Elizabeth Gaskell, in her “Our Society at Cranford,” creates for herself a means of revisiting the maternal matrix from which she emerged, the lengthy gestational period with her mother. As the desire for symbiosis with our mothers, who are “our original primary source[s] of pleasure, security, and identity” (25), is always with us, we experience throughout our lives “a regressive longing to ‘return’ to the maternal matrix” (Koeningsberg 26). At the same time, as fusion with our mothers means the disintegration of our own self-constructed identities as well as feelings of “re-capture” by the “devouring mother [. . .] [. . .] who destroys at will or retributively” (Rheingold 18), this push to make a return generates subsequent desperate attempts to pull ourselves back out. It is a hazardous journey; however, there are ways to make it a less troubling one. Gaskell, for instance, goes on the journey second-hand, through a constructed narrator. Further, she brings with her totems of maleness, that is, representations of an other that all mothers carry with them that represent something alien and distinct from themselves. Their male essence acts as a repellent which provides time to re-experience the matrix; but their potency, detached from their manly source (i.e., the outside world), is quickly drained. Gaskell therefore needs to generate successive representations of maleness within her narrative to accomplish the transformation she is attempting to effect. Her goal is nothing less than the replacement of her own internal representation of her mother with one less terrifying, one less threatening to drain her own individuality from her. She is assisted by men, but it is a heroine’s journey, towards a most valuable prize: after braving such a journey, daring such a feat, she feels entitled and becomes empowered to keep this transitional mother as the one she returns to on subsequent journeys.

Before we begin this, our own journey, which likely threatens to be moving inwards to its own strangely alluring (hopefully) but also menacing “swamp” (hopefully not), to help lure the reader in, I will make some attempt to anticipate sources of apprehension my reader may currently be having. 1) Though I believe that the quality of parental care varies enormously and is more important in determining the adult personality than one’s sex, my argument is based on a biologically fixed way all mothers react to their differently sexed children. My study is not inspired by the work done on the instability of semantic boundaries; I do believe, though, that contemporary critical approaches to literature such as deconstruction and new
historicism provide journeys similar to the one I will be describing here. Critics set off from an “enlightened” (st)age: they are aware of the instability of meanings and of the multiplicity of selves (a sophisticated state of consciousness denied those they set out to visit). Though they are braving a journey into a matrix they associate with the disintegration of selfhood, they come equipped with theories that enable them to transform their environment. They too are attempting to become heroes: by demonstrating a text’s incoherence and heterogeneousness they leave the text, formally a formidable representation of the literary canon, “de-fanged”—it becomes a less threatening object to play with and return to. 2) I am also identifying the narrator with the author. I see the narrator in “Cranford” as the object generated by Gaskell to locate herself within the text; the narrator’s status, whether flattened out within the plural pronoun “we” or strongly individuated within the personal pronoun “I,” serves to both represent Gaskell’s own sense of herself at a particular point of the text and to generate subsequent plot developments. Since the distinction between author and narrator is so often made these days, I accept my reader’s potential disapproval, but also ask for open consideration of this possibility: Perhaps my brazen approach will for some help reinvigorate subsequent revisits to “Cranford.”

The first several paragraphs of the story establish for both the reader and for Gaskell herself that we are about to revisit the maternal home. As children naturally see their mother as vastly more powerful than themselves (she is their first god, and the inspiration behind all subsequent ones), and with the father (especially in the past, but so often these days too) often either for the most part absent from the home or distant while in the home, the maternal matrix (i.e., home) is a place where the mother is in charge. Cranford, the narrator tells us, “[i]n the first place, [. . .] is in the possession of the Amazons” (3). The Cranford women are described as if they are each best identified by what they share in common: they all “keep [. . .] gardens full of choice flowers” (3); they all “frighten [. . .] away little boys” (3); they all “rush out at geese” (3); they all “decid[e] [. . .] questions of literature and politics without troubling themselves with unnecessary reasons or arguments” (3); they all “obtain [. . .] dear and correct knowledge of everybody’s affairs in the parish” (3); they are all “kind [. . .] to the poor” (3); they are all “sufficient” (3). They are all the same. At our entrance into Cranford, into the maternal matrix, we sense immediately that we are in an environment where our individuality, our personhood, may not be secure.

