Gaskell Now & Then:

The Reception of Cranford and Wives and Daughters

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I was in a bookshop in Oxford, UK, looking for a copy of Jane Austen’s Persuasion when my eye was drawn to the cover of this big book, Wives and Daughters, by Elizabeth Gaskell. I had never heard of Gaskell, but somehow the title seemed familiar. I bought the book and for the next half year it stood on my bookshelf, besides Austen, Dickens, Alcott, Twain and the likes. When I finally came round to reading it, I knew before I had finished the first chapter that I had stumbled upon a real gem. Unable to put it down, I finished it in a couple of days. I will never forget the mortification I felt when I realized, a few pages before the end, that there were too few pages left for the novel to have a proper ending. I turned the last page and there it was:

Here the story is broken off, and it can never be finished. What promised to be a crowning work of a life is a memorial of death. A few days later, and it would have been a triumphal column, crowned with a capital of vestal leaves and flowers: now it is another sort of column – one of those sad white pillars which stand broken in the churchyard.¹

Elizabeth Gaskell had died unexpectedly, never finishing her last novel. Even though the editor went on to tell what Gaskell had planned to do with the ending of the novel, it just was not the same. I had suspected early on that Molly Gibson and Roger Hamley would probably end up together, but not to be able to read it in Gaskell’s own words was really disappointing. Yet, every year or so I returned to the novel, reading and rereading my copy until the back was broken and it had dog-ears on all its corners. Now, almost eight years later, I am in the position to thoroughly examine why I loved the novel so much, and in general, why people love certain novels.

¹Elizabeth Gaskell, Wives and Daughters (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1999), 618.
Elizabeth Gaskell, Victorian mother, wife and novelist, has been loved, hated, scorned, forgotten and finally revived in the last two decades. Born in 1810 on the outskirts of London, a young Elizabeth lost her mother the following year, and was sent by her father, a Unitarian minister, to live with her maternal aunt in the town of Knutsford, Cheshire. She continued to live there even after her father remarried and relocated to Manchester, going for extensive periods of time without seeing her father and stepmother. She did maintain a good contact with her older brother John, who was in the Royal Navy, and his disappearance at sea in 1829 had a profound impact on her. In 1832, after having lived with her father and stepmother for three years, Gaskell married the reverend William Gaskell, and they relocated to Manchester. Between 1833 and 1846 seven children were born, of whom four daughters survived. The death of Gaskell’s children, especially of son William a year after his birth in 1844, was the reason that Gaskell first started writing. Looking for a release from her sorrow at losing her son, William Gaskell encouraged his wife to write, resulting first in two short stories as well as in Gaskell’s first novel *Mary Barton*, published anonymously in 1848. During the next seventeen years of her life, Gaskell wrote a further five novels, eight novellas, nine short stories and one non-fiction work: the biography of her friend, Charlotte Bronte. Gaskell died at her own home very unexpectedly in 1865, at the age of 55, having led a life that was both traditionally Victorian, and revolutionary at the same time.

It is commonly understood that Gaskell used her writing to cope with her life, and her personal circumstances are reflected in her novels. As noted above, Gaskell had lost her mother at an early age, and we see that many of her leading characters also lose their mothers, fathers or both parents. The loss of a child is also a common recurrent theme in Gaskell’s writings, not surprising considering that of Gaskell’s seven children only four lived to adulthood: her first child, a daughter, was stillborn, and her two sons died in infancy. The loss
of a sibling in a foreign place is also a recurrent feature of Gaskell’s writing; this is based on the disappearance of her brother John at sea when Gaskell was only nineteen years old. But whether or not a parent or sibling lives or dies, the emphasis is usually on the redemptive features of motherhood.² Gaskell lets her heroines sacrifice themselves for their children and loved ones regardless of their own wishes. In the cases where the heroine is selfish instead of redemptive, Gaskell often wants to make a statement as to the reason for the character having become that way. We see this in Cynthia Kirkpatrick in *Wives and Daughters*. Cynthia is wilful, selfish and a flirt, yet the blame for these character flaws is laid squarely with her mother, Hyacinth Gibson, for abandoning her daughter at too early an age and refusing to see her child, and thus setting a wrong example for Cynthia, who is now unable to change, having missed too much in her childhood. Molly Gibson, her stepsister and Cynthia’s complete opposite in looks as well as character, lost her mother early on, and was raised by a loving, if old-fashioned father. The message that Gaskell wants to convey thus seems to be that it is better to be raised by an old-fashioned father than by a non-redemptive mother. The redemptive mother in the novel is Mrs. Hamley, who dies from grief at the arguments between her eldest son and her husband. Mrs. Hamley gave up everything, including her health, in order to be the best wife and mother she could be, and her reward is a loving husband, two loving sons, and death. Perhaps, to Gaskell, the perfect mother can do no more noble thing than die, and death and perfection seem to go hand in hand in her novels.

Another theme that Gaskell took from her own life and used repeatedly in her novels is Unitarianism. Gaskell’s father was a Unitarian minister, as was her husband. The emphasis of Unitarianism lay on freedom of thought and the importance of rationality, as well as on the existence of an underlying social progress of those who were morally self-aware and responsible – even though this was juxtaposed against the social hardships and personal

tragedies that took place on an everyday basis. This juxtaposition is a basic theme in Gaskell’s novels, both connected with Unitarianism and on its own, and for Gaskell seeing this juxtaposition on a daily basis around her in Manchester meant that it would inevitably end up in her novels.

Gaskell lived in a time in which the differences between the classes were becoming more and more pronounced; the upper and higher middle classes growing richer because of their ability to set up factories, and the lower classes growing steadily poorer and more anonymous, exactly because of the progress made by the upper classes. Owning a factory meant, among other things, a steady income and a strong social position, yet factory workers were interchangeable. Perhaps it is because of this fast moving world that the rural and the pastoral scene also took such a great prominence in Gaskell’s work. Growing up in the rural town of Knutsford, Gaskell drew upon happy memories when she gave a number of her writings a rural setting, sometimes as a haven or an escape, but always as a comforting alternative to large industrial towns. Many more themes besides the ones I have already mentioned feature in Elizabeth Gaskell’s writing, yet, the aforementioned ones are in my view the ones that are of main importance, and that seem to return in all her novels, whether the industrial or the pastoral ones.

The novels of Elizabeth Gaskell have not always been as well liked as well as they are now. On publication, her novel *Ruth* was actually mass burned by members of her husband’s Unitarian congregation, as the novel was regarded as being too positive about fallen women. After the Victorian period, Gaskell’s work went out of fashion. In 1929, in his book *Early Victorian Novelists*, Lord David Cecil characterized her as being: “all a woman was expected to be; gentle, domestic, tactful, unintellectual, prone to tears, easily shocked.” Yet, she did make it into the book; her novels were being read where so many of her peers’ novels were

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3 Ibid., 2.
4 Ibid., 60.
being forgotten entirely. In the 1950’s Gaskell was revived as a feminist writer as well as a Social Problem Writer. Raymond Williams in his book *Culture and Society* places her among Dickens and Disraeli, yet he also criticizes her for being melodramatic. However, by including Gaskell in his very influential book, she became once again known as an author worth reading. The notion of Gaskell as a feminist writer has been kept alive, but she has been placed alongside her female peers rather than her male peers as a female-empowering writer. The late eighties saw a move from Gaskell being seen solely as a feminist writer to placing her in a broader context of Victorian fiction and culture. More recently, critics have begun to see Gaskell’s novels from a broader cultural point of view.⁵

