presages the way more substantial resources will circulate among them to protect their world, their ways, and their privilege. This Cranfordian “elegant economy,” though not productive of new material resources, is productive of substantial social capital and, therefore, calls into question the stability of currency as a signifier. Indeed, Cranford points to the very instability of money as a sign; it is just one interpretable sign among many.

The women are all relatively poor, but they manipulate cultural

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1 Nina Auerbach takes this position in Communities of Women, concluding, “In the verbal and commercial battle of nineteenth-century England, the cooperative female community defeats the warrior world that proclaims itself the real one” (87).

2 Auerbach points to Cranford’s unsettling “power to obliterate men” with its “corresponding gift of producing them at need” (Communities 81).
codes so adeptly and control so effectively the discursive practices that signal class—dress, dining, and the rules of etiquette that govern visiting, calls, and cuts—that they can dispense with any ostentatious display of a capitalist society tainted by the “vulgarity” of money-spending. The narrator admits, “We none of us spoke of money, because that subject savoured of commerce and trade, and though some might be poor, we were all aristocratic” (41). And she adds, “We had tacitly agreed to ignore that any with whom we associated on terms of visiting equality could ever be prevented by poverty from doing anything that they wished . . . we blinded ourselves to the vulgar fact, that we were, all of us, people of very moderate means” (42). And so they are, a condition that makes palpable the extent to which status has come to depend on a manipulation of signs. Their behaviors challenge the values of an industrial capitalism that seeks to stabilize meaning and value in productivity, profit, and use.

Instead, Gaskell represents a meaning that is always in the process of being created. The ladies all collaborate in one another’s machinations, in their scripting of a middle-class scenario, as when “Mrs. Forrester . . . gave a party in her baby-house of a dwelling, and the little maiden disturbed the ladies on the sofa by a request that she might get the tea-tray out from underneath, every one took this novel proceeding as the most natural thing in the world; and talked on about household forms and ceremonies, as if we all believed that our hostess had a regular servants’ hall, second table, with housekeeper and steward” (41). The ladies’ behavior demonstrates that they are not naive semioticians, prey to the belief that signifiers and signifieds, signs and referents all collapse in some determinate way. They are, instead, alive to the play of the signifier, and they endlessly accommodate aberrations within their signifying practice. Perhaps the most humorous recognition of the power of these practices, albeit a tacit one, occurs when Miss Matty relates the story of her brother, Peter, and his pranks, which involve dressing up as a woman and gulling his father, a narrative that confirms the centrality of the sign: “Peter said, he was awfully frightened himself when he saw how my father took it all in, and even offered to copy out all his Napoleon Buonaparte sermons for her—him, I mean—no, her, for Peter was a lady then” (94). In Miss Matty’s semiotics, if Peter signifies he is a “woman,” then that is how she will represent him in her narrative.

The performance of gender that is both explicitly and implicitly acknowledged here feeds into a more general and pervasive staging of identity that focuses on class. In a similarly humorous vein, Gaskell represents the ladies’ eccentric dress, which is “very independent of fashion” (40). The ladies observe, “What does it signify how we dress here at Cranford, where everybody knows us?” And if they go away from home, their reason is equally cogent: “What does it signify how we dress here, where nobody knows us?” (40). These antiquated ladies grasp an essential point of semiotics in understanding the arbitrariness of how things “signify.” Yet, the vaunted indifference to dress is, in reality, only an indifference to the latest fashions, which the ladies cannot afford. They make do with an occasional new cap “to suit the fashion of the day,” confident that the quality of their clothing, its “chaste elegance and propriety,” will always denote their social position (120). That is the telling signification.

The women’s deployment of these signifying systems and their grasp of the realms constituted by these systems ultimately affords them remarkable latitude in arriving at social meanings; their flexibility in discursive practice declarations itself in their circumvention of seeming improprieties. For example, when Captain Brown arrives in Cranford, he immediately speaks loudly and publicly about his poverty, which is a “word not to be mentioned in ears polite” (42). Such “vulgar” behavior should dictate a social cut, but “somehow, Captain Brown made himself respected in Cranford, and was called upon in spite of all resolutions to the contrary” (42). On another occasion, Captain Brown makes an egregious social blunder in “taking a poor old woman’s dinner out of her hands, one very slippery Sunday” and escorting her home (49). The ladies conveniently reinterpret the semiotics of the event so that they need not deny themselves the captain’s pleasant company.

These last examples introduce us to the complex signifying practices of the Cranford ladies, the ways in which they are creating meaning rather than slavishly following rigid social formulas. The very conventions that seem, in the abstract, to bind them, prove enormously flexible in their practice. Cranford represents a female society so well versed in the semiotics of class and efficient enough in economic management that it has obviated the need for men. The narrator early announces the aptitude of the ladies for all the pur-

*Patsy Stoneman interprets these details in a more conventional way. She claims that the “proliferation of specialized names of fabrics . . . reflects the narrowing preoccupation with dress deployed by Mary Wollstonecraft” (92). We once more come up against the trivialization of detail. It is useful, in this context, to recall Virginia Woolf’s caveat against reading through an ideological grid that encodes women’s preoccupation with fashion as “trivial” (A Room of One’s Own 77).
poses of daily life: “For obtaining clear and correct knowledge of everybody’s affairs in the parish; for keeping their neat maid-servants in admirable order; for kindness (somewhat dictatorial) to the poor, and real tender good offices to each other whenever they are in distress, the ladies of Cranford are quite sufficient” (59). Thus begins Gaskell’s humorous revision of a domestic ideology which dictated a man’s concerns and comfort as a woman’s chief occupation. That same revision scouts conclusions, like those of Carol Dyhouse, that “the economic dependence of wives and daughters advertised the independence and the status of the male breadwinner” (“Middle-class Mothers and Daughters” 28). Here, obviously, the women are more than advertisements for the male. The economic independence of the Cranford women, their horror that marriage might be a contagion they could catch like a cold, allows us to appreciate Gaskell’s demystification of social practices.

The ladies’ small and practical gestures, their “careful economies” (193), enter into a larger system of exchange based on cooperation rather than competition. In Miss Matty’s financial collapse, all the ladies pool their resources to enable her to stay in her house. Moreover, the domestic ideology of mutual interdependence (of social relations as “familial”) enables Miss Matty to achieve a competitive edge in the business of selling tea. She achieves it through cooperation rather than competition: she “had trotted down to [her competitor Mr. Johnson’s] shop . . . to tell him of the project that was entertained, and to inquire if it was likely to injure his business” (200). Mary Smith’s father, their financial adviser, terms this idea “‘great nonsense’ and ‘wondered how tradespeople were to get on if there was to be a continual consulting of each other’s interests, which would put a stop to all competition directly’” (200). But the step answers very well, for Mr. Johnson sends all his customers to Miss Matty for their choice teas “saying that the teas he kept were of a common kind” (200-201). Miss Matty simply supercedes the competitive business ethic with a cooperative social ethic that quite successfully manages social interaction among individuals and classes; Mr. Johnson, the lower-middle-class shopkeeper is only too happy to oblige the rector’s daughter, who is related to Lady Arley.