As we crave the love of our mothers, and as an attempt to revisit and reclaim this love motivates our journey, the narrator takes care not to be too critical of the way the
mother, so to speak, tends her home. So despite having described the town of Cranford as a swampy place into which men “disappear,” and into which goes the Cranford women’s individuality, the narrator assures herself (and us) that “each [of these Amazons] has her own individuality” (3). But she follows his declaration by once again making them seem all alike. We are told, “good-will reigns among them to a considerable degree” (3). In truth, there is only one distinctive individual who resides in Cranford: the formidable mother-figure, Miss Jenkyns. And she is to be found further, deeper into the story—at its center, rather than along its periphery.

The journey into Cranford is a journey into the past. “Their [i.e., the Cranford women’s] dress is very independent of fashion” (3)—“the last tight and scanty petticoat in wear in England, was seen in Cranford” (4). Specifically, Gaskell is creating a journey to a past we have all experienced. “Cranford” is a journey to the time in our lives when we were subject “to rules and regulations” (4) of our own mothers. The narrator tells us that it takes but a few days’ stay in Cranford for young people (who are just visiting) to lose their autonomy, their “liberty,” and to internalize Cranford’s “rule[s]” (4). These are the same rules, presumably, they hoped to have left behind them in their becoming adults, but to be within Cranford is to become the child in his/her mother’s domain. It is to re-experience the authority of all that “your mamma has told you” (4), and finding yourself accepting her rule. Acquiescence means that visitors lose their adult sense of autonomy in their speech (“no absorbing subject was ever spoken about” [4]), in movement (“the inhabitants […] dattered home in their patterns” [5]), in time (“the whole town was abed and asleep by half-past ten” [5]), and in dwelling-place (“baby-house of a dwelling” [5]). In Nostalgia and Recollection in Victorian Culture, Ann Coley argues that “Cranford” is a creation born out of a “yearning for a time and place that seems to compensate for and soothe the rough incongruities of the present” (76). I concur, but considering that such shaping and softening means the obliteration of one’s own distinct personality, I think “Cranford” at least as much or more represents Gaskell’s attempt to “undercut the longing for such an idyllic past” (Coley 76)! In fact, if we were not driven by our need, set by our early experiences of our mother as the source of love and human warmth, to re-experience this “idyllic” environment, we likely would not attempt the journey.

Our narrator does not stay long in Cranford. Just as she is beginning, with her successive step-by-step itemizing of the particular regressions Cranford commands of her, to slowly acclimatize herself, she pulls herself out: she leaves this space within the text she calls and we think of as Cranford. She withdraws to her starting point, her
present existence in the city of Drumble. She is able to do so because she has not well identified herself as being, in the present tense, within the town. Moreover, she has a masculine place to return to. This place, this city, Drumble, is associated with commercialism, modern technology, a quickness in pace and an authoritative judgment of anything not new as of bad taste. It is a masculine Now prepared to ruthlessly shorn itself of its feminine past. She uses a description of Mrs Jamieson as “practic[ing] ‘elegant economy’” (Gaskell 5) to remind herself she is no longer in Cranford. When she repeatedly writes “[e]legant economy!” and reminds herself that she was “fall[ing] back,” of how easy it is to “fall back into the phraseology of Cranford!” (5), she is startling herself back into her adult mindset with the help of successive exclamations. The narrator is losing herself too readily within the collective pronoun “we” in the text, despite her attempts to sustain the singular “I.” She becomes part of the “we” that “kept [. . .] [them]selves to short sentences of small talk, and were punctual to our time” (4), despite her earlier attempt to establish the young visitors to Cranford as those who acquiesced to its rules.

At this point in the text the singular pronoun “I” is claimed by the narrator principally while she is outside Cranford, explaining its nature to someone else. For now, within Cranford, “I” is associated with the commanding mother-type who transforms the visiting youth and the narrator into a complicit “we,” that is, the one who offers scolding lectures (“I dare say your mamma has told you, my dear, never to —”) [4]) to them. However, the narrator is merely testing the waters; she knows from the beginning what is required to explore Cranford without so readily disassembling. She needs to bring along “[a] man,” a representative of—and one metonymically linked to—the “outside world,” who will get “in the way” (3) of the homogenizing forces at work in Cranford.

