

A Tale of Two Authors: On the Short Fiction of Gaskell and Collins

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In February 1857 there appeared unsigned in the New York *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* a short, dramatic story of a young woman's bravery, entitled "The Siege of the Black Cottage".¹ My objectives here are first to confirm the bibliographical status of this narrative, which has been claimed for both Elizabeth Gaskell and Wilkie Collins, and then to suggest briefly what can be learned from the confusion concerning the publishing formats and literary forms of shorter fiction around the middle of the nineteenth century.

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Founded in 1817, well before there was any American law to protect the copyright of aliens, the New York literary house of Harper had long specialized in reprinting fiction originally published in Britain, with or without authorization. When Charles Dickens first visited the United States in the early 1840s, Harper & Brothers were still known as "the redoubtable champions of literary piracy" (Barnes, p. 80), though not long after they acquired a London agent, Sampson Low, and began to offer payment to English authors whenever there was an economic incentive to do so. In June 1850, shortly after the appearance in London of the first issue of *Household Words*, the New York house had started its own literary miscellany, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. With each issue containing nearly 150 double-column pages, including a generous supply of quality illustrations, and selling at only a quarter, this represented even better value than Dickens's twopenny plain weekly paper. A major reason was doubtless the magazine's policy of "transfer[ing] to its pages as rapidly as they may be issued all the continuous tales of Dickens, Bulwer, Croly,

Lever, Warren, and other distinguished contributors to British Periodicals”.² Indeed, two of the lengthier items in the opening issue were the first serial installment of *Maurice Tiernay* and the complete narrative of “Lizzie Leigh, lifted respectively from the April issue of the *Dublin University Magazine*, and the first three numbers of *Household Words*. Both on the paper cover of the June issue of *Harper’s Magazine* and in the index to the bound volume containing the first six, *Maurice Tiernay* was correctly assigned to Charles Lever, while “Lizzie Leigh” was ascribed mistakenly to Dickens himself rather than to Elizabeth Gaskell. It is now difficult to ascertain whether or not the mistake was intentional.³

Though it appeared along with a number of unsigned sketches of local origin, “The Siege of the Black Cottage” itself was clearly from the pen of a British author. The heroine Bessie, a stone-mason’s daughter without “a farthing of money of her own”, acts as the narrator of her own story, which is set “in the midst of a moor in the West of England”. The main events take place when the eighteen-year-old Bessie is left alone at night in an isolated cottage, and acts with unexpected courage and ingenuity to protect a large sum of money, left in her care by a wealthy neighbour, from a violent gang of ruffians. This narrative opens:

To begin at the beginning, I must take you back to the time after my mother’s death, when my only brother had gone to sea, when my sister was out at service, and when I lived alone with my father . . .

But there is also a frame narrative, where the adult Bessie, now “the wife of one of the largest and richest gentlemen-farmers” in the area, explains to a young visitor how her social advancement came as an indirect reward for her heroic performance during the siege. The tale’s underlying theme is indeed a questioning of the conventionally assigned class and gender roles of the mid-Victorian period. Although there is no reference to the story among the author’s

private papers, it is not difficult to find parallels, whether of setting, characterization, plot or subject, elsewhere among the shorter works of fiction written by Gaskell. On the face of things, then, the attribution to her does not seem unreasonable.

The source of the attribution appears to be Harpers themselves. Though there was no signature on the February 1857 magazine cover, or in the index to the bound volume appearing in the May, in mid-1870 the New York house issued a cumulative index where “The Seige of the Black Cottage” and the name of “Mrs E.C. Gaskell” were linked together in the alphabetical lists of both authors and works (*Index to Harper’s Monthly*, pp. 191 & 371).⁴ This attribution still has a certain currency today. The rapid growth in recent decades of academic interest in both Victorian women’s writing and Victorian periodicals has inevitably encouraged a search for lost work. Most notable for our purposes is the 1981 article by Unsworth and Morton, which attributes eight new items to Gaskell, based mainly on stylometric analysis.⁵ It is then perhaps unsurprising that many modern Gaskell scholars have been keen to add “The Seige of the Black Cottage” to the list. On “The Gaskell Web”, Matsuoka includes the tale in his listing of shorter works of fiction by the author, though as an “uncertain attribution”; Hughes and Lund (p. 118), on the other hand, discuss the story confidently as a product of Gaskell’s pen.

