“Stitching Together Pieces:” Gender, Genre, and the Figure of Peter in Gaskell’s Cranford

Sierra Eckert
Swarthmore College

Abstract

Cranford’s is often misread as merely “a woman’s book about a woman’s place,” (Dolin 180). Yet within this Amazonian “utopia” of a Victorian novel, Elizabeth Gaskell makes the pointed inclusion of a cross-dressing male figure: Peter—later, Aga-Jenkins. Peter’s gender-defying deviation is dramatized as the novel unfolds. Turning from gender to genre, we see a different kind of heterogeneity in the makings of Cranford itself. Published serially, the author appears anonymously in the journal Household Words, under the male editorial figure, Charles Dickens and is only later reconfigured into a novel. By examining Gaskell’s representation of the reconfiguration and ambiguous gendering in the figure of Peter alongside the novel’s serial production, I will argue that Peter, as a fragmented-then-cohered subject, becomes metaphoric means for Gaskell to engage in the politics of production. The interplay between gender and genre reveals the dynamics of material alteration within Cranford as articulations of a complex struggle for authorial control.

Elizabeth Gaskell’s Cranford begins “in the possession of the Amazons” (3), likening the elderly spinster who owns property and populates the chapters of the novel to a tribe of masculine women warriors. The narrative goes on to loosely follow the episodic life of this “Amazonian” English township during the changes of the mid-nineteenth century. Within this “female utopia,” however, Gaskell includes a notable variation on the virago Amazon. In a scene where Miss Matty narrates family history, a feminine male figure emerges in the form of her cross-dressing male figure: Peter—later, Aga-Jenkins. Peter’s gender-defying deviation is dramatized as the novel unfolds. Turning from gender to genre, we see a different kind of heterogeneity in the makings of Cranford itself. Published serially, the author appears anonymously in the journal Household Words, under the male editorial figure, Charles Dickens and is only later reconfigured into a novel. By examining Gaskell’s representation of the reconfiguration and ambiguous gendering in the figure of Peter alongside the novel’s serial production, I will argue that Peter, as a fragmented-then-cohered subject, becomes metaphoric means for Gaskell to engage in the politics of production. The interplay between gender and genre reveals the dynamics of material alteration within Cranford as articulations of a complex struggle for authorial control.

Criticism surrounding Cranford, generally speaking, falls into two categories: readings that see it as merely “a woman’s book about a woman’s place” (Dolin 180) with a “homogenously pleasant tone and dismissively trivial content” (Schaffer 221), and those that read its realism as mask for a “panic about change”(Schor 85), male dominance, Orientalism, or class discontents. Hilary Schor’s characterization of the novel’s “flux” (119) gets closer to this dialectical complexity, yet even her reading remains bound to the binary of masculine/feminine spheres, and thus fails to capture the complexity of Peter as a fluidly-gendered anomaly who becomes central in wrapping together the plot of Cranford. Looking closer at the arc of his transformation reveals its striking similarities to Cranford’s own transformation from serial text to novel, shedding light on a second gender dynamic: that of Gaskell and her editor, Charles Dickens. In what follows, I analyze how Peter’s dynamic gender serves as a metaphorical commentary on the generic construction of Cranford. Through Peter’s illusory unity, Gaskell subtly subverts the notion of coherence, blurring the lines in both categories to reveal the fictionality of homogeneity.

In Cranford’s third installment, Miss Matty Jenkyns rediscovers an old letter, plunging the narrative into past family history. As she reads and recollects, the figure of Peter Marmaduke Arly Jenkyns emerges: an inadequate son overshadowed by his sister Deborah’s comportment. “Poor Peter” first act of disobedience toward gender conventions comes as he impersonates a female admirer of his father’s sermons. Dressed up as a lady, he goes unrecognized by his father, dramatizing a duality of personas when he is then forced to copy out sermons for “the lady.” Peter’s “practical-joking” continues as, later,

[…] he went to her [Deborah’s] room, it seems, and dressed himself in her old gown, and shawl, and bonnet; just the things she used to wear in Cranford, and was known by everywhere; and he made the pillow into a little - you are sure you locked the door, my dear, for I should not like anyone to hear - into - into a little baby, with white long clothes. It was only, as he told me afterwards, to make something to talk about in the town; he never thought of it as affecting Deborah (52-53).

