"Such a fine, close weave": Gender, Community and the Body in *Cranford* (2007)

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Abstract:
Elizabeth Gaskell's novels have become a popular choice for adaptation for the small screen in recent years. This essay explores the most recent, the 2007 BBC production of *Cranford*, which was critically and popularly acclaimed. *Cranford* is intriguing because it represents a movement away from the romance plot, which is usually at the centre of such Sunday night costume dramas, focusing instead on the lives of a group of middle aged, unmarried and unglamorous women. This article interrogates the political agenda behind this adaptation, which I suggest is influenced by the writings of feminist critics on Gaskell, and which is epitomised by what Nina Auerbach calls the Utopian "community of women" that is offered as a criticism of, and resistance to, patriarchal society. Via an examination of the workings of this community, and in particular of its representation of health, illness, and the pathologised male body, this essay discusses *Cranford*'s view of Victorian gender politics, its struggle with gender stereotypes and viewer expectations, and its attempt to give voice to a different kind of heroine.

Keywords: adaptation, the body, community, *Cranford*, feminism, Elizabeth Gaskell, illness, patriarchy.

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The highly successful 2007 adaptation of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1853) is the latest manifestation of TV's love affair with this author, whose other novels *North and South* (1855) and *Wives and Daughters* (1866), adapted in 2004 and 1999 respectively, have already proved highly popular with viewers and critics alike.[1] This is somewhat surprising, given that Gaskell has, as Patsy Stoneman notes, remained something of a "minor Victorian", who was rescued from obscurity by Marxist and feminist literary critics from the 1950s onwards, but has never fully crossed over into the literary mainstream (Stoneman 1987: 1). Over the last decade, however, her re-incarnation on the small screen has transformed this 'outsider' status. Indeed, Gaskell's works have found new life as source texts for adaptation: the "insatiable hunger" of modern audiences for nineteenth-century novels has resulted in the heritage film industry recruiting her novels as fodder, alongside far more well-known novels by Austen, Dickens and the Brontës (Troost 2007: 75). Gaskell's presence amid much more illustrious names is

striking because, of course, the subjects of such adaptations are conventionally canonical texts, and necessarily so, according to Julie Sanders:

> Adaptation both appears to require and to perpetuate the existence of a canon, although it may in turn contribute to its ongoing reformulation and expansion. The required 'reading alongside' of source and adaptation demands a knowledge on the part of the reader (or spectator) of the source when encountering the derivative or responsive text. In this respect, adaptation becomes a veritable marker of canonical status; citation infers authority. To this end, adaptation could be defined as an inherently conservative genre. (Sanders 2006: 8)

Hence adaptation tends not only to operate within the canon, in order to be accessible to viewers, but often serves to reinforce and perpetuate that canon, by ensuring a continuing interest in the source text.

Gaskell's position is interesting, therefore, because she has not previously shared the same established and widely-read position as has been enjoyed by other nineteenth-century authors such as Dickens and Gaskell, whose novels are perennially adapted and updated. Most twenty-first century viewers who are not academics or students of literature do not have much prior knowledge of Gaskell's novels, and hence "the required 'reading alongside' of source and adaptation" cannot occur in her case. Sue Birtwistle, one of the producers and writers of the BBC versions of both *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters*, has acknowledged that Gaskell must be regarded as a literary outsider: "Although I come from barely seven miles from where Elizabeth Gaskell lived, I'd never heard of her until after I left school" (Birtwistle, cited in Wylie 2007) In this case, then, adaptation is not Sander's "marker of canonical status"; it can, however, bestow that status on a previously neglected text. Birtwistle implies that she saw in Gaskell a figure worthy of being rediscovered and set out to accomplish this, and the subsequent successful BBC productions of her work have rendered Gaskell a household name. One might argue, then, that it is the process of adaptation itself that has established, or is perhaps still establishing, Gaskell as a canonical author – though the televised versions of her novels still seem to

be critically neglected by adaptation scholars, in comparison, for example, to the much-discussed Jane Austen industry.[2]