In fact, there is incontrovertible evidence that the story was written by Wilkie Collins:⁶ it was reprinted as “Brother Owen’s Story of the Black Cottage,” the first tale in *The Queen of Hearts* (Hurst & Blackett, 1859), a signed collection of ten set within a frame narrative. There, it is true, the original frame of Bessie’s address to the young visitor is stripped away, and instead we find the Sheherazade-like conceit of an elderly lawyer and his two brothers spinning stories to detain his beautiful young ward, so that his absent son will have time to return from the Crimean War to claim her heart. Yet the text of the main narrative remains the same in all but the most minor details, and opens unmistakably, “To begin at the beginning, I must take you back to the time after

my mother's death . . .”.

What does remain rather uncertain is how the New York publishers obtained the story, since the pattern does not match that of any of the other five pieces by Collins carried in *Harper's Monthly* during the 1850s. These were two travel sketches in April 1851, reprinted without authorization from the signed volume *Rambles Beyond Railroads*, two tales lifted from *Household Words* (“A Terribly Strange Bed”, July 1852, and “A Lawyer’s Story”, February 1855),⁷ plus a “A Marriage Tragedy” in February 1858, which the New York firm had purchased from the author via Sampson Low. Like “The Black Cottage” itself, “A Marriage Tragedy” appeared first in *Harper's Monthly* and was later incorporated into *The Queen of Hearts*, as “Brother Griffith’s Story of a Plot in Private Life”. When it was published in New York, though, “A Marriage Tragedy” was clearly signed and headed “Written Exclusively for Harper’s Magazine,” as indeed was Gaskell’s “Doom of the Griffiths” the previous month. It is difficult to explain both these variations and how the editors came eventually to attribute Collins’s tale to Gaskell. Amongst Collins’s surviving correspondence, there is only a single reference to the story, in a letter written to the editor of the *Athenaeum* objecting to a review of *The Queen of Hearts*, on the grounds that it dismissed the book as merely “a reprint from *Household Words*”:

If the critic in question will be so obliging as to open the book, he may make acquaintance with three stories (“The Black Cottage,” “The Biter Bit,” [first published in the Boston *Atlantic Monthly*] and “A Plot in Private Life”) which he has not met with before in *Household Words*, or in any other English periodical whatever; and he will, moreover, find the whole collection of stories connected by an entirely new thread of interest . . .

(26 October 1859, *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins*, I p. 181)

While this suggests that Collins had in fact authorized the publication of “The

Black Cottage” in New York, it does not otherwise help to explain the confusion over authorship.⁸

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I have described this affair in some detail not only to settle the question of who wrote “The Siege of the Black Cottage”, but also because it can tell us a good deal about the earlier Victorian market for shorter fiction in general, and Dickens’s impact upon it in particular. In other words, it can help to explain how it was possible for informed observers to confuse the work of writers as different as Gaskell and Collins. For, while it may be true that the two authors coincide in their tendency to depict strong female characters, or to probe distinctions of social class, in almost all other respects their positions seem strongly opposed. This remains true whether we focus on the generation to which they belonged, their social background, gender identity, regional affiliation, religious beliefs, or literary style. Things become clearer if we consider whether it would have been possible to confuse the authorship of full-length novels by Gaskell and Collins, say *Wives and Daughters* and *Armada*, whose initial serial runs in the *Cornhill Magazine* happened to overlap to a considerable extent.⁹ The answer must, of course, be a resounding negative. Here it is important to recognize a further commonality, the complex influence of Dickens as editor and publisher, at the same time empowering and overbearing, on the development of their early literary careers.

We should note, however, that this influence was less crucial regarding novel serialization in the case of Gaskell at least, none of whose full-length narratives were to appear in Dickens’s journals after the problems in 1854 with *North and South*. These left the author convinced that the form of the work had been distorted, that “[e]very page was grudged” to her so that she was “compelled to desperate compression” (to Anna Jameson, [Jan 1855], *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, #225, pp. 328-9).¹⁰ In contrast, the form of Collins’s mature sensation novels was shaped to a considerable extent by the fact that four out of five of them, from *The Dead Secret* (1857) through to *The Moonstone* (1868),

appeared initially in weekly installments in *Household Words* or *All the Year Round*; and here there was relatively little in the way of tension with the editor. In the space remaining, I thus wish to consider the impact of publishing format on literary form, in relation to the shorter fiction produced by Gaskell and Collins in the course of their literary careers.

