

Gossip and the Limits of Female Self-Representation in *Cranford*

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1. Introduction

Mary Smith is the observant and sympathetic first-person narrator of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1853).¹ Her narrative is constituted by a detailed record of various anecdotes from the female-dominated rural society that is disappearing despite its resistance to the advent of a modern age represented by industrial Drumble. In contrast to the abundant descriptions of Cranford and its inhabitants, the dearth of information regarding the narrator, Mary Smith herself, has contributed to the comparative lack of analysis beyond her narrative role and the generalization of her character in criticism. Henry Fothergill Chorley simply defines her as "the Cranford Chronicler" (Chorley 194). Patricia Meyer Spacks asserts that Mary Smith's name "suggests her role as almost anonymous chorus" (Spacks 183). Hilary Schor, on the other hand, is one of the few critics who focus on Mary as an emerging character and narrator who achieves "her own voice" (Schor 87) through her narration and actions. I concur with Schor's assertion that Mary's narration gradually transforms into a distinct voice of an emerging character. In fact, I would suggest that Mary's narrative is significant not only for its observation of the disappearing pastoral and moral world represented in Cranford, but also for what it reveals of the rising character, Mary Smith herself, and the pervasive oral discourse, gossip. This is particularly illuminated through Mary's use of gossip in her narrative as that which reveals to a certain extent her repressed anxieties as a single woman who is increasingly marginalized in a changing society. Indeed, Mary seeks in Cranford and its gossip a kind of surrogate social platform and medium through which to compensate for her marginalized status in Drumble and to reestablish her self-representation as a valued member of a society.

At the same time, the novel also problematizes gossip that is readily available to

women in Cranford and Mary Smith. Although gossip was perceived to be a form of female speech that was often specifically associated with women, it was an ambivalent and problematic medium for female self-representation because it was often denigrated as a frivolous and morally ambiguous speech that lacked credibility or authority. The definitions given in the Oxford English Dictionary and Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755) show that the speech originated as a derogatory term that was or has been predominantly associated with women. According to the *OED*, the oldest meaning of gossip, dating from 1014, is that of a godparent, "one who has contracted spiritual affinity with another by acting as a sponsor at a baptism." From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the noun, gossip, began to have a meaning more similar to contemporary use: as "[a] person, mostly a woman, of light and trifling character, esp. one who delights in idle talk; a newsmonger, a tattler." Johnson's *Dictionary* also reflects this development. His three definitions of the noun were a "godparent," a "tippling companion," and "[o]ne who runs about tattling like women at a lying-in." By the early nineteenth century, its meaning had expanded to include frivolous speech itself.² Mary Smith's narrative highlights gossip as a precarious form of discourse for women, as that which finally reinforces rather than alleviates their social marginalization by illustrating the ways in which it belittles female speech and sanctions male, authoritative intervention.

By closely examining the ways in which the Cranford women and Mary Smith respectively grapple with gossip, this thesis seeks to illumine the limits of gossip as a medium for female self-representation for the often marginalized and silenced woman of the Victorian age.

2. Mary Smith and Gossip

Mary Smith is a sympathetic narrator of Cranford who fluctuates between two contrasting perspectives: an assimilated member of the small female community who shares its values and a detached observer who clearly demarcates herself from her subjects. At first, Mary seems to occupy the former position, as she appears to make little distinction between her subjects and herself by sharing the social rules and values

distinctive to the female community. For example, she repeatedly uses the pronouns “our”, “we” and “us” when introducing their eccentric social rules. In the first chapter entitled as “Our Society” (C 1), she asserts, “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” (C 3).

Despite Mary’s seemingly unbridled identification with the Cranford women, however, there is a certain distance that is maintained between her and her subjects. Firstly, Mary simultaneously posits herself as at once a member of the Amazonian town through the repeated use of “we”, and an outsider by referring to her subjects as “them” or “they”. For instance, she asserts, “[t]heir dress is very independent of fashion; as they observe, “What does it signify how we dress here at Cranford, where everybody knows us?” (C 2) Secondly, it becomes apparent that some of her assertions in which she emphasizes her affinity with the Cranford women are in fact, untrue. Mary initially aligns herself with Cranford’s single, financially modest women by including herself in the reference as “all of us, people of very moderate means” (C 4). However, she later admits that she is in fact, “well-to-do” (C 88) as the daughter of a successful businessman in Drumble, hence more financially secure than initially revealed. As the wavering pronouns of “we” and “they” indicate, as do the way in which Mary travels between commercialized Drumble and pastoral Cranford by the railway, she fluctuates between representing herself as an assimilated member of the small female community and as a detached outsider, who despite her sympathetic understanding of their idiosyncrasies, demarcates herself from them. This shifting perspective allows her to maintain an appropriate position as a reliable first-person narrator and recorder of Cranford events to her urban readership. This approach also applies to Mary’s use of gossip, the prevalent speech shared by the Cranford women.