It has become important to look at how and why the public, both academic and non-academic, read and still reads Gaskell. This importance has become even greater with the acceptance of the paracanon. As Catherine Stimpson explains in her article, the literary canon - consisting of books that have been classed by critics as ‘the best’ - is a very small circle of works created by societies and in turn its function is to instruct that society that created it in the rules of the canon, or, in Stimpson’s words: “societies first construct a canon and then their canon instructs them.”⁶ The problem with the canon is that it creates a tension between the ideological, such as the question ‘what is the best book’, and the fact that when working with literature requires judgement of some form.⁷ To ease this tension Stimpson introduced the paracanon, which recognizes the cultural need for ordering and classifying literature while appreciating the orthodox nature of the canon. The paracanon can be seen as “a jumble of works that float beside, beneath and around any canonical arrangements that a culture might have in place to hoard and board up art, literature and media.”⁸ A work can join the paracanon

⁵ Ibid., 60-68.
⁷ Ibid., 957.
⁸ Ibid., 965.
if it is loved and has been loved by some people. When looking at the reception of Elizabeth Gaskell’s novels, we can see that they have moved in and out of the canon as time progressed, but that they have always been part of the paracanon. So even though Gaskell’s novels might not always have been popular among critics, the public has always loved them.

In this light, I feel that the time has come to look at the reception of Gaskell’s novels again. I am sure that there are many people also reading, rereading and loving Gaskell as I do. There are Gaskell societies, which host web pages, publish a magazine, meet up to discuss her novels, and the BBC recently even hosted a one hour documentary on the people who love Elizabeth Gaskell. In my thesis I will look at the reception of Elizabeth Gaskell’s novels Cranford and Wives and Daughters at three points in history in order to analyze the reception of the novels at the time of release, and the changes that time caused in the reception at two later dates. I will also devote part of this thesis to the reception Gaskell in the twenty-first century. Elizabeth Gaskell’s novels Cranford and Wives and Daughters were well received at their time of publishing, yet after Gaskell’s death critical and public reception dwindled to near non-existence, only to be revived again in the nineteen-sixties and rising to a new popularity in the nineteen-nineties with the release of the BBC television adaptations.

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9 Ibid., 958.
Chapter 1: Reception theory

The practice of reception theory goes back to at least the mid-1800s, but over the decades the exact definition of reception theory has been subject to a major change. Two hundred years ago, reception theory would not have been known under that name, and would have mainly focused on sales figures; how many of a certain book were sold, and at what price. Due to factors such as the circulating libraries of the Victorian era the figures that survived are hardly representative to the popularity of certain books at the time. Books were available in different price ranges and thus affordable for both the upper classes as well as the middle classes, but there is no way of knowing how many people a book was lent out to or how many people took it out of the library and read it. Sales figures were everything; what the audiences actually thought of a certain novel was not statistically important. At the end of the Victorian era, scholars started to become concerned with the reception of certain authors, most notably William Shakespeare and Jane Austen. The male and female bard of English literature were so hugely popular among all social classes – those that could read anyway – that their impact on their audiences simply could not be ignored, nor the impact of the public on the cultural life of the works.

All this implies that prior to the Victorian era books were only read, to disappear afterwards in boxes or on shelves stowed away somewhere. This is, of course, far from true. As soon as books were published, most notably starting from the time of the invention if the printing press which made mass publishing of books and newspapers possible, books have been read and discussed – the reception of novels has always been important at least to those who read them. Book discussions could take place in the drawing room, while taking tea with friends, or at the club, in letters to each other, and later in the form of discussion groups and book reviews in newspapers. The literate would buy or borrow books, read them and
invariably also discuss them. Hence, the public reception of books has always been one of the main factors in the success of a book, and if the public does not like it, they will not talk favourably about it and less people will read it. Conversely, a book thought of as unlikely to become a success by the publishers may turn out to become a huge success, simply because the public likes it and thus recommends it to each other. However, academic critics, until quite recently, were mostly interested in the aesthetic or moral qualities of a book – not its sales figures or popularity.

No matter how important the public reception of a book was and still is, academics have up until the 1980s never really taken an interest in this kind of reception. However, in this decade, reception theory began to focus on the importance of audience reception, instead of on the sales figures of the Victorian times or the academic views of the first half of the twentieth century. Also, the focus no longer lay on the popularity of a book with the audience, but rather on how an audience reading a certain book can influence that book’s meaning, because the background of any audience influences them and thus also influences their interpretation of a book. The academic question of reception moved from being concerned with the ‘how’ to the ‘why’ – or from how a book becomes popular to why a book becomes popular. One of the first full books to focus on this subject is *The Reader in the Text*, edited by Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman. This 1980 collection of essays focuses on “the theoretical and practical implications of the notion of reader – and more generally of audience – in literary texts and in other artistic forms that can be thought of by analogy as texts.”¹⁰ The importance of this book lies in the fact that it focuses on the individual reader as well as a certain audience and what influence they have on the perception of a text. As the emphasis on reading in our society increases it becomes impossible for critics to ignore the effect an audience has on a text, and analysing any text without taking the public into account

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would be lacking at best. Suleiman and Crosman were among the first to notice and write
about this trend of audience-oriented criticism and their book has been one of the founding
works of changing literature criticism.

As early as 1984 Janice Radway in her book *Reading the Romance* started doing
academic research on the sentiments of the non-academic reader. Radway wanted to know
what readers thought of the books they read, outside the area of academic discussions,
published articles and conferences. She asked the question: “why do you love romance
novels?” to a group of New England women, who were neither academics nor scholars, but
who did love to read. The results were staggering; while not schooled in literature, the women
could expertly point out the elements that for them made a romance novel, elements not very
different from the criteria that had always been used in the academic field of literature
discussions. However, they also pointed out clearly that they read romances not because they
wanted to seek patterns, to isolate certain recurrent elements in the books, or to compare the
books they read to other books. They read because they loved to read, because they liked to
use a book as an escape from their lives, to relax by, to submerge themselves in the lives of
others just for a little while. While these results may sound logical to a non-academic reader,
in the academic field these results were far from the norm of assessing and discussing
literature that critics had been used to, and the research thus had a profound impact on the
academic world.

Another part of reception theory that has become more important over the last ten
years is the idea of fan culture. Edited by Deirdre Lynch and published in 2000, *Janeites:
Austen’s Disciples and Devotees* is one of the most obvious examples of this movement.
Janeites are those people that read Jane Austen purely for the love of the novels. They are
often non-academic, and have therefore mostly been ignored by those academics writing on
Jane Austen. It is only over the last ten years that this audience has become increasingly more
interesting to academics; they realize that to interpret, or indeed to say anything about Jane Austen without taking into consideration the millions of Janeites, is to confine themselves to a very old-fashioned notion of importance of novels. Indeed, within the new 1980’s definition of reception theory, Austen’s novels cannot be deemed of any importance taken out of the society in which they are read. To say something about Austen without taking into consideration the time the novel is being read in, or without considering who is reading the novel, is to completely uproot a novel from its historically-specific meaning, thus leaving any conclusion made invalid, because only the critic writing it will truly agree – and understand – those conclusions. In the last decade, academics have finally had to accept that they need to take the Janeites seriously, and that Austen is no longer solely to be appreciated by the elite. And this not only goes for the novels of Jane Austen or William Shakespeare; more and more authors are being taken by the masses and elevated to love objects: one look at the TV guide is enough to see that there is clearly a market for the novels of the past. Elizabeth Gaskell is one of those authors. Over the past two decades three of her novels have been adapted for television by the BBC, and new editions of her novels are being printed, complete with new introductions and study questions. Gaskell’s popularity is rising, but it has not always been so. In the next three chapters I will examine and discuss the reception of Cranford and Wives and Daughters, starting with their publication and ending in the present time.
Chapter 2: Cranford

In this chapter I will discuss the reception of Elizabeth Gaskell’s novel Cranford. First, I will give a brief summary of the novel. Then I will discuss the reception of the novel at three points in time: first, at the time of publication; second, at the time of Gaskell’s death, and third, at the turn of the century - the end of the Victorian era. I will look at how the novel came to be published and how it was received both by the audience and by critics at the time. Also, I will look at the reasons behind the reception of the novel. As Cranford was written at turbulent times amidst the Industrialization, its quiet pace immediately appealed to the public, and it was favourably received by the critics as well. However, with the end of the Victorian era, the book was almost forgotten, being deemed to old-fashioned for the twentieth century, and it took the feminism of the nineteen-sixties to spark new interest in the novel.

