

CONSERVATION OF SYMPATHY IN *CRANFORD*

By Jill Rappoport

BY THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY, British women had ample motivation for imagining forms of charity that did not require money. Property laws continued to deprive most married women of personal wealth and new statistics revealed a “surplus” of unmarried middle-class women lacking employment.¹ Elizabeth Gaskell addressed these financial challenges by envisioning alternative forms of economic power for women. Her novella *Cranford* (1851–53) depicts a community of shabby-genteel women who support each other, in the virtual absence of men, through gift practices.² Using principles of sympathetic and economic conservation, *Cranford*’s system of exchange reworks material limitations, turning these women’s lack of private property to their advantage. *Cranford* is among a number of mid-century works that treat sympathetic exchange in a sustained manner and on an expanded scale, writing women’s charity in terms of sympathy and sisterhood rather than coin. By doing so, it not only co-opts the traditional province of the upper class by pitting middle-class women’s care-giving against unfeeling wealth,³ but also defines a sympathetic gift economy in opposition to the masculinized marketplace essential to such models of charity as that of Dickens’s turkey-buying Scrooge.⁴

Noting *Cranford*’s resemblance to Knutsford, where Gaskell spent much of her youth,⁵ critics overwhelmingly read this fictional town as its author’s quaint and old-fashioned feminine utopia. In contrast, the story’s other fictional town is an acknowledged site of modern industry and finance. Drumble, whose very name echoes the dreary rumble of machinery, stands in for Manchester, home of Gaskell’s adult life and source of her “industrial” novels *Mary Barton* and *North and South*.⁶ According to this distinction, *Cranford* may very well seem like the wrong place to posit economic power. But Manchester offered more to Gaskell’s literary imagination than industry or factories. Home to the theories of political economist Friedrich Engels and scientific engineer James Prescott Joule, Gaskell’s Manchester was, in the 1840s, fertile ground for two important intellectual premises: one of capital, commodities, and circulation; the other of energy, conversions, and conservation. *Cranford* brings these theories together to offer a practical counterpart to Drumble’s industrial development, an alternative economy that corresponds to new scientific models. Lacking factory engines but not nearly as old-fashioned as most accounts describe it to be, the feminized *Cranford* community is itself a tightly-knit system of sympathetic energy. In *Cranford*, where materials are scarce, streamlined processes of conservation and circulation replace consumption and

growth. These processes then serve, in part, as a model and defense for the mundane concerns of realist fiction.

SYMPATHY – LIKE MONEY – is a limited commodity in Cranford. This is not to say that the “ladies” are not capable of great love, exertion, and sacrifice. Rather, their primary stores of sympathy are reserved for each other, to the exclusion of outsiders.⁷ Their “tender good offices to each other whenever they are in distress” contrast starkly with their “kindness (somewhat dictatorial) to the poor” (1). Indeed, when opportunities for charity arise, the women of Cranford often view them with suspicion. They reserve their sympathy for the would-be donors of charity rather than their recipients, treating poor elderly women, Irish beggars, and starving children as impositions or imposters. But Gaskell’s gently-mocking description of Cranford’s charity serves more to characterize the community’s insularity than to condemn it. From the first page, readers learn that this story will focus almost entirely on the lateral relationships of the town’s principal residents, locating their sympathy in active assistance to a group narrowly defined by gender, birth, and nationality.

Even when charity seems to benefit those beyond the women’s intimate circle, it ultimately cycles back to them. Their gift practices operate according to a new model based on a principle of conservation. What goes around comes around: their sum of sympathy never diminishes. Rather than forming new affiliations, women in the town use sympathy to underwrite a tightly knit and fairly closed community. When the traveling conjurer Signor Brunoni comes to town, the ladies conclude that his foreignness, his broken English, and even his turban make him “a French spy, come to discover the weak and undefended places of England” (90). They soon work themselves into a panic by attributing to him “all manner of evil” – robberies, dog-murder, and even ghosts (102). After they discover that Brunoni has been injured and that his real name is Sam Brown, however, the women all rally to help.

Learning that he is one of their own and not a magical foreigner relieves the women of their anxiety. They are then able to give back some of that relief, attending to his medical needs, and even giving him Mrs. Forrester’s highly coveted bread-jelly⁸:

It was wonderful to see what kind feelings were called out by this poor man’s coming amongst us. And also wonderful to see how the great Cranford panic, which had been occasioned by his first coming in his Turkish dress, melted away into thin air on his second coming – pale and feeble, and with his heavy filmy eyes, that only brightened a very little when they fell upon the countenance of his faithful wife, or their pale and sorrowful little girl.

Somehow, we all forgot to be afraid. (104)

In this passage, knowledge of sameness dissolves ethnic fear; that dissolution in turn gives rise to sympathetic energy. The “great panic” that has been circulating subsides but is immediately converted into “kind feelings,” which have as much to do with the women’s relief from panic as with Signor Brunoni’s relief from pain. Indeed, their help – they “did as much as if there was great cause for anxiety” (103) – is in proportion to their former anxiety, not to Signor Brunoni’s case. The narrator goes on to attribute the communal relief to “finding out that he, who had first excited our love of the marvelous by his unprecedented

arts, had not sufficient every-day gifts to manage a shying horse” (104). This exchange of the exotic for the local, the “marvelous” for the mundane – in short, of romance for realism – is also a conservation of sympathetic feeling predicated on the exchange of the angry, bearded, “magnificent gentleman” (87, 86) for the feeble and feminized man who bears more resemblance to the women themselves and who can therefore receive some of their sympathy. The unveiling at once celebrates the novella’s generic interest in the “every-day” and shows how that everyday depends upon its contrast with the masked figure at the margins. Realism, here, requires a degree of insularity.⁹ But insularity should not be confused with stasis. In contrast with Nina Auerbach’s assertion that Cranford denies motion through “its protective resistance to the rhythms of the universe” (80), I am arguing here that sympathy is key to the novella’s sense of motion. The unmasking demasculinizes Signor Brunoni in a way that permits sympathy to flow toward him.