His decision to then parade himself down the lane marks a turning point. For his actions, Peter is mercilessly flogged by his father, an action Carolyn Lambert reads as “symbolic rape” (78), and then disappears off to India.

The story ends abruptly. Interrupted by the sound of Martha and Jem “kissing –” outside, we are brought out of the unlit, locked room and back into Cranford present. Layers of removal mediate this encounter: we hear Peter’s story from letters, narrated by Miss Matty, and finally told by Mary Smith, the telling occurs behind a locked door, and during her narrative, Miss Matty puts out the light– all these details code the scene as family history layered in secrecy, guilt, and unease.

The cross-dressing–quickly smoothed over–could be seen as merely another anecdotal tale, like the cow in flannel or the lacing cat; yet its troubled undertones and Peter’s reoccurrence later compel a closer reading. In the Cranford “panic,” Helen Kuryllo points out “gender ambivalence” (102) in the description of a woman as “masculine-looking - a perfect virago; most probably a man dressed in woman’s clothes” (Gaskell 95). This
woman, later identified as Signora Brunoni, leads the narrative back to Peter. The signora says while in India, she was aided by one “Aga Jenkyns” (109). The presence of this gender ambiguity and the “panic” about masculinity/intersexuality in Cranford, forces us to reconsider the role of heterogeneity in Peter’s figure, a divided nature that, as Alyson Kiesel notes, inspires “textual hybridity” in Mary’s letter that functions as both a personal appeal and a private one (1013). Together, these seemingly insignificant details signify the narrative’s high ambivalence toward gender.

It is Peter’s transformation in the text that is crucial. After Gaskell introduces the rather romantic possibility that Aga Jenkyns could be the lost Peter, he reappears nearly 100 pages (and 14 months) later, as “Aga himself” (147) in Cranford. His apparent transformation unites Cranford, as he regales the ladies with stories, smooths over tensions between Mr. Jamieson and Mrs. Hoggins, and appears a benign, masculine force of order working to ensure harmony in Cranford. And yet, evidence of Peter’s past remains in a letter in a locked, dark room. Like Peter, Gaskell seems to wink at us here, tacitly and ironically acknowledging, as in the first chapter, that “she knew that we knew, and we knew that she knew that we knew” (5), that there is more to his appearance.

Critical approaches to Cranford’s subversive depictions of gender have, ironically, remained rooted in the rigid binary of gendered spheres. Schor, in her reading, characterizes Cranford as a narrative “on the way women read,” (110; emphasis in the original) and write. Schor, despite her desire not to replicate readings that perpetuate Cranford’s “delicacy,” paints a rather domesticated picture of the novel. Though she notes Cranford’s form illustrates “fluidity, the movement between expectation and reality,” Schor insists that it “hold[s] that flux steady for us” (119) as a distinctly feminine mode of writing and reading. To categorize Cranford as merely “a woman’s text” is to re-assert that which the text pushes up against: the novel’s capacity to produce, as Nancy Armstrong theorizes, “oppositions that translated the complex and competing ways of representing human identity into a single binary opposition represented by male versus female” (Armstrong 474). In approaching the text, critical camps have tended to create still frames of what is, in fact, a dynamic work where Gaskell, more subtly, contorts and disrupts the very notion of uniform genre or gender.

We see disruption stylistically as Peter causes fragmentation in the text’s language. Two personas battle in his letters: “They were of a highly mental description, giving an account of his studies […] but now and then, the animal nature broke out in such a little sentence as this […].: ‘Mother dear, do send me a cake, and put plenty of citron in’” (49). In this fractured fragment, the “animal” and the “mental” aspects here become intriguing entwined, as his emotional appeal to his mother is combined with an intellectual “account”: the recipe-like enumeration of what to put in the cake. His language dramatizes the strangeness of this fracturing and results in an ambiguous and fuzzy portrait. Even Miss Matty, as she recounts the story, becomes confused. She switches the gender pronouns: “for her—he, I mean—no, her, for Peter was a lady then” (51). In narrating her brother’s actions, Miss Matty’s speech becomes increasingly fragmented and broken. Her description of Mr. Jenkyn’s reaction is a single, 174-word-long sentence filled with dashes and parentheticals that interrupt the narrative build toward the story’s climax, where Mr. Jenkyns “lifted up his cane, and flogged Peter!” (52). Peter’s language, and the language of characters around him, reveal the interruptions he engenders. Linguistically, he fractures the placid front of domestic dynamics.