Cranford tells the story of two spinster sisters, Miss Deborah and Miss Matty Jenkyns, and their friends in the small town of Cranford. Both the sisters and their friends are very conscious of the rules of proper conduct in society and try very hard to live their lives by those rules. However, when Miss Deborah dies, Miss Matty is compelled to become a shopkeeper, thus forcing all her friends and indeed the whole town to rethink the wisdom of living by such strict rules. Fortunately for Miss Matty, her long lost brother returns from India, and she is restored to her former station of life, but not before having developed an entirely different outlook on life. The story is told from the eyes of the protagonist Mary Hawkins, essentially an outsider from the city of Manchester, rendering her able to both observe and judge the inhabitants of Cranford in a way that a Victorian reader would have done. Gaskell leaves Mary Hawkins nameless for the better part of the novel, thus making it very easy for any Victorian reader – or indeed, any reader – to take the place of Mary

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11 When I write Cranford in italics, I will be referring to the novel; when I write Cranford bar the italics, I will be referring to the town in the novel. The difference is in my experience important enough to be noted at the start of this chapter.
Hawkins in the text, to make her observations our own, and to judge for ourselves all we see happening in Cranford.

*Cranford* was written not as a novel, but as different stories about the town of Cranford and its inhabitants, and published separately in Charles Dickens’s magazine *Households Words*. Gaskell wrote the first episode at the specific request of Dickens; he had previously published her work, but Gaskell had never written anything specifically for him. Dickens wanted Gaskell to write for him, but he did not allow her creative freedom, nor even allowed her to take the credit for her work. All pieces in *Household Words* were published anonymously, yet Dickens’s name appeared on each and every page. Gaskell knew and did not object to the anonymous publication of her work, but she did object to the appearance of Dickens’s name on every page, effectively claiming ownership of all the works published in his magazine, especially after his promise to her that: “no writer’s name will be used, neither my own nor any other; every paper shall be published without any signature.”

Gaskell’s professional relationship with Dickens was fraught with such incidents, and his approach to her seems to have been a mix of deference, innuendo, and power. He claimed to value modesty in his authors but had no such modesty himself, and although his letters are flattering and beautifully written, they usually contain a message that no one could argue with, as is seen in the letter he wrote to Gaskell in reply to her request not to publish her work unless he undid his editorial changes, quoted below. Even though Gaskell found it an honour to write for *Household Words*, working for such a glamorous magazine with such a demanding editor took a lot of the joy out of writing, and it is no wonder that she interrupted writing *Cranford* for Dickens in order to work on the novel *Ruth* which she owed to no-one.

Yet, it was not so much the lack of credit for her work that vexed Gaskell, it was the editorial changes that Dickens made that she really objected to. Gaskell originally intended to

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13 Ibid., 88-93.
only write one episode, titled “Our Society at Cranford”, which was published in *Household Words* on 13 December 1851. It describes the memories of the narrator of the small town of Cranford many years ago, especially those concerning the spinster daughters of the late Minister, Deborah and Matty Jenkyns, when their lives are disrupted by the arrival of Captain Brown, whose ideas and morals are distinctly more modern than those of the ladies of Cranford. Because Gaskell only intended to write one episode, she promptly killed off Captain Brown, one of her favourite characters in the story, who was run over by his beloved train while reading Dickens’s *Pickwick Papers*, putting his death at a much later date in the episodes when they were later published as a novel and thus assigning him a far greater part in her novel that he had previously inhabited. The decision to have Captain Brown read *Pickwick Papers* at the time of his death did not sit well with Dickens, who changed the reference from *Pickwick Papers* to *Hood’s Poems* as he did not want to have his own novel scorned in his own journal. This upset Gaskell extremely, as the contrast between Johnson’s solemnity which Deborah Jenkyns favours and Dickens’s amusing humanity was the main element of the difficult relationship between the two characters. Dickens, being the charismatic, intelligent and well-spoken man that he was, replied to her objections in the following way:

> I write in great haste to tell you that Mr Wills in the utmost consternation has brought me your letter just received (4 o’clock) and that it is *too late* to recall your tale. I was so delighted with it that I put it first in the No. (not hearing of any objection to my proposed alteration by return of Post) and the No. is now made up and in the Printer’s hands. I cannot possibly take the tale out – it has departed from me.

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15 Ibid., 283.
There was nothing Gaskell could do – except put the reference to the *Pickwick Papers* back into *Cranford* when it was published as a full novel. After that, and despite having meant to only write one episode of *Cranford*, Gaskell was so interested in the subject that over the next sixteen months she wrote a further six episodes, which were all published in *Household Words*. Then, after April 1852 came a long break as Gaskell worked on *Ruth*, only returning to *Cranford* at the end of the year, after having finished *Ruth*. The final four episodes were published in *Household Words* from January to May 1853.\(^{16}\) After that, the episodes were bundled in June 1853 under the collective name of *Cranford*.

At the time *Cranford* was published, Gaskell was already a fairly popular author. Her first novel *Mary Barton*, even though published anonymously, had been well received, and she had written a number of shorter stories, some published anonymously, some unpublished but shared with friends, which were also well liked. *Cranford* was published by Chapman & Hall, a publishing firm which also published works by Charles Dickens and William Thackeray\(^{17}\), and later also as the first of the “yellow covers” – books published in a cheaply bound yellow cover – by the newly established W. H. Smith.\(^{18}\) For the episodes of *Cranford* in *Household Words* Gaskell received £76. Chapman & Hall priced *Cranford* at seven shillings and sixpence, paying Gaskell £100 for 1500 copies sold. Gaskell received royalty payments and in 1863 sold the entire copyright to George Smith for £50. In 1856 Gaskell received royalties for 3250 copies sold, which was probably on top of the 1500 copies for which Chapman & Hall had paid her the £100 back in 1853. These amounts were far greater than what Gaskell received for her previous novel *Mary Barton*, and also more in keeping with the payments other authors received, attesting to Gaskell’s growing popularity as a writer.\(^{19}\)