Cranford seems an intriguing and far from 'conservative' choice for adaptation in other ways, too, for it is not only in fame and familiarity that it differs from the kind of nineteenth-century novel which has traditionally been popular among television audiences. Its subject matter, with its focus on the older woman, represents a departure from the conventional preoccupations of the BBC Sunday night costume drama, which usually concentrates on youthful romance and the marriage plot. Recent BBC adaptations of *Bleak House* (2005) and *Little Dorrit* (2008) combine versions of the Bildungsroman with Gothic mystery to produce what Eckart Voigts-Virchow describes as "heritage soap-opera" (Voights-Virchow 2007: 132): dramatic, sensational television that examines a grittier, darker and more poverty-aware version of the past, and one which may appeal to a different audience than the traditional heritage production. Gaskell's *North and South* shares this trend by being set in urban Manchester where dirt and hardship are commonplace, but *Wives and Daughters* and *Cranford* have more in common with Austen adaptations, given that they epitomise "leisurely pre-industrial gentry life, a feel-good utopia" (Voights-Virchow 2007: 124). Recent small screen productions of Austen, have, however, spiced up their plots by emphasising sex, youth and excitement. For example, Andrew Davies's 2008 *Sense and Sensibility* included a duel and several sex scenes, and the 2007 *Mansfield Park* referenced popular culture by controversially casting Billie Piper as Fanny. In contrast, *Cranford*, directed by Simon Curtis and Steven Hudson, represents a return to more innocent 1990s adaptations. In a way reminiscent of Andrew Davies's 1995 adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), a kiss between the lovers in *Cranford* is constantly deferred and witnessed only after they are married. This sexual innocence is matched by economic optimism – in a rejection of social realism the poverty represented by the Gregson family is transformed, fairy-tale like, into wealth by Harry's inheritance in the final episode. Most significantly for the concerns of this article, however, is *Cranford*'s movement away from the conventions of nineteenth-century adaptations: insofar as this adaptation can be described as a Bildungsroman at all, it is the unromantic journey of an elderly spinster and her friends.

As Kate Flint has suggested, Gaskell's text presents a "quaint picture of provincial […but] gynocentric life", and in fact is not only gynocentric

but primarily focused on the lives of a group of middle-aged unmarried women (Flint 1995: 31). Birtwistle and Conklin did admittedly combine the novel with two of Gaskell's short stories, also set in rural Knutsford ('Mr Harrison's Confessions' [1851] and 'My Lady Ludlow' [1858]), in order to introduce several younger characters and some romance into the mix. It is, however, the mature women of Cranford who remain at the epicentre of the plot, as indicated by the status of the illustrious and well-known actresses cast in these parts, who include Dame Judi Dench, Dame Eileen Atkins, Francesca Annis and Imelda Staunton. Andrew Higson, in his discussion of the casting of heritage productions, has noted that a key group of "established actors who specialise in character parts, and who bring with them all the qualities and connotations of the British theatre tradition" are a customary and essential part of the costume drama (Higson 2003: 29). *Cranford* has a plethora of such figures, certainly, but it is interesting to note that, the small part played by Michael Gambon aside, most of them are women. Hence its mature female cast tends to lend the series most of its cultural capital, gravitas and popular appeal. In contrast, most of the younger generation are played by lesser-known actors – Lisa Dillon, Kimberley Nixon and, arguably, Simon Woods. Just as Gaskell's source text seems to represent a re-evaluation of the usual subjects of the Victorian novel, then, the BBC adaptation shifts the focus of the Sunday-night serial, albeit in a very deliberate and ratings-focused way. By this I mean that *Cranford* accepts that audience for the costume drama is usually "middle-class, middlebrow, middle-aged and largely female" (Monk 2002: 180),[3] and it capitalises on this by representing characters who share this demographic. Hence Cranford's mature viewers are invited to enjoy the novelty of watching a different type of heroine from those usually found in television adaptations, and one with which they may have certain things in common. This does seem to display an awareness that the target audience for the Sunday night serial may not be primarily interested in the lives and romances of characters much younger than themselves: the success of recent dramas such as BBC's *New Tricks* (2003-present) and ITV's *Rosemary and Thyme* (2003-2006) suggests a growing market for programmes whose subjects are characters of middle age or above.

This adaptation seems to have two agendas, then: to establish the significance and 'watchability' of the older heroine and to declare the validity of Gaskell as an important writer. I have mentioned that Gaskell had

a reputation as a "minor novelist", as F.R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition* (1948) damningly described her (Leavis 1960: 1). However, this description of Gaskell was somewhat reversed by Marxist critics, beginning with Kathleen Tillotson and Raymond Williams in the 1950s. Indeed, Alison Chapman has stressed the importance of Williams's writing on Gaskell scholarship, suggesting that his comments on her novels *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855) "have overshadowed all subsequent responses to the novels" and convincingly established their author as an industrial novelist with important political points to make about the condition of England (Chapman 1999: 44). Patsy Stoneman, however, has pointed out that such Marxist readings of these books are not without their limitations, especially given their marginalisation of gender concerns (Stoneman 1987: 118). As Chapman notes, though, Williams's observation that Gaskell is concerned with *community* rather than *society* is crucial for later understandings of her work. Subsequent critics have agreed that much of the significance of Gaskell's fiction comes from its focus on the relationship between the public and the private, and on the "bonds within and between classes" (Chapman 1999: 49). Such an alignment with and interweaving of the domestic, familial and personal with the public and political was of great interest, though also a subject of much controversy, for feminist critics in the 1970s and 1980s. Williams was dismissive of some elements of Gaskell's novels: the romance plot in *Mary Barton*, for example, was to him just a sentimental distraction from the novel's politics, and one which prevented it from becoming "a great novel", which he suggests it would have been had John Barton remained the focus (Williams 1958: 100). Critics like Rosemarie Bodenheimer and Terry Lovell, however, attempted to defend Gaskell's "melodramatic" plots because, as the latter claims, "in her writing she gives the feminine role and identity pivotal importance in the construction and maintenance of social life" (Lovell 1987: 86). More recent criticism has built on this assumption and further examined Gaskell's important female heroines and their plots. Of course, the recent television adaptations of Gaskell's work have been primarily interested in this focus on the 'feminine', which correlates with their target audience, and have capitalised on the popular appeal of the romance and melodrama in her novels. Thus her reputation as a highly significant literary figure – if still not a widely read one – has been consolidated by critics and adaptations alike. And, of course, her exploration of the private sphere and the 'community',

which so preoccupies critics, is central to the 2007 version of *Cranford* also, as will be discussed below.