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The reader might be aware that I have so far avoided using the term “short story”. This is because, in Britain at least, the phrase did not come into common use until late in the nineteenth century, when it was associated with the aesthetics of early modernism with its preference for realism, irony and compression. Around this time, there appeared a number of articles claiming that the form had originated in America, where short narratives of local colour had long been popular.¹¹ Yet there was clearly no shortage of British shorter fiction earlier in the Victorian period, especially in periodicals. There the term “tale” was still preferred for narratives that tended either to function as fillers between the runs of full-length installment novels, or to be associated with the Christmas season, which thus imparted a distinctly gothic flavour. (A similar argument can be made concerning the terms “novella” and “novelette”; until the *fin de siècle* the latter is far more commonly found.)¹² This is only one among a number of my dissatisfactions with Harold Orel’s monograph *The Victorian Short Story* (1986), which remains the most detailed historical treatment of the subject. Another is that, while Orel recognizes the importance to the changing aesthetics of shorter fiction of “the development of mass-circulation periodicals” (p. 184), his book is extremely short on detailed knowledge of publishing history. In the twenty years since Orel’s work appeared, of course, the study of what is now often called “print culture” has become a burgeoning academic enterprise. Here I can mention briefly only two among many relevant projects: Simon Eliot’s bibliometric work on nineteenth-century publishing trends, which shows how the Christmas season gradually emerged as the climax of the publishing year (Eliot, esp. pp. 26-42); and John Plunkett’s works on Queen Victoria as the

first “Media Monarch”, which shows how important the illustrated press then was in melding the concepts of the bourgeois family and the nation state (Plunkett, esp. pp. 1-12). In their different ways, both help us to understand that Dickens’s impact on the growth of mass-circulation journals was determined not just by his massive talent and personality, but also by the fact that his editorial projects encapsulated the spirit of the age.

By any calculation, even excluding “novelettes” like Gaskell’s *The Moorland Cottage* and Collins’s *Mr Wray’s Cash-Box*, both writers produced well over fifty works of shorter fiction, of which a large proportion made their first appearance in either *Household Words* or *All the Year Round*. In fact their careers as writers of tales run in parallel fashion to a remarkable extent. Both made their early appearances in monthly journals edited by others (Gaskell in *Howitt’s Journal* and Collins in *Bentley’s Miscellany*, most notably), defected later on to more prestigious and remunerative venues, notably George Smith’s *Cornhill*, but in between remained very faithful to Dickens’s cheap weekly miscellanies. In Gaskell’s case this phase spanned from “Lizzie Leigh” (*HW*, 30 March 1850, the first number) to “Crowley Castle” (*AYR*, Christmas 1863); in Collins’s from “A Terribly Strange Bed” (*HW*, 24 April 1852) to a share in *No Thoroughfare* (*AYR*, Christmas 1867).

Within these periods, among the most telling were the tales appearing in the Extra Christmas Numbers. In total, there were seventeen such issues, published continuously from 1851 to 1867. Gaskell appeared in five, though in the initial two cases, *A Round of Stories by the Christmas Fire* (*HW*, 1852) and *Another Round of Stories . . .* (*HW*, 1853), as the titles suggest, there was no frame narrative or unifying concept other than that of Yuletide itself. Collins appeared in a total of nine, all with strong conceptual frameworks, including eight continuously from 1854-61, and, as Lillian Nayder has emphasized (pp. 9-14), in two cases (*The Perils of Certain English Prisoners*, *HW* 1857, and *No Thoroughfare*) the work was co-authored by Dickens and Collins alone. But it could also be claimed that Gaskell and Collins were themselves literary

collaborators, since both contributed to not only *A House to Let* (1858) but also *The Haunted House* (1859), respectively the last Christmas number of *Household Words*, and the first of *All the Year Round*. Moreover, during the 1850s at least, even those works of shorter fiction by Gaskell and Collins that were not subject to Dickens's control as editor reveal his influence to a remarkable extent. Indeed, both *The Moorland Cottage* (Chapman & Hall, 1850) and *Mr Wray's Cash-Box* (Bentley, 1852) are apprentice Christmas books following the format popularized by the master Boz from 1842 with *A Christmas Carol*. And in the later 1850s, when both authors begin to gather their shorter tales from the periodicals into collections for book publication, the model is clearly the Dickens Christmas Number with its elaborate narrative framework. Having already alluded to Collins's *The Queen of Hearts* in 1859, we need mention here only *Round the Sofa* from the same year, where Gaskell employs the device of a weekly *soirée* at the residence of a doctor in Edinburgh's Old Town to contextualize her tales.