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 295.
\(^{18}\) Schor, 85.
\(^{19}\) Easson, 6, 7.
Cranford was immediately successful. It was published without much critical discussion, as it was not controversial and had already appeared serialized in Household Words, and as a reprint, it was more commonly put in categories such as ‘Publications Received’ rather than being discussed at length. Yet it did get several reviews. John Bull stated that the story’s “picture of commonplace gossiping gentility’s [was] unlikely to be surpassed.”20 The Spectator and the Westminster Review were also enthusiastic, the Westminster Review declaring that only “a woman of genius, quick of wit, and not less quick of feeling” could have written it.21 Cranford’s balanced control of wit and feeling, the achievement of satire without bitterness, sympathetic ordinariness and a revelation through detail that achieves a sense of reality were the features most praised, both by newspapers such as Athenaeum and the Examiner as well as by fellow authors – and incidentally friends of Gaskell – such as Charlotte Brontë.22 Charlotte Brontë wrote to Gaskell in 1852, while following Cranford in serialized form in Household Words, saying: “I read “Visiting at Cranford” with that sort of pleasure which seems always too short in duration: I wished the paper had been twice as long.”23 After the serialization of Cranford in 1853, rereading the episodes as a novel this time, Brontë wrote: “I have read it over twice, once to myself, and once aloud to my Father. I find it a pleasurable reading – graphic, pithy, penetrating, shrewd, yet kind and indulgent.” 24

Fourteen years after the first publication of the first episode of Cranford in Household Words, Elizabeth Gaskell was spending the twelfth of November 1865 quietly at home in Manchester with her family, when she broke off talking mid-sentence, and fell forward, with a slight gasp, into the arms of Meta, her daughter, sitting next to her on the sofa. While the family tried to revive her and sent immediately for a doctor, Elizabeth Gaskell had quietly and

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20 Ibid., 24.
21 Ibid., 24.
22 Ibid., 24, 25.
23 Ibid., 193.
24 Ibid., 193.
suddenly passed away at the age of 55. At the time of her death, Gaskell had been a published author for eighteen years, being published anonymously, under a pseudonym, and under her own name. Of all her novels, *Cranford* was the one which had been printed and reprinted the most, gaining positive critical acclaim all the way. According to Susan Hamilton in her essay “Gaskell then and now”:

Gaskell’s contemporaries cared a great deal about her fame. Newspaper obituaries and periodical press summations of her writing laid the groundwork for a reputation that was later chased into the shadows by modernism’s onslaught on the Victorians, and remained remarkably unchanged until revisited in the 1960s and 1970s by materialist and feminist critics.

The further popularity of Gaskell in the second half of the twentieth century is something that I shall revisit in chapter three, but for the moment it is especially important that Gaskell was indeed seen as a very popular and accomplished writer, and her obituaries reveal as much. After her death, her obituaries were all distinguished by the author’s critical impulse to define Gaskell’s writing achievements by only one of her books, whether that was one of the ‘social problem novels’ such as *Mary Barton* or *North and South*, or the ‘provincial life novels’ like *Cranford*, *Cousin Phillis* and *Wives and Daughters*.

Many of the critics tended towards favouring the ‘provincial life novels.’ Writing on November 18, 1865, Henry Fothergill Chorley wrote for the *Athenaeum* that he considered Gaskell to be: “if not the most popular, with small question, the most popular and finished female novelist of an epoch singularly rich in female novelists.”

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25 Uglow, 610.
27 Ibid., 179.
“Saturday Review” wrote that Gaskell: “had written herself into a well-deserved popularity”\textsuperscript{28}
by the time of her death. Both Chorley and the “Saturday Review” went on to write that they
favoured Cranford, because they would not endorse Gaskell’s work that represented one-
sidedness and indiscretion, so Mary Barton, North and South and The Life of Charlotte Brontë
were unfortunately out. In this situation Cranford gained significantly in status, to the point
that the “Saturday Review” elevated Cranford to a classic status in which its strength is in the
way in which the reader is placed into the midst of a far greater structure; Cranford takes the
reader and makes them part of the novel, rather than an outsider.\textsuperscript{29} David Masson, in
Macmillan’s Magazine applause the innocence of Gaskell’s work and downplays its political
strivings, going on to predict that Cranford is the novel that: “will be read when all are dead
and buried.”\textsuperscript{30} Masson’s focus on the quiet provincial novels which he perceives to be
perfection, complete and gently sad as the only fitting testimony to a popular woman writer, is
the focus that critics after him usually adopted, even far into the twentieth century. Gaskell’s
work was to be commended because of its characteristically emotional strength rather than its
intellectual strength, as would be befitting a Victorian woman writer.\textsuperscript{31} Gaskell had always
been perceived as a feminine writer because of the subjects of her novels as well as her
personal life as a wife and mother, and the choice of many of the critics to favour her rural life
novels is a direct consequence of that. However, as time progressed this label also caused
critics to look at Gaskell’s work as inferior. It would take until the nineteen-sixties for the
negativity around Gaskell as a feminine Victorian writer to be seen as a positive thing again.

Only ten years after Gaskell’s death it was becoming apparent that Gaskell’s
popularity during her lifetime might not be enough to mark her novels as timeless classics.
Writing in 1878 for the Fortnightly Review, William Minto ranks her among “those who are

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 179.
\textsuperscript{29} Easson, 45.
\textsuperscript{30} Matus, 180.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 180.
comparatively unambitious in their efforts, and who, having a just measure of their own powers, succeed perfectly in what they undertake; he classes her virtues as being decidedly feminine: unconscious artistry and moderation, as well as praises her for achieving the perfection of her art within the restrictive field of femininity, and never straining to go beyond it. The focus of the criticism on Gaskell shifted from her actual novels towards the question of why she wrote the novels in the first place, and especially towards the question of whether as a woman, and writing on the subjects of social problems and country life, Gaskell could ever be considered a great writer.

In 1901, after the death of Queen Victoria, the Victorian era was officially at its end, and with the emergence of modernism, the Victorian era was deemed old fashioned and if not forgotten, then largely ignored. The reviews written by Masson and Minto cleared the way for another, markedly twentieth-century author and literary critic: Lord David Cecil. In his book *Early Victorian Novelists*, Cecil included Gaskell among other authors such as Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot. Even though the inclusion of Gaskell in the book proves that Gaskell had not been forgotten in 1934, the description that Cecil gives of Gaskell harmed her popularity to such a degree that she remained virtually unknown until the rise of feminist criticism in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Cecil argues that it is because of her domesticity and womanhood that Gaskell became the popular author that she was in Victorian times. Cecil regards Gaskell as a “dove” amongst the “eagles” that are Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, and he wrote that:

[i]n an age whose ideal of woman emphasizes the feminine qualities at the expense of all others, she was all a woman was expected to be; gentle, domestic, tactful,

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32 Ibid., 182.
33 Ibid., 182, 183.
unintellectual, prone to tears, easily shocked. So far from chafing at the limits imposed on her activities, she accepted them with serene satisfaction.\textsuperscript{34}

It is in this last sentence especially that we see the influence of the critics that wrote before Cecil; Minto also stressed Gaskell’s acceptance of her position within Victorian femininity. Cecil goes on to call Gaskell’s provincial life novels feminine and mediocre and her social problem novels melodramatic.\textsuperscript{35} About \textit{Cranford}, Cecil is the least negative: he calls it “the least faulty of her novels” and states that, together with \textit{Wives and Daughters}, it “express[es] a stronger side of Mrs Gaskell’s talent” and ends with comparing it to the freshness of “this morning’s roses” meaning that it will be a nice read for a while, then it will wilt into nothingness.\textsuperscript{36} Cecil’s views on Gaskell stayed in place well into the 1960’s when the first critics carefully began to argue against Cecil. Yet, even though Gaskell has been out of the public’s eye for almost forty years, she has never fully faded into oblivion, and especially in the last two decades she has been revived and even appreciated again, by critics and scholars as well as by the general public.\textsuperscript{37} Further discussion on the popularity of \textit{Cranford} in the last two decades will take place in the chapter on modern reception.