That same class solidarity also facilitates intraclass bonding when the ladies need to protect one of their own. When Miss Matty goes bankrupt, the community colludes in stratagems to enable her to open a shop selling tea “without materially losing caste” (184). Mrs. Jamieson, the social arbiter, decrees that “whereas a married woman takes her husband’s rank by the strict laws of precedence, an un-

married woman retains the station her father occupied” (199). This decision contradicts an earlier conclusion that Miss Jessie Brown, impoverished by the death of her father, Captain Brown, betrays a lack of proper feeling in proposing to go into a shop. “Some people,” one lady argues, “have[n] no idea of their rank as a captain’s daughter” (59). In another, analogous episode, the community is scandalized that a lady would even speak, in polite company, of having shopkeepers as relatives. Yet Miss Matty opens a shop and thrives socially as well as economically.

Matty’s success calls into question conventional ideas of the home and women’s role within it, and thus contributes to the subversion of domestic ideology that bespeaks women’s naiveté, innocence, and ignorance. Miss Matty has run a tight financial ship at home, settling and balancing her accounts every Monday (118). She confesses to Mary Smith: “I never was ambitious . . . but I thought I could manage a house (my mother used to call me her right hand)” (158). And when her bank collapses, she is able to calculate to the pence her loss of income: “one hundred and forty-nine pounds thirteen shillings and fourpence a year” (179). The exactness speaks for itself. Mary Smith and Miss Matty have the last word. In response to her father’s comment that Miss Matty’s “simplicity might be very well in Cranford, but would never do in the world,” Mary notes, “And I fancy the world must be very bad, for with all my father’s suspicion of every one with whom he has dealings, and in spite of all his many precautions, he lost upwards of a thousand pounds by roguery only last year” (201).

I suggested earlier that it has been easy for critics to miss the ideological subversion that occurs in Cranford when gender and class are read simultaneously. Such critics often stress, therefore, the ways in which male characters “when they do appear in the shapes of Captain Brown, Holbrook, Peter, and to a lesser extent Signor Brunoni . . . bring with them, by their very awareness of a wider world and larger values of life, a serious challenge to Cranford’s existence” (Keating 24). This is precisely the conclusion the text works against. Why, we might ask with Virginia Woolf, are men’s values always “larger”? What is larger about the provincialism of Holbrook, who stubbornly holds to his yeoman habits and disdains all refinement? What is larger about the hand-to-mouth existence of Signor Brunoni, whose wanderings have led to the deaths of all but one of his children? What is larger about Captain Brown, who has scandalously pronounced his poverty in a loud voice to the ladies of Cranford but doesn’t manage even a whisper of it to Lord Mulever, whose life
he has saved and who might help relieve his distress? Mr. Smith, with all his practical wisdom, has nothing to do but facilitate the plans that women have already originated. And Peter? "Peter was a lady then." According to critic Peter Keating, Peter Jenkyns, in dressing as his elder sister and pretending to nurse a baby, "strikes instinctively at the repressive life around him" (25). But, properly considered, Peter is more comfortable with women than men, and his prank is just a good joke. And the only person profoundly disturbed by it and the unstable meanings it suggests is Reverend Jenkyns, the rector, who tore off the feminine clothes and "before all the people...lifted up his cane, and flogged Peter" in an attempt to end the play of signifiers (96), an action that ultimately defeats him and spells the decline of patriarchal rule in Cranford.

Not only does Cranford question the proposition of a "larger world" inhabited and dominated by men, but it also troubles gender categories. When Reverend Jenkyns strips off Peter's clothes, the narrator does not describe what is underneath. The text never names Peter's body, which is an absent signifier. Thus, this scene also-emblematics the way in which the novel denies biology and the body as telling signifiers within the ladies' discursive practices. Peter, who prefers dressing as a woman, announces thereby his identity and position within society, just as his sister Deborah, with her "helmet" cap, declares herself her father's logical heir.

Peter, who loves performing identities, also takes on racial difference. When he finally returns to Cranford from India, many years after he has fled the patriarchal tyranny of his father, he does so in the guise of Aga Jenkyns. The ladies think of him as the "arrival from India" who tells "more wonderful stories than Sinbad the Sailor" (211). "So very Oriental," Peter once again appropriates the status of an Other to destabilize cultural encodings. He enters smoothly into the ladies' elegant economy, facilitating the social interactions and cooperation upon which it depends.

In this regard Peter is a positive and revisionary figure in the novel. But there is another dimension to his narrative positioning. In a commentary on traditional patriarchal practice, Luce Irigaray has suggested that men trade in women to facilitate their homosocial bonding: "Wives, daughters, and sisters have value only in that they serve as the possibility of, and potential benefit in, relations among men. The use of and traffic in women subvert and uphold the reign of masculine hom(m)o-sexuality" (172). When Peter teases his now-aged sister about playing her cards very badly in letting his friend Holbrook slip through her fingers, he implies that he might once have carried out such a role in Matty's life. He laughs that she "wanted [her] brother to be a good go-between" (213). But Cranford refuses the story of women exchanged, like other commodities, for the "smooth workings of man's relations with himself, of relations among men" (Irigaray 172) and substitutes the alternative economy I have explored here. When Peter returns, he is himself positioned as the figure that facilitates female bonding, yet within an economy that does not degrade him as commodified object. Irigaray questions about women: "But what if these 'commodities' refused to go to 'market'? What if they maintained 'another' kind of commerce, among themselves?" (190). She postulates that "use and exchange would be indistinguishable. The greatest value would be at the same time the least kept in reserve" (197). Irigaray's closing words to "Commodities among Themselves" read as an apt coda to the struggle between the worlds of Drumble, with its "laborious accumulation of capital," and Cranford, with its recycled resources: "As for all the strategies and savings, the appropriations tantamount to theft and rape, the laborious accumulation of capital, how ironic all that would be" (197).

Yet the harmonious conclusion of Cranford, which I here postulate, depends entirely upon the mystification of labor: both household work and childbirth. Production and reproduction are class issues in the novel. As persistently as the text denies the body of Peter and his sexuality, it just as pertinaciously insists on the body and its functions as a class signifier. Miss Matty refuses to suck an orange in public because the activity evokes a suckling child. She cannot eat peas with the utensils available because the action would be indelicate. She is so entirely ignorant of biology that she fails to perceive her maid's pregnancy and accepts unquestioningly the seemingly "miraculous" arrival of a baby, which the narrator encodes as a "little bundle of flannel" (204). Against Miss Matty's effaced, refined body stands the flesh of her maidservant Martha, her sexuality writ large through her pregnancy.

The novel opens with the observation that "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

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Dennis Allen has given sustained attention to the confusion of gender in Cranford, a confusion that stems from a refusal to name the body. He argues that Gaskell's construction of gender differences relies on a biology she is "reluctant to express." She handles the threat posed by biology through the Virgin Mary motif, where motherhood is the "ideal of a biology without sexuality," a cultural fiction that renders the vulgar facts of the body acceptable to culture by redefining them to exclude the sexual (77-78).
in the town, somehow the gentleman disappears” (39). Ironically, the number of middle-class men seems in inverse ratio to the number of men in the lower classes, so the task of class management—the “servant difficulty”—devolves entirely on women:

This subject of servants was a standing grievance, and I could not wonder much at it; for if gentlemen were scarce, and almost unheard of in the “gentile society” of Cranford, they or their counterparts—handsome young men—abounded in the lower classes. The pretty neat servant-maids had their choice of desirable “followers,” and their mistresses... might well feel a little anxious, lest the heads of their comely maids should be turned by the joiner, or the butcher, or the gardener; who were obliged, by their callings, to come to the house; and who, as ill-luck would have it, were generally handsome and unmarried. (64-65)

The “ill luck” of handsome and unmarried lower-class men gives rise to a number of regulatory strategies and rules governing “followers.” “Gentle” Miss Matty, for example, initially forbids her maid-of-all-work any followers whatsoever, a policy laid down during the reign of her more austere sister. Her first frisky maid, Fanny, practices deception and concealment; Mary Smith confesses that “a vision of a man seemed to haunt the kitchen” (65). And Fanny plays on her mistress’s “weakness in order to bewilder her, and to make her feel more in the power of her clever servant” (67). Fanny’s tenure, however, is brief: “It so fell out that Fanny had to leave” (65). This explanation tells us nothing and everything. Its brevity, its elliptical nature, is fleshed out by our sense that her disrespect and dishonesty disqualify her for holding the situation.