In Peter, we see the ironic twisting of gender as means for artistic production. Peter’s plays with the “art” of deception as he dresses up and “performs” himself as Deborah. Peter’s “hoaxes” dramatize the distinction between Peter’s biological sex and the gender he performs. After the flogging, “he turned to where the people outside the railing were and made them a low bow” (53). Peter’s performances play on the dramatic irony of appearance vs. actuality, turning on the fact that, underneath, he in fact, Mr. Jenkyn’s son and not the daughter or female admirer he performs himself as. His bowing after “playing” Deborah seems to signal the end of a fictional play and the return to the “reality” of his male gender.

Yet, Peter’s fictional performances constitute a significant part of his “real” identity. From the beginning, he crafts fictions and stories: Miss Matty describes him as a lover of “practical jokes” and “hoaxes,” and, even after returning from India, Miss Smith notes that “for all his grave face, he was at his old tricks” (157) in telling tall tales and in setting up a magic show in order to bate Mrs. Jamieson. Thus, fictional, ironic interplay is one of the “real” components of his character. The narrative internalizes this dramatized irony, and incorporates it into his physical description to such an extent that, when he finally returns, Miss Smith recognizes him by the incongruity of his “foreign” and his “oddly contrasting” features (148). Elsewhere in the novel, Miss Matty repeatedly resorts to analogy to describe her brother. She first compares him to the Captain: “He was like dear Captain Brown in always ready to help any old person or a child” (51), switches to describe him “dressing himself up as a lady” (51), and finally to “looking haughty as any man—and indeed, looking like a man and not like a boy” (54). The shifting comparisons between male and female referents illustrate the complex heterogeneity in Peter’s character. It is Peter’s “tricks” and fiction that, paradoxically, come to form the “reality” of his character.

Through his bold and explicit cross-dressing hoax, Peter displays the construction of gender differentiation. In the moment of his performance, he exists as a multiplicity, embodying both himself and Deborah. The figure of patriarchal authority, the rector, strips Peter of “bonnet, shawl, gown, and all,” reveals him as a man, and beats him back into his masculine role. At face value, the scene illustrates a reassertion of traditional gender order after a deviation. Peter’s fragmentary identity and its destruction exemplify the phenomenon Jacques Lacan termed the “mirror stage”:

The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency [...] and which manufactures for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic (Lacan 1288).

As Peter’s gender instability is punished, he is forced into rigid, “orthopaedic” gender structures. The Oedipal tensions at these points create a complex relationship between Peter and the sister that he impersonates. His actions seem overdetermined:

1 The original text of Household Words describes Peter’s departure as “the last time he saw father or mother,” (207; n.58)
after failing to live up to his father's expectations as a son, he masquerades as his sister; his "charade" (Lambert 79) functions as both a rebellion and an attempt to regain his father's favor by imitating Deborah's masculine traits.

It is this act of transvestism that dissolves the Jenkyns family domestic ideal, creating instability in the text and in the domestic realm. Peter refuses to cohere; as Lambert observes, he does not merely resist masculine gender conventions, in his action he "is challenging constructs of both masculinity and femininity" (77). Kiesel reads Peter's departure as a "violent rupture" (Kiesel 1002).

Yet, in arguing that "his parting seals Cranford off from the rest of the world and locks it in a timeless, changeless Eden" (1002-1003), Kiesel fails to account for the active processes that it sets in motion. His action brings to the surface existing familial tensions, establishing the strictly "feminine" domain spheres of Cranford and the "masculine" world beyond. By departing, Peter dramatizes the gender divisions already present within the rector's household, as his departure causes them to determine the demographic of Cranford and, in so doing, creates destabilizing contradictions. Though Cranford, is, ostensibly, gendered "female," we see that each installment curiously contains a male presence—the Captain, Mr. Holbrook, Peter, Mr. Mulliner, Signor Brunoi—revealing, implicitly, the township's multifarious nature.