\textit{Cranford} has always been Gaskell’s best known novel. From the time it appeared in serialized form in \textit{Household Words} in 1851 to the present day, it has been this particular novel that spoke to the imagination of the public, albeit for different reasons at different points of time. When \textit{Cranford} was first published, industrialization in Britain was at its height. People found it both comforting and entertaining to read about the adventures of elderly spinsters in a country town, as described in \textit{Cranford} because it reminded them of the times in the not too distant past, when life in those towns would indeed have strongly

\textsuperscript{34}David Cecil, \textit{Early Victorian Novelists} (London: Penguin Books Ltd), 152.
\textsuperscript{35}Ibid., 180.
\textsuperscript{36}Ibid., 184 185.
\textsuperscript{37}Easson, 47.
resembled those described in *Cranford*. These feelings of nostalgia were still in place at the time of Gaskell’s death, yet the elevation of *Cranford* to a classic piece of literature also has to do with the role assigned by critics to women writers at the time. As we can see in the obituaries written about Gaskell after her death, it is her feminine style of writing that is mostly commented on, whether from an inability of the critics to understand why, if a woman did decide to write she should write on those things that were a reality in the first place, instead of writing fantastic stories with a lesser base in the truth, or because the ideal female Victorian writer should have a feminine style of writing. Then, in the early twentieth century, views on what a writer should be changed with the rise of modernity, and *Cranford* fell out of grace. It wasn’t until feminist writers in the 1960’s and 1970’s began to look for role models from the past that Gaskell resurfaced again as a valued writer, but this time it was not *Cranford* that was highly valued. Just the opposite, *Cranford* was deemed old-fashioned, even backward, and no novel to associate with the budding feminist movement. Feminist critics focused instead on *Ruth* and *Mary Barton*, or in general, on the ‘social problem novels’ which they valued for their strong and independent women. *Cranford* remained unpopular until the early 1990’s when it was rediscovered by scholars and critics, as well as by the public. I will discuss the re-emergence of *Cranford* in the second half of the twentieth century in more detail in chapter four, but first I will conduct a similar investigation as I have done in this chapter into Gaskell’s final novel *Wives and Daughters*. 
In the previous chapter I discussed the reception of Elizabeth Gaskell’s novel *Cranford* in detail, focusing on three points in history: the year the novel was first published, the year Gaskell died, and the end of the Victorian era. My discussion of *Wives and Daughters* in this chapter will follow similar lines, with one exception: due to Gaskell’s untimely death in 1865 the first two points in history that I discussed separately in the chapter on *Cranford* have to fall together in this chapter. Yet, since *Wives and Daughters* was published in a serialized form in the *Cornhill Magazine* from August 1864 onwards, I will take the years of ongoing publication of the serial from 1864 to 1865 as my first point in history. The second point in history will then be Gaskell’s death in 1865 and the publication of the full novel, and the third point in history will remain the same as it was in the chapter on *Cranford*: reception at the end of the Victorian era. I will begin this chapter by giving a brief plot summary of *Wives and Daughters* and the main issues in it. After that, I will discuss the reception by both critics and the public of *Wives and Daughters* at the adjusted historical moments as explained above. I will end this chapter with a brief explanation as to why the novel was received in the way it was in those periods of time.

Set in the rural town of Hollingford in the later 1820’s and early 1830’s, *Wives and Daughters* tells the story of the coming of age of Molly Gibson, the doctor’s daughter. After having thwarted a one-sided love interest from one of his pupils towards his daughter, Mr. Gibson takes as a wife Hyacinth Clare Kirkpatrick in order to secure a chaperone for Molly. Molly is unhappy with her father’s choice of wife, but happy in gaining a sister, Mrs. Kirkpatrick’s daughter Cynthia. Meanwhile, during prolonged visits to Hamley Hall, home of country Squire Hamley, his wife and two sons, Molly befriends the family, especially Mrs. Hamley. During one of those visits Molly learns that the heir of the house, Osborne Hamley,
has secretly married a French serving woman, someone of whom Squire Hamley will certainly disapprove. Molly is then drawn into another love affair when she accidentally learns of her sister Cynthia Kirkpatrick’s secret liaison with Mr. Preston, the land agent of the grand Cumnor house. Determined to help those around here, she frees Cynthia from her engagement to Mr. Preston at the cost of her own reputation, and she keeps Osborne Hamley’s secret, ignoring her own feelings towards Osborne’s younger brother, Roger. Then Mrs. Hamley dies, and Osborne also dies shortly after, setting Molly’s life in a spin as she is forced to reveal the secret of Osborne’s wife, and give up her feelings for Roger as he becomes engaged to Cynthia. Finally, Cynthia breaks off the engagement to Roger while he is away on a scientific expedition, and the Squire comes to terms with Osborne’s choice of wife, aided by the appearance of Osborne’s small son. Roger and Molly now are in a position to recognize their feelings for each other, but before their engagement Roger has to return to his scientific expedition, which he had only interrupted at the news of Osborne’s death. The novel ends with Molly waving Roger goodbye from the window of her house when he leaves to catch the coach to London to go off on the second leg of his expedition.

The ending of *Wives and Daughters* is very frustrating; we will never be told what happened next, as Elizabeth Gaskell unfortunately died weeks before the completion of her last novel. The editor’s note at the end of the novel tells us that Gaskell planned to have Roger come back from his expedition to propose to Molly, and that they would live a very satisfactory and loving life together with their eventual children. Cynthia, now married to a Mr. Henderson from London, would continue to lead her pretty, empty life, and Mr. and Mrs. Gibson would continue their lives together, the former visiting often at Hamley Hall, the home of Molly and Roger. Yet, knowing how it would end and actually reading it in Mrs. Gaskell’s words are far from the same thing, and the readers of *Cornhill Magazine*, in which
Wives and Daughters was being serialized, seemed to have felt the same. In fact, in 1866 Connop Thirlwall, a lawyer, author and bishop, wrote to a friend that:

I mourn deeply over the loss of Mrs. Gaskell. I am not in the least comforted by anything that the editor of the Cornhill has said. The few things which he has disclosed as to the sequel of the story, if indeed it is anymore than a guess, instead of allaying, excite one’s curiosity. There was matter left for another volume…

At the time Gaskell started working on Wives and Daughters, she had already been an accomplished and well-liked author for more than ten years. Gaskell started writing Wives and Daughters in 1864, not quite finishing it before her death in 1865. Like her earlier novel Cranford, Wives and Daughters again had a rural theme, but interspersed with signs of the changes that time and the industrial revolution brought. Medicine and science play a very important role in the novel; Mr. Gibson is a doctor and both Roger Hamley and Lord Hollingford are scientists. Ideas and opinions on medicine and science are freely shared across Mrs. Gibson’s dining room, much to her annoyance. Like her social problem novels, Wives and Daughters harbors many of the problems addressed in her earlier work, such as poverty and inequality, but above all the novel – as are all Gaskell’s novels – is about change: change from childhood to adulthood, from single to married, from ignorant to educated, and from poverty to wealth. These were all themes that lay close to Gaskell’s heart, and addressing these issues was what prompted Gaskell to write novels in the first place. Wives and Daughters is her best and final address to inequality and injustice in society.