It initially appears that Mary adopts without inhibition the stereotypical traits of gossip in her narrative. This is exemplified by several points. Firstly, the content of Mary’s narrative is predominantly constituted by detailed descriptions of the Cranford ladies’ inconsequential small talk and random anecdotes, namely, gossip, rather than a single plot. In the first few chapters, Mary introduces various, seemingly frivolous,

temporally disconnected gossip ranging from that of “Miss Betty Barker’s Alderney” cow “clad in dark grey flannel” (C 5), the sudden and unwelcome arrival of Captain Brown, his subsequent dispute with the Cranford matriarch Miss Deborah Jenkyns, and the story of Miss Matilda Jenkyns’s unfulfilled love affair. The novel only gradually converges to a single plot from Chapter XIII with the bank failure in Drumble and culminates with Miss Matty’s reunion with Peter Jenkyns who saves her from her financial crisis.

Secondly, Mary’s colloquial, unpremeditated and deviating style of narrative in which she digresses from one topic to another also overlaps with the gossip engaged by the Cranford women. Chapter III, entitled “A Love Affair of Long Ago”, begins with Mary’s suggestive reference to a “shadow of a love affair that was dimly perceived or suspected long years before” (C 24). However, her narrative digresses for four pages before fully elaborating upon the subject. It is only after she has discussed random topics such as the domestic regulations bequeathed on Miss Matty by her formidable sister Deborah Jenkyns that she finally addresses the topic initially introduced. Mary also diverges from the mission of discovering the identity and whereabouts of Aga Jenkyns by drifting into irrelevant gossip about Lady Glenmire’s unexpected marriage. In fact, she becomes so engaged in the narration of this new piece of information that she must stop herself abruptly in order to resume a coherent narrative: “But I must recover myself; the contemplation of it, even at this distance of time, has taken away my breath and my grammar, and unless I subdue my emotion, my spelling will go too” (C 113).

Thirdly, Mary also shares the Cranford women’s propensity for fiction-making gossip. Most of the women in Cranford have a tendency to indulge in creating and consuming sensationalized stories through gossip. For example, Signor Brunoni is likened to fictional characters such as “Thaddeus of Warsaw and the Hungarian Brothers, and Santo Sabastiani” (C 83). However, their initial excitement is quickly displaced by anxiety that he is “a French spy, come to discover the weak and undefended places of England” with his “accomplices” (C 90). In fact, Miss Pole becomes so convinced of an impending attack on her household by the imagined

culprits that she leaves her home to take cover at Miss Matty's. They spend the night by engaging in competitive storytelling of sensationalized "horrid stories of robbery and murder" (C 92).

Mary Smith also participates in fiction-making gossip through her narrative. She refers to Miss Pole's and Miss Matty's competitive storytelling as that of a "nightingale and a musician, who strove one against the other which could produce the most admirable music, till poor Philomel dropped down dead" (C 92). Men, who manage to infringe the borders of Cranford, such as Thomas Holbrook, Signor Brunoni, and Peter Jenkyns, are not exceptions. Holbrook is twice described by Mary as embodying her "idea of Don Quixote than ever" (C 31). The Oriental conjuror, Signor Brunoni, is sensationalized as the "Magician to the King of Delhi, the Rajah of Oude, and the Great Lama of Thibet, &c. &c." (C 158). Peter, whose identity as Aga Jenkyns is demystified upon his arrival, is also sensationalized as one who "told more wonderful stories than Sindbad the sailor" (C 154). The conclusion of the novel further reinforces this point as it is comprised of a description of the Amazonian town that is pervaded with an almost magical peacefulness. The return of Peter, or "Sindbad the sailor" (C 154), immediately resolves Miss Matty's predicament, endows the children, or the "troops of little urchins", with "showers of comfits and lozenges" (C 153), and others "who had shown kindness to Miss Matty at any time" with "many handsome and useful presents" (C 153). These passages illustrate Cranford as an enchanted town than a disappearing pastoral society.