Fanny’s replacement is “a rough, honest-looking country-girl, who had only lived in a farm place before” (65), and even though the new servant, Martha, is “terribly deficient” in knowledge of household routines and needs careful instruction, the ladies prefer to train her and mold her to their values rather than work with someone more competent but less respectful of class prerogatives. Martha is both honest and properly grateful that “missus is very kind, and there’s plenty to eat and drink, and no more work but what I can do easily” (79). Her loyalty is rewarded when Miss Matty, reminded of her own disappointed love, relents on her policy regarding suitors and decides to allow Martha one follower, who

may visit one day a week. In her capacity as servant, Martha is being drilled in the routines of middle-class life, disciplining her preference for men and regulating her sexual appetites to “once a week.”

In internalizing middle-class values this domestic servant is seemingly closing the gap between herself and her mistress; yet, representations of the body reinscribe their class positions. Earlier in the novel, Miss Matty and Mary Smith had tried to instruct Martha in how to serve a dinner for ladies and gentlemen. When her teachers tell her to serve ladies first at table, Martha leaves them both “uncomfortable and shocked” when she responds that “I’ll do it as you tell me, ma’am... but I like lads best” (68). Her robust sexuality functions, in part, to highlight the ladies’ prudery. Yet, at the same time, her frank acknowledgment of bodily needs—food and drink and sex—marks her as lower class; the biological imperatives signify her social position and naturalize the difference between her mistress and herself. Thus, the internalized values function largely in a regulatory rather than in an equalizing way.

The gap between labor and management is further reinforced by the represented synergy between Martha and Miss Matty. Indeed, if one more depends on the other, the text suggests that labor requires management, rather than the other way around. In a significant displacement, when Miss Matty loses her fortune, Martha is depicted as more devastated by the prospect of leaving her “kind” mistress than her mistress is by the prospect of sacrificing her competent servant. In this way, Martha is represented as requiring the very conditions that contribute to her class oppression. The social discipline is so successful that Martha remains unwavering in her loyalty to her mistress and hurries her surprised suitor, Jem Hearn, into marriage so that she and he can continue to provide a home for the spinster. His excellent joiner’s wages of “three-and-sixpence a-day” contribute to the wherewithal to keep the lady’s establishment going. Before he has even moved in, Jem promises that “Martha would do her best to make you comfortable; and I’d keep out of your way as much as I could, which I reckon would be the best kindness such an awkward chap as me could do” (189). When Miss Matty’s fortunes are restored by the return of Peter, the community assumes that Martha and Jem will now move out of the mistress’s house. But “Miss Matty would not hear of this” (213). In fact, she holds tenaciously to her position: “As long as Martha would remain with Miss Matty, Miss Matty was only too thankful to have her about her.” And Jem has succeeded so completely in his promise to “keep out of
[her] way” that Miss Matty finds him “a very pleasant man to have in the house, for she never saw him from week’s end to week’s end” (214). He, like the middle-class gentlemen of Cranford, conveniently disappears, his presence marked only by the daughter Martha bears to fill the arms of a mistress, the ease of whose body naturalizes the difference between them. Miss Matty happily anticipates the “probable children”: “If they would all turn out such little darlings as her god-daughter Matilda, she should not mind the number, if Martha didn’t. Besides the next one was to be called Deborah” (214). A happy circumstance indeed; the lot of management—the child is to be a girl named Deborah—falls to Miss Matty while the labor of childbirth falls to Martha. One has the mental work, the other the menial labor, a reinscription of the “head” and “hands” dialectic. It certainly is an ideal set-up for the bourgeoisie; it almost seems “ Providential,” especially when the mistress gets all the ethical credit for damping social opinion to preserve intact her little “family.” Class difference has all but disappeared from before our eyes.

If Dickens’s novels indulge in the romance of terming the desire for a household manager “love,” Gaskell’s Cranford colludes in the romance of interclass commonweal, the notion celebrated in the manuals that Providence so ordained domestic service to allow the lower classes to benefit from the middle-class models even as the middle class profited from lower-class labor. Nonetheless, one never forgets who is serving whom. However convenient it may be to close the class gap from time to time, it can always be reasserted, as we see when Miss Betty Barker entertains her friends with the help of her maidservant, Peggy. The narrator says: “When Peggy came in, tottering under the weight of the tea-tray, I noticed that Miss Barker was sadly afraid lest Peggy should not keep her distance sufficiently. She and her mistress were on very familiar terms in their every-day intercourse, and Peggy wanted now to make several little confidences to her, which Miss Barker was on thorns to hear; but which she thought it her duty, as a lady, to repress” (111). This is not to argue that the class structure allows no movement. Perhaps little Matilda Hearn will successfully internalize middle-class values and so facilitate her own rise in class status.

Gaskell, in fact, does represent class mobility, albeit as a limited, conservative process. The many etiquette practices, as I noted earlier, were directed not at the working classes, who needed to be managed in a household but did not threaten the upper middle classes. Rather, they were aimed at the lower middle classes, the tradespeople and shopkeepers, who aspired to gentility, having already purchased the house and hired the servants that lifted them into the middle class generally. The Miss Barkers in Cranford are themselves an example of successful social climbing. The eldest began as a maid to Mrs. Jamieson, one of the ladies with whom she now visits as an equal. She and her sister enjoyed a significant rise in status with the purchase of a select millinery shop. Their strict policies—they would not sell their caps and ribbons to any one without a pedigree (105) (that is, they snub their former companions)—have made them both valued among the elite of Cranford and capable of dressing with sufficient elegance to take their place among them. Thus, those who can become disciplined to the routines, rhythms, and refinements of middle-class life may find the path to gentility open before them, especially if they help to bar the gates behind. For the ladies are always at the gate to ensure that the established forms are fulfilled and the distinctions carefully preserved.

The social practices of the ladies produce a strong class solidarity that facilitates numerous offices of kindness to the poor. Charity begins, however, at a remove of two steps down the social ladder. The narrator remarks that the Miss Barkers “aped their betters in having ‘nothing to do’ with the class immediately below theirs” (106). This policy helps explain the unexampled goodness of the ladies to their maids, where no danger of class confusion exists, and the absolute distance maintained between them and the wives of local shopkeepers and farmers, members of the prosperous merchant and yeoman classes that often surpass theirs monetarily.

Gaskell’s Cranford is written against the grain of traditional ideology that positions “old maids” on the margins of productive activity. In its understanding of the ways in which women’s discursive practices and their quotidian details constitute society and its meanings, it constructs another reality, another truth that counters that of women’s marginality, passivity, and dependence. At the same time, Cranford points both forcefully and subtly to the way that the “Providential” logic of class exploitation is daily rearticulated in the home by those very women who—so Victorian mythology tells us—are seemingly most removed from the class question.

