

FORTHCOMING IN RAVON #61 (APRIL 2012)

Thomas Recchio. *Elizabeth Gaskell's Cranford: A Publishing History*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009. ISBN: 9780754665731. Price: US\$104.95.

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Cranford (1851-53) was reputedly the only one of her own books that Elizabeth Gaskell could re-read, and for more than 150 years, readers, teachers, and dramatists on both sides of the Atlantic have resoundingly echoed her enthusiasm for it. The slim novella may seem like an unlikely subject for a scholarly monograph, but, as Recchio ably suggests, its “literary mutation” (2) is both a rewarding topic for study in itself and a compelling way to understand the ideological work that *Cranford* and its followers have performed. As serial publication, illustrated text, school edition, and staged drama, Gaskell’s tale of a largely female mid-Victorian English community has served editorial, educational, and national interests in its rich and multifaceted afterlife. Thomas Recchio’s *Elizabeth Gaskell’s Cranford: A Publishing History* offers a very welcome account of the novella’s origins and transatlantic legacy, which will be of use to scholars and students of Victorian fiction and its adaptations.

The first chapter of this study considers the serial publication of *Cranford* in relation to its original context in Charles Dickens’s *Household Words*, where it initially and irregularly appeared between December 1851 and May 1853. Discussing the placement of the text, Recchio argues that “relations of contiguity in reading become dialogic relations” (63). To take one example, in his demonstration of the “more than merely miscellaneous” mix of materials in each

issue (46), he reveals how an 1851 article on “The Merchant Seaman’s Fund”—which, after being established for the benefit of wounded mariners and their families was about to be closed—might have benefited from its placement following the fictional death of Captain Brown and the near-destitution of his daughter in *Cranford* (48).

This chapter places particular stress on the orientalist and economic threads of the novella, showing “the ways in which the material surrounding the Cranford papers encourages particular interpretive emphases” (51). Highlights of the chapter include Recchio’s discussion of how the “uncertainty and discomfort [...] of the ladies’ response to the Indians” (51) approximates the ambivalent approach of Dickens’s 1852 article “Pearls from the East,” connects the tale to the British imperial project, and ultimately becomes “a strategy to encourage community cohesiveness” (57). Recchio’s analysis of contemporary reviews of *Cranford* is nuanced but left me wondering why a publishing history that otherwise does such an admirable job of working with primary sources would rely on “the two reviews [Angus] Easson has excerpted for us” in a volume of reviews collected two decades ago (65), even if “[t]he substance and tone of these reviews set a precedent for subsequent judgments of *Cranford*” (66). Also puzzling to me in this chapter was its discussion of late-century fiction “that evokes with various degrees of specificity *Cranford* as ur-text” (66). Despite the engaging nature of this material, it struck me as out of place in a larger argument about the tale’s original context, contiguity, and dialogue and might have been more effective in a chapter on textual adaptations.

In his second chapter, Recchio provides detailed readings of three illustrators’ visual representations of *Cranford*. A discussion of George du Maurier’s 1864 illustrated edition emphasizes how the visual focus on human relationships “suggest a plot [...] and in so doing [...] can be said to have made *Cranford* into a novel” (85). In contrast with assessments that this