Given that Gaskell's "modern rehabilitation" (Chapman 1999: 83) has been brought about by the attentions of feminist and Marxist critics, then, it is appropriate and unsurprising that the television adaptations which are ensuring her increasing popularity seem to be in dialogue with that criticism. For example, David Lodge's appropriation of *North and South*, *Nice Work* (1988), which was televised by the BBC the following year, foregrounded Marxist readings of Gaskell's novel through its setting in the gloomy industrial Britain of the Thatcher era and its examination of the modern factory system (Connor 1996: 74). Even the BBC adaptation of *Wives and Daughters* balances its romantic plot with a portrayal of the tensions between classes, an awareness of which is present from its the opening scenes. Curtis and Hudson's *Cranford*, too, is interested in economy and class relations; for instance, the viewer sees Lady Ludlow arguing with her estate manager over her conservative, paternalistic treatment of her servants and tenants. More centrally, the controversial education and resulting social mobility of Harry Gregson – whose scenes with his impoverished family are depicted with quite dark and gritty social realism – is one of the key plot lines. More could be said about the Marxist subtext of *Cranford*, but my main concern in this essay is with the ways this adaptation speaks to the feminist literary criticism, which highlighted this novel's gender politics in the 1970s and 1980s. Nina Auerbach, Martin Dodsworth and Patsy Stoneman, among others, have produced "startling re-readings" of this novel as a proto-feminist "community of women" (Auerbach 1998: 77), which is wary about, and resistant to, male power structures and which champions a "feminine ethic" of compassion and concern (Noddings 1984: 123). While the writers of the BBC version have stressed their fidelity to the original text, Birtwistle has also acknowledged that the central appeal of Gaskell's novel was, for her, the picture it presented of a town controlled and run by females (Arnstein 2007): a town, as we read in the opening lines of Gaskell's novel, "in possession of the Amazons; for all the holders of houses above a certain rent are women" (Gaskell 1993: 15). This adaptation is arguably influenced by feminist interpretations and foregrounds these aspects of the text which speaks to them. Hence the 2007 *Cranford* is designed to appeal – albeit in complex and at times still reactionary ways – to a modern audience which has grown

up with, and internalised, second-wave feminism and presents a challenge to the accepted view of the gender politics of the Victorian period. Heritage programmes may habitually construct a "crystallised past which remains a stable utopia across the centuries" (Voights-Virchow 2007: 124), but this female-dominated adaptation is an imagined feminotopia, a fantasy female landscape that "sweeps across official cultural images of female submission, subservience, and fulfilment in a bounded world" (Auerbach 1998: 6). *Cranford* attempts to assert itself against the patriarchal systems of this "bounded world", even while acknowledging their continued and encroaching power.

One of the most significant aspects of this utopia, as has been suggested, is its assertion that the older woman is a figure of central, rather than minor, importance. Judi Dench has suggested that its exceptional female characters were, for her, one of the most desirable aspects of the 2007 *Cranford* and that, in its focus on age, it stands out from other costume dramas of recent years (cited in Arnstein 2007). Usually, the mature female parts in costume dramas are mother or chaperone roles, with these characters frequently functioning as objects of pity, or ridicule,[4] and it is unusual that any heroine role should be written for a woman of fifty or more. In *Cranford*, of course, most of the leads are just such older women. However the styling of *Cranford*'s lead actresses suggests a political agenda as well as the interest in popularity and audience, as previously suggested. We might expect this production to stress the continuing attractiveness of the older woman, but in fact here Dench, Annis and the others look much older on than off screen. Certainly, this may be partly due to this production's stress on historical and textual accuracy: the costumes and severe hairstyles of the 1840s are not the most flattering to the mature face, and in Gaskell's novel practicality and respectability are prized among her female characters rather than aesthetics. Unusually for television, however, there seems to be no attempt to glamorise the mature characters in any way in this production. In fact the camera frequently lingers in exposing close-up, as though refusing to flatter or shy away from the wrinkles of the older woman. Their appearance thus constantly reminds the viewer of the passage of time, which forms an important theme in both source text and adaptation. The point is made, then, that in a society where men are largely irrelevant, age is not something to be disguised or camouflaged – an unlikely fantasy for the contemporary audience, of course.