What is even more to the point, however, is that Mary converges with the other Cranford women in her use of such fiction-making gossip as a means to provide entertainment, confirm shared community values, and most importantly, to express their repressed personal and collective anxieties. The Cranford women engage in gossip not only as a means of providing entertainment in their supine lives, but also to indirectly express and to deflect their collective and individual anxieties. It is indeed telling that gossip occurs most frequently amongst the women when there is an unwanted infringement of their lives by harbingers of change and disruption in some form. The proliferation of numerous stories of supposed robberies of houses and shops

by a “murderous gang” (C 95) of foreign men exemplifies this point. Amidst the chaotic gossip, the women converge upon the single point that “the robberies could never have been committed by any Cranford person; it must have been a stranger or strangers” (C 90), particularly foreigners, such as the French. The fact that the culprits are anticipated to be unknown foreigners of a country that had experienced a great social change in the form of a revolution not so long ago indicates their underlying collective anxiety towards disruptive change in their own society in the form of urbanization and the disintegration of social class boundaries; threats that were already beginning to infringe their borders in various ways; through newcomers, change of transportation, and so forth.

Indeed, this is also attested by the Cranford women’s abhorrence for the railway. Cranford is portrayed as a community that is unified in its voluntary dissociation from the railway which emerged in the 1820s and revolutionized the traditional concepts of time, space, and even the ways of communication during travel in the nineteenth-century.³ Although the railway geographically links the two neighbouring towns, Cranford and Drumble, it also divides them as it highlights the contradistinction between the less secularized former and the progressive latter. This is epitomized in the different approaches taken by the inhabitants of the two towns towards the ever-expanding railway that anticipates the gradual infiltration of the industrial world into the old. In contrast to the inhabitants of Drumble, such as Mary Smith or her father, who regularly use it as a mode of transport, the Cranford women reject it as a threatening force that disrupts the order of their world. They resist it by not only “vehemently petition[ing] against” the construction of the “neighbouring railroad”, but also by seldom riding on the trains themselves. Captain Brown, who is a former employee of the railway, is initially rejected by them on the basis of “his connexion [sic] with the obnoxious railroad” (C 4), as are other imaginary or real influxes of foreign intruders. In other words, gossip simultaneously derives from and reflects their understated collective fear against unfathomable social change concomitant with urbanization that would potentially disrupt their status quo.

Moreover, the Cranford women’s use of fiction-making gossip also illuminates

their unspoken personal anxieties. As much as Miss Pole appears to enjoy entertaining others through her sensationalized storytelling, her fiction-making gossip also indicates her efforts to indirectly express and assuage her deeper, more personal anxieties. Her frantic attempts to justify her fear of the intruding robbers through her tales imply her repressed need for male protection that is lacking in her life. This is also shown on the occasion in which she bemoans the rumour that Peter Jenkyns is to marry Mrs. Jamieson by implying that there were others, namely, herself, that were more suitable for him rather than a widow. As Mary points out, “Miss Pole seemed to think there were other ladies in Cranford who could have done more credit to his choice, and I think she must have had some one [sic] who was unmarried in her head, for she kept saying, ‘It was so wanting in delicacy in a widow to think of such a thing’” (C 158).

Similarly, Miss Matty’s participation in the fictional storytelling upon the crisis of the impending robbers indicates her withheld anxieties and regrets of having lost the opportunity to marry and to have children with the only man she loved, Thomas Holbrook. Miss Matty is as obsessed with the idea of intruders targeting her home as is Miss Pole, as she proclaims her fear of finding them “under a bed” (C 98). Charlotte Mitchell suggests that “Miss Matty’s fears of a man under the bed connect with her tragic childlessness” (C xxiii). This is reinforced by the fact that Miss Matty checks under her bed by rolling “a penny ball, such as children play with . . . under the bed every night” (C 98), almost as if to compensate for her childlessness by remaining an innocent child herself. Although they remain undeclared, their underlying anxieties are thus revealed through their actions and often, through their gossip.

Mary Smith also converges with the Cranford women in that she indirectly expresses her own withheld anxieties through the incorporation and proliferation of their gossip into her first-person narrative. That is, by consuming and relaying their fiction-making gossip through her visits to Cranford and subsequently, in her retrospective narrative, Mary compensates to a certain extent for the lack of an active role or voice in her relationship with her father and in the male-dominated, commercial hometown of Drumble.