She creates one. And, after her successive and nearly endless listing of the smothering forces at work in Cranford, she begins her re-entry into Cranford with a successive listing of the masculine attributes of her guardian, Captain Brown, which enables him to resist meekly conforming to Cranford’ laws upon entrance into town. He is described as “brazen” (6), and he is. He speaks openly (“about his being poor” “in the public street!” [5]), “in a loud military voice!” (5). He is “invad[ing] [. . .] their territory” (5). More importantly, he scares them (the women of Cranford) with his “connexion with the obnoxious railroad” (6). He is empowered by his “masculine gender” so that rather than being made to feel like a child, he soon “ma[kes] himself respected in Cranford [. . .] in spite of all resolutions to the contrary” (6).
The narrator likely means for “masculine gender” to mean the male sex, and though he clearly is supposed to represent the exceptional man, it is largely because of Captain Brown’s sex that he is able to remain distinct while in Cranford. Unlike with their girls, mothers automatically react to their boys as if they are fundamentally different and distinct from themselves. Because of this, girls understand early on that “freedom”—i.e., an identity distinct and separate from their mother—has something to do with being male. As we will explore, freedom can be, not just disorienting but an absolutely terrifying thing, and fear of experiencing freedom is the inspiration for the Cranford women literally scaring away all the (unexceptional) men in town. But to be able to be fully free, that is, to be able to strongly resist capitulating to others in favor of your own growth, is unceasingly alluring. And thus we understand the Cranford ladies’ attraction to the exceptional man—to Captain Brown—who can remain undaunted after experiencing their best efforts to either expel him or make him conform to Cranford’s law.

Captain Brown, by keeping Cranford’s smothering forces in check, makes it safe for the narrator to re-enter the text. She can now revisit her memories with her mother without experiencing an overwhelming sense of regression or a withering away of her autonomy and individuality. He is her agent, and her lead-in: after he triumphantly establishes himself in the town as conqueror of the Amazons, the narrator establishes herself, in the present tense, within Cranford.

While in Cranford Captain Brown serves two primary purposes for the narrator: 1) As he does not take his “appointed” house and instead “take[s] a small house on the outskirts of the town” (7), he thereby provides the narrator with a place to situate herself so that she can be, so to speak, at Cranford, but not wholly within it. Coley argues that Cranford’s rituals, which “soften and smooth out the effects of change,” permit Captain Brown (whom she describes as representing “a more modern age or progress” [75]) to “be admitted from the periphery into the center [of Cranford] [. . .] without rupturing its core” (75). I appreciate her focus on the various sorts of textual spaces in Cranford, and might agree that Cranford eventually integrates Captain Brown within its society, but strongly argue that his very purpose for being introduced into Cranford is so that he can rupture its core! 2) With his masculine otherness and essence he will help bring the narrator to her goal: a re-encounter with her “mother,” and not just with her (i.e., her mother’s) immediate environment. As mentioned, he will also, as a representation of “Death” (Gaskell 6), and through the narrator’s sacrifice of him, destroy the authority and potency (a kind of death) of
Cranford’s town matriarch, Miss Jenkyns.

Captain Brown, this early into Cranford and into the text, is capable of dramatic displays of his manhood, but this soon begins to drain away. We are offered a sense of both who he is (a master) and who he will become (a servant), when he again distinguishes himself from the Cranford crowd at church. “He [Captain Brown] made the responses louder than the clerk—an old man with a piping feeble voice” (8). Soon afterwards the text shows him fluctuating between loud brazenness and inaudible feebleness. Importantly, however, still energized and encouraged by his dominance of the church crowd, he is able to lead the narrator to his one-on-one encounter with Miss Jenkyns.

