

ELIZABETH GASKELL'S VIRGINS

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With a secret wife and child, Osbourne Hamley in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* is not precisely a "virgin," though his sickly body, like Causabon's in *Middlemarch*, suggests distance from a fully physical life. More significantly, like Causabon, Osbourne is, or would be, an author, attempting to raise money by selling a collection of his poems; and because he is unsuccessful, Osbourne remains in one sense uninitiated, innocent, inexperienced. Seen as the last in a series of writers who are unable to market their words in Gaskell's fiction, Osbourne Hamley underscores some of the issues the author herself faced in negotiating with the publishing industry of the 1850s and 1860s.

In Gaskell's works, virgins—young, unmarried women, as well as old maids—can claim little status, as in Victorian society in general. Not yet having accepted the approved roles of child bearer and child raiser, the virgin stands outside regular positions of social authority. Paradoxically, however, many of Gaskell's virgins assert unusual power by virtue of that exclusion. The "Amazons" of her early work *Cranford*, and the Browning sisters in her final work *Wives and Daughters*, offer readers potential avenues to fulfilment unrecognised by conventional Victorian wisdom. Gaskell's virgins also sometimes represent the author's questioning of traditional modes of publication. And these female virgins can be linked with masculine characters whose histories complement the primary narrative.

Hilary Schor has shown how the themes of Gaskell's work are shaped by "issues of publication and authorship, issues like changes in circulating libraries, in serial publication, Gaskell's complicated relationship with other writers, with editors and publishers and readers" (8). This paper will link such study of production with scholarship of the body and literature. Elaine Scarry writes of the way in which the physical self can be extended by an object—a tool or a weapon or even a book: "Language," she explains, "is an artefact, and when it is written down, the verbal artefact becomes a material artefact" (234). The texts, then, that Victorians held in their hands in the 1860s represent extensions of authors' bodies, contained by publication formats.

The shape of the tool or weapon or book that someone uses to extend a body is often a product of the models available from the past. We fashion our levers, spears, and tablets based on what has worked well for our predecessors. That Osbourne Hamley in *Wives and Daughters* is unable to find a publisher for his

writing may mean that he has recognised no existing model by which to shape them. Throughout her career, Gaskell tried out a number of inherited forms for the stories she told—the ghost story, the multiplot work, and the industrial novel. She also embodied her tales in different publication formats—weekly magazine parts; one, two, and three-volume issue; and monthly instalments. As such, Osbourne Hamley and related characters in her fiction are representations of their creator's continuing search for the best material form of her own self expression, embodiments of her vision in powerful cultural artefacts. In several key respects, the serial form best suited Gaskell's vision, though her use of instalment structure differed from the traditional models established by Dickens and other Victorian authors.

The questioning of established literary modes is visible in *Cranford*, the first of Gaskell's major works published in a periodical. In this collection of sketches, first appearing in Dickens's weekly *Household Words* and later becoming a novel published by Chapman and Hall, we find a forerunner of *Wives and Daughters*'s Osbourne Hamley. The story of the Jenkins's brother, Peter, appears as a small part of *Cranford*'s background, as is appropriate for a novel focusing on a pre-industrial village abandoned by men who have gone to the modern city to seek their fortune. Felicia Bonaparte finds Peter's story "magic [and] enormously satisfying" to the author; but there is more to this subplot of Gaskell's novel.

Peter is initially mentioned in the middle of the third part (13 March 1852): "Poor Peter" [Miss Matty] said; "he was always in scrapes. . . . He could never resist a joke" (49). The young (probably virginal) Peter dresses up twice as a woman, once to ask jokingly about the sermon his father had published in a periodical. On the second occasion, in which Peter feigns holding a baby in his arms (52), his irreverent antics lead to a flogging from his father (53), an event which drives Peter from home, and away from England. Further lost to the family after "some great war in India" Peter's absent body represents a failure of masculine parenthood in pre-industrial, village England. The text Peter's father attempted to write on his son's body was a crippling one for both of them, and for the mother (who dies less than a "twelvemonth after Peter went away"). Peter escapes the old story of absolute patriarchal authority, but only by separating himself from the culture it represents, preserving an innocence that helps explain his later comfortable presence in a village of "old maids."