Gaskell's inclusion of Peter and his gender confusions in Cranford can be illuminated by examining Cranford, the text itself, as a divided body. Thus, on this abrupt note, we send Peter away and examine the letter of the novel, with the hope of bringing these two disparate pieces together to shed light on one another.

Like Peter, the material form of Cranford has undergone several transformations. First conceived as the 1849 sketch "The Last Generation of England," in which Gaskell makes the disclaimer that "classing the details ... will be impossible from their heterogeneous nature" (15), the text was originally published serially in Charles Dickens' journal, Household Words. Thomas Recchio, in his study of the novel's history in print, notes that Cranford was published in nine parts and in irregular intervals between December 13, 1851 and May 211853 (45). Initially, Gaskell did not conceptualize the work as a novel at all. She writes that "The beginning... was one paper in Household Words and I never meant to write more" (Gaskell, Letters 747-748). What we have are "fragments and small opportunities" that are "gathered together to make a pot-pourri" (Gaskell 17). As it was a serial fiction, reader's first interactions with the text would have been with these fragments. The novel is temporally and physically fragmented, the text parcelled out in discreet packages, creating "a continuous story over an extended time with enforced interruptions" (Hughes and Lund, Victorian Serial which reads as an error, given that Peter does return briefly, lauded by his father. Though later editions also included it, Birch here changes it to mother. This original version, however, presents an interesting possibility; namely a far harsher separation between father and son, and no return as the proud son. We might read that Gaskell initially intended this reading, but changed it to reflect a more normative gender dynamic with Peter as the favored child, as during this visit: "Deborah used to smile... and say she was quite put in a corner" (59).

While Mr. Jenkyns accepts Deborah's "intellectual" pursuits and dominate nature, it is important to note that Deborah nonetheless conforms to the expectations of feminine behavior, never appearing in the text as "masculine."

2. Such serialized fiction allowed for a more immediate reading experience: "a work's extended duration meant that serials could become entwined with readers' own sense of lived experience and passing time"(8). Like foreign dispatches, the Cranford sequence comes to readers produced in distinct parts, dramatizing the rapid consumption of text in an industrializing print market. The Peter sequence—spread over two chapters in the novel form: "Old Letters" and "Poor Peter"—occurred compartmentalized as single installation (Gaskell xxvi) which Dickens titled "Memory at Cranford" (Recchio 45). Looking at this scene, along with the representation of male characters in other installments, we see the serial form allows for the most dramatic aspect of Peter's story to be compartmentalized, contained, and thus, artificially cordoned off as distinct from Cranford writ large. Divided thusly, the reading experience was inherently episodic and discontinuous, despite the illusion of continuous narration.

Each installment of Cranford exists imbedded within the contextual thicket of other texts in Household Words. An early reader might have read it like Recchio, "reading each Cranford installment as it originally appeared, half-reading/half-browsing through the rest" (28). The journal comprised a "heterotopic" assortment. A reader navigating the text would have found it juxtaposed with a poem, an essay, a history, and a journalism piece (46). Though united by location and the papers, Cranford "had no clear title and no clear generic status" (2). Unlike "The Last Generation of England," a "history," the "Cranford Papers" were not even titled comprehensively. Lorna Huett argues that "the form of Cranford, like that of Household Words [...] echoes that of the Exhibition" (37). The episodic sketches at once function as individual units, yet are also loosely connected as part of a collection of assorted tales. Reading Cranford at its contextual edges, we see that it exists not as a self-contained called a "novel," but as an ambiguous assortment in dialogue with other texts in the journal (Recchio 27) in generic limbo.

Issued serially, Cranford's production was not just a preatory and separate stage to the novel, but rather, integrated within a role in the reception. Self-aware of this fact, Cranford dramatizes the consumption and reading of texts. Physical text is scattered throughout the novel itself: we get to know Peter mediated through letters, Captain Brown is killed reading the Pickwick Papers, the ladies pass around the St. James Chronicle, Miss Jenkyns prepares for a party by "cutting out and stitching together pieces of newspaper" (Gaskell 15), and as Mary visits Miss Jenkyns for the last time, the latter rambles long enough "for Flora to get a good spell at the 'Christmas Carol,' which Matty had left us on the table" (24). The references to real texts provide "paper paths" for Gaskell's readers to walk on, signaling the text's awareness not just of the external world, but its own print medium. The prominence of paper scraps calls attention to the disrupted materiality of the serial novel. As a fragmentary form that develops as it is published, Cranford situates itself as a text among texts, wholly conscious of its status as a work "publishing in parts" (10).