At a party of Miss Jenkyns’, Captain Brown still dominates the Cranford women (“sharp voices lowered at his approach” [9]), but he is beginning to seem more courteous than brazen. Captain Brown, we are told, “immediately and quietly assumed the man’s place in the room” (9). However, he still has enough manly impudence to challenge the hostess in her home. Like dueling shamans, they summon their gods for battle: Miss Jenkyns’ Dr Johnson versus Captain Brown’s Mr Boz. Miss Jenkyns attempts to tame Captain Brown’s literary taste, telling him, “I have formed my own style upon it; I recommend it to your favourite” (11). Her friends already consider Miss Jenkyns’ “[e]pistolary writing as her forte” (11; emphasis in original). However, he rebuffs her by telling her, “I should be very sorry for him to exchange his style for any such pompous writing” (11). It is a brave confrontation with Cranford’s chief “amazon,” but also one that required most, if not all, of his adult masculinity. He shows dear signs of regressing to a childlike state while dueling with her. While listening to her, he “screw[s] his lips up, and drummed on the table, but he did not speak” (11), as if a child afraid to confront his mother directly. He asks her a defiant question, but “in a low voice, which [the narrator thinks] Miss Jenkyns could not have heard” (11). And after managing to deliver upon Miss Jenkyns “a personal affront,” “he was penitent afterwards, as he showed by going to stand near [her] [. . .] arm-chair, and endeavouring to beguile her” (11). In short, in this scene, where he does act the part of the triumphant shaman, he also plays the part of the sometimes timid, sometimes remorseful, acoyte.

The personal suffering of Captain Brown’s kin and his repeated attempts to placate Miss Jenkyns, constitute much of what immediately succeeds this scene in the text. We hear of Captain Brown’s daughter’s (Miss Brown’s) “lingering, incurable complaint” (13), and as if her condition is linked to Miss Jenkyns fury at Captain
Brown’s impudence, we read of Captain Brown trying repeatedly “to make peace with” her. The narrator, as if in response to Captain Brown’s loss of “potency” (i.e., his “placidity” [13]), coupled with signs of her own obedience to Miss Jenkyns (she is described as being “bade” [13] by Miss Jenkyns), leaves Cranford for Drumble while still empowered to do so.

The narrator introduces a new source of manly potency into the text to help rejuvenate her sagging Captain Brown—Lord Mauleverer. Lord Mauleverer is a source of energy: he “brings his lordship into the [. . .] little town” (14; emphasis added). He has come to visit Captain Brown, and brings upon him associations of manly performance “in the ‘plumed wars’” and the power to “avert destruction” (14)—just what Captain Brown needs to avoid losing the individuality which had empowered him thus far in Cranford! As formerly with Captain Brown, Lord Mauleverer is described as exciting the town. He, much like Captain Brown, tames the Cranford Amazons, and thereby makes it safe for the narrator to re-enter Cranford. Her next visit is described in such a way to make Cranford seem set for another energized happening: “[t]here had been neither births, deaths, nor marriages since I was there last” (15). The stage is set, with a newly energized Captain Brown, for the delivery of another powerful blow to their head “prophetess” (14).

Lord Mauleverer does indeed “do something for the man who saved his life”: Captain Brown becomes “as happy and cheerful as a prince” (17). Newly energized, Captain Brown is primed to usher in the narrator’s coup-de-grâce: she uses his newly reinvigorated association with the outside world (his experience in wars and his friendship with lords) to bring in a “nasty and [. . .] cruel” (17) train into Cranford to run over him. The train might have been introduced at any time, but is best introduced when it can most readily be associated with him. This is likely only when he seems energized, as then the train’s dramatic entrance is more apt to remind one of his own “invasion” (5) of Cranford. The train could not, however, be introduced at the beginning of the text, because the narrator required time to strongly associate Captain Brown and Miss Jenkyns with one another. With him always placating her, and with her forever piqued at him, the pairing is complete. Further, just as Captain Brown’s association with Lord Mauleverer made him “a prince,” Captain Brown’s association with Miss Jenkyns incurs upon her his association with death.

We remember that when we first met Captain Brown, his association with the railroad also associated him with death. In this early part of the story, in two sentences, one following the other, these two key words are linked with Captain
Brown’s own behavior. The text reads, “[along with] his connection with the obnoxious railroad, he was so brazen as to talk of being poor—why, then, indeed, he must be sent to Coventry. Death was as true and as common as poverty; yet people never spoke about that, loud in the streets” (6). Captain Brown brings Death into “Cranford,” and it filters into our experience of “Cranford” thereafter.