Gaskell’s conservation of sympathetic feeling in a closed community is analogous to the conservation of energy that was being hypothesized by her contemporaries. Putting them into conversation with each other reveals interests common to both “literary” and “scientific” minds at mid century, a time when such disciplinary boundaries had not yet solidified. Displays such as the Great Exhibition (1851) – which Gaskell herself attended – popularized technological and scientific innovations, and observers there and elsewhere were eager to draw analogies between natural and social law.¹⁰ In the 1840s, several scientists scattered throughout Europe simultaneously hypothesized energy conservation in both general formulation and concrete quantitative application.¹¹ That is, in varying ways, these scientists began to note how heat, work, and other forces – later known as “energy” – were “quantitatively interchangeable” and “could never . . . be created or destroyed” (Kuhn 321). One of these scientists, James Prescott Joule, was local to Manchester. Joule hypothesized “that wherever mechanical force is expended, an exact equivalent of heat is *always* obtained.”¹² In discursive postscripts, Joule connects his scientific experiments to other strongly-held beliefs: he was motivated to prove “that the grand agents of nature are, by the Creator’s fiat, *indestructible*.”¹³ Religious belief both justified and inspired Joule’s work; it is not a huge leap to consider that Gaskell, the wife of a Unitarian minister who was himself “absorbed in the new scientific studies” (Gérin 52), may in turn have been aware of papers and lectures written by a fellow Manchester thinker between 1843 and 1851, regardless of whether or not she personally read them. More importantly, *Cranford* reflects these contemporary discourses, sharing with scientific theories an interest in discerning a single existing force, conserved through its ability to be converted.

Interest in conservation not only shaped theoretical models for contemplating life but also produced practical systems for studying it. In 1860, Nathaniel Hawthorne famously compared Anthony Trollope’s writing to “a great lump [hewn] out of the earth and put . . . under a glass case,” a comparison Trollope himself felt to be accurate, and that Walter Kendrick has since described as a metonymic account of realist fiction’s relationship to the world, on account of the enclosure it presumes (6–7). Surely Gaskell’s earlier novella stands even more clearly as a “world under glass,” circumscribing, as it does, a town whose inhabitants are almost entirely secluded from the outside world except at points of such violent contact – a train accident, a bank failure – that the community might be expected to shatter under their impact. More literally, Victorian science during this period offered popular examples of life sustained and examined in closed systems under glass. Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward’s fern-growing bottles (also called Wardian cases) were on display at the Great Exhibition that Gaskell frequented.¹⁴

In this case, as in the case of energy conservation, popularized science offered Gaskell a model for *Cranford*.¹⁵ Her realist fiction renders the minute details of women's lives as if they were observed under glass.

Gaskell's desire to establish fictionally a hermetic community of women may thus have drawn on contemporary ideas of other closed systems. The story offers the possibility of a cyclical system in which sympathetic energy remains an equivalent force throughout frequent and varying exchanges. This sympathetic economy makes a virtue out of the ladies' material limitations and gives them a way to maintain their community in the absence of men, consumption, and procreation. Conservation thus presents both a sustainable economy for the "surplus women" of Cranford and a structure for a realist novella that rejects the conventions of marriage plots or other teleologies.¹⁶

The expressions of sympathy in the women's gifts to the Brunoni family seem generous, but, as gift theory tells us, even generosity demands reciprocity. The donors, here as in most gift economies, get something back.¹⁷ In Marcel Mauss's influential anthropological study and the accounts that have followed it, gift exchanges function largely to open up economies, expanding communities by helping groups to form alliances. In contrast, Cranford's closed economy limits the pool of potential recipients, heightening the bonds between each member of the community at the expense of traditional definitions of kinship.¹⁸ Through the conservation of sympathy, every act of generosity becomes the direct (and nearly immediate) focus of reciprocal acts and gifts. Miss Matty Jenkyns, for example, benefits through her own kindness to the Brunoni family (110); the conjuror's wife connects her name with that of the "good, kind Aga Jenkyns" who aided them in India (110), setting in motion the chain of events that will restore Miss Matty's brother, the "lost Peter," to her. Peter's history of cross-dressing, like Sam Brown's feebleness, makes him an easy addition to the feminized circuit of sympathy; his feminized generosity to the Brunoni family in India also suggests the possibility that he has never truly left Cranford's economy (Miller, *Novels* 113). At home, Peter will perpetuate the conservation of kindness: "In short no one was forgotten; and what was more, every one, however insignificant, who had shown kindness to Miss Matty at any time, was sure of Mr. Peter's cordial regard" (153). Peter's return to Cranford after a long, self-imposed exile occurs at precisely the right moment for him to assist Miss Matty. When Peter arrives and helps to pay his sister's debts, he also helps to resolve a series of exchanges begun (if, in this conservation of sympathy, we can ever point to a "beginning" of exchanges¹⁹) by the failure of Miss Matty's bank.