However, these examples also serve to remind us that, when we look more closely at the parallel outputs of shorter fiction from the pens of Gaskell and Collins, there are significant differences of literary form alongside the similarities of publishing format. Above all, the disparities concern the degree of tension with the models laid down by Dickens, the general point being that Gaskell typically displays a good deal more resistance than Collins. Let me briefly offer some examples. Regarding the early Christmas Books, Collins's *Mr Wray's Cash-Box*, with its urban setting, gothic cast of eccentrics, wry humour, and sentimental ending, is far more in keeping with the Dickensian Yuletide spirit than Gaskell's *The Moorland Cottage*, where the dénouement, with its symbolic drowning and resuscitation of the heroine, seems more in the Easter vein. In the case of the collections of tales, Gaskell's narrative framework in *Round the Sofa* is far more perfunctory, accounting for only 3% of the total word count as opposed to 18% in the case of Collins's *The Queen of Hearts*.¹³ And in contrast to his stout public defence of his method in the letter to the *Athenaeum*,

she writes off her own construction in private correspondence with a friend:

You will be seeing a book of mine advertized; but don't be diddled about it; it is only a REpublication of H W Stories; I have a rascally publisher this time (Sampson Low . . .) & he is trying to pass it off as new.

(To Anne Robson, [February 1859], *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, #414, pp. 530-1)

Perhaps the most telling cases, though, are found in those Extra Christmas Numbers to which both Gaskell and Collins contributed. Here the varying levels of resistance are obviously related to the fact that, as a woman, Gaskell was excluded from any editorial role in Dickens's journals, while from late 1856 until early 1862 Collins was a paid member of staff. In *A House to Let*, Collins's "Trotter's Report," with its focus on the restoration of the lost boy, not only reinforces Dickens's theme of the gift of the Christ child, but is also committed to the narrative frame (constructed together by the two men) to such an extent that it cannot stand independently as a short tale.¹⁴ In contrast, Gaskell's contribution, "The Manchester Marriage," one of her most anthologized tales, remains independent of the frame and again more strongly evokes the spirit of Easter, with its *dénouement* in the sacrificial death of the first husband, Frank Wilson, and the consequent redemption of the second, the Manchester man Openshaw. Moreover, the sympathetic treatment of Openshaw can be interpreted as a retort to Dickens's attack on Manchester values in the person of Gradgrind in *Hard Times*. Since the serial run of *Hard Times* in *Household Words* had immediately preceded that of *North and South*, there might even be a sense in which Gaskell was getting her own back for the damage done to the form of that narrative.

A similar argument could perhaps be made about "The Crooked Branch," Gaskell's contribution to *The Haunted House*, but here I will focus instead on the

nature of the frame narrative itself, in this case constructed by Dickens alone. There, each of the fictional house guests to tell a story is given a *persona* that parodies the personality of the real contributing author, and thus reveals his or her identity to those in the know – with the marked exception of Gaskell herself. The Bohemian George Augustus Sala becomes “Alfred Starling, an uncommonly agreeable young fellow ... who pretends to be ‘fast’”. Feminist versifier Adelaide Anne Procter becomes “Belinda Bates, ... [who] has a fine genius for poetry, ... and “goes in” for Woman’s mission . . .”. The stocky sailing fanatic Wilkie Collins, becomes “one ‘Nat Beaver’, . . . with a thick-set wooden face and figure, and ... a world of watery experience.” Gaskell, in contrast, is disguised as Dickens’s lawyer Frederick Ouvry: “Mr Undery, my friend and solicitor: who came down, in an amateur capacity, . . . and who plays whist better than the whole Law List . . .”. In thus symbolically excluding her from the group around the Christmas fire, Dickens seems to have been signalling his annoyance at Gaskell’s resistance to his narrative schemes. Indeed, she was not asked to contribute to the extra number for several years, though she eventually returned for one last contribution, to *Mrs Lirriper’s Lodgings* in 1863. This, of course, was after Collins himself had jumped ship.

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Seen in this context, the confusion over the authorship of “The Siege of the Black Cottage” becomes more comprehensible and enlightening. Though they tended to negotiate them in different ways, Gaskell and Collins clearly shared many of the same constraints as writers – and especially as writers of shorter fiction – whether from the prevailing print culture of the mid-Victorian era in general or specifically due to their dependence on Dickens. Perhaps I can conclude by differentiating my position from those of a couple of earlier commentators on the process of collaboration with Boz. First, despite my admiration for its patient unravelling of the ideological tensions between Dickens and Collins in their co-authoring of the Christmas numbers, I think that Lillian Nayder’s *Unequal Partners* slightly overdoes their personal and

political conflicts. Something in the way of a control experiment, more systematically comparing and contrasting Dickens's acts of collaboration with a women writer – and Gaskell is the only viable candidate – might have produced a more nuanced account. On the other hand, I am convinced that Orel considerably underplays the importance of Dickens's relations to his co-authors in order to stress the uniqueness of his sense of fictional form: "A short story by Dickens may resemble short stories by his contemporaries much less strikingly than it does longer stories by himself. In this genre, as in so much else that he wrote, Dickens created his own universe." (p. 78). I could not disagree more with this conclusion.