The novel’s multiple figurations of female subjects as cultural capitalists managing human and monetary resources produce complex, even conflictual, responses. To describe this world and its inhabitants through such commonly employed adjectives as “fragile,” “delicate,” and “charming” is to participate in the very mystifications that the novel subtly exposes.
Gaskell’s Angels with a Twist

Wives and Daughters in Social Circulation

Gaskell fully understood the implications of a domestic economy run by women and its role in the world at large. And her protestations in *Mary Barton* that she does not grasp political economy should be taken with a grain of salt. As her contemporaries pointed out, Gaskell was an apt pupil, if not an expert. She grasped the complex interplay among masters, workers, and production. Further, she grasped what the political economists failed to see: the way women’s domestic economy—process-oriented and focused on control of social signs and signifiers—intersected with a political and product-oriented economy, focused on controlling the means of production. She articulates the relationship between use or exchange value and representational value. Her last novel, *Wives and Daughters*, sets forth a brilliant depiction of the domestic economy at work.

The title suggests that we must see women in their relationship to men, as wives or as daughters, but that initial emphasis is subverted by a shift of focus to the ways men rely on women. The novel concentrates on the discursive practices of middle-class domestic life. At its center is a “socially ambiguous” figure, Dr. Gibson; that is, as a doctor, neither is he bound by society’s rules, nor can he use them as others might for social advantage. As Leonore Davidoff explains, “non-participants [in society]—like servants—could not introduce or cut. Nor, it is interesting to note, could functionaries like

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22 "I know nothing of Political Economy, or the theories of trade. I have tried to write truthfully, and if my accounts agree or clash with any system, the agreement or disagreement is unintentional" (58). It is striking that Gaskell pits “theory” against her “truth.” One is tempted to interpret her disclaimer ironically because a theory that does not reflect truth is useless.

23 Margaret Homans points out, “Before she started writing *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell proposed to her publisher, George Smith, a long story (to head a collection of stories) to be called ‘Two Mothers. . .’” (251). Homans notes the appropriateness of both titles to the manuscript of Gaskell’s last novel, the actual title emphasizing the circulation of daughters as wives, the other pointing to “the relation that is prior to the circulation.” This Lacanian interpretation, focusing on Molly as a split subject, reads many events negatively that are positive and productive in my materialist framework. This tension is inevitable, and I wish to use the conflict here to point out the way in which psychoanalytic perspectives tend to reinscribe women’s position as Other within patriarchy, even as they try to disrupt that reinscription through a reinterpretation of the mother-daughter bond. A cultural materialist perspective suggests several possible scripts. Whereas one might argue that Molly is simply being put into social circulation as a commodity-wife, issues of control and power are complicated when we turn from a gendered perspective to one that examines the ways gender is inflected by class, class by gender. Ironically, psychoanalytic approaches often feed into Victorian ideology by reading all women’s experience of oppression as similar. They play into the bourgeois mystification of the priority of gender difference over all others.

clergymen, doctors or governesses” (*Best Circles* 42). Indeed, doctors were neither fish nor fowl. Daviddoff comments on the social hierarchy of parties: “The ambiguous doctor and other neighbours would be allowed the semi-privacy of lawns and tennis courts while still being denied the inner sanctum of the drawing room” (67). Thus, we can readily intuit that what happens to the doctor’s daughter—whether she improves her social lot or not—falls to the doctor’s wife, her mother. Here we discover the inherent drama of Gaskell’s final novel, which presents two charming and marriageable girls—one the daughter, Molly, the other the stepdaughter, Cynthia, of the Hollingford town doctor. The doctor acquires his stepdaughter in the course of the novel by wedding a Mrs. Kirkpatrick, a second marriage for both. Dr. Gibson’s new wife has been compared to Jane Austen’s Mrs. Bennet, but the comparison is only superficially apt. Both women are presented as vain, foolish, shallow, and self-interested, easily vexed when thwarted in their wishes. Like Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Gibson is ambitious for her daughters, but, unlike Mrs. Bennet, she actually succeeds in furthering their interests. This difference is an enormous one, and it reveals how the social importance of the middle-class mother and wife, the semiotician of the middle class, has been consolidated in the fluid and shifting society of Victorian England.

When critics “read” Mrs. Gibson, they often dismiss her, as Patsy Stoneman does, as a “neat satire” of “human deficiency” (173). Laurence Lerner pinpoints in her the “little cleverness of a mind that lacks the imagination really to understand that she has done wrong” (26). Even feminist critics have found only a negative value in her portrayal: that is, she reveals the “deficiencies of female education and dependency on men” (Stoneman 176). But Gaskell’s triumph of presentation, her demystification of domestic ideology, depends on simultaneously inscribing Mrs. Gibson within two different scripts—the patriarchal and bourgeois—and foregrounding their contradictions. In conventional gender terms, as wife and mother, Mrs. Gibson appears insensitive and selfish. In class terms, as

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4 Stoneman makes this particular comparison (173).
5 These assessments are part of a general critical tendency to interpret Mrs. Gibson negatively, as a monster stepmother: unaffectionate and overly concerned with “appearances” rather than “reality.” But, I reiterate, these critics reproduce the ideological scripts that the novel problematizes. It is striking to see the critical interpretive agreement on Mrs. Gibson. Although by any social standards her daughters make spectacular marriages, the critics define Mrs. Gibson as a failed mother. In order to reach this conclusion, a critic must divorce the patriarchal from the bourgeois narrative and so simplify the complex, unfolding tale of female subject formation.
household and status manager, she demonstrates fine discrimination and familial loyalty. Her masterful negotiations of signifying practices—etiquette (including introductions, visiting, calls, and cuts), dining rituals, household decor, and dress—make her a key player in the socially prestigious marriages of Molly and Cynthia, marriages that install them permanently within the upper middle class and remove them from the ambiguous status of doctor's daughters and potential governesses.

Although Gaskell has been regularly faulted by critics for privileging social codes over “deeper values,” for confusing appearances with “reality,” her strategies, in fact, critique the idealist metaphysics that inform such concepts as truth and reality.9 Gaskell's subtle tactics align concepts of nature, inherent goodness, and virtue with patriarchal oppression of women. Although *Wives and Daughters* superficially celebrates the mutual devotion of the doctor and his daughter, the dangers in Molly's unhealed idealization of her father and the degree to which he has failed her emerge in the tension between conceptions of “natural” virtue and “artificial”—or social—cultivation. Fearful of spoiling his daughter, the doctor has set forth an educational plan that is primarily prescriptive, and Molly remains intellectually and socially backward. Dr. Gibson has secured a governess for Molly largely as a chaperone to protect her from the attentions of his male apprentices. This governess, Miss Eyre, has these instructions: “Don't teach Molly too much; she must sew, and read, and write, and do her sums; but . . . I'm not sure that reading or writing is necessary. Many a good woman gets married with only a cross instead of her name” (65). Miss Eyre, intimidated by the doctor and financially dependent upon him, endeavors to carry out his wishes and “taught Molly to read and write, but tried honestly to keep her back in every other branch of education” (65). This disastrous course is countered solely by Molly’s own energetic struggles against it, and the narrator relates that “it was only by fighting and struggling hard, that bit by bit Molly persuaded her father to let her have French and drawing lessons” (65). Mr. Gibson’s intentions for his daughter remain somewhat obscure because his policies virtually guarantee that she will be unfitted to maintain herself after his death, and he is contemptuous of the first young man who presents himself as a suitor. Mr. Coxe, who aspires to win Molly’s hand, serves as apprentice to Dr. Gibson and, with surgical training and an inheritance in store, he would seemingly be a highly eligible match for the doctor’s daughter, especially since she has been educated by a governess who “only took rank as a shopkeeper’s daughter” (66). Rather than allow Mr. Coxe to communicate with Molly, however, Mr. Gibson sends her out of harm’s way.