Against this backdrop is Charles Dickens. While authors such as Gaskell write anonymously, Dickens' name appears on the masthead as "conductor" of Household Words; Schor notes that "his imprint was everywhere" in the journal (92). His faith in progress and "material form that develops as it is published, Cranford situates itself as a text among texts, wholly conscious of its status as a work "publishing in parts" (10).
innocuous references to *Pickwick Papers*, “Boz,” and *Christmas Carol* appear to be tacit nods to Dickens, looming, literally, above the text. Dickens resembles the Rector. He, not Gaskell, had authority to title the installments (Recchio 45). As Elsie Michie describes it: “his function as editor is to be a disciplinarian; he must keep Gaskell’s professional behavior within the limits of what is proper” (86–87). The critical picture that emerges paints Gaskell as writing under the domineering shadow of the male literary figure. This reading, while acknowledging the reality of the power dynamic between the editor and the author, gives Gaskell’s writing little agency. Taken together, these small details about reading help create Cranford as a text not only aware of its reading public, but aware of its relationship to Dickens’ journal as a “literary daughter” (Schor 93).

The body of the manuscript becomes the space in which the fraught literary relationship between Gaskell and Dickens plays out. The latter makes several significant revisions to Gaskell’s text, converting references to *Pickwick Papers* (Cranford 10, 11, 24, 110) into “Hood’s poems” and *Christmas Carol* into “Miss Kilmansegg and her Golden Legg” (Recchio 46). Though claiming “modesty,” the fact that he references it as the place “where the captain was killed” (46), suggests a discomfort with allowing Gaskell the freedom to make Dickens himself an interpretable object. At the end of the first installment, “Our Society at Cranford,” Dickens adds an extra line: “Poor, dear, Miss Jenkyns! Cranford is Man-less now.” This addition, as Recchio notes, destroys some of Gaskell’s subtly (47); even more, Dickens’ editing pen marks the text, explicitly delineating *Cranford* (and Gaskell’s subsequent installments) as a textual space gendered female. In removing his own name and adding the sentence drawing attention to the absence of men, Dickens reduces the complicated, intertextual dynamic that Gaskell establishes. Though in his 1853 novel, Gaskell restores the *Pickwick* references and removes Dickens’ addition, in this first version, it is Dickens - not Gaskell - who ends the first installment.

The addition of “man-less,” Recchio observes, causes a heightened contrast between the story and the decidedly masculine news piece that follows: “The ‘Merchant Seaman’s Fund.’” Here, Dickens puts Gaskell into a corner. Just as he retaliates for the train killing by distorting Gaskell’s text, we might read the knotty portrait of gender in *Cranford* as Gaskell striking back.

In *Cranford’s* “Panick,” a scene seemingly concerned with the intrusion of men, Gaskell explores the possibility of a far more intermixed conception of gender. After hearing the gossip and visiting the dentist, Miss Pole goes on the following “diatribe against the sex”:

“[M]en will be men […] If you will notice, they have always foreseen events, though they never tell one for one’s warning before the events happen […]”

“Now, only think,” said she. “There, I have undergone the risk of having one of my remaining teeth drawn (for one is terribly at the mercy of any surgeon-dentist; and I, for one, always speak them fair till I have got my mouth out of their clutches)” (95–96)

At first glance this curious passage appears to merely espouse gender differences. Through Miss Pole, Gaskell gets her “mouth out of [Dickens’] clutches” and speaks freely. Couched as a frivolous panic over ghosts, Gaskell inserts a pointed commentary about gendered sensibility. She writes that hidden underneath this domestic bed there might be “a man concealed, with a great fierce face staring out at you” (97). Looking to Cranford’s context, this passage’s self-consciousness serves as an expression panic over Dickens, a “surgeon dentist” with his editing pen, lurking behind the text, and a subsumption of his presence. This scene comes bookended by Peter’s first appearance and the reemergence of Aga Jenkyns. Though Peter isn’t explicitly in this passage, we had, just a few paragraphs above Miss Pole’s diatribe, the mention of the “virago,” echoing the image of intermixed genders. Like so much of Cranford, Gaskell ironically emphasizes turmoil behind its simple veneer. Though she speaks about men’s and women’s separate spheres, Gaskell’s comment points to the fact that the text of *Cranford*, itself, is, itself, a composite of Gaskell and Dickens, a dialogism possessing “gender ambivalence.” *Cranford’s* obedient literary daughter, Deborah Jenkyns, has died. Enter, stage right: “poor Peter.”