It is important to note also that the adaptation, while emphasising the age of its central characters, is careful to represent that age as healthy, strong and active. The women are frequently shown running – often in pursuit of gossip – eating ice-cream, cake and cold meats with an enthusiasm rarely seen in Victorian heroines, and displaying their energy and zest for life. However, Gaskell's novel, like most of her works, also foregrounds illness and death both as a common reality of life and a means of exploring and revealing character. The BBC version remains faithful to her text by including a number of medical plotlines – one of the central characters being a physician. However, the drama concentrates primarily on the male body as a site of illness and violent trauma. This is notable from the first episode, when the young, attractive carpenter Jem Hearne, who is "six feet one in his stockinged feet!" as Mrs Forester admiringly comments, breaks his arm in a fall from a tree (*Cranford*, Episode 1). This accident, and the operation which follows, appear to function as a useful plot device that first reveals the sense of solidarity, support and compassion on which the town is founded; the central characters donate their precious candles to light the procedure. The way in which the scene is presented suggests a further significance, however. Jem's badly broken and bleeding arm itself is lingered on by the camera, with several long shots and close-ups displaying the injury, seeming to suggest that the strong, virile male body broken and in pain functions as an object of fascination to the viewer. This fascination is certainly shared by the women of Cranford themselves, for shots of Jem collapsing in the marketplace, in full view of all the town, stress that his affliction is a public spectacle, and his transportation to the doctor's house on a stretcher, surrounded and followed by anxious and excited women, ensures it remains so. There is a breathless excitement in the way his injury and its treatment is reported and discussed: Miss Pole, the town gossip, reports the latest news to the Jenkyns household with a relish that is shared by her listeners:

> Miss Pole: You will cast it [the sewing] all aside when you hear what I must say [...] There is to be an *amputation*! It will be severed at the elbow with a silver saw.
>
> Mrs Forester: Dr Harrison is wonderfully quick. He gave exhibitions at St Guy's hospital.

Miss Pole: Perhaps he went for tar – he will need to seal the stump. (*Cranford*, Episode 1)

The observation about Harrison's previous experience is significant here, given that Jem's operation itself is deeply voyeuristic. The viewer watches the procedure as though it were an 'exhibition'; the six women wait, half-appalled and half-fascinated, in the next room throughout, listening to his cries of pain as the bone is set and the wound stitched. Even the candles they all supply tie in thematically with the construction of Jem's trauma as visual spectacle.

This is all notable primarily because of its complete contrast in tone to the way female illness and death is represented in the drama. The deaths of Miss Brown and Miss Deborah Jenkyns both happen quietly off-camera. We do not see the invalid Miss Brown at any point, and this represents a departure from Gaskell's novel, in which her illness and deathbed scenes are described in some detail (see Gaskell 1993: 6). Similarly, even though Miss Jenkyns is a central character, all we are allowed to witness of her demise is the outstretched hand visible when her family go to investigate her sudden collapse. All the remaining deaths in Cranford are male: Thomas Holbrook's from pneumonia, the young Walter Hutton's from croup (which is also represented in some detail by the adaptation) and most significantly of all, that of Mr Carter. Mr Carter's death, from an explosion during the building of the railway track in the final episode, is the culmination of the drama and mirrors Jem Hearne's accident in the first. Thus *Cranford* seems to begin and end with images of virile men who are both damaged and undermined at every point. Again the camera witnesses Carter's pain and seems to revel in his blood loss, which covers both his clothes and Dr Harrison's, with gory detail quite different from the general tone of the adaptation. In addition Carter is, again like Jem, shown first on the stretcher and then, in a prolonged scene, on the operating table: first preparing his will, then beginning the operation to remove his injured leg, and finally in death, when we realise he has endured the pain of the procedure unnecessarily. These events seem invested with added significance because they are interwoven by shots of Sophy Hutton's typhoid fever, which is also treated by Dr Harrison. This patient is also shown in pain. However, there is no graphic depiction of the horrors of her condition. (Dr Harrison discusses her

vomiting, for instance, but we do not witness it.) In her case, medical intervention is successful and she makes a complete recovery.

Even male characters who do not actually appear on screen are defined by their physical weakness and fragility. Lord Septimus, the only living son of Lady Ludlow and the heir to Hanbury, has gone to Italy for his health, and never actually returns to Cranford, though he is mentioned by other characters at several points throughout the series. We learn that Septimus, who is probably consumptive – itself an indicator of compromised masculinity, given its cultural construction as a "female disease" in the nineteenth century (see Lawlor 2006: 64-73) – cannot, or will not, fulfil his social and familial duties by taking over the running of the estate. Furthermore, he is presented as effeminate and effete, disliking physical activity and more interested in his appearance, as Miss Galindo reminds us: "Septimus loathed all equestrian pursuits [...] he said rising in the saddle always put his hat askew" (*Cranford*, Episode 2). He is also very good at spending his mother's money. Most importantly, his main task in life – to continue the family name and provide an heir – is something he seems unlikely to achieve:

> Lady Ludlow: I still hope that he may find a suitable bride whilst living out in Italy – that there might still be an heir for all this.
> Sir Charles: I think, perhaps, that you should not hope too hard. (*Cranford*, Episode 2)

Septimus's ill-health, then, signals an escape from conventional gender roles and expectations, as well as being symbolic of a sexuality that is deviant and subversive because unproductive.