The submerged logic of this episode reads: rigorous education of women is like social grooming, a falsification of nature. The attitude Mr. Gibson holds resembles Ruskin’s in “Of Queen’s Gardens,” but, if anything, it is less liberal. Molly is not even to have the liberty of Ruskin's girl let “loose in the library” like a “fawn in a field.” But Mr. Gibson shares with Ruskin a deep suspicion of women’s “play[ing] at precedence with her next-door neighbour.” Early in the novel, it is clear that although he reads the backwardness of his daughter as a sign of her natural goodness, that sign has only a very limited social currency. Proud of his daughter’s social clumsiness, Gibson admits that “she is a little ignorant, and has had no . . . no training in etiquette” (88). Her taste in clothes is atrocious, and Mrs. Hamley, the local squire’s wife, is persuaded that Molly will not prove a dangerous distraction for his sons because, as she tells her husband, “she's not at all the sort of girl young men of their age would take to. We like her because we see what she really is; but lads of one and two and twenty want all the accessories of a young woman. . . . Such things as becoming dress, style of manner” (112).

The novel, however, dismantles such conventional distinctions between what she “really is” and how she appears. Appearances shape lives; valorizing a natural goodness in individuals helps to keep them in their “natural” social place. And Dr. Gibson, who has entrusted Molly’s dress to “his old servant Betty,” whose taste he esteems “as the more correct, because the more simple” (43), is collaborating in this social project, which, of course, helps keep women in their “place.” Molly is good, but dismissable. This seemingly small episode of the importunate Mr. Coxe sets up the complications that will drive the narrative. In Gaskell’s humorous revision of Jane Austen, it is a truth universally acknowledged that a widower in possession of a marriageable daughter must be in want of a wife. He seeks a kind of chaperone for his daughter to protect her from the wolves circling the patriarchal stronghold, but in the novel’s poetic justice, he gets a woman who is a master of the social discourses he despises. She challenges his values through the consummate success of her own.

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9For example, Maureen Reddy faults Mrs. Gibson for “not realizing that system of social codes ought to be based upon deeper values” (79). Inevitably, then, she has to convict Gaskell of the same “limitation”: “[Gaskell] seems to endorse women's suppression of their feelings and strict adherence to a constraining code of manners” (83). Such details are “constraining” only when read within an idealist metaphysics that, as Schor points out, is threatened with dismanlement by valorization of the detail (5-4).
Contempt for details leaves individuals vulnerable to the social power operations that work through status display and class regulation. Dr. Gibson's failure to prepare Molly for any fate other than that of a small-town apothecary's wife is mirrored in the chaos and confusion that afflict his household at his servants' whims. The link between the corollary strategies of household management—status display and class regulation—emerges most clearly in Dr. Gibson's inability to control his servants, who subject him to their spites and punish him with discomfort, disorder, and social disgrace. When he dismisses a young servant, enlisted as go-between by Mr. Coxe, he is vulnerable to the remaining servants' pique. When Dr. Gibson invites Lord Hollingford to dine with him—the normal class barriers between the two men erased by their common scientific interests—"it was just at the time when the cook was sulking at Bethia's dismissal," and she punishes him by being "unpunctual and careless" (134). The luncheon proves a disaster: "At last dinner was ready, but the poor host saw the want of nicety—almost the want of cleanliness, in all its accompaniments—dingy plate, dull-looking glass, a table-cloth that, if not absolutely dirty, was anything but fresh in its splashed and rumpled condition, and compared it in his own mind with the dainty delicacy with which even a loaf of brown bread was served up at his guest's home" (134). Dr. Gibson apologizes that he does not have "a regulated household which would enable [him] to command the small portions of time [he] can spend there," but Lord Hollingford advises that he find "a sensible, agreeable woman of thirty or so... to manage your home" (134-35). Science may enable the lord to overlook certain discomforts, but he makes clear that Gibson's own professional interests will advance if he regulates his household. And, although Dr. Gibson may invite Lord Hollingford to dine at his house, he has a precarious position at the Towers, the home of Hollingford's parents, Lord and Lady Cunmor. There, he attends strictly as a functionary—the local doctor; thus, he goes "in by the back-way to the house; the 'House' on this side, the 'Towers' at the front" (40).

The issue here is strictly social, but Gaskell indulges in the rhetoric of romance in a way that exposes it as a fiction concocted by individuals to mask more utilitarian motives. That is, Dr. Gibson's need for a household supervisor is interpreted as desire for a wife, a companion for his quiet hours, someone to love. The entanglement of social convenience with personal desire reveals "love" as a construction, especially because the question of a "suitable" partner is foremost. In emphasizing social matters in this way, Gaskell is much more blunt than Dickens, who swerved away at key points to reinforce a romance of "love." The doctor experiences no small difficulty in identifying someone of his rank who is eligible, a problem expressed colloquially as "a case of 'first catch your hare.' Where was the 'sensible and agreeable woman of thirty or so' that he is to marry? He reflects on the social difficulty: "Among his country patients there were two classes pretty distinctly marked: farmers, whose children were unrefined and uneducated; squires, whose daughters would, indeed, think the world was coming to a pretty pass, if they were to marry a country surgeon" (135). Hyacinth Clare Kirkpatrick, formerly the Cunnors' governess, widow of a curate and gentleman, fits the bill, and, although Dr. Gibson eagerly submits to the romance of "falling in love," the novel remains clear-eyed about the way love is harnessed to the work of solidifying social bonds and social status; sexual desire is thus generally mapped out on a social grid. Although disabused of his love for his new wife, Dr. Gibson can always assure himself of the "advantages to be gained to his daughter from the step he had just taken" (143), partially disguising from himself the advantages that he has realized.

Gaskell's deft representation of this bourgeois narrative of upward mobility through cultural capital thus exposes as mystification Dickens's rhetoric of love and spiritual uplift. Mrs. Gibson is not a ministering angel, a spiritual guide, a sympathetic, charming, self-sacrificing goddess. Nor does "love" survive the nuptial vows. Mrs. Gibson is a social mentor who makes the doctor and his daughter figures to be reckoned with socially, and that, as Elizabeth Gaskell forces us to recognize, is the goal occluded by Victorian mystifications of middle-class women.