Wives and Daughters was published in an serialized form in the Cornhill Magazine from August 1864 to January 1866, two months after Gaskell’s death. Gaskell had first started

38 Ibid., 462.
publishing in the *Cornhill* in 1860, after Smith, the *Cornhill*’s publisher who was scouting for authors in late 1859, had approached her. As relations between Gaskell and Charles Dickens had fallen to an all-time low, Gaskell was interested in publishing in the *Cornhill*, not in the least because she had so much material to publish. As she wrote herself to Smith two days before Christmas 1859: “I have three things begun (very bad management I know: but there are excuses for all things if you know them)”\(^{39}\) The first was a long story which Gaskell thought: “not good enough for the *C.M.* – I am the best judge of that, please – but might be good enough for *H.W.*,”\(^{40}\) *C.M.* being the *Cornhill Magazine* and *H.W.* referring to *Household Words*. The second piece was a short story of which Gaskell said: “begun and I think good.”\(^{41}\) The final one was her new novel, *Sylvia’s Lovers*. It was decided between Gaskell and Smith that the shortest of the pieces would be published in the *Cornhill* after two weeks, and that the new novel would appear in September, also in the *Cornhill*. The short story “Curious but True” was published in February 1860, but *Sylvia’s Lovers* took far longer to finish than expected, eventually to be published in book form – and not in *Cornhill* – in 1863. Even though Gaskell was pleased to start publishing in the *Cornhill* as well as in *Household Words* and later in Dickens’s new periodical *All The Year Round* she was also anxious as the *Cornhill* was being run by yet another dominant male figure: William Makepeace Thackeray. Gaskell knew Thackeray but had never felt at ease with him after he did not reply to notes and letters sent to him by their mutual friends the Storys or by herself after the death of her good friend Charlotte Brontë. Thackeray for his part had been mortified at Gaskell’s representation of Charlotte Brontë’s opinions of him in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. Yet, her first piece in the *Cornhill*, “Curious But True”, was published without any complaints from Thackeray, and this gave her the confidence to continue publishing her work in the *Cornhill*. The balance was

\(^{39}\) Uglow., 459.  
\(^{40}\) Ibid., 459.  
\(^{41}\) Ibid., 459.
clear: from now on Dickens only got short stories to publish in his magazines, but the publishing of serialized novels became reserved for the Cornhill.42

When the novel was first serialized in the Cornhill Magazine reactions were immediately very positive. Gaskell herself was very pleased with it, knowing it was her best work yet, and the novel fully deserved its place next to Anthony Trollope’s The Small House at Allington and later besides William Thackeray’s unfinished Denis Duval and Wilkie Collins’s Armadale.43 There is no reason to assume that Gaskell’s death made the reviewers kind; Wives and Daughters was being recognized as Gaskell’s masterpiece and as a major work of its genre and time.44 Frederick Greenwood, the editor of the Cornhill, wrote the conclusion to the unfinished Wives and Daughters, and his review was to be the basis for further reviews both in papers and periodicals. Greenwood praises Wives and Daughters’ power and femininity:

Gaskell’s powers are wholesome and in her art she eschews startling or sensational materials. Her artistry is the greater since she works with incidents in which the ordinary novel-maker could see nothing and from which he would fail to make the striking effects he believes to be the end of fiction.45

Greenwood goes on to praise especially the characters of Osborne Hamley and above all, Cynthia Kirkpatrick. Writing for the Nation, Henry James, later, of course, a famous author himself, wrote a review for Wives and Daughters in February 1866 which would also be an inspiration for many reviewers to come. James focused on the qualities of ordinariness and quietness in Wives and Daughters. He praises Gaskell’s artistry, which creates a world that

42 Ibid., 459-461.
43 Ibid., 601.
44 Easson, 43.
45 Ibid., 41-42.
encloses the reader and becomes the reader's new world, all of which is made possible by Gaskell's meticulous use of detail and providing of small facts, such as Molly's outfits or her French lessons, and which help the reader to really feel like they know the characters in the novel. He also comments on Gaskell's nature as a writer; that her position as a Victorian wife and mother enables her to let her novels spring from feelings rather than thought, and that, because she is a woman and a mother, her feelings are correct and delicate where her thoughts might have been unreliable. Like Greenwood, he praises the achievements and qualities of the main characters, particularly Mrs. Kirkpatrick and her daughter Cynthia, yet he also praises Molly's artistic seriousness. James's review was one of the first to set Gaskell apart from her peers on the basis of her social position as a wife and mother, in contrast to being a reclusive intellectual such as Charlotte Brontë, and he assesses her work accordingly, as do many reviewers after him.46

Wives and Daughters was also used to renew the attack on the sensation novels that were popular at the time. Frederick Greenwood, among others, celebrates Gaskell's use of ordinary events that other writers would perhaps not incorporate in their writing for fear of the novel failing to make the striking effects that some authors believed was the point of writing novels in the first place.47 Connop Thirlwall, whose comment I quoted on the editor's note after the final instalment of Wives and Daughters in Cornhill Magazine, went on to praise Gaskell's lack of flashiness in her writing. Inspired by Greenwood, Thirlwall compared Gaskell's work to the works of Jane Austen, whose reputation, though never totally obscured, had been growing again in the last half of the nineteenth century. Many reviewers followed suit, commenting on the attention to detail, the similar use of wit and the similar scrupulous care in both Gaskell and Austen. Most often, reviewers would favor Gaskell over Austen, arguing Gaskell possessed greater depth and refinement in her writing, particularly Wives and

46 Ibid., 43.
47 Ibid., 41.
Daughters. The reviewer for the Manchester Guardian even went so far to say that Wives and Daughters would survive in a different way from Gaskells earlier industrial novels, as Wives and Daughters was so uncharacteristic for Gaskell, echoing works from Charlotte Brontë, Anthony Trollope, William Thackeray and Charles Dickens, who were deemed the great Victorian writers of the time. 48 Even though the reviewer probably meant well by favorably comparing Gaskell’s work to that of Brontë, Trollope, Thackeray and Dickens, the comparison is not quite so obvious, as Angus Easson explains: “Wives and Daughters bears little resemblance to Thackeray or Dickens, and still less in its control and penetration to the facelessness of Trollope.” 49 Farfetched as his review may seem, the reviewer clearly had a fine goal in mind when he wrote his review: to classify Gaskell among the great writers of the time. Had Gaskell still been alive at the time, the reviews would have certainly been less favourable. Gaskell’s work had been popular for more than a decade before she died, but she had never been classed alongside Brontë or Dickens as her work was always deemed too feminine. This reviewer’s sudden comparison of Gaskell to Brontë, Trollope, Thackeray and Dickens appears to be based more on the situation of the author than on the quality of the novel, as often happens: when an author, artist or any prominent figure suddenly dies, the critics as well as the public feel compelled to take a more favorable stance to the deceased’s work that they would have done before their death. This is what happened to Gaskell, and we can see this in all reviews that were written in the years following her death.