Peter, in the wake of this preliminary dispute, becomes a complicated figure onto which the literary battle is inscribed. Peter is inextricably connected to the written word: the narrative links his story to material texts in the form of letters to his family, sermons, and in Mary Smith’s letter (VP 71). Peter, as a cross-dressed and composite form makes a curious analogue to Gaskell’s text, a collection of stories by a female author inside the male-edited journal. Just as Peter rebels in Oedipal struggle with his father figure, by impersonating a female admirer, Gaskell’s critique of Dickens comes cloaked in praise. Though an attempt to parse authorial intention is inevitably impossible, the juxtaposition with Peter’s man-dressed-as-a-woman antics offers several layers of meaning in light of the author’s textual tensions. Peter is both Dickens masquerading as Gaskell, subtly inserting his own text into her fiction and Gaskell herself, creating a gender-binary defying character. In refusing to abide by the conventional boundaries of gender, Peter becomes the site where the textual tradition is played out.

In the third installment, Peter’s arrival marks a turn for both the content and the material form of *Cranford*, as with his introduction, Gaskell begins to negotiate narrative form in the serial. Up until this point, the episodes have been scattered, the plot not progressing forward in a linear fashion. With Peter, we begin to see Gaskell becoming more conscious of a plot; instead of killing off this male character like the captain, she only writes that they “believe he is dead”(59). By the time the fifth installment, “The Great Cranford Panic: Chapter the Second” (Chapters 10–12) ends, the possible link between Aga and Peter generates a cliffhanger and a feeling of suspense that propels the plot. Along with Mary, the readers of Cranford feel Peter’s absence in the novel’s temporality—we feel the real distance in the time it takes from the first mention of Peter to the sending of the letter, to finally, his arrival. The form of serial fiction leant itself to an eroticism defined by “waiting, anticipating, anxiety” (Hughes and Lund, VP, 112). By placing the serial anticipation and plot motivation onto Peter, the estranged son, Gaskell further contorts generic expectations; the object of readerly desire here is not a woman but a cross-dressing man.

An interesting reading, one not possible in the scope of this paper, would put Gaskell’s relation with Dickens in dialogue with Gaye Tuchman’s *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change*, and examine it alongside changing trends in authorship.
Under the pressures of generic conformation, Cranford re-shapes itself as a novel; or, at least, it does on the surface. Its form “imagines” the “re-union” of the text (Schor 105-106) by assembling them into a single entity. The tentative title “Cranford Papers” is shortened to “Cranford,” signaling a shift from plural multiplicity to monologic entity. Likewise, the separate fragments of the novel are gathered, homogenized and stitched together, first, to conclude the serial fiction, and second, to form a single novel. Cranford was printed first by Chapman & Hall in 1853, reprinted later that year with “minor edits,” and then as a “cheap edition” in 1855 immediately following the publication of the last installment (Recchio 63). In addition to reinstating the original text, the chapters were re-divided. Instead of nine installments, there are now sixteen chapters. Peter’s story now occurs over the span of two chapters. This addition of more chapters to the material text, introduces more divisions while, interesting, smooths over interruptions, as these sections of text are no longer separated in time as they would have been in serial form. Taken together, these details indicate the formal reconceptualization of the work as a novel; yet in “stitching together” this “pot-pourri,” its fragmentation still pervades.

Cranford wears only a thin scrim of unity. The 1855 Manchester Library “cheap edition” copy includes double quotation marks around the final chapter, “Peace at Cranford,” within the chapter heading, while the other “cheap edition” at the British Library erroneously includes no punctuation marks (Collin 83, 85). I point to the dropped punctuation marks because it gets at the question of the divided readings surrounding Cranford “peaceful” and cohesive ending and its publication. Read without the quotations, it evokes a pastoral “re-union” of Cranford’s serial fragments; read with them, the chapter title suddenly becomes ironic. The “peace” and “old friendly sociability” restored at the end that wrap up the novel.