The bank failure and the personal accountability that Miss Matty feels for it as a shareholder have attracted much critical attention.²⁰ Miss Matty's reaction to bankruptcy and the town's reaction to her loss show the conservation of sympathy at work. Despite the protests of a shopman and her companion, Miss Matty offers five sovereigns for a farmer's now useless bank note:

'I don't pretend to understand business; I only know, that if it is going to fail, and if honest people are to lose their money because they have taken our notes – I can't explain myself . . . only I would rather exchange my gold for the note, if you please,' turning to the farmer, 'and then you can take your wife the shawl. . . . Then, I have no doubt, everything will be cleared up.'

'But if it is cleared up the wrong way?' said I.

'Why! then it will only have been common honesty in me, as a shareholder, to have given this good man the money.' (124)

Miss Matty directs her “common honesty” toward an “honest-looking” man (121) whose desires are not for himself but his family, his largest expense a shawl for his wife that, in turn, recalls the shawl Peter once sent to his own mother from India. This farmer quickly puts his family’s wants before his own, giving up his tobacco but choosing “yon figs for the little ones – I promised them to ‘em” (123). His seemingly transparent honesty, his ability to moderate his own desires, and his concern for his family would all mark him as a deserving recipient of Miss Matty’s gold by nineteenth-century standards for giving charity, but the farmer’s purchase of luxury items shows that he does not need her charity. In this case, what makes him deserving of help is that he exists outside of a charitable economy. His similarities to Miss Matty, with respect to both his honesty and his limited resources, allow sympathy, instead of charity, to flow toward him. And this sympathy will therefore find its way back to Miss Matty.

The episode marks Miss Matty (unlike the bank) as one fit to judge a recipient of sympathetic gift exchange. Thus this sacrifice (Miss Matty met the farmer when she was shopping for silks that this exchange prevented her from buying) is figured as noble in spite of the narrator’s caustic (and quickly regretted) question to Miss Matty, “if she would think it her duty to offer sovereigns for all the notes of the Town and County Bank she met with?” (125). Miss Matty’s ostensibly generous exchange operates according to an economy utterly divorced from the economy to which Mary’s father regularly appeals in Drumble. Miss Matty, of course, cannot afford to reimburse all of the bank notes. After the bank fails, she will have only thirteen pounds a year. It appears to be an economy of sacrifice, a one-sided gift transaction from a person who cannot afford such an exchange. And yet we have already seen that such gift transactions are never truly one-sided.²¹ In Cranford, bank notes can lose value, but true currency – that of Miss Matty’s kindness, for example – is stable. She will get her return.²² The narrative rewards her to such a degree that, if we consider the act in terms of its return, the decision could not have been better calculated. While the moral and motive of these “just deserts” assuredly share in Gaskell’s Christian sensibility, *Cranford*, like much closed-system realist fiction, rewards its good Samaritans on earth rather than in heaven. After the act, we see Miss Matty (unknowingly) collect on it and countless others, reinforcing community through acts of gift exchange.

The plot structure of Cranford rewards Miss Matty by returning her long-lost brother to her; the community structure of Cranford also rewards her through individual acts and gifts. Indeed, the two structures merge, as the plot’s circulation and return of brother Peter mirror the community’s conservational economy. Gaskell’s *caritas ex machina* functions to instruct her readers even as the Cranfordians’ generous impulse to repay gifts reinforces and personalizes that instruction. As soon as Miss Matty’s reduced circumstances are known, everyone to whom she has shown generosity returns it. (They, in turn, will not have to wait long for Peter to repay them). Miss Matty’s maid, Martha, repays her former kind treatment with affection, unpaid service, and the offer of a home.²³ Similarly, the Cranford women who come together to provide Miss Matty a supplemental income do so remembering the many good deeds Miss Matty has done for them. Mrs. Fitz-Adam, for example, recalls Miss Matty, many years ago, “[running] after me to ask – oh so kindly – after my poor mother, who lay on her death-bed; and when I cried, she took hold of my hand to comfort me; and the gentleman waiting for her all the time; and her poor heart very full of something, I am sure” (139). Mrs. Fitz-Adams values Miss Matty’s former kindness all the more since it came at a cost, and Mrs. Fitz-Adams takes that cost into consideration as she prepares to repay it.

Returns come in more concretely financial terms as well. When Miss Matty decides to sell tea but “had some scruples of conscience at selling tea when there was already Mr. Johnson in the town, who included it among his numerous commodities,” she approaches him to “tell him of the project that was entertained, and to inquire if it was likely to injure his business” (144). When her financial advisor – the father of narrator Mary Smith – fears that this “great nonsense . . . would put a stop to all competition directly,” the narrator concludes that “perhaps, it would not have done in Drumble, but in Cranford it answered very well; for not only did Mr. Johnson kindly put at rest all Miss Matty’s scruples, and fear of injuring his business, but I have reason to know, he repeatedly sent customers to her” (144). Critics such as Hilary M. Schor and James Mulvihill use this quote to distinguish between “male” and “female” economies and to show that Miss Matty’s economy, comprising both the “moral” and the “material,” surpasses those that only serve the latter.²⁴ This is true – but “female” economy in *Cranford* is not merely “moral.” Compassion, sympathy, and even generosity serve as economic value, returning to the woman whose expenditure began the cycle. Miss Matty’s money allowed the farmer to spend his money at Mr. Johnson’s store; Mr. Johnson, in turn, sends customers to Miss Matty’s tea shop.