Wives and Daughters remained a firm favorite among the Victorian readers, as well as being widely considered Gaskell’s best novel. Even a decade after Gaskell’s death, George Barnett Smith declares Wives and Daughters to be Gaskell’s most complete and best of her novels. Unfortunately, as the Victorian era drew to a close, Gaskell became remembered increasingly for her final novel, and after 1880 her fading fame centered more around her

48 Ibid., 41-41.
49 Ibid., 42.
status as a once-famous author than on her novels. The readers became more interested in the
new and fashionable sensation novels, and as English readers moved into the twentieth
century, Gaskell’s novels were well and truly forgotten, and the hundred year anniversary of
her birth was only a remembrance of an author once famous.\textsuperscript{50}

After the end of the Victorian era, Gaskell’s novels quickly lost much of their
popularity. Even though she was still on the radar as far as critics and reviewers were
concerned, the discussion had shifted from reviewing her novels as well as her life to the
discussion of which Gaskell novel was the best, and consequently, which represented
Gaskell’s talents as an author in the most rounded way. This mode of discussing Gaskell had
started almost as soon as she died, but after the end of the Victorian era critics focused on this
particular question with a burning singularity. As I already discussed in the previous chapter
on Cranford, critics like David Masson in MacMillan’s Magazine and William Minto in the
Fortnightly Review called Gaskell’s works unambitious and therefore successful, for they
achieve exactly that what they set out to do. They both praise Gaskell for writing in the way
the Victorian female was supposed to write. Masson finally decides on Cranford as Gaskell’s
best work, while Minto, rather than choosing his favourite, opts instead to argue that Gaskell’s
work is best when she follows her instincts, rather than her morals. This image fits perfectly
with the virtues a female Victorian writer ought to have possessed: unconscious artistry and
moderation.\textsuperscript{51} Masson and Minto neatly cleared the way for that other very important critic:
Lord David Cecil. Writing in 1934, almost seventy years after Gaskell died in 1865, Cecil
argues that Gaskell’s popularity is only due to her feminine writing style, as I have already
argued in the previous chapter. In good Gaskellian tradition, Cecil also chooses his favorite of
the Gaskell novels, settling on both Cranford and Wives and Daughters, because they are the
best examples of feminine Victorian writing. Lord David Cecil, in the words of Susan

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 45-47.
\textsuperscript{51} Matus., 179-183.
Hamilton: “has reevaluated Gaskell right out of literary history.”\textsuperscript{52} It would take another thirty years before anyone would even be mildly interested in Gaskell and her work again.

\textsuperscript{52}Ibid., 184.
Chapter 4: Modern Reception

After the scalding criticism given by Lord David Cecil in his book *Early Victorian Novelists* Elizabeth Gaskell disappeared completely from the literary scene. Assessing her to be weak, feminine and of little success, Cecil effectively destroyed what was left of Gaskell’s popularity, as I have discussed in the previous chapters. It took until the 1950’s for critics to begin to reappraise Gaskell’s writings. Unlike the Victorian critics, they focused their criticism on Gaskell’s social problem novels instead of the provincial life novels the Victorians favored. One of the 1950’s critics, Arnold Kettle, claims that Gaskell’s social problem novels were not only central to her own fame, but also to the formation of early Victorian culture. In *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, Kathleen Tillotsen goes even further when she names Gaskell as the exemplary writer of social problem fiction. Tillotson considered the ‘slowness’ of Gaskell’s novels as a choice made by the author rather than a feminine flaw, thus countering all the earlier criticism in which Gaskell’s femininity was seen as central to Gaskell’s writing style, and consequently her main flaw. Unfortunately, redemption was short-lived: *Early Victorian Novelists* was reissued in 1958 with a new preface but without a revision of the criticism of Gaskell’s work, making Cecil again the authority in the field of Gaskellian criticism, and Gaskell’s popularity disappeared again.\(^{53}\)

It took until the 100 year memorial of Gaskell’s death in 1965 before critics became interested in her work again. Arthur Pollard and J. A. V. Chapple published a new edition of Gaskell’s letters, and Edgar Wright in *Mrs. Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment* describes Gaskell as one of the major Victorian writers coming back into critical popularity. Then, in the 1970’s and 80’s, Gaskell was brought back into the public eye by feminists, who focused mostly on the problems of domesticity in Gaskell’s novels. Whereas Cecil had found the

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 184, 185.
gendered criticism of Gaskell to be self-evident and natural – after all, Gaskell was a woman and would therefore write feminine novels – feminists criticized Gaskell for being too feminine. Most notably, Elaine Showalter’s book *A Literature of Their Own* lists the range of strengths and weaknesses attributed to Victorian writers by Victorian critics, exposing the gendered bias in women’s fiction up until then. Her list of strengths and weaknesses that were attributed to women writers by nineteenth-century reviewers consists of characteristics such as: “sentiment, refinement, tact, observation … [but no] originality, intellectual training, abstract intelligence … [or] knowledge of the male character.”

This list shows that Cecil’s criticism of Gaskell hardly differs from the criticism she would receive in the 1860’s. In her book, Showalter did not focus specifically on individual authors, yet her study lays bare the gendered view in which women writings had been seen and, by exposing the bias, makes room for a less-biased future for female Victorian literature.

However, as the studies focused more on comparing novels to each other as well as to the reality they represented in order to explore the history of Victorian culture, critics were still solely focused on Gaskell’s social problem novels. The political messages disseminated by Gaskell were no longer important as statements and criticism on society, but only as a framework from which to better understand Victorian culture. Gaskell’s role in this form of literary criticism was important because she was both a noted writer as well as an advocate for worker’s rights and her novels thus gave a unique view of the Victorian society. From the 1980’s onwards critical studies started to focus more on the cultural aspect of Gaskell’s novels, for example the woman question, Victorian celebrity, publishing history, working class autodidacts and Chartism. Cultural studies at the time still rarely centered on a single

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54 Ibid., 185.
55 Ibid., 185, 186.
author, but when Gaskell was singled out it was mostly to focus on her personality as a celebrated Victorian author, or on her relation with publicity.  

Since the 1990’s Gaskell has become more popular with the general public as well as with critics. Cheap editions of her novels published by major publishing houses such as Wordsworth and Penguin have assured that Gaskell’s novels are now available as well as affordable for the general public. These editions of Gaskell’s novels usually come with a newly commissioned introduction which offers novel ways to read the texts. Also, the internet has provided a alternative way for the public to read Gaskell; the Gaskell web has published some of Gaskell’s more difficult to find texts online as well as some of her better-known works, some with introductions and some without any guidance. Yet, with or without introduction or additional information, publishing Gaskell’s works online provides an even wider access to the public as well as appealing to those readers who might not necessarily be willing to visit a bookstore but would want to read the novels. Another major reason for Gaskell’s surge in popularity among the non-academic public has been the Gaskell society. Founded in 1985, after a literary lunch following the 175th anniversary of Gaskell’s birth, and with branches in America, Japan and Italy, the Gaskell society has published over half of all the critical works published about Gaskell in their magazine or on their website, and it has proven to be a formidable source of information about all things Gaskellian, from a tour of Manchester through dissertations to academic research. It was the Gaskell society which promoted the idea of making an adaptation of *Wives and Daughters* to the BBC in 1999. This production was so successful that it led to the adaptation of *North and South* in 2004, and of *Cranford* in 2007, placing Gaskell among the other great Victorian writers such as Charles

56 Ibid., 186, 187.
57 The Gaskell Web at www.gaskellweb.com
58 Matus, 186.
59 The Gaskell Society at www.gaskellsociety.co.uk
Dickens, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope and Emily and Charlotte Brontë, as well as placing her even more clearly in the public eye.\textsuperscript{60}

It is beyond doubt that the BBC adaptations of Gaskell’s novels have been the driving force behind Gaskell’s still rising popularity among the general public, and consequently the attention given to Gaskell as well as Gaskell’s popularity within the academic field. In a time when people find it more convenient to turn on the television or look things up on the internet, getting people to read a book has proven difficult. That is, unless those people have already seen the adaptation of that book in TV or on the internet and liked it, and now want to know more. \textit{Wives and Daughters} was adapted for television by the BBC in 1999, and starred a number of well-known British actors. It was immediately very successful, and in 2000 won awards at the British Academy Film and Television Awards (BAFTA), the Broadcasting Press Guild Awards and at the Royal Television Society, among others for best actor, best actress and best drama series. It is no wonder that in 2004 the BBC went on to adapt \textit{North and South} as well. Starring less well-known actors, this adaptation was markedly less popular, receiving only one nomination at the BAFTA’s for best production design. In 2007 \textit{Cranford} was adapted by the BBC from three Gaskell novellas: \textit{Cranford}, \textit{My Lady Ludlow} and \textit{Mr Harrison’s Confessions}. The cast comprised several well-known actors, including Judi Dench, Eileen Atkins, Imelda Staunton and Michael Gambon, and the series did extremely well, ranking in the top ten of BBC programmes for the duration of the series. It was nominated for eight BAFTA’s and won three, including Best Actress; it was nominated for eight Emmy Awards and won two, and it was nominated for three Golden Globes. All three adaptations have also been sold to television stations abroad, as well as released on DVD and also subsequently uploaded illegally onto the internet, where Youtube even features a version of \textit{Cranford} with Japanese subtitles. Also, the BBC regularly broadcasts reruns of the

\textsuperscript{60} Matus, 187, 188.
adaptations, particularly of *Wives and Daughters* and *Cranford*, the latter of which has been broadcast at least four times since its first appearance in 2007, and is scheduled as a BBC Christmas Special for Christmas 2009.