Hence *Cranford* seems preoccupied by the fragility of masculinity, which is portrayed as weak (Harry Gregson, too, turns faint at one point) and susceptible to disease. Even previously healthy men like Jem are shown pierced and penetrated by trauma. How might we account for this construction of the vulnerability of the male body? At the very least Curtis and Hudson's production represents a reversal of the way many Victorian novels, including Gaskell's own, traditionally associate illness with femaleness. Curtis seems to be deliberately leaving behind what Bram Dijkstra terms the nineteenth-century "cult of invalidism", which

encouraged the representation of woman as "a permanent, a necessary, even a natural invalid" (Dijkstra 1986: 25). The women of the BBC's *Cranford* challenge this by being energetic and vital, even into old age; if they are not, like Miss Brown, they have no part in the story. This contrasts with Gaskell's own writing which was filled with central female invalids: from Mrs Hale and Bessy in *North and South*, to the consumptive Esther in *Mary Barton* and the love-sick titular character of *Cousin Phillis* (1864). There are many sick or wounded men in nineteenth-century fiction too, of course, but as feminist critics have shown, illness was nonetheless most frequently gendered as female (see Bronfen 1992, Vrettos 1995, and Showalter 1978). Yet the modern production rejects this association, literally shifting our gaze to the sickly male instead.

Donald E. Hall has discussed how Victorian "manliness was synonymous with strength, both physical and moral", and how, in order to be successful, the male body required "a physical armour-plating to withstand various potential threats" (Hall 1994: 7, 9). Bruce Haley has also examined how, as the writings of Thomas Carlyle, Charles Kinsley and Herbert Spencer display, the ideal nineteenth-century man was productive and active because he was healthy in body and mind (Haley 1978: 21). Those whose bodies proved vulnerable to penetration by disease or trauma, then, have their masculinity compromised. Certainly, from Linton Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* (1847) to Ralph Touchett in the *Portrait of a Lady* (1881), the male invalid in literature is portrayed as effeminate and inadequate. For the woman writer, however, such a representation has political potential. Rochester in *Jane Eyre* (1847), for example, is "symbolically unmanned" at the end of the novel by his blindness and lameness, so that Jane, for the first time in their relationship, becomes his equal (Kim 2003: 61). Just as there is an association between health and "the ability to shape and control the world around oneself" (Hall 1994: 7), male vulnerability undermines patriarchy: Victorian women's writing seems to use physical fragility as a means of subverting and taking revenge on male dominance. Drawing on such representations, *Cranford* is no exception. Its damaged, weakened, and suffering male bodies are symbolic of how this "town of the Amazons" (Gaskell 1993: 15) regards men, as well as a form of punishment for the patriarchal power they attempt to assert.

In Cranford, men are regarded as either an irrelevant nuisance – as Miss Matty says pityingly when she sees that her new neighbours have a

male head of the household: "a man is so in the way in a house" (*Cranford*, Episode 1) – or they are viewed as a threat. Captain Brown, the only active and empowered head of a family in Cranford, gives cause for disapproval and is a source of anxiety for the women around him, who, clearly uneasy with the powerful man in the midst, condemn his social conduct, treatment of his daughter, and his career aspirations. When he and the local landowner Sir Charles are found to have plans for bringing the railway to Cranford, the ladies are appalled by what they see as his betrayal of the town and its way of life. Miss Jenkyns's angry condemnation of him as an enemy who has "insinuated himself into our society, like a snake" (*Cranford*, Episode 2), reveals much about the source of their anxiety: it is his masculinity, as represented by the phallic serpent, which is really objectionable here. Miss Jenkyns goes on to liken Captain Brown to a "wolf in sheep's clothing" (*Cranford*, Episode 2), clearly constructing him as predatory, a view which seems to be symbolically if not literally justified when her fury at his actions brings on the stroke which kills her. Jane Spencer has suggested that Captain Brown, and similar threatening alien forces in Gaskell's novel, are "absorbed and defused" as they become more familiar, and that fear in this cosy world is illusory (Spencer 1993: 83), but this is much less true of the television adaptation. Men are, *Cranford* implies, pathological to others, as well as fragile themselves.