This recycling of *Cranford*’s sympathetic energy within a closed system, like Joule’s “indestructible” force, contrasts with capitalism’s drive toward accumulation and expansion.²⁵ Thus the transactions of Cranford, whose business it is to conserve rather than consume or accumulate, will always differ from those of Drumble, the money-making town. Mary’s Drumblish father would be quite right to encourage competition, but the Cranford *modus operandi* makes conservation the more pressing matter. The economies of the two towns differ in their relationships to time as well as money: while capitalist systems circulate money and commodities in order to accumulate value over time, the system of sympathy conservation circulates gifts that maintain constant, atemporal value. With no room for the upward movement of marriage, inheritance, or self-help, the women of Cranford reconcile themselves to limited commodities by disregarding capitalist models and operating instead on a horizontal plane of equivalences and conservation.²⁶ In their communal approach, they reflect the changing emphasis from individual to corporate liability that Andrew Miller has usefully observed in the emergence of joint stock companies.²⁷ But the models differ along an axis of gender. That is, despite their similar movement to communal systems, such capitalist ventures and innovations of the mid-nineteenth century are deliberately made foreign to Cranford’s alternative, feminized gift economy. As part of a new collective system whose aim is to conserve rather than increase sympathy, Miss Matty’s sense of personal accountability is not merely old-fashioned; nor is it limited to sympathetic expenditures that involve money. This system of conservation allows Miss Matty and the other “ladies” of Cranford to maintain their social status as givers without requiring the individual wealth that such giving usually entails. It thereby imagines some sense of economic control for them within a culture that denied this control to its “surplus” women.

LACKING MATERIAL COMMODITIES, the women in this community circulate symbolic capital instead. Secrets, too, are central to their system of communal conservation and narration. Through secrets perhaps even more than through sympathy, *Cranford* proposes a system of

gift exchange that is in tension with both marketplace capitalism and the ideology of separate spheres. While Cranford's community of women is generally understood as the quintessential private sphere – a feminized world set apart from public concerns of masculine business and politics – I am interested here in how this women's community creates its own alternative definitions of "public" and "private."²⁸ The ladies of Cranford pretend that the knowledge they share belongs instead to individuals in secret. Through its public fiction of secrecy, the community creates a sense of privacy for women who have relatively few other claims to private property, private interest, or private lives. In short, secrets function as forms of what anthropologist and gift theorist Annette Weiner has called "inalienable possessions," objects withheld from regular exchange, conferring status through their irrevocable association with a person or family.²⁹ Both as non-monetary, non-material gift and as a structure of knowledge, secrets not only help to weave individuals into a community, but they also serve as a form of ownership for the community, giving it property rights and the possibility of inheritance and non-procreative perpetuation.³⁰

In the closed circuit of Cranford, sympathy cycles back to the same women who generate it, circumscribing community participation. This system of conservation relies on secrets to further demarcate insiders and perpetuate the community. In Cranford, the public fiction of private secrets forges a communal identity and narrative which are maintained through sympathetic transactions.³¹ Mrs. Forrester's unconcealable poverty and Miss Matty's romantic history are two secrets, scrupulously kept by every member of the community, that give those two women the fiction of privacy and also help the community maintain its collectivity. This paradox of a secret that is also "the best-shared thing in the world" depends upon common knowledge, as Jacques Derrida notes (*Taste* 58). But while for Derrida people share only the knowledge that the secret cannot be known, that it is "*tout autre*," in Cranford secrets are precisely what the women both know and commonly deny (*Taste* 57). Shared knowledge and shared concealment of these secrets allow the ladies to erase (or ignore) difference, and to validate the (public) community that shares in the secret-keeping.

In Cranford, secrets are the shared business of the poor-but-genteel "ladies." The narrator treats the women's communal knowledge as an established fact, information so taken for granted that it can be glossed in dependent clauses: "for obtaining clear and correct knowledge of everybody's affairs in the parish . . . the ladies of Cranford are quite sufficient" (1). Each lady's personal daily management is information commonly known and suppressed: "We none of us spoke of money," recalls the narrator (3). At the home of Mrs. Forrester, they play along with their host "pretending not to know what cakes were sent up; though she knew, and we knew, and she knew that we knew, and we knew that she knew that we knew, she had been busy all the morning making tea-bread and sponge-cakes" (3). The removes necessary to maintain the fiction of servants who would secure Mrs. Forrester's gentility suggest that there is much at stake in that fiction, which is maintained equally by the "private" secret holder and the other members of her community: "We had tacitly agreed to ignore that any with whom we associated on terms of visiting equality could ever be prevented by poverty from doing anything that they wished" (4).

Cranford's *collective* pretence is something more than etiquette or self-preservation, two of the functions that Patricia Meyer Spacks usefully suggests were important to eighteenth-century ideas of privacy (12, 15). In Cranford, the fiction of privacy preserves a whole community; the "self" has very little to do with it at all. Privacy is also, of course, a class

marker in Cranford, “the ultimate generalized privilege” (Williams 243). A fiction of privacy serves the women of Cranford in much the same way that their fiction of financial stability serves them: to preserve (or create) their ties to a class beyond their present means. By loudly and openly acknowledging his poverty, newcomer Captain Brown breaches the Cranford community’s sense of etiquette – poverty “was a word not to be mentioned to ears polite” (4) – and ruptures the public fiction of private secrets, thereby threatening the very basis of their community.