Death is first characterized as if it is similar to poverty, both being true and common, but a distinction is made between the two terms: Captain Brown loudly speaks of his poverty, but does not speak of death. Why, then, if he himself doesn’t, and the Cranford ladies most certainly don’t, does the narrator attach this word to Captain Brown, so early into the narrative and brazenly capitalized? It is not simply an apt comparison to make to help convey how inappropriate his openness about poverty is in Cranford. It serves this purpose, but the selection of death as the particular association to be paired with poverty serves as a due that to the narrator and to the Cranford women to openly acknowledge one’s poverty is to very specifically bring about thoughts of death. Therein, in fact, lies the true reason the Cranford women deliberately blind themselves to poverty.

The narrator complains of the Cranford ladies “blinding [themselves] to the vulgar fact that [. . .] [they] were, all of [. . .] [them], people of very moderate means” (6). She offers a reason—a highly suggestive though badly misleading one—for their self-blinding: it is so they are not “prevent[ed] [. . .] from doing anything that they wished” (6). Arguably, the opposite is true: if the Cranford women did not blind themselves and instead permitted themselves to openly acknowledge their poverty, they might take the first step towards increasing their status materially rather than just imaginatively. That is, they might stop compensating for their fallen state and arise through the efforts required to amass material possessions.

Change requiring the altering of habits might lead to personal growth, to self-discovery, to individuality, and thus to emergence from the maternal fold. Blindness leads to a static life in which “doing anything [one] [. . .] wish[es],” really amounts to doing much the same as everyone else. The real reason they blind themselves is because, because individuation by a child is so often imagined by the mother as a rejection of her, if they allowed themselves to individuate it would bring about real feelings of abandonment, of having incurred an intolerable loss. “The perception of loss is not bearable, it cannot be integrated by the ego” (Koenigsberg 10). “The child is so dependent on the mother, [his/her] [. . .] attachment to her so intense, that separation from the mother is experienced to be equivalent to the death of the self” (14;
emphasis in original). To be blind is to lose individuality, to remain in symbiosis with the mother; but to allow oneself to see is to risk losing oneself altogether. The double-bind women are in explains Captain Brown’s possession of totemic powers: because the mother’s original conception of the male is as someone different from her, Captain Brown can exist outside the maternal fold (in the realm of death) and still claim the attention of the mother figure. This is, after all, the original way mother and son encounter one another.

Soon we encounter Miss Jenkyns identified with Captain Brown (as a warrior), and thus to death as well. At Captain Brown’s funeral, the narrator imagines Miss Jenkyns’ bonnet as a helmet (Gaskell 20). However, Miss Jenkyns resists the fate the narrator has in mind for her. She uses the power her own hegemony over Cranford still provides her to attempt to overwhelm the wily narrator who seeks her destruction. Our narrator momentarily is in a weak position: she has killed her own guardian, who not only facilitated departure from Cranford but also provided a safe position on the periphery in which to locate herself.

And Miss Jenkyns is powerful in her death-knell. She is described as both commanding and angry (e.g., “Miss Jenkyns dedared, in an angry voice” [21]). She reduces the narrator to a child-like state, “catching [her] crying,” and making her “afraid lest she would be displeased” (21). Miss Jenkyns insists that Captain Brown’s remaining daughter, Miss Jessie, “stay with her,” leaving her (i.e., Miss Jessie’s) own house “desolate” (21). Contrary to Colley’s view, Captain Brown’s house is not located on the periphery because it will take time for him to integrate himself within the Cranford community; rather, the periphery is instead the ideal position to locate oneself while Cranford’s core is under Miss Jenkyns’ control. As many new historical and Marxist critics hold as true regarding the societies they study, the best space to develop one’s own voice in Cranford is along the periphery, where the hegemonic hold of the dominant power is least certain.

Now lacking a conception of Cranford as having a secure periphery in which to ground some opposition to its potent center, the narrator is helplessly being drawn into its core and is showing signs of losing her self-command. Her “adulthood” is being drained from her as she looses her established means of resisting Miss Jenkyns—so we hear that she “durst not refuse to go where Miss Jenkyns asked” (22). However, Miss Jenkyns has suffered a mortal wound she cannot recover from. The narrator, by introducing a representative of powerful manliness into Cranford, and by imagining a way to sustain him until his identity could become intertwined
with Miss Jenkyns,’ is able to bring the destructive powers of a train straight to the heart of Cranford. The power that sustains Miss Jenkyns, her maternal world of Cranford, is pit against the powers of the exterior world, and it is no contest: track and train master swamp. In fact, the power of (what is in effect) the Industrial Revolution to overwhelm Cranford owes to the Victorian need to conceive of an external reality in this way.