Female Cranford regards Captain Brown, then, as a dangerous, suspicious 'Other', because he is both male and an outsider, hence a doubly unknown entity. Another new arrival, young Dr Harrison, is also a source of concern for the women of the town, but their rapid identification and construction of him as a suitor renders him less threatening – though only temporarily, as I will discuss later. For the contemporary viewer, though, Captain Brown is initially a likeable and amiable character, but as the drama progresses we come to share Cranford's more ambivalent attitude towards him: Captain Brown may be benevolent in himself, but the patriarchal system he represents is not. For example, with regards to the situation of his daughter Jessie, we can see Victorian gender issues and their accompanying power struggles at work. That is, while his concern for his daughter's material well-being is admirable, he is not sensitive to her personal needs, and his own desires always take precedence over Jessie's. *Cranford* stresses the seemingly inevitable power imbalance implicit in their relationship, revealing in a pivotal scene that Jessie is not informed, nor consulted,

regarding her father's plans for their future, and that he blindly pursues his own ambition as a representative of the railway company without thinking about her happiness:

> Brown: And I am about to enter the Company's employ. When construction of the new line starts, I shall be head of works.
> Miss Matty: This is startling news indeed.
> Jessie: It is more than starling to me, and I live beneath his roof!
> Brown: There are still some matters to be clarified, but I am likely to be away a great deal, my dear. It will be all change for us.
> Jessie: I cannot believe you have made such plans and told me nothing of them! I had determined to stay at home and care for you in your old age! (*Cranford*, Episode 2)

In this scene, Captain Brown can see nothing amiss in his actions, which are sanctioned by a patriarchal society, but we witness here perhaps the only small moment of rebellion voiced by his otherwise obedient daughter. In fact, like most of the women in the text, Jessie is the epitome of idealised Victorian femininity, being passive, dutiful and altruistic.[5] Indeed, she tells Miss Matty that she has spent her youth nursing a sick mother and sister and, prior to her father's career move, we see her turn down a marriage proposal in order to care for him, even though he remains oblivious to her sacrifices and takes her devotion for granted. While Jessie is usually uncomplaining and compliant with her father's wishes, the viewer is invited to be angry on her behalf at certain moments that arguably demonstrate a young woman's oppression. These are often connected to her piano playing, which represents the only personal pleasure in which she indulges, but which we see her father repeatedly discourage. He 'asks', just as she sits down at the piano: "you weren't planning on playing this evening, were you?" (*Cranford*, Episode 2) Later on in the series, Jessie says that her playing pains him after his injury: "I have hardly had the lid up at home these last three weeks – every time I start, poor father says it pains his eye" (*Cranford*, Episode 5).

This father-daughter relationship typifies the way gender relations are represented in *Cranford*; most of the female characters are defined by their altruism and most of the male figures are marked out as lacking understanding regarding those very sacrifices. Amongst these women, giving up their personal freedom to serve others – usually by postponing a marriage they want – is a common and accepted practice. Miss Matty refuses to marry Mr Holbrook, because it goes against the wishes of her family, and she feels her first duty is to them: "Mr Holbrook proposed in the midst of all our sorrows, and I so wanted to say yes, but I couldn't accept him. Nor after all that had occurred […] I was afraid it would destroy [the family]" (*Cranford*, Episode 3). It takes thirty years, and the deaths of all those who disapproved, for Miss Matty to allow a reunion with her lover. However, when he suddenly succumbs to pneumonia before their engagement can be finalised, we are reminded that self-sacrifice and patience is not always rewarded. Sophy Hutton, too, spends her youth caring for her father and siblings after the death of her mother and tells Mary that she fears she will have no opportunity to marry, given that she has no time to go into society and "no conversation" as a result of all her domestic responsibilities (*Cranford*, Episode 3). Mary's reassuring response, that men will not expect her to talk but merely listen, becomes more than a light-hearted comment when considered in light of the adaptation's feminist subtext. Even the most compassionate and caring men in Cranford, after all, do not consider the feelings of women and do not perceive their suffering. Dr Harrison, for example, is unaware that both his housekeeper and one of his patients are in love with him, even though their symptoms are clearly apparent to everyone else, and the resulting misunderstandings and false expectations of engagements lead to heartache for all concerned. In contrast, even the female servants are sensitive to the needs of others and put their well-being ahead of their own: Martha is willing to work without pay rather than leave Miss Matty in times of hardship and arranges her own marriage and future to benefit her mistress.

Feminist critics have identified this sort of "kindness and mutual help" as the main theme and focus of Gaskell's novel, which posits Cranford in opposition to the male, urban world of struggle, strife and capitalism, which exists at the other end of the railway (Spencer 1993: 81). The BBC adaptation foregrounds this positive representation of female solidarity, constructing the town as a comforting place where women care for and

support each other, in an otherwise increasingly isolated – and male, capitalist world. Men are dangerous and romantic love is perceived to be problematic, even pathological – Sophy's fever is, after all, a disease more emotional than physical, in that it is a direct result of her belief that Dr Harrison has been unfaithful to her, and of the attendant trauma. However, female friendship provides a panacea to most of life's difficulties. There are small instances of female support demonstrated throughout the drama, but this motif is made explicit in the final episode, when Miss Matty loses all her savings in a collapsed bank and her friends gather together to anonymously donate money to keep her from ruin. This example of what Flint terms "social solidarity" is lifted directly from Gaskell's novel, presumably because it seems to demonstrate a nostalgic view of a caring community which appeals to us in a more cynical age (Flint, 1995: 33).