Secrets are among the few possessions to which the women of Cranford can lay claim.³² It is not surprising, then, that Captain Brown gains greater status – and becomes more sympathetic to the ladies – when they learn that he, too, has a secret. The illness of one daughter and the efforts that he and his other daughter make to keep the invalid comfortable are known to all of Cranford, though the family “never spoke about it” (14). Ownership, in Cranford, depends upon silent public knowledge. Secrets are shared and then deliberately suppressed in order to secure collective interest, the very definition of community in Cranford. Just as community sympathy operates according to principles of conservation rather than accumulation, here too it favors shared property over private ownership; the result is a system of ownership at odds with the capitalist marketplace that Gaskell genders masculine.³³ Secrets have value in this alternative economic system. Gaskell rejects Drumble’s competitive economy in favor of her opposing gift system where the only way to “have” something is to share it, and where possession gains value through suppression.³⁴

Secrets, then, have symbolic value in gift exchange, and they help to define the boundaries of the Cranford community. They also ensure the community’s continuity. Any community, even one so adept at conserving its own sympathetic energy, requires the addition of new community members to maintain equilibrium when it loses the old. The non-procreative membership of the Cranford community – like that of many religious orders both Victorian and contemporary – renders biological reproduction unlikely. Thus in place of generational models of mothers and births, the town reaches out laterally to perpetuate itself.³⁵ Cranford compensates for the passing of Deborah Jenkyns by initiating Mary Smith, the narrator, into its secrets, and hence, into its community. If, as Weiner’s anthropological studies show, the transmission of “inalienable possessions” legitimates kinship ties, the transmission of communal secrets here works in a similar way.³⁶ Through her lessons in Cranford’s personal affairs, Mary advances from the perimeter to the center of community life. Through hints and guesses, she learns the town’s secrets, particularly one about Miss Matty’s former romance, thwarted by her sister and father: “It seems that Miss Pole had a cousin, once or twice removed, who had offered to Miss Matty long ago” (28). Neither Mary nor Miss Pole professes direct knowledge, but their reluctance to be open and forthcoming does not prevent them from confident speculation on the subject. Miss Pole disavows her knowledge even as she shares it: “Nay, now, I don’t know anything more than that he offered and was refused . . . it is only a guess of mine” (29). Yet this “guess” is based on Miss Pole’s first-hand observations and borne out by the succeeding narrative. It is also corroborated by Mrs. Fitz-Adam’s recollection about the gentleman and a younger Miss Matty (139). Without ever confronting Miss Matty about her feelings, Mrs. Fitz-Adam and Miss Pole know them. And they also know when not to keep her secret, letting a calculated leak teach Mary how and what to observe. Mary’s eyewitness accounts of these feelings soon after Miss Pole’s (tacit) disclosure help to ensure the fiction of Miss Matty’s “secret” while also reinforcing Mary’s developing insider status in the community.

When Miss Matty's erstwhile lover appears, Mary actively commits herself to the personal observation and speculation entailed in public knowledge: "I saw Miss Matilda start, and then suddenly sit down; and instantly I guessed who it was" (30). Until this point she has included herself in the communal "we" only because the ladies have impressed their rules upon her. But if "[i]t was impossible to live a month at Cranford, and not know the daily habits of each resident" (10), it is more difficult to know their daily feelings. Mary's new project, upon learning of the love affair, is to study and conserve the secrets of Miss Matty's heart. After this first reunion between the former lovers, Mary notes that Miss Matty "looked as if she had been crying" (30), and after the ladies pay a visit to Mr. Holbrook's house, Mary observes that "[Miss Matty] had probably met with so little sympathy in her early love, that she had shut it up close in her heart; and it was only by a sort of watching, which I could hardly avoid, since Miss Pole's confidence, that I saw how faithful her poor heart had been in its sorrow and its silence" (36).

Confidence here mandates watching, and thus the lateral bonds of Cranford's closely-knit community require a (silent) delving into the secrets of other members' hearts – a sympathetic invasion of privacy that knits each member still closer. While surveillance has been shown to be the medium of modern power and individualism in capitalist societies (Goodlad 11, Foucault 193), in *Cranford* surveillance serves a different economy. Rather than grant power to the viewer at the expense of the observed object, it commits the group more firmly to shared communal codes and sympathetic circulation. When Holbrook is ill and Miss Matty silently distressed, both Miss Matty's reticence on the subject and Miss Pole's own decision to tell her immediately about the illness confirm suspicions of romance. Miss Pole remarks that it is "odd" that Miss Matty has not told Mary of this illness, but Mary's (silent) response acknowledges their communal fiction of ignorance: "Not at all, I thought; but I did not say anything. I felt almost guilty of having spied too curiously into that tender heart, and I was not going to speak of its secrets, – hidden, Miss Matty believed, from all the world" (38). Mary's sense of guilt and her (unasked for) refusal to tell Miss Matty's secrets underscores the power that her surveillance has indeed granted her. Yet this is less the power to tell than the power to refuse telling – the power to hold on to information, conserving it rather than spending it. The refusal is thus part of the town's larger gift economy. Rather than hoarding her knowledge, Mary circulates it with care. Just as Miss Pole has passed it along to her, Mary passes it and other secrets along to the reader. The fictional narrative is Cranford's secret-sharing writ large. The narrative's emphasis on her guilt rather than her power again serves to acknowledge Miss Matty's inalienable rights to her own "secret." Mary's power to observe and withhold is predicated on her drive to preserve the property – and propriety – of the community.