Against the façade of unity, it becomes easy to forget Peter’s transvestism. His scenes of cross-dressing are relegated to a single installment, thus “contained” within a single unit. None of the later illustrated versions of Cranford include images of Peter cross-dressing (Recchio 102; n. 7). It is as if his actions are invisible, smoothed over in the re-tellings of the text. By bringing Peter back in the end, and by drawing subtle parallels between his consolidation and the material consolidation of the novel, Gaskell invites their comparison. The narrative opens up possibility that, like the transformation of Peter, the novel’s narrative conformity is the result of corrective forces and “performances.” His apparent reformation internalizes the novel’s generic struggle as, by the end, his gendered struggles are sublimated. Though early in the text, Mary refers to him both as “the Aga” and as “Peter,” by the novel’s close he metamorphoses into the official, public, “Mr. Peter.” Peter “[s]omewhere or another” stitches together the company at Cranford, and Mary’s closing remarks, “I somehow think we are better when she is near us” end the novel on a sentimental, feminine note (158). Thus, in Peter we seem to see the process of categorical “formalization” dramatizes in the gradual consolidation of genre and gender. Yet, looking back to the previous sentence, we see that this “Peace at Cranford” is the result of Peter’s lie to Mrs. Jamieson. While the female utopia is stabilized by a male presence, it is, ironically, Peter “at his old tricks” (157) as a transgressive fiction-weaver that leads to domestic tranquility.

Reading the trajectory of Peter’s behavior as a metaphor for the genre of the novel further illuminates his erratic characterization in the text. First incarnated in the epistolary form, his generic instability and heterogeneity reflects that of novels during the 18th century (Garside 21). Hughes and Lund observe that Peter embodies central elements of the archetypal “fallen woman’s story” (VP 89). Like the novel, Peter’s actions straddle that of private, inner family life and that of the public gaze: this struggle is encapsulated in Peter’s performance as he parades “half hidden by the rails, half seen” (Gaskell 53). The unmasking of Peter as male enacts the novel’s concern with female purity while his journey to India, as Cass notes, parallels imperialism’s incorporation of the “Oriental Other” (Cass 425). In his quasi-metaphoric role, Peter appears to function like Henry James’ Daisy Miller, as an allegory for the novel itself. The fact that Peter is not the eponymous female heroine infuses his allegoric function with irony: while “performing” the form, he dramatizes a novel tradition grounded in restrictive and artificial structures. Cranford is a text about writing, yet one that pushes radically toward a conception of writing not confined by genre or gender. As an artificially re-shaped material body, Peter shows the realist novel’s work of re-imaging itself as whole and homogeneous.

Yet Gaskell does not entirely erase Peter’s fraught multiplicity. In the final chapter, Gaskell presents an image of autonomous female subjectivity: Mary and Miss Matty, sit “quiet, each with a separate reverie for some little time,”—a picture of harmony quickly punctured by the clause that follows: “when Mr. Peter broke in—” (153). Even as the text slips into the novel’s clothes of coherence, Peter’s presence reinserts a sense of fragmentation, an interrupting force reminding the reader that, in the seemingly “feminine” end to the text there is also a “man concealed.” Cranford, like Peter, cannot escape its heterogeneous past. Stitching together the narrative transformation of Peter and the material transformation of the serial segments, we see that in her textual tensions with Dickens and categories of gender/genre, Gaskell does not strive, as Schor suggests, to “reinvent the novel for women”(119) but instead, explores the possibility of the genre as metaphorically “intersex.” Even when collated as a uniform body of text, the figure of Peter in Cranford illustrates the internalization of the serial form’s multifarious and dynamic nature into the text itself.

The only other chapter title to have quotes around it is “Your Ladyship,” which surrounds the drama of manners in preparation for the decidedly unladylike Lady Glenmire (Gaskell).
Throughout the manipulation of expectation and reality in the realm of gender, Gaskell’s problematizes the notion of categorization even as it undergoes the process. Gaskell’s cross-dressing narrative warps the gendered spheres as Armstrong theorizes them, illustrating the artifice and production of both genre and genre with Peter’s transvestism in an Amazonian novel that is never, truly “man-less.”

References