In this way *Cranford*'s popularity, along with most heritage films and adaptations, reflects what Eric Larsen describes as "the past serv[ing] effectively as an escape from the present" (Larsen 1983: 462). Andrew Higson has extensively explored the appeal of heritage productions, which allow the audience to "turn their backs on the industrialised, chaotic present [...] The version of the national past offered is above all a modern past, an imaginary object offered from the point of view of a present which is too distasteful to be confronted head-on" (Higson 1993: 110-113). In this way, the audience is offered access to a past that is "purged of political tension" (Wright 1985: 69) and so can be enjoyed as a fantasy of a unified and stable England (Higson 1993: 113). Cranford's intimate, supportive and altruistic society certainly functions as nostalgic escapism for the contemporary viewer, but from a feminist perspective is not entirely 'purged', as we have seen. Indeed, the solution to Miss Matty's financial collapse challenges traditional gender relations and criticises modern day reiterations of those relationships. In the canon of adapted nineteenth-century fiction, it is usually men who rescue the heroines from financial hardship and personal or familial catastrophe: Mr Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) provide obvious examples.

Cranford's idealised matriarchal society, then, is a self-contained world with its own support networks, based on compassion and altruism, which seeks independence from men. In this regard, *Cranford* can be seen to be sharing the value system of successful contemporary female television dramas like *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004), which may be very

different from heritage programmes in content, but which also appeal to the viewer mainly because of their preoccupation with female solidarity and support. In what might arguably be a link with this kind of sex, shopping and friendship narrative, the BBC production displays a thematic preoccupation with fabric and dressmaking and includes numerous conversations about spring fashions, lace collars and muslin for new gowns running throughout the story. Interest in dress, it is implied, is something the contemporary viewer can share with the nineteenth-century woman: *Cranford* reminds us that, then as now, clothes are important emotional signifiers. Miss Matty's desire for a new bonnet at a time of crisis and her choice of a widow's cap after the death of Mr Holbrook are examples of this. In the same way, clothing brings the female characters together, both literally and metaphorically. The bond between Caroline Tompkinson and her sister, for example, is cemented through their excitement at some red silk for Caroline's dress. (In yet in another demonstration of the self-sacrificing nature of women, her elder sister has gone without a new gown herself in order to purchase one for Caroline.) Indeed, the women of Cranford all meet, gossip and shop in the local haberdashery and milliners, revealing a significant domination of the public as well as the private sphere in this town. If there are shops run and frequented solely by men in Cranford, we do not see them, and when the male characters attempt to purchase anything, they are clearly uncomfortable and inefficient consumers: Dr Harrison is repeatedly bullied into buying things he does not want, and Jem Hearn is humiliated when his bank note is not accepted.

This interest in clothes and fabric is used throughout *Cranford* as an overarching metaphor for the community, the aims of the production, and indeed for the processes of adaptation itself. For example, Birtwistle has described the creation of the adaptation as a 'weaving' together of the strands of Gaskell's novel with her short stories and critics have commented, using similar language, on the "interweav[ing]" structure of the novel (Foster 2002: 100). This symbolism culminates in Miss Matty's receipt of the long-awaited gift of muslin for her wedding gown from her brother Peter on his return from India. Of course this is no longer of any use to Miss Matty, who instead donates the material to Sophy Hutton who is to be married, an act which provides the concluding sense of altruism and closeness in this society. Miss Matty's final words, regarding the "fine, close weave" of the wedding dress, are thus imbued with added significance

(*Cranford*, Episode 5). *Cranford* suggests that the lives of the women in this town are interwoven around each other as threads in cloth.

More problematic for a feminist reading of the adaptation, however, is a similar earlier scene, in which Miss Matty and Jessie parcel up books with paper and – significantly – string, while discussing their loneliness and their longing for the return of their loved ones, both of whom are lost to them in India:

> Miss Matty: We have a deal in common, you and I. We have both seen a sister buried, and seen someone dear to us go off to India [...] Do you ever listen for footsteps in the street, at night, when you are sitting alone?
>
> Jessie: Major Gordon usually called on horseback. But I cannot deny that sometimes, when I head the clip of hooves, something inside me leaps up for a moment. But I wish it would not, for I think that it is not the despair that hurts one, but the hope. Would you pass me the string? (*Cranford*, Episode 5)

The clear suggestion here is that the women of *Cranford* are tied together with bonds of friendship, but also tied down by their gender and the passivity, inaction and frustration that accompany it. It seems that their community is "founded on a sisterhood of shared pain"(Auerbach 1998: 17), and its strength and positivity are undermined as a result. In contrast, all the men, from Captain Brown to Peter Jenkyns, are, as Stoneman notes, "self-reliant, [and] decisive" with a "store of information" gained by their active lives and their travels abroad (Stoneman 1987: 96). It is they who embrace activity and change, as symbolised in *Cranford* by the coming of the railway. The adaptation hints that this may be a destructive, dangerous modernisation, given that it is its construction which kills Mr Carter and half blinds Captain Brown, but it is a force which the women of the town are powerless to stop. In the same way these women's lives are spent waiting quietly at home for their loved ones, and it is only the return of Major Gordon and Miss Matty's brother Peter that gives Jessie and Miss Matty a happy ending.