Notes

1. "The Siege of the Black Cottage", *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 14:81 (February 1857) pp. 334-41.
2. "A Word at the Start", *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 1:1 (June 1850) pp. 1-2.
3. *Household Words* carried the legend "Conducted by Charles Dickens" prominently on its masthead, and, either for that reason or because his name would sell more copies, unauthorized American reprints of material from that journal written by others often identified Dickens as author. For example, Wilkie Collins's tale "Sister Rose", appearing in *Household Words* from 7-28 April 1855, was reprinted in the same year as a slim volume by Peterson of Philadelphia under Dickens's name.
4. The author entry for Gaskell overlooked not only "Lizzie Leigh", which remained assigned to Dickens, but also five other stories "transferred" from *Household Words*. However, it did correctly identify three works: "A Love Affair at Cranford" (March 1852), "The Doom of the Griffiths" (January 1858), and "An Incident at Niagara Falls" (June 1858). The two 1858 items had both appeared in *Harper's Monthly* signed "Mrs Gaskell": "The Doom of the Griffiths" had been purchased through Sampson Low, while "An Incident at Niagara Falls" must have been lifted from Gaskell's edition of Maria S. Cummins's *Mabel Vaughan* (1857).
5. See Anna Unsworth & A. Q. Morton. "Mrs Gaskell Anonymous: Some Unidentified Items in *Fraser's Magazine*", *Victorian Periodicals Review* 14 (Spring

1981) pp. 24-31. In the 1999 CD-ROM edition of the *Wellesley Index*, the six items attributed on internal evidence alone are flagged as uncertain. Both Angus Easson in his Gaskell entry in the latest *Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, pp. 1291-1301, and Joanne Shattock in her edition of *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell*, take a similarly cautious approach. See Joanne Shattock, "The new Complete Edition of the works of Elizabeth Gaskell", *Gaskell Society Journal* 19 (2005), pp. 100-106, especially pp. 104-5.

6. The fact that the attribution to Gaskell was spurious and the true author was Collins is indeed noted in the *Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, pp. 1299-1300, though there Easson traces the error back only to the 1885 edition of the cumulative index to Harper's Monthly.
7. In the *Index to Harper's Monthly*, "A Terribly Strange Bed" was unassigned, while "A Lawyer's Story" ("The Fourth Poor Traveller" from the *Household Words* Extra Christmas Number for 1854) was given to Dickens; see Lohrli, p. 235.
8. We should perhaps note here that, from 1859, Dickens began to sell advance sheets of his new journal to Harper & Brothers via Sampson Low, so that many of the contributions of both Gaskell and Collins to *All the Year Round* received authorized reprinting in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*; see Oppenlander, pp. 52-3.
9. *Wives and Daughters* ran in 18 parts from August 1864 until January 1866, while *Armada* appeared in 20 parts from November 1864 to June 1866.
10. To Maria James, Gaskell wrote: ". . . my poor story is like a pantomime figure, with a great large head, and a very small trunk. And it might have been so good! I shall try to add something to the separate publication to make it less unnatural, & deformed. But I will never write for H. W. again." (?24 January 1855, *Further Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 123); the promise was kept, of course, with regard to full-length serial novels only.
11. See, for example, Bret Harte, "The Rise of the 'Short Story'", *Cornhill Magazine* NS 7 (July 1899) pp. 1-8; or "Editor's Study", *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 112 (March 1906) pp. 638-40, where it was stated: "The short story is peculiarly an American Institution" (p. 638).
12. The first cited usage in the *OED* of the term "novelette" is 1814, while that of

“novella” is by the *doyen* of American Realism, W.D. Howells: “Few modern fictions of the novel’s dimensions . . . have the beauty of form many a novella embodies.” See W.D. Howells, “Some Anomalies of the Short Story,” *Literature and Life* (New York: Harper, 1902), pp. 110-24; here p. 116.

13. This was in fact the only occasion on which Gaskell attempted to create a frame narrative. Collins, on the other hand, had already produced a “new thread of interest” for the earlier collection, *After Dark* (Smith, Elder, 1856).
14. In *Wilkie Collins: The Complete Shorter Fiction*, Julian Thompson notes that “Trotter’s Report” belongs to a group of contributions to Christmas numbers that “do not seem to me to be sufficiently self-contained to merit reprinting here” (p. xiii).

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