The story of Peter's youth is told in a variety of texts that could be seen to represent Gaskell's own narrative, *Cranford*: at the time Matty Jenkin's father was preaching "a whole set of sermons" regarding the dangers of Napoleon's invading England, he was also taking "up his pen, and [rubbing] up his Latin, once more, to correspond with his boy," Peter; and his son's series of responses to those paternal inscriptions, also in Latin, constitute, according to the novel, "what are called show-letters" (48). Another series of letters by Peter, his captain, and both parents, presents the sad story of his departure from England to fight the French and to flee from his father's disapproval. Read aloud years later to the novel's

narrator, Mary Smith, these letters become a narrative in parts perilously close to destruction when Miss Matty begins to burn family papers, lamenting that "no one will care for them when I am gone" (44). But several more letters are added to the chain, bringing the lost brother's physical self back to his homeland.

Peter's story was kept alive in Gaskell's readers' minds by a brief, suggestive reference at the end of the sixth part of *Household Worlds* (15 Jan 1853), but it was concluded in the seventh and final instalment (2 April 1853). Having receiving a letter from Mary Smith which explained that his sister Matty still lived in England but thought him dead, Peter, "with the odd vehemence which characterised him in age as it had done in youth . . . had sold his land and all his possessions to the first purchaser, and come home to the poor old sister, who was more glad and rich than any princess when she looked at him" (153). Although years of military service and the life of an indigo planter in Burma make it unlikely he remained a virgin, this confirmed bachelor becomes "a favourite" of the ladies in Cranford, perfectly comfortable in the distinctive cultural life of "Amazons."

Peter's threatened body—first flogged, then taken prisoner—survived, as had the private documents chronicling his life. But until Mary Smith's inspired letter finds him far from England, Peter had no public way to present himself in England. Gaskell's own sketches about village life, which evolved into a novel, followed a similarly risky path to a material presence in their irregular issue in *Household Words* from 13 December 1851 to 21 May 1853. Hilary Schor writes: "it is *Cranford* that taught her the demands of serial publication and the difficulty of writing for (and defying) Charles Dickens" (86). Gaskell's narrative was contained and shaped by both Dickens's periodical and the book produced by Chapman and Hall in June 1853.

The story of Gaskell's resistance to established Victorian publishing practices continued with *North and South*, also serialised in *Household Words* (2 September 1854 to 27 January 1855). In this novel about Victorian industrial life, the threat of flogging again underscores the powerful imposition of social codes on weak or defenceless bodies. Of course, the central figure of this novel is Margaret Hale, who, Helena Mitchie explains, "links philanthropy and the body in a . . . positive way" (45). Margaret's female form in the first chapter supplies "the blank" (7) on which to hang her cousin Edith's wedding clothes, prefiguring a woman's potential value in the marriage markets of ancient, rural and, and of industrial, modern England; but Margaret will demand through her own later actions an expanded definition of the Victorian woman. The story of her brother Frederick provides a second (and secondary) analogue to Gaskell's efforts as a Victorian author to find new extensions of self through language and in a material embodiment, the literary text.

Margaret's brother, like Matty's in *Cranford*, is "lost to us all" (16), an "outlaw" (33), because he rebelled against the established masculine order of the military. Always seen by his mother as "a poor little fellow" (104), a "little first-born child" (127), Frederick is depicted as virginal in the early numbers of Gaskell's

text, before he comes to see his dying mother. And to Margaret, he later shows "delicate features, redeemed from effeminacy by the swarthy of his complexion, and his quick intensity of expression" (248).

Frederick is in exile because of involvement in a rebellion against "a long course of tyranny" (104) aboard a navy ship commanded by a Captain Reid. A fellow sailor, "passionately dreading the disgrace of . . . flogging," had attempted a risky manoeuvre in the rigging and fallen to his death (105). The resulting mutiny threatens Frederick with being "hung at the yard-arm" (107) should he ever return to his home. When he does risk arrest to visit his dying mother, Frederick and Margaret find themselves falsely defined in one of the novel's two central scenes of physical confrontation. Margaret's presence at the railway station is read by John Thornton in sexual terms; she is another's lover. And Frederick's masculine form is named by Leonards, who served "in the *Orion* at the same time" (254-55), as a wanted man. The imposition of a lover's identity on the virgin Margaret—along with fear for her brother's safety—will cause a later collapse: she "swayed for an instant where she stood, and fell prone on the floor in a dead swoon" (277). Frederick, on the other hand, "by some sleight of wrestling" is able to "trip up" his antagonist (266), preserving enough control of his own body to escape.