The BBC production seems to reinforce the feminine ethics of compassion and love apparent in Gaskell's novel, and it certainly pays tribute to the benevolence of the female characters and to their concern for others, which contrasts so dramatically with the attitudes and concerns of the men in the text. However, this glorification of the self-sacrificing nature of women in *Cranford* has traditionally been problematic for the feminist critic and is no less so in this adaptation. Its conventional happy ending for the kindly and loving Jessie and Miss Matty does perpetuate the romantic myth that passivity and altruism will ultimately be rewarded, and that happiness is granted in the form of the return of those who have been lost. Indeed, the number of marriages (for almost all the cast in the final scenes) and the hints of romance for the independent-minded Miss Pole and Mary are arguably ridiculous and stretch the viewer's goodwill. Such a finale seems to undermine the subversive spirit of Gaskell's text, which stresses the insensitivity of men even in its final pages,[6] and instead reinforces connections between men, matrimony and happiness for women, – connections which appear to be as tenacious in the present day as they were in the 1840s. Heritage productions have long been accused of perpetuating reactionary right-wing viewpoints, because their central pleasure is "the artful and spectacular projection of an elite, conservative version of the national past" (Higson 1996: 233). Such a projection reshapes collective memory to construct views of 'Great Britain' as affluent, aristocratic, hierarchical and white. This critical debate has tended to centre on questions of class and nationality, but similar observations could be made about the presentation of gender in historical drama. Janice Doane and Devon Hodges have suggested that nostalgia constitutes a "frightening antifeminist impulse", because "nostalgic writers construct their visions of a golden past to authenticate women's traditional place and to challenge outspoken feminist criticisms of it" (Doane and Hodges 1987: 3).

With this in mind, it could be said that *Cranford*'s feminotopian society provides a fantastic mythical past, which glosses over the harsh realities of nineteenth-century patriarchal society. Its stress on marriage and on women being uncomplainingly altruistic and passive does seem to support Doane and Hodge's comments about heritage's attempt to "authenticate women's traditional place". Yet this is complicated by this adaptation's determination to give voice and television space to women; to construct them as healthy, vibrant and self-sufficient, and to involve the

viewer in their domestic existence. Higson notes that, despite their conservatism, heritage productions "very often seem to move marginalised social groups from the footnotes of history to the narrative centre" (Higson 1996: 244), and the mature, unglamorous and unmarried women of Cranford certainly represent such a marginalised group. The BBC version, and its feminist message, then, struggles within the confines of its own genre. On the one hand, *Cranford* is enabled by the female audience associated with heritage films to attempt to give the kind of alternative, hidden history usually repressed by nineteenth-century novels and adaptations alike. At the same time, however, it is hampered by the expectation that such productions indulge the viewer with cultural nostalgia, which inevitably demands a rosy, unified and stable vision of the past. In this way, of course, this adaptation has much in common with Gaskell's work itself, which, as has been seen, critics like Williams have denounced for its commitment to romantic and domestic plots, even while others have applauded her feminist re-appropriation of the genre.

Notes

1. *North and South* was voted 'Best Drama' in the BBC drama website's annual viewers' poll in 2004; *Wives and Daughters* won four BAFTAs and was nominated for a number of other awards in 2000. See http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0417349/awards and http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0215364/awards.
2. There is surprisingly little criticism on Gaskell adaptations: they are not discussed, for example, by Cartmell and Whelehan's otherwise comprehensive *Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen* (2007), or Sarah Cardwell's *Adaptation Revisited* (2002), though in fairness only the 1999 adaptation of *Wives and Daughters* had been made at the time of the latter study's publication.
3. Here Monk criticises assumptions about the target audience, but this comment seems accurate nonetheless – a view reinforced by Higson, who suggests "the female audience is crucial to most [...] costume films" (Higson 2003: 23).
4. The obvious comparison here is with the 1995 *Pride and Prejudice*'s Mrs Bennet. Hysterical and gossipy, she forms a prototype for the characters of Mrs Forester and Mrs Pole in *Cranford*, though they also have a depth and warmth that no portrayal of Bennet has yet displayed.
5. Here we might recall Sarah Cardwell's comments on the "layering process of

characterisation", where she discusses the intertextuality given to a production when a viewer is reminded of an actor's previous roles when they see them on screen (Cardwell 2002: 91). This is applicable because Jessie is played by Julia Sawalha, perhaps most famous for her role as Safie in the BBC's *Absolutely Fabulous* (1992 - 2004), who thus brings resonances of that other long-suffering and put-upon daughter to her character in *Cranford*.

6. See Peter Jenkyns's comments to Matty about the death of Mr Holbrook (Gaskell 1993: 248).

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