Both Mary's knowledge and the women's shared silence intensify after Mr. Holbrook's death:

Miss Matty made a strong effort to conceal her feelings – a concealment she practiced even with me, for she has never alluded to Mr. Holbrook again, although the book he gave her lies with her Bible on the little table by her bedside; she did not think I heard her when she asked the little milliner of Cranford to make her caps something like the Honourable Mrs. Jamieson's, or that I noticed the reply –

'But she wears widows' caps, ma'am?'

This effort at concealment was the beginning of the tremulous motion of head and hands which I have seen ever since in Miss Matty. (39)

Symbolic exchange operates according to a system of conservation as Miss Matty's secrets are converted from feelings and spoken language into equally legible bodily signs. Again we can see the fiction of privacy ("she knew, and we knew, and she knew that we knew, and we knew that she knew that we knew") that reveals information to community members through visible signs (a widow's hat, a tremulous motion), even as it conceals their knowledge of that information through silence – "practiced even with me."³⁷

As Mary watches and learns to keep silent about Cranford's common secrets, she too becomes an active member of the community. The shift to present tense in the passage quoted above ("the book he gave her lies with her Bible") indicates her present stance in Cranford. In the very next chapter, Mary shares secrets of her own with us in the context of revealing her observations of others. She notes, "I have often noticed that almost every one has his own individual small economies . . . any disturbance of which annoys him more than spending shillings or pounds on some real extravagance" (40), while also revealing her own private "human weakness" that makes her part of this collective: "String is my foible" (41). Her narrative movement from "they" (1) to an "I" that un-self-consciously considers itself part of a larger "we" (41) shows her successive movement from outsider to insider. Cranford, like mid-century Anglican Sisterhoods, has to recruit its membership, rather than produce it. As Rae Rosenthal notes about the narrator's initiation, Mary is "the clearest evidence of Cranford's strength and its capacity for self-perpetuation" (88).³⁸

Equally indicative of Cranford's success and ability to perpetuate itself is the way the text initiates the reader, as well as the narrator. Along these lines, Hilary Schor has valuably pointed out similarities between Mary's role in Cranford and the reader's role outside of that community (118), calling the novella a "commentary on the ways women are taught to read cultural signs" (87). While Schor suggests that Mary's "narrative has meaning only in that community" (117), I would like to extend her reading here. If the reader learns to observe with Mary; to hold, with Mary, the common unspoken knowledge of the Cranford community; and to speculate, with Mary, on her own personal economic "foibles," then the relationship between text and reader is more than analogical. Meaning extends beyond the single fictive midlands community to embrace a wider circle of "conscripted" readers (Stewart 8). Public knowledge and the fiction of private secrets not only create membership in the Cranford community but also contribute to a model for an (imagined) women's community beyond the textual borders of the novel. Elizabeth Gaskell's 1851 letter to Eliza Fox famously shows the slippage between the novel's community and her own: "I've the comfort of sitting down to write to you in a new gown, and blue ribbons all spick and span for Xmas – and cheap in the bargain, 'Elegant economy' as *we* say in Cranford." She refers to her novel affectionately in other letters – to John Forster in 1854, "Shall I tell you a Cranfordism"; and again, to John Ruskin in 1865, "It is the only one of my own books that I can read again; . . . And it is true too, for I have seen the cow that wore the grey flannel jacket." From the informer's stance that Gaskell takes in relation to these publishing men, to the inclusive, communal "*we*" of her letter to Fox, *Cranford's* meaning and community reach beyond the text.³⁹

Cranford thus creates a women's community capable of self-perpetuation, able to harness its store of secrets for community and to preserve, by conserving within the community, the sympathetic energy that keeps the town moving. *Cranford's* conservation of sympathy also asks us to think more broadly about what's at stake in the idea of conservation for women. Conservation offers a way to conceive of alternative economies of generous giving for

women without money, reconciling liberality of sympathy with the conservation of social structure. It is, in a large sense, reactionary, a (conservative) contrast to the forward-pressing mentality of the mid-nineteenth century. Cranford's conservation draws imaginatively on cyclical time, rather than the future-tending progressivism of the 1851 Great Exhibition and pseudo-evolutionary theories. But the conservation of sympathetic energy is also remarkably progressive.⁴⁰ By echoing contemporary theories in science and economics, it suggests that the mid-century project of finding and forging communities for "surplus" women takes up contemporary discoveries and concerns. It also shows the centrality of sympathetic gifts to the blending of communal, economic, and industrial ideals. In its merger of old and new, conservation offers a useful language for thinking about the shape of sympathetic economies and their place in a century-long proto-feminist attempt to imagine elective communities of active women.