Mary’s frustration towards her marginalized position in Drumble and in her family

emerges through passages where she complains of the lack of appreciation of her presence by its inhabitants, particularly by her father. She claims that she is unjustly judged in Drumble, as she was “blamed for want of discretion” for no particular reason other than that they “had nothing else to do” (C 111). She also points out her father’s indifference to her absence at home while she frequently travels to Cranford. Indeed, Mary clearly states that she had decided to extend her stay in Cranford on one occasion after having “heard from [her] father that he did not want [her] at home” (C 25). It becomes clear that Mary seeks to overturn their negative assessments of her character through her actions in Cranford. For example, upon facing the mystery of “the Aga Jenkyns of Chunderabaddad”, Mary vows to ascertain Aga’s identity and to present her discovery to her father who presides in Drumble. In fact, it almost appears that she places more importance on the latter objective when she declares, “I was tired of being called indiscreet and incautious; and I determined for once to prove myself a model of prudence and wisdom. I would not even hint my suspicions respecting the Aga. I would collect evidence and carry it home to lay before my father, as the family friend of the two Miss Jenkynses” (C 111). The passage implies that the motivation for Mary to actively partake in the investigation not merely comes from her wish for Miss Matty’s welfare, but also from her determination to change her father’s indifference and to specifically disprove his and her Drumble acquaintances’ disparaging estimation of her character as being “indiscreet and incautious” (C 111). Indeed, her presence in Cranford as a member of its community rather than an observant visitor becomes prominent following her declaration, as she becomes more active in her pursuit of Aga Jenkyns’s identity and whereabouts. She composes and covertly dispatches “a letter to the Aga Jenkyns—a letter which should affect him, if he were Peter, and yet seem a mere statement of dry facts if he were a stranger” (C 127). This is arguably one of her most influential actions in the novel as it initiates Peter’s return to Cranford. The fact that Mary’s motivation for her most marked actions in Cranford derives from her self-proclaimed desire to achieve a reevaluation of her character in Drumble and in her father’s eyes, suggests that Mary seeks in Cranford and its gossip, a surrogate platform and medium through which to reestablish her self-representation.

Mary succeeds to a certain extent in compensating for her marginalized role in Drumble by establishing a surrogate citizenship in Cranford. Her visits are eagerly anticipated by its inhabitants, particularly by Miss Matty and Miss Pole. Their trust in Mary is particularly manifested on the last occasion in which she is chosen by the Cranford women as someone to whom they confidentially entrust their money to aid Miss Matty. In any case, Mary is certainly not dismissed by the Cranford ladies as she is in Drumble. Nor is her voice any longer neglected. Mary acknowledges that she “evidently rose in [her father’s] estimation” (C 142) after having successfully made an astute business suggestion for Miss Matty’s financial crisis. Mr. Smith, “a capital man of business” (C 140), initially dismisses his daughter’s attempts to resolve Miss Matty’s pecuniary matters by sharply rebuffing her “slightest inquiry” (C 140). As a result, Mary and Miss Matty both lapse into a “nervously acquiescent state” (C 140) in which Miss Matty “said ‘Yes’ and ‘Certainly’ at every pause” (C 140) and Mary joins in “as chorus to a ‘Decidedly,’ pronounced by Miss Matty in a tremblingly dubious tone” (C 140). On this particular occasion, both women’s voices are rendered into a meaningless “chorus” that is immediately silenced by her father. Nevertheless, it is Mary, not her father, who later suggests that Miss Matty open a tea shop, an idea which proves as successful in improving her financial situation as it is in winning her father’s approval.

As I have shown, the Cranford women and Mary engage in gossip as a means of achieving indirect or direct representations of their innermost hopes and anxieties that contribute to their mutual alliances. However, despite incorporating gossip into her first-person narrative in its content and style, Mary Smith finally remains detached from gossip to a certain extent. Although gossip appears to be an unrestricted medium through which the Cranford women and Mary Smith may express their withheld anxieties, Mary’s ambivalent stance towards the discourse suggests that it is, in fact, a precarious oral speech.

3. The Limits of Female Self-Representation through Gossip

The limits of gossip as a medium for female self-representation is reinforced

by the fact that Mary Smith internalizes, to a certain extent, the prejudiced views against gossip as an unreliable and incoherent discourse that sanctions authoritative intervention. Indeed, Mary indirectly reinforces her father's dubiousness of women's ability to engage in a productive and logical discussion as well as effectively govern others or even themselves by quoting his disparaging claim against a female-dominated committee and thereby demarcating herself from them.