The romance of falling in love is thus continually shadowed by a narrative depicting the clever deployment of cultural capital. Mrs. Gibson's management strategies begin with her reluctant and resistant stepdaughter, and the novel again plays with the idea of a "natural" as opposed to a "cultivated," or artificial, self. But Wives and Daughters systematically dismantles this opposition, which is oppressive to women, as Molly's supposed naturalness is represented as just another, inferior, form of cultivation. Before her stepmother's arrival, Molly's appearance has been, at best, "quaint." It is not simply that Betty's tastes are simple; Molly's own unformed sense of fashion is appalling. When she must choose a new gown to visit the local squire's home, the narrator reveals that "Miss Rose's [the dressmaker's] ready-made resources and Molly's taste combined, did not arrive at a very great success" (92). She chooses a "gay-
coloured flimsy plaid silk,” which the narrator characterizes as a “terrible, over-sart plaid gown” (92, 118). When asked by Molly what she should wear on a particular occasion, the squire’s wife privately thinks, “anything but that horrid plaid silk” (160), and urges Molly to dress in her last year’s muslin, so that she looks “a little quaint, it is true, but thoroughly ladylike, if she was old-fashioned” (160). Roger Hamley, the squire’s younger son, assesses Molly as “a badly-dressed, and rather awkward girl” (119). The heart will not be enraptured when the eye is offended. Lady Cumnor early predicts that “Clare” (the designation for their former servant, which reminds her of her place) “may make something” of Molly (164), and her talent for human management promises well. Lady Harriet, Lady Cumnor’s daughter and Clare’s former pupil, confesses to Molly that “I used to think I managed [Clare], till one day an uncomfortable suspicion arose that all the time she had been managing me” (195). The former governess rapidly assesses Molly’s deficiencies and shortly after becoming Mrs. Gibson “had already fidgeted Molly into a new amount of care about the manner in which she put on her clothes, arranged her hair, and was glued and shod” (216). Even before the marriage, she commissions “a very smart dressmaker” from the county town to sew a dress “which was both so simple and so elegant as at once to charm Molly,” who is “almost startled” at the “improvement in her appearance” (187). Her dear old friends, the Miss Brownings, are so surprised that they confess they “shouldn’t have known” her (187). And the squire’s fastidious older son, who has previously ignored Molly, immediately notes that “her appearance was extremely improved” (216). That Molly ultimately marries the squire’s younger son testifies to Mrs. Gibson’s success in putting her stepdaughter into social circulation. The narrator seems to pinpoint Mrs. Gibson’s folly in such comments as: “Cynthia and Molly looked their best, which was all the duty Mrs. Gibson absolutely required of them” (306). But while the text appears to collude to some extent in an ideology that debases women’s interest in fashion as frivolous, it is subversive in showing how preoccupation with dress leads to social advancement because sexual attraction is inscribed on the body through social signs.

The contrast between Molly and Cynthia helps establish the value of Cynthia’s cultivation, which, ironically, counterbalances notions of natural goodness put into circulation through representations of Molly. Both Cynthia and her mother, the narrator claims, possess an inherent “genius for millinery and dress,” which enables them to settle “a great many knotty points of contrivance and taste” in their appearance, achieving magnificent results with limited resources (476). The novel makes clear that Cynthia’s impeccable taste in dress forms the foundation of her “charm,” which promises to secure for her an eligible husband, once she can appear in higher circles. Cynthia’s charms, the narrator remarks, are perhaps “incompatible with very high principle,” a subversive debunking of the angelic ideal. And Roger falls in love first not with the “real” angel, Molly, but with the apparent one, Cynthia, she of exquisite taste. Indeed, Roger never loves Molly until she has acquired her stepsister’s charms. Together, Cynthia and Mrs. Gibson give Molly social currency. A young woman’s social advancement depends on her millinery tastes and talents, as Cynthia fully appreciates in refusing to visit her elegant relatives without new clothes. She argues, “It would not do to go there in a state of shabbiness, for... I remember, my aunt was very particular about dress; and now that Margaret and Helen are grown up, and they visit so much—pray don’t say anything more about it, for I know it would not do.” (470). Dr. Gibson accepts the validity of her arguments and the desirability of her keeping up the acquaintance, so he finally offers her ten pounds to outfit herself. His money and her management combine to produce the desired effect: Cynthia’s prestigious marriage.

While the novel stresses the dramatic changes in Molly under new management, it also asserts the more general social transformations effected by Mrs. Gibson, a repositioning of the family within Hollingford society. At the same time that Mrs. Gibson is putting her daughter and stepdaughter into social circulation, she is attending to much neglected household affairs, whipping up the entire establishment to a higher social standard, a process that begins with a renovation of household discipline.

Gaskell’s representation of those renovations challenges Victorian sentimental pieties of the happy, bonded family of servants and management. When the servants grumble about the work their new mistress demands of them, she summarily dismisses them—even Betty, Molly’s nurse and surrogate mother, who has been with the family for sixteen years. We share Molly’s point of view and distress over the dismissal, aggravated by the honeyed expression of Mrs. Gibson’s regret: “But, sweet one, you seem to forget that I cannot go against my principle [never to take an apology from a servant who has given notice], however much I may be sorry for Betty. She should not have given way to ill temper, as I said before; although I never liked her, and considered her a most inefficient servant, thoroughly spoilt by having had no mistress for so long, I should have borne with her” (212). Mrs. Gibson will not tolerate the kind of purposeful neglect practiced by the servants when they want to “mark
their displeasure” (210) with the family. Nor will she allow Molly to perform menial tasks when “there are servants to do it” (236). As a result, the organization of the house improves, the hierarchy is reasserted, and the insolence and carelessness disappear. Gaskell’s depictions bring to the fore what is disguised in other texts, that is, the process by which the middle class served its own ends, justifying and legitimizing its controls to perpetuate its existence. The bourgeois manager reasserts middle-class ideals to the ultimate benefit of the middle-class family.

Gaskell also debunks Victorian domestic ideology in depicting the reach and extent of Mrs. Gibson’s reforms, which encompass even her resistant husband. The social historian Carol Dyhouse argues in support of Victorian mythology when she claims the existence of a “social expectation that a wife should be solicitous for her husband’s needs. . . . Even in the lower-middle-class home meals would tend to be taken at times which fitted around the routine of the man’s work” (“Mothers and Daughters” 33). Gaskell’s representations challenge that ideology when Mrs. Gibson overturns long-established pleasures and customs in her husband’s life, disrupting his schedule when that schedule upsets her manipulations of the discursive practices that will win them social standing. In short, her social business “rather diminished [his] domestic comfort” (213), a truth rarely represented so directly in Victorian fiction, where ostensibly the husband is feathering a nest with only the master’s comfort in mind. Mrs. Gibson entirely rearranges her husband’s schedule, forcing him to give up noon dinner for a “six o’clock dinner” to prevent the aromas of “hot, savoury-smelling dishes from the kitchen . . . when high-born ladies, with noses of aristocratic refinement, might be calling” (213). Mrs. Gibson also forbids her husband his favorite diet of bread and cheese because, as she says, “really I cannot allow cheese to come beyond the kitchen” (214). Further, when the cook objects to late dinners and the newly popular entrées, she departs, and Mrs. Gibson institutes a more fashionable cuisine, so that Mr. Gibson has “to satisfy his healthy English appetite on badly-made omelettes, rissoles, vol-au-vents, croquettes, and timbales” (214). Of course, all of these changes are accompanied by Mrs. Gibson’s fulsome protestations that she has only her husband’s wishes at heart, her concession to Victorian sentimentality.