tale—as “a depiction of place” and a “way of life”—lacked “a narrative center” (85), Recchio argues that “du Maurier’s illustrations highlight the psychological drama of Miss Matty, whose fundamental desires come into conflict with community practices in unspoken but inexorable ways” (92). However, the popular and influential illustrations of *Cranford* by Hugh Thomson in 1891—images which, as Recchio notes in his subsequent discussion of stage adaptations, would govern many theatrical performances of Gaskell’s work as well—pass over this “sense of narrative” (94) in favor of a “sense of the past as pleasant retrospect” (97) or nostalgia. Reading Thomson’s images as “a response to two related cultural anxieties [...]: the perception of the degeneration of the English people and of the decadence of literature” (98), Recchio makes a persuasive case that they “functioned as a visual counter-argument” to these fears (99) and “seem less engaged in interpreting *Cranford* as a novel than in [...] connect[ing] the novel to an idea of a visually recognizable, quintessential English nation” (113). Discussions of illustrated editions, like the earlier discussion of *Household Words*, show how *Cranford*’s domestic concerns are also of national importance. The increasingly visible presence of India in illustrated editions highlights British ambivalence about empire while also “captur[ing...] a certain blindness in the early critical work on *Cranford*, where [...] all the early critics tend to see is Knutsford” (137). I found this chapter exciting, which made the appearance of errors all the more regrettable. While one doesn’t wish to quibble with minor points, more significant mistakes—including what appear to be a mislabeled image and an in-text reference to one that was not included—should have been corrected.

The second half of the book further emphasizes the importance of *Cranford* to British and American national projects by showing how its adaptations worked to defuse anxieties about foreignness and assimilate immigrant communities. In his discussion of early twentieth-century

school editions of *Cranford*, Recchio argues that a recurrent focus on “the goodness and even purity of Mrs. Gaskell as a woman” (151) and the fictional fantasy of assimilation through “the vaguely oriental and vaguely Italian intruders who are transformed into the ordinary, domestically English Samuel and Mrs. Brown” (157) made *Cranford* editions relevant and even central to the formation of an Anglo-American cultural identity for immigrants. Recchio’s analysis of *Cranford*’s place in community theater in chapter four continues to explore the transatlantic importance of the novella; I found this chapter’s work of recovery and analysis particularly strong. Studying play manuscripts, introductory notes, reviews, and references to scripts and performances in newspaper accounts and broadsheets, Recchio shows how dramatic adaptations of *Cranford* helped, among other things, “to build a sense of local community and national identification” (196) in part by using “local” artifacts such as period costumes and furniture which “transform[ed] *Cranford* from a reading experience about a past English village life to a lived experience of material culture that represents values associated with a way of life, which [...] can be retrieved from the past and made useable in the present” (190).

As a publishing history, Recchio’s book takes up critical literature not just as a theoretical framework but also as an object of analysis itself. His discussions of contemporary reviews, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century adaptations, and theatrical commentaries advance his arguments nicely, but at other times—particularly in paragraphs and pages devoted to more recent literary critics and theorists—unnecessarily lengthy detours from his own analysis struck a different tone and left me wanting Recchio to get back to the primary objects of his study. And there is much to appreciate in this study.

The breadth of the book’s historical sweep (1848-2007) and primary documents (from periodicals and published books to less readily available theatrical ephemera) is impressive and

illuminating. Recchio's persuasive case that *Cranford* played an important role in the consolidation of Anglo-American cultural identity helps to focus wide-ranging chapters. I also enjoyed the frank style of Recchio's critical voice. In discussions of dramatic adaptations, for instance, Recchio records that despite "an effort to understand in a generous spirit the relation of the adaptation to the original and to the immediate social context of its production," he nevertheless "felt increasingly less generous" as he read a version that appeared to be "mocking the story and bullying the characters" (224). In a different way, but with a similarly appealing directness, his discussion of the "fragmentary record of dramatic adaptations of *Cranford*" (191) usefully documents both the pleasure and frustration a scholar can experience when attempting to follow up on ephemera, when the archive lacks the hoped-for materials (195) or when a "serendipitous" discovery—in one case, handwritten notes for the introduction to a performance of *Cranford*, which led to contact with one of the performers herself—helps to breathe life into the text's "fragmentary and ephemeral [...] traces" (191n.4). Though such personalized moments are not the rule in a scholarly work that focuses primarily on critical, textual analysis, they provide a useful meta-narrative about scholarly discovery and an important reminder to literary historians, whose experiences with primary sources have been changing in response to digital archives, that such discoveries occur in many ways.

Biographical Notice:

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