In my search after facts, I was often reminded of a description my father had once given of a Ladies' Committee that he had had to preside over. . . . So, at this charitable committee, every lady took the subject uppermost in her mind, and talked about it to her own great contentment, but not much to the advancement of the subject they had met to discuss. But even that committee could have been nothing to the Cranford ladies when I attempted to gain some clear and definite information as to poor Peter's height, appearance, and when and where he was seen and heard last. (*C* 111)

Although Mary defends Cranford against her father by defying him when he disparages Miss Matty's handling of her financial crisis through trusting in others' good-will and sympathetically depicting the moral goodness that pervades Cranford, she reinforces her father's judgmental perspective on the Cranford women's social ineptness, as exemplified in their gossip. In other words, at the same time that Mary incorporates gossip into her narrative, she also demarcates herself from it because she acknowledges that the demeaning qualities associated with gossip would be detrimental to the reliability of her voice as a narrator. For, despite the fact that the Cranford women achieve a certain degree of mutual alliance and unity through their gossip, their speech also become a source of belittlement and a sanction for authoritative male intervention.

For example, this can be seen in Mary's condemnation of the Cranford ladies' incoherent speech during her search for evidence that would prove that Peter was in fact, Aga Jenkyns. Although she herself deviates from the given topic in her narrative,

Mary stresses that she strives to obtain “facts” from the ladies, but to little avail, as they each “go off on her separate idea” (C 112).

I asked Miss Pole what was the very last thing they had ever heard about him; and then she named the absurd report . . . about his having been elected great Lama of Thibet. . . . Mrs. Forrester’s start was made on the Veiled Prophet in Lalla Rookh . . . I was thankful to see her double upon Peter; but in a moment, the delusive lady was off upon Rowland’s Kalydor, and the merits of cosmetics and hair oils in general . . . that I turned to listen to Miss Pole, who (through the llamas, the beasts of burden) had got to the Peruvian bonds, and the Share Market and her poor opinion of joint-stock banks in general. . . . (C 112)

As Mary’s condemnation of Miss Forrester as “the delusive lady” (C 112) indicates, she demarcates herself from the ladies who become easily immersed in their fictional fantasies.

Another example is Mary’s reaction towards the Cranford women’s failure to question the authenticity of Peter’s sensationalized tales of his life abroad, which are purposefully made to control and maintain order amongst the Cranford ladies. Mary emphasizes that she realizes Peter’s tales to be just a part of “his old tricks” (C 159) and distances herself from those who are incapable of separating fantastic fiction from fact. She indirectly refuses to submit to Peter’s control as he takes over as the new patriarch of Cranford by emphasizing that she is of a more rational, discerning character as the searcher of solid “facts,” hence, in no need to be overseen by an authoritative figure.

As these examples show, Mary must maintain a certain distance from gossip in order to procure her status as the credible narrator whose intervention in Cranford as the voice of reason and authority through her narration is sanctioned. The novel thus exposes gossip, the seemingly benign oral speech available to women, as a precarious form of discourse that complicates rather than alleviates their social marginalization.

4. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have examined the ways in which Mary Smith's ambivalence towards her association with Cranford and gossip is exemplified throughout her narrative that emphasize her position as a fluctuating narrator and observer. Although she appears to be assimilated into the community as a gossip, her first-person narrative betrays her anxiety towards the feminized speech as that which could potentially undermine her authority and credibility as the reliable narrator and observer of the Cranford community. Indeed, Mary cannot fully adopt gossip as a means of self-representation because of its debilitating and demeaning definition as an unreliable, feminized discourse that sanctions authoritative intervention. Hence, gossip finally fails to become an adequate means for her to fully express her repressed anxieties or compensate for her marginalization in Drumble. Mary's struggles to maintain a balanced position as at once an assimilated insider and a detached observer, a gossip and a non-gossip, illuminate the source of her anxiety that underlies her narrative: the predicament of superfluous women such as Mary Smith herself, who are marginalized in society as rootless nonentities, entrapped in a vacuum between speaking at the risk of belittlement as gossips or remaining silent.

Notes

- 1 Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford*. Ed. Elizabeth Porges Watson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. All references are to this edition and hereafter shown as *C*.
- 2 The *Oxford English Dictionary* shows that the first usage of gossip as a way of talk appeared in 1811.
- 3 See Wolfgang Schivelbusch (1986) 33-44.

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