Despite this, Frederick, cannot compose his story within the structures of his native society any more than could the sailor on whose body Captain Reid had the authority to write with "the cat of nine tails" (107). Frederick's true history is embodied in a set of "yellow, sea-stained letters" long kept by his mother (104). Because these personal documents have no legal authority in England, to return from exile Frederick would have to reinscribe the facts in "statements by credible witnesses" (287). Margaret later keeps "four or five of Mr Henry Lennox's [letters] relating to Frederick's affair . . . to be preserved . . . as valuable" (349).

When the possibility of legal action seems most remote, Frederick sends to Margaret a "renunciation of England as his country; he wished he could unnative himself, and declared that he would not take his pardon if it were offered him, nor live in the country if he had permission to do so" (345). Marrying in Spain, he begins to present himself through a new language, sending letters home "with little turns and inversion of words which proved how far the idioms of his bride's country were infecting him" (345).

In the same way, Frederick was "not sufficiently sure of the purity and justice of those who would be [his] judges" in England, and is reluctant "to give [him]self up to a court-martial" (260). According to Coral Lansbury and others,¹ Elizabeth Gaskell similarly hesitated to turn over her story to Dickens as editor of *Household Words*. From deciding upon the story's title ('Margaret Hale' or 'North and South'), to shaping handwritten text into printed columns, to extending the length of the serial run, Gaskell found herself so at odds with Dickens that she added an apology to the later, expanded-volume edition: "this tale was obliged to conform to the

¹ See Hughes and Lund, "Textual/Sexual Pleasure."

conditions imposed by the requirements of a weekly publication, and likewise to confine itself within certain advertised limits" (1). Hilary Schor concludes that Gaskell found more than publication format inadequate to her aims: "the novel also begins to express some doubts about its own role as mediator between one language and another, with its own models of reconciliation, with the mythic promise of a common language that will unite the two nations" (136).

In the three-volume *Sylvia's Lovers* (published by Smith, Elder in 1863) Gaskell continued her effort to inscribe the human body in an appropriate literary form. Again, a virginal protagonist, Sylvia Robson, is the centre of the narrative; but a masculine character's story also adds to the theme of exclusion. Proclaiming himself unafraid of death, "bein' a bachelor," Charley Kinraid is shot "through t' side" and "kicked . . . aside for dead" when he tries to protect the bodies of Monkshaven whale fishermen from a press-gang during the Napoleonic wars (55). Charley later suffers loss of control over his own body when he is captured by a press-gang: after a "hand-to-hand struggle" he is bound lying "still as any hedgehog . . . as if it cost him more effort to be passive, wooden, and stiff in their hands than it had done to fight and struggle with all his might" (277). And he later is held "in th' French prison" (382).

In addition to control of his body, Charley is robbed of his story when the rival suitor, Philip Hepburn, allows Sylvia, the woman he would marry, to believe the whaler has been drowned rather than impressed. Unable in wartime even to represent himself to Sylvia through letters, the absent "spectionsioneer" can be with Sylvia only in memories and as an "old dream of Kinraid's actual presence" (361). The limited literacy of an ancient, rural society leaves little physical evidence of his life—such as letters—among Monkshaven residents.

Charley's prolonged separation from his place in England and the absence of any written record of his material existence provide an analogue to this story's slow composition and movement toward publication. Jenny Uglow writes of Gaskell's three-year effort to compose *Sylvia's Lovers*:

The long gestation of this novel partly explains the change of tone in each volume: the vital, energetic realism of the first volume, written rapidly in the spring of 1860; the intensity of the second, full of death and loss, composed slowly during 1861; the spiritual allegory of the third, a desperate search for belief in a better world, written amid the shadows of the cotton famine. (504)

Victorian authors like Thackeray and George Eliot often resented the constant demand for production inherent in periodical publication. However, Linda Hughes and I have argued in *The Victorian Serial* that authors like Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and Trollope were also often inspired by the regular schedule of instalment issue to sustained creative effort over long periods of time. Blocked in the composition of

Sylvia's Lovers at the end of the second of three projected volumes, Gaskell needed the encouragement and pressure of her publisher to complete the novel (Uglow 499). Gaskell's highest level of prolonged achievement comes perhaps in her longest instalment novel, *Wives and Daughters*, which appeared every month in the *Cornhill* for a year and a half (Aug 1864 to Jan 1866).