It is striking that where academics still seem to favour Gaskell’s social problem novels, the general audiences prefer the provincial life novels. Because it was the academic interest in her social problem novels that first brought Gaskell back to the critic’s attention in the 1970’s and 1980’s, it is understandable that this focus would have remained to the present day, especially when considering that Gaskell’s popularity was redeemed because of her clear views on the Manchester work ethics and because the social problem novels, at first glance, seemed to inhabit so much more history, making them more interesting to analyze. The sales figures and the number of awards won suggest that the public may be more interested in the romance of the Victorian age rather than its hardships. Of the three BBC adaptations, *North and South*, Gaskell’s only social problem novel to have made it onto the television screen, has been received far less well than *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters*. As discussed before, modern novel reading is used mostly by people for escaping their own life, for relaxing, and for allowing the public to submerge themselves in other people’s life. We see this happening not only in novel reading, whether that be modern novels or historical novels, but also in television watching. Thus, it only stands to reason that, like novels, television shows which feature more depressing subjects might be less popular than shows with a more positive theme, especially if that show consists of multiple episodes spread out over several weeks, as people would prefer to escape from their own situation to the lives of people who have at least a marginally better life than their own. It also explains the popular demand for everything on television to have a happy ending. However, as shows such as *Eastenders* or *Coronation Street*, which are also about the working class and their hardships, are very popular, we can only assume that the lesser degree of popularity of the adaptation of
North and South must be a combination of audiences having to watch nineteenth-century hardships – which are markedly different from the present day hardships as seen in Eastenders and Coronation Street – and perhaps a less interesting plotline that tends to focus more on the social circumstances of the characters than on their romantic lives.

Because of this tendency of audiences to prefer television shows which are interesting but happy it becomes less important for the content of the adaptation to be as accurate as possible. All novel adaptations, from Victorian texts or otherwise, have to have changes made to them in order for the adaptation to become a success. In the case of Cranford, the series was actually adapted from three of Gaskell’s short stories: Cranford itself, My Lady Ludlow, and Mr. Harrison’s Confessions, and the adaptation of Gaskell’s Wives and Daughters had a new ending provided, as the novel has no ending, only a postscript by the editor. Academically, one could argue about the quality of the combination of the three short stories combined to make Cranford, or on the historical probability of the BBC’s ending of Wives and Daughters. One could watch the adaptations and note all the historical errors in landscape, dress and speech. One could compare the script to the novel and note all sorts of differences, omissions and adding. But the general audience does not do this. Because audiences are only watching these adaptations to be entertained and possibly – but not usually – to get an idea of what living in the Victorian era must have been like, they do not care about accuracy of the script or exact source of the adaptation. When looking at the adaptations of Cranford and Wives and Daughters in a non-academic way, we see two stories about town life in the 1830’s, and we sympathize with the people living in the towns who are going about their lives in an ordinary fashion. They do not mind that Cranford is comprised of three stories, as long as it does not interfere with the storyline of the adaptation, and they also do not mind that the ending if Wives and Daughters probably is not what Gaskell had in mind for Molly. Audiences want to be entertained, and the lists of awards and prizes that the
adaptations have won shows that in that respect *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters* are very big successes.
Conclusion

It is clear that Elizabeth Gaskell has come back from obscurity to become a well-known and loved household name, both in the academic field and with the general public. Academic research is being done into her work, articles are being published, her book sales are up, the DVD versions of the BBC adaptations are selling well, and one can hear her name in television shows, quizzes and talk shows. It is strange to think that an author who was so popular in her lifetime could go through such a low after the review of one critic in particular, and take so long to be restored in both the critics and the public eye and mind. But that is what happened to Gaskell. She was a respected author, an advocate for worker’s rights in Manchester, a wife and mother, and most importantly a Victorian. Her novels were published among the great writers of the times, and she was personally close to many of them, such as Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë. Her novels were well-structured and written with feeling, even though the subjects of the social problem novels, especially *Ruth* eventually led to mass book burnings. Gaskell’s provincial life novels were less controversial and therefore generally more popular, especially among the critics. Her untimely death abruptly ended a blossoming career as well as cutting short one of her best novels as well as my personal favourite: *Wives and Daughters*. After her death, critics not only tried to define Gaskell by only one of her novels, they also made her into a typically feminine writer, effectively sabotaging any acclaim she might have received on behalf of her novels. Thanks mostly, but by no means only, to Lord Cecil, Gaskell was labelled a female writer of nice little books about love in the countryside, whose books were weak and prone to feminine feelings, and subsequently, people lost interest in the novels. The social problem novels finally brought critical interest back to Gaskell, and cleared the road for a more popular interest in the provincial life novels as well, with reissues of the novels as well as BBC adaptations of three
of her novels, *North and South, Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters* as a result. The public recognized an author who knew how to tell the story of everyday people doing everyday things and Gaskell suddenly became popular again. Book sales went up, DVD sales went up, and the adaptations are broadcast regularly on television. Also, recently, the debate about the degree of conservatism in Gaskell’s novels has been reopened, and it will perhaps serve to eliminate the negative nineteen-thirties opinion of Gaskell as an emotional female writer for good, leaving room for more in depth analysis of Gaskell’s novels and taking her reputation beyond that of the author of those nice rural life novels to a deserved place in which Gaskell is famed for her excellent understanding of what exactly drives people to lead their lives in a certain way.

In turbulent times people turn to the simple things in life. Gaskell’s Victorian world was very turbulent; the Industrial Revolution was at its height, the world became smaller and smaller as new worlds were being inhabited and scientific discoveries were made, and life became infinitely harder for those at the bottom end of society. It is no wonder that people turned back to a world a few decades earlier, when the biggest problem was how to wash lace, or what to do when your beloved father suddenly wanted to remarry. We can see the same trend happening right now: the world is still getting smaller as technology is getting smarter, there is always a war to be fought or an epidemic to be cured, and the television brings it all into our living room. It seems only obvious for people to want to return to a time when life was infinitely more simple, though obviously not without the hardships. Reading and watching *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters* evokes feelings of nostalgia in us, and allows us to forget for a moment our own problems. Gaskell’s novels are still part of our paracanon, and have been since the time of their publication. And no wonder, watching other people in other times leading their lives makes us forget our own. And as long as some people love certain Gaskell novels, she will forever remain in the public’s eye and in their heart because in the
end, no matter what the critics say and whether a book is accepted by the academics as part of a canon, we do not need any justification to love a certain book, we just love it.
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