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NOTES

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1. Not only did Malthusian economics and the 1834 Poor Laws discourage giving money to the poor, but many women had no money to give. Married women lacked property rights until the Married Women's Property Acts (1882, 1893). An 1851 census revealed a disproportionate number of single women. Solutions offered for these "redundant" women included emigration and religious sisterhoods.
2. *Cranford's* formulation of a hermetic community of women makes it significant to contemporary visions of the religious Anglican Sisterhood movement as well. See McArthur's "Unwed Orders."
3. See, for example, Tobin 3.
4. Scrooge demonstrates his emotional transformation by buying a turkey for the Cratchits (Dickens 129).
5. For example: Gérin 123–25; Miller, *Novels* 95, 101.
6. See Wolfe 161–76 and Rosenthal 73–92. Mossman contrasts the Jenkyns sisters rather than the two towns, 78–87. In Auerbach's account, Cranford is a "homely little village . . . a sadly withering root of English kindness and community" (77), but one that triumphs over masculine "reality" (82, 86). More recent accounts complicate these oppositions to examine gender construction (see Croskery 198–220) or to consider Cranford economies in the context of contemporary cultural events. See Miller, "Subjectivity" 139–57; Schor; Huett 34–49, and McArthur 59–76.
7. I agree with Auerbach's similar observation that "the ladies of Cranford are too involved with each other to interest themselves in their larger charitable mission" (85); in fact, the ladies' "larger mission," though sympathetic, is not actually charitable.
8. Brunoni's need for nursing in some ways serves as a catalyst for sympathetic conversion. Nursing has a similar function in the case of Captain Brown. The ladies become reconciled to him mainly through the illness of his daughter, whose state permits their rendering of "many little kindnesses" (16).
9. Contrast this episode with a similar unveiling in *Jane Eyre*: there, the unmasking of Rochester's performance as gypsy woman ruptured exchange by revealing his gendered sympathy as manipulative

- performance (ch. 19; 172). See Auerbach 84, for a comparison of Brunoni to Rochester as a Grand Turk.
10. See, for example, Clayton 8. Gaskell saw the Exhibition a few months before *Cranford* serialization began; her repeated visits contradict her professed lack of interest. See her letter to Anne Robson, 1 Sept. 1851 (*The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, letter 101, p. 159): "Of course we did the Exhibition. I went 3 times, & should never care to go again; but then I'm *not* scientific nor mechanical. Meta and Wm went often, but not enough they say."
 11. See Kuhn 321. Kuhn notes eight additional scientists who, between 1830 and 1850, also derived either the generality or a concrete application of energy conservation; his interest, like mine, is in the *zeitgeist*: "Why, in the years 1830 to 1850 did so many of the experiments and concepts required for a full statement of energy conservation lie so close to the surface of scientific consciousness?" (323). Boyer, criticizing Kuhn's essay for what he sees as insufficient emphasis on quantitative elements, nevertheless agrees that the scientists' simultaneous suggestions were significant (386–87). See also Cardwell 682, and Lloyd 212, 219. For nineteenth-century perspectives on this simultaneity of discovery, see Youmans: "The discoverer is . . . in a great degree, but the mouthpiece of his time" (xvi, also xxvi–xxviii). Youmans ranks the work of Joule, Mayer, and Grove highest among those engaged in similar scientific pursuits.
 12. Joule, "Calorific Effects" 158. See also "Changes in Temperature" 172.
 13. Joule, "Calorific Effects" 158. See also "Changes of Temperature": "the power to destroy belongs to the Creator alone" (189). Joule is not alone in aligning his scientific observations with religious belief. Hence Grove's similar work concludes: "in all phenomena, the more closely they are investigated, the more are we convinced that, humanly speaking, neither matter nor force can be created, and that an essential cause is unattainable. – Causation, is the will, Creation, the act, of GOD" (50). See also Carpenter 730.
 14. Fern collecting became extremely popular for Victorians. See Barber 111–15; Flanders 162–66; Elliston Allen 24, 43. The Crystal Palace that housed the Great Exhibition itself, influenced by its architect/engineer's earlier horticultural efforts, was another large-scale attempt to enclose and preserve life, as well as to display a wider range of goods. See Clayton 30–31, 35.
 15. And perhaps *Cranford* returned the favor, offering science a view of what its discoveries might look like on a social scale. Youmans, in 1865, considers the social application of correlation and conversion a distinct possibility (xxxvi).
 16. In contrast with *Cranford*'s conservation of sympathy, Rowlinson notes that diminishment is inherent to capitalism: "while money can transform itself into commodities and back again without losing value, it cannot do so without suffering the continual wear of its material substance and eventually becoming the residue of its own repeated use" (357).
 17. Gift theories largely reject the idea of a "free gift" – or the possibility of any "gift" at all – because of the implicit reciprocity that the gift demands. For discussions of the obligation entailed by gifts, see Mauss 5, as well as subsequent discussions from theological, sociological, philosophical, and literary camps: Milbank 122, 123; Bourdieu 105; Derrida, *Given Time* 13; and Rappoport 452–53, 456.
 18. See Rubin 174, 183, and Irigaray 175, for discussions of how patriarchal kinship structures use gift exchange at the expense of women. By limiting participation in its community, however, *Cranford* in effect overturns these kinship structures, insisting that women can both join in and contribute to the organization of relationships. One key difference is the gift object: if, in the structures that Rubin and Irigaray denounce, women are the gifts exchanged between men, in *Cranford* women exchange sympathies in order to form and reinforce alliances. Weiner suggests that women also participate in gift exchange by producing and protecting "inalienable possessions," a point to which I return in section two of this article (11, *passim*).
 19. Grove's similar point about the "reciprocal dependence" of forces in experimental physics is "[t]hat neither, taken abstractedly, can be said to be the essential or proximate cause of the others, but that either may, as a force, produce or be convertible into the other" (8).