Margaret Homans notes that by the 1860s, Elizabeth Gaskell's "stories and novels sold so well as to make anything she might propose [to George Smith, the publisher of *Cornhill*] acceptable" (251). Thus the decision to shape this long work in monthly instalments provides evidence about her own formal preferences. Molly Gibson, the protagonist of the work, moves slowly but elegantly from virginal youth to the doorstep of adult womanhood on terms interestingly different from many Victorian heroines. She will choose scientist Roger Hamley, the unconventional man, characterised repeatedly as "slow, but . . . steady" (296). On the other hand, Cynthia Kirkpatrick, Molly's alter ego, admits: "I'm capable of a great jerk, an effort, and then a relaxation—but steady, every-day goodness is beyond me" (258). Yet "steady, every-day goodness" is a goal of this novel—subtitled "An Every-Day Story"—and the rhythm of its prose, the structure of the chapters, and the regular pace of instalment issue are its proper form, the finest material artefact of Gaskell's vision.

Roger's brother, Osbourne Hamley, with "a girl's delicate face, and a slight make, and hands and feet as small as a lady's" (106), continues the pattern established by Peter Jenkins, Frederick Hale, and Charley Kinraid—the exiled or imprisoned man whose problematic story has no appropriate form. Having taken a French wife from the servant class, the next "Hamley of Hamley" cannot find a way to confess his marriage to his very traditional father. Desperate for money and approval, and physically more ill than he knows, Osbourne thinks of trying "the fate of his poems with a publisher, with the direct expectation of getting money for them" (300-01). He is aware of a periodical context for literary activity, imagining his poems "praised in *Blackwood's* and the *Quarterly*" (301). And he suspects a structure for the whole: "in their order" they "were almost equivalent to an autobiographical passage in his life" (299). He even analyses audiences and potential reviewers when he speculates that his work would be recognised "if I called [my wife] 'Lucy' in these sonnets" (300).

However, Osbourne is dismayed to find "there's no one like a publisher for taking the conceit out of one. Not a man among them would have [the poems] as a gift!" (367). Osbourne is advised by Molly's father to work in other modes: "Try your hand at prose, if you can't manage to please the publishers with poetry" (367). Meanwhile, his brother's mastery of newer Victorian forms is evident when Roger publishes "a paper in some scientific periodical, which [excites] considerable attention" (339). Dr Gibson links Roger's promise as a writer to bodily strength: "Now I, being a doctor, trace a good deal of his superiority to the material cause of a thoroughly good constitution, which Osborne hasn't got" (412).

What Osbourne Hamley, Peter Jenkins, Frederick Hale, and Charley Kinraid lose in bodily weakness, foreign exile, or domestic imprisonment, is the chance to build their lives little by little, day by day, within the national structure they assume to be their inheritance. More specifically, Osbourne Hamley would have to work within the dominant temporal framework of Victorian life: the regular, steady beat of industrial time, which can be felt in the periodic issue of instalment literature. The publication of *Wives and Daughters* fell between the publication of the 1859 *Idylls of the King* and *Holy Grail and Other Poems* in 1869, the two most important volumes of Tennyson's life-long project. And Robert Browning would soon issue *The Ring and the Book* in four separate volumes (from November 1868 through February 1869). Osborne's love lyrics, like his weakened body, are not substantial enough to demand the recognition of payment from the Victorian marketplace. Of equal importance, his literary output is not steady, sustained, and ongoing as was the work most valued by this age's expansive reach. However, in her own fiction Gaskell achieved both the stature and the continuing power to advance her vision: an extension of the body ("Mrs Gaskell") so suddenly and untimely stopped in November 1865.

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