That is, in order to assist their escape of the maternal matrix, they had to imagine that a distinct, tasked “outside world” exists which compels them to leave our homes—to make it seem that in fact there is no choice in the matter! Because they create a world that compels them away, they can imagine their mothers as being less likely to interpret their departure as a deliberate rejection of her. The result of creating a world in which leaving their mothers and the family home behind them is the harshest demand a modernizing world makes of its citizens, as something that should inspire no guilt, as it was not up to them, is that nostalgic revisits to the family home still seem available. Industrial society, then, though deemed something they had to adjust to, as something which ravaged a less abrasive, more peaceful and natural way of life, was in fact a construct Victorians wanted, that they needed and themselves created, to help youth, to help themselves, tame an entrapping home life so to partake in some individuality-enabling freedom.

However, since they need to revisit this past, they can make their return easier if they can avoid, as much as possible, re-experiencing the traumas associated with childhood. It is often overwhelming and therefore unhelpful to recall traumatizing experiences with significant verisimilitude. Instead, it is better to revisit these experiences transformed. Transform actual experiences into fiction (so they are not “real”), and means to reshape or replace memories becomes facilitated. I am arguing that this is what Gaskell is up to when she strips Miss Jenkyns of her potency: she is readying her for a replacement—Miss Jessie. By bringing to the fore a formidable Miss Jenkyns, she primes memories of her own mother when she seemed most powerful and controlling. Then, with these memories drawn out, she supplants their association with authority—which prevents their being tampered with—with instead, depletion and exhaustion. The net effect is that, unconsciously, she can feel empowered to effect a permanent transformation of her own memories, making them less scary, and therefore better suited for future revisits.

Miss Jenkyns is not killed at the end of “Cranford”; she is instead weakened and then replaced by Captain Brown’s daughter, Miss Jessie. But a weakened and defeated
Miss Jenkyns can no longer set the tone for the rest of the town. The Cranford ladies now orbit around Miss Jessie, who has a strong sense of self-possession. “[H]er house, her husband, her dress, and her looks” (23) all draw praise from them. Miss Jenkyns is “old and feeble” (23-24), and her reign is effectively over. To help ensure this end, Gaskell introduces Major Gordon into the text. Major Gordon is a young military man associated with freedom of movement and with much grander distances and locals than even Captain Brown. Major Gordon, who “had been travelling to the east” (23), will now apparently reside within Cranford. With Major Gordon in place in Cranford, Gaskell lodges a potent male presence that will reside not only in this fictional creation but likely also within her own memories of her childhood alongside her mother. She is creating an empowered father figure both to accompany her own memories of her mother and to oppose them.

With the Cranford ladies now depicted as reading Dickens rather than Johnson, there is a sense that the narrator leaves Cranford much different than it had been upon her entrance: no longer will its inhabitants be amazons who scare away men and restrict women’s individuality. Now that our heroine has freed them from smothering taboos, next time young visitors go to Cranford perhaps they’ll bring with them some “commerce and trade” (4), and afford the Cranford women some new fangled ways of living and being.

We, of course, have been attempting our own heroic journey. I hope that our visit to an example of nineteenth-century Victorian literature leaves it tampered for bold new explorations. I imagine those interested in nostalgia in Victorian and Edwardian England may now have, if they wish to explore it, evidence that nostalgia is best understood as a longing for our mothers’ love, not a past society’s. They may also have a new hypothesis to test: Is it possible that nostalgic revisits are better understood as expeditions involving potentially brave encounters with primal fears than as the sort of thing indulged in only by those who cannot face the everyday hazards of the real world? If so, and so long as it unconsciously moves their readers to face and perhaps ease old traumas, is novel reading potentially both nurturing and progressive, the vehicle, perhaps, of personal and social advance, over any other sort of literature? If ostensibly light, genial stories like “Our Society at Cranford” indeed did trump the work of serious essayists such as Newman and Mill in the service of good, it’s so far passed our notice more than any train into “Cranford” could possibly have—but it may nevertheless have been the way of it.
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