Mrs. Gibson ultimately enforces a high standard of bourgeois discipline, lacing her family into a straitjacket of social custom to achieve significant results. When Molly chafes against having to go through every ceremony “in the same stately manner for two as for twenty,” so that dinner “took up at least an hour” and includes dessert—“although Molly knew full well, and her stepmother knew full well, and Maria knew full well, that neither Mrs. Gibson nor Molly touched dessert” (548)—her stepmother remonstrates: “It’s no extravagance, for we need not eat it—I never do. But it looks well, and makes Maria understand what is required in the daily life of every family of position” (549). And in the end the social disciplines that seem pointedly futile to Molly and her father triumphantly justify Mrs. Gibson. First, the gossiping townspeople remark on the social elevation the Gibsons have enjoyed under the regimes of the new mistress, who is “quite the lady herself; dines late . . . and everything in style” (553). The townspeople agree: “Very different style to what Bob Gibson, her husband, was used to when first he came here . . . we called him Bob Gibson then, but none on us dare Bob him now; I’d as soon think o’ calling him sweep!” (554). Second, Lady Harriet—sister to Lord Hollingford—makes a morning call on Mrs. Gibson and decides to stay for luncheon. In sharp contrast to the taudy and unappetizing fare that Dr. Gibson had earlier offered her brother, Mrs. Gibson has anticipated the possible guest and has arranged for a lovely meal, which so impresses Lady Harriet that she was “more and more convinced that Clare had done very well for herself” (404–5). The elegance and taste of this repast confirm a series of impressions in Lady Harriet’s mind that the Gibsons are a family worth troubling about, and the positive consequences for Molly are enormous.

The episodes in which Mrs. Gibson figures are both amusing and distressing: the way her character is complexly figured through conflicting gender and social expectations stresses the pressure of social codes, that complex system of signifiers which Mrs. Gibson reads so well, to force at least grudging admiration from those in her world. Although he grumbles about his wife’s lack of integrity, Dr. Gibson admits:

So the prestige was tactily sold and paid for; but neither buyer nor seller defined the nature of the bargain. On the whole, it was well that Mr. Gibson spent so much of his time from home. He sometimes thought so himself when he heard his wife’s plaintive fret or pretty babble over totally indifferent things, and perceived of how flimsy a nature were all her fine sentiments. . . . Still, . . . he forced himself to
dwell on the positive advantages that had accrued to him and his through his marriage. He had obtained an unexceptionable chaperone, if not a tender mother, for his little girl; a skilful manager of his previous disorderly household; a woman who was graceful and pleasant to look at for the head of his table. (164–65)

This is not an entirely fair assessment, since it refuses to recognize that her “fine sentiments” are not flimsy in their effects. But it does begin to appreciate her productivity within his household. There sits Mrs. Gibson in state, a master of the semiotics of status, fully constituted by the discursive practices of her society, unaccompanied by any mystifying rhetoric of sensitivity, sympathy, and sainthood. It is a measure only of persisting mystifications of patriarchal ideology that Mr. Gibson cannot but regret that his wife is not more saintly and selfless, less shallow and selfish.

In sum, the premium Mrs. Gibson places upon appearances may elicit the reader’s laughter or censure, depending upon the particular context foregrounded, but the novel consistently depicts her efforts and emphases as socially productive rather than destructive. This is part of the text’s substantial revision of cherished ideas, such as that substance counts for more than surface. In fact, as Gaskell demonstrates here, appearances are productive of substantial effects, and those who know how to manage the social signifiers are individuals to be reckoned with. For example, Mrs. Gibson may seem to reach a nadir when Squire Hamley rides into Hollingford to request that Molly immediately accompany him home to attend to his ailing wife, who has had one of her “bad fits of illness” (222). Molly is preparing to go, bolstered by her father’s permission, when Mrs. Gibson scatches the whole plan because Molly forgot that she was to go out with her stepmother that night, “to visit people . . . with whom I am quite unacquainted” (222). Despite earnest entreaties, Mrs. Gibson insists “an engagement is an engagement” and Molly is “bound to accompany me, in my husband’s absence” (223). Although, initially, the narrator seems to pinpoint Mrs. Gibson’s folly in placing a meaningless social visit and social forms over meaningful attentions to a suffering individual, ultimately the text does not collude in this assessment. No death or dramatic event intervenes in Molly’s absence. In fact, Mrs. Hamley is always ailing; the delay of one day has no consequences whatsoever, and Molly spends several days with the invalid. Furthermore, Mrs. Gibson helps put Squire Hamley in his place; the squire is only too willing to appropriate Molly when he or his wife feels the need for some daughterly affec-

tion, but he repeatedly insults Dr. Gibson by insisting that his sons must look higher than the doctor’s daughter when seeking wives. Mrs. Gibson helps claim a social importance for Molly that will partially counteract the squire’s implicit estimate of her as a servant at his beck and call. Even after the humiliation of his eldest son’s marrying a French Catholic nursery maid—whom he calls that “French baggage of a servant” (613)—even after Molly has served both him and his wife devotedly, he stills remarks to her that she is “beneath what [he] ever thought to see [his sons] marry” (689). Gaskell’s representations of both squire and doctor’s daughter underline the productivity of the signifier. And, in spite of the squire’s sense of consequence, Lady Harriet opines that elegant, intelligent Molly Gibson, whom Mrs. Gibson has put into social circulation, would make an excellent wife for Roger Hamley.

One of the novel’s concluding episodes confirms both the productivity of social signifying practices and Mrs. Gibson’s positive effect in Molly’s life. Molly, who has been ill, is invited by Lady Harriet to recuperate for a few days at the Towers while the rest of her family travels to London for Cynthia’s wedding. This visit recalls her only previous experiences at the Towers before her father’s remarriage, and structurally it serves as a point of reference in evaluating Molly’s changes. On the first visit, Molly was poorly dressed and awkward, her own undeveloped taste and manner aggravated by the vulgarity of her advisers. One guest characterizes her as “wild and strange” (53). She feels like a “careless intruder” (53) and balks at the task of thanking her hostess, who identifies her as “the daughter of our medical man at Hollingford” (54). Lady Cumnor dismisses Molly as one of the townspeople to whom she condescends once a year for helping her in the charity school she sponsors. The school helps perpetuate the class system by ensuring a steady stream of domestic servants for the Towers; the “girls are taught to sew beautifully, to be capital housemaids, and pretty fair cooks, and above all, to dress neatly in a kind of charity uniform devised by the ladies of Cumnor Towers;—white caps, white tippets, check aprons, blue gowns, and ready curseys, and ‘please, ma’am,’ being de rigeur” (37–38). And in Lady Cumnor’s view, Molly is not far from that rank. In sum, Molly confides to her father, “I was never so unhappy in all my life, as I have been all this long afternoon” (59). At this point, she has been effectively “ schooled” by the Cumnors to stay in her place.

Molly’s second visit with the Cumnors is an entirely different matter because of Mrs. Gibson’s social discipline and its good effects.
Completely prepared, Molly captivates the society at the Towers. Even critical Lady Cumnor is “pleased by Molly’s manners and appearance” (669). When dressed for dinner, Molly “scarce knew the elegant reflection [in the glass] to be that of herself” (670), and when she goes to bed, “she was constrained to admit that staying at the Towers as a visitor was rather pleasant than otherwise” (671).

Molly’s subsequent effort “to reconcile old impressions with new ones” will depend on her own grasp of society’s signifying practices of class. The Towers is unchanged, but her elegant dress and refined manners are productive of a different effect. She is now, to general acclaim, a “very pretty, lady-like, and graceful girl” (671). Mrs. Gibson gratifyingly pronounces on Molly’s further improvements when she returns from Cynthia’s wedding and is “impressed with her [stepdaughter’s] increased grace” (677). She says, “Ah, Molly . . . it’s really wonderful to see what a little good society will do for a girl . . . . There is something quite different about you—a je ne sais quoi—that would tell me at once that you have mingled with the aristocracy” (677–78).

Again, we see the way in which sexual desire itself is always mapped within a social grid, and feminine beauty is inscribed onto the body through signifiers of social status. The lady that Molly has now become attracts the romantic interest of the squire’s son, who, at this point in their long acquaintance, finally learns to “love” her. Roger Hamley, whom Molly has long loved, is visiting the Towers at the same time and “hardly recognized her, although he acknowledged her identity” (672). This disruption in his conception of Molly’s “identity” paves the way for his desire of her. “He began to feel that admiring deference which most young men experience when conversing with a very pretty girl: a sort of desire to obtain her good opinion in a manner very different to his old familiar friendliness” (672). Molly possesses the same sterling virtues she has always had, but now she looks like a Victorian angel, that is, a refined lady. Lady Harriet callously pinpoints the role of class in perception when discussing Mr. Preston’s appearance: “I never think of whether a land-agent is handsome or not. They don’t belong to the class of people whose appearance I notice” (128). No one has better grasped that truth than Mrs. Gibson, who exploits her command of the society’s signifying practices to settle her daughters into upper-middle-class life. And not only has she enriched their lives monetarily; they also now move in circles that the novel represents as more sophisticated, talented, and educated, so that Dr. Gibson finds his own sphere greatly enlarged by the stimulating contacts of Lon-

don society. He is as much a beneficiary of his wife as is his daughter, but he prefers to cultivate the myth that he suffers from her foolish innovations and pointless vanities, a view that the novel rhetorically supports but structurally subverts. In fact, Mrs. Gibson has skillfully employed cultural capital to accumulate superior material resources, which further enhance the family’s cultural capital, marking a permanent rise in status. No longer teetering between lower and upper middle class, the Gibsons take their place among the gentility at the novel’s conclusion.

Morality, like sexual desire and sexuality, is also inscribed and interpreted within a social text. Gaskell undertakes a substantial examination of social signifiers and women’s centrality in one of the novel’s central complications: Cynthia’s entanglement with the Cumnor’s land agent. As a girl of sixteen, Cynthia has been betrayed by youth and inexperience into contracting a secret engagement with Mr. Preston. Although she subsequently wishes to break from the relationship, he refuses to release her and uses some letters she wrote to blackmail her. When Molly intervenes and tries to extricate her stepsister by retrieving those letters, she is observed by the townspeople, who conclude that she is carrying on a clandestine relationship with him. They communally castigate her specifically in class terms. Mrs. Goodenough avers “she might as well be a scullery-maid at once” (552), while Mrs. Dawes claims that “Molly and Mr. Preston were keeping company just as if she was a maid-servant and he was a gardener” (561). Despite his outrage at the gossip and his conviction of Molly’s innocence, Dr. Gibson is powerless to stem the rumors; he only warns her darkly “how slight a thing may blacken a girl’s reputation for life” (563).

Dr. Gibson’s powerlessness is contrasted with the power of a lady, the Cumnors’ daughter Harriet. Molly is finally rescued from her suffering by Lady Harriet, who uses her prerogatives as social superior in the town to redeem the girl. Having determined that the gossip is groundless, Lady Harriet clears her reputation through the rituals of “full etiquette” (585). First, she calls on the girl, then parades the “unconscious Molly” through “all the length of the principal street of the town, loitered at Grinstead’s for half-an-hour, and wound up by Lady Harriet’s calling on the Miss Brownings, who, to her regret, were not at home” (584). She then leaves her own card with Molly’s name pencilled underneath, in spite of naïve Molly’s protests that she “never leave[s] cards; I have not got any, and on the Miss Brownings, of all people; why, I am in and out whenever I like.” But Lady Harriet pursues her plan that “today you shall do
everything properly, and according to full etiquette,” congratulating herself at the conclusion that “we’ve done a good day’s work!” And she continues addressing the now-absent Molly: “Hollingford is not the place I take it to be, if it doesn’t veer round in Miss Gibson’s favour after my today’s trotting of that child about” (585). Molly is completely redeemed. Of course, one might argue that Molly’s innocence is important. Cynthia, however, is not innocent. More important are appearances. The girl branded a scullery maid for apparent indiscretions is both exonerated and elevated by the patronage of Lady Harriet. The community never possesses the “truth.” It is guided entirely by the semiotics practiced by the ladies; therein lies its truth. Morality is articulated through sociality.

The functioning of this domestic economy has implications, too, for the national economy through their intersection in politics. That particular imbrication is not emphasized in the text; rather, it emerges like the negative of a positive image. But accession to the powerful centers of political influence in London—Cynthia through government, Molly through the new scientific disciplines—shadows the fates of Cynthia and Molly as they move toward socially desirable marriages. This intrication of class and politics has one telling but brief representation in the novel when the Cum nors, accompanied by a duchess, attend a local public ball, ostensibly as a gesture of goodwill, actually as a campaign tactic. Lady Harriet, ever alert to social signs, circulates through the crowd of tradespeople and shopkeepers. She takes the measure of their disappointment in the duchess’s dowdiness. She quietly goads her brother into performing the part of a lord: “You don’t know how these good people here have been hurt and disappointed with our being so late, and with the duchess’s ridiculous simplicity of dress.” She answers his incomprehension with the retort: “Oh, don’t be so wise and stupid; don’t you see, we’re a show and a spectacle—it’s like having a pantomime with harlequin and columbine in plain clothes.” When he still professes not to understand the significance of their class “performance,” she simply urges, “Then take it upon trust... We must try and make it up to them; for one thing, because I can’t bear our vassals to look dissatisfied and disloyal, and then there’s the election in June” (337). Lady Harriet recognizes two things that escape her brother: by performing class status they preserve class prerogatives and by preserving class prerogatives they ensure their continued control of national policy through election to Parliament.

It is easy for the reader to succumb to the romance with which the plot of Wives and Daughters concludes, as if it were only a simple and natural matter for the young people to fall in love. Alternatively, one may resist the romance plot only to succumb to the now-fashionable critique of that romance, the fact that it culminates generally in the sacrifice of rare and substantive creatures in marriage—particularly, here, in the spectacle of a commodified Molly Gibson. Indeed, it has become common for feminists to read Victorian narratives of courtship and marriage as stories of sacrifice of talented women in patriarchy. But that gendered script diminishes the narrative of multiply constructed female subjectivity which Gaskell has crafted. The textual crosscurrents of Wives and Daughters invite us to evaluate the productivity of sociality in the development of women. A Molly Gibson married to wealthy, intelligent Roger Hamley, moving in sophisticated and scientific circles in London and abroad, will be a different and more fulfilled person than Molly Gibson, wife of a small-town apothecary, Mr. Coxe. A Cynthia Kirkpatrick married to Mr. Henderson, with “a handsome private fortune,” will enjoy an identity quite other from that of Cynthia Kirkpatrick wed to an insignificant land agent, Mr. Preston. Class tells; it is the telling signifier in this world.

The same truth holds in Gaskell’s other novels, such as Mary Barton, which represents the other side of the class coin. The working-class Mary, who has experienced the freedoms of Manchester and Liverpool streets, must learn that she truly “loves” a man of her own class, Jem Wilson, instead of the wealthy son of the factory owner. The rhetoric of love justifies the wisdom of Providence in so placing individuals. And the romance plot is revealed to be less about boy meets girl than it is about the right boy meeting the right girl. And those who know how to make it right, like Mrs. Gibson, have might.

Gaskell mixes this message of socially managed mobility into the romance plot, allowing certain illusions to be partially preserved in terms such as “love.” Margaret Oliphant, one of her successors, was less interested in the illusions of romance. She represents the social managerial role of women as it extends from the home to the community, and the principal love affair for her heroines lies in their romance with a career.