20. For Mulvihill, who is interested in economy more as management than as exchange, Matty's "happy returns" are a function of her moral and material management (355). See also Auerbach 85–87 and Miller, "Subjectivity" 151–54 for Matty's communal ethos.
21. Even sacrificial transactions have two sides; anthropological analyses of vast expenditures reveal the debt accrued through these often antagonistic displays of wealth. See, for example, Osteen, "Introduction" 4.
22. Auerbach notes that these returns – such as the gifts brought to "the old rector's daughter" in the shop – constitute part of Matty's "triumph" (87). I agree, but while Auerbach attributes such returns simply to "Matty's innocent generosity" I see them as an element of *Cranford's* larger structure of sympathetic conservation. The triumph thus belongs to the town, for maintaining itself by aligning "generosity" with forms of two-way exchange.
23. Reversing Matty's and Martha's fortunes and roles as giver/receiver may attempt to replace class alienation with affection (see Singh 78). But the exchange serves Matty's class, not Martha's, by representing a servant's life as indistinguishable from her mistress's interests. Martha is never granted equal status in the exchange. Indeed, by making Martha's plotline traditionally linear through matrimony, the story underscores her outsider stance in a more cyclical community.
24. Schor 115–16; Mulvihill 354. Auerbach notes that Matty's "feminine and corporate" response (85) helps Cranford to "triumph over the failure of economic and masculine reality outside" (86).
25. Consider, for example, Marx's equation for surplus value: $M_1 - C - M_2$ where $M_2 > M_1$, or, in other words, where a commodity (C) is sold for more money (M_2) than the money that originally purchased it (M_1) (329–36).
26. One exception is the miserly practice, shared by many of the ladies, of hoarding butter, string, or candles – a form of conservation that exists outside of circulation, and, as Marx notes, is more akin to the capitalist's drive to accumulate. See Rowlinson 355–56. But hoarding is also antithetical to capitalism. The actual interest that presumably comprises a source of income for some of the ladies – their "genteel competency" (136) – is passed over almost entirely. *Cranford* ignores the capitalist exchanges that have guaranteed that continual interest, in favor of the conservationist activities it describes.
27. Miller, "Subjectivity" 151–54. See also Auerbach 85–86 for the element of "communality" in Miss Matty's dealings and Schor 6, on how this novel without a heroine models collective heroineship.
28. The (well-documented) interpenetration of "public" and "private" spheres, and the instability of the gender codes they purport to regulate, offers one way of seeing Cranford as inflected by Drumble, and helps to show why Cranford's creation of "public" and "private" are interdependent. See Habermas, Poovey, Cohen, Chase, and Levenson. But Cranford – a town that limits both domesticity and its supposed counterpart – is a unique case, as are the alternate public and private spheres it creates.
29. See Weiner, especially 6, 40–42, 150. Although most of the properties that Weiner describes are material objects, she also suggests that oral tradition and knowledge may be inalienable possessions (37, 64). Osteen explicitly compares the ways in which inalienable possessions and secrets are withheld from exchange: "they are given only in privileged circumstances, and given only to Others who are part of ourselves" ("Gift" 244).
30. My discussion of secrets as a form of ownership extends Auerbach's observation that "white lies" and "the female error of discreet falsity, the code that is secret message rather than ethical imperative" (87, 89) play a powerful part in preserving Miss Matty. Miller also notes that "deceit encourage[s] a communal spirit" among the ladies (*Novels* 114).
31. According to Weiner, possessions become inalienable through their "exclusive and cumulative identity with a particular series of owners through time" (33). See also Weiner 6.
32. Indeed, the gendered nature of these secrets and their power within Cranford underscore how women's production and maintenance of "inalienable possessions" can shape gift communities as much as the exchanges brought about between men. See Weiner 2–4, 12.

33. Finn, too, distinguishes between the individualism of capitalism and the “fictional descriptions of gifting [that] instead prized social groups” (45). See also Finn 67.
34. Nunokawa usefully notes a paradox of the capitalist marketplace when he describes the model of ownership set forth in Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* (1848): to share property is to lose it, but capital’s symbolic value as communication makes such sharing inevitable. *Cranford*, a book that self-consciously recalls *Dombey* in the railway death that Captain Brown suffers (à la Carker) while reading Dickens, inverts the relationship between sharing and loss. See Nunokawa 40–76, esp. 44–49, 56.
35. In its membership recruitment, *Cranford* reveals that though its economy is limited, it does not actually succeed in its fantasy of self-containment. Even Miss Matty’s slight venture into tea implicates her in a global economy, despite her preference for gift transactions over sales.
36. Weiner 11. In Weiner’s study, the passing of inalienable possessions from generation to generation, over time, increases their power to authenticate status. While time is certainly important to many of the secrets circulating in *Cranford* – the secrecy of Miss Matty’s romance depends on the lapse of time since her youth – I want to stress that these secrets are transmitted laterally as much as vertically, spread among friends as much as passed down to generations.
37. Miss Matty’s quivering frame can also be considered through the lens of conservation. Carpenter, working on the physiological ramifications of theories of conservation, notes “the extraordinary force developed under the influence of emotional excitement, which often calls forth a much greater measure of muscular power than the will can command” (746). Youmans, adding that “Dr. Carpenter, in his *Physiology*, has brought forward numerous exemplifications of this principle of the conversion of emotion into movement” suggests that “[a]s the emotions rise in strength . . . the various systems of muscles are thrown into action; and when they reach a certain pitch of intensity, violent convulsive movements ensue. Anger frowns and stamps; grief wrings its hands; joy dances and leaps – the amount of sensation determining the quantity of correlative movement” (xxxiv; see also xxxi–xxxv).
38. Rosenthal similarly attributes this transition to gained knowledge, but focuses on spoken transmissions. I consider Mary’s most important education silent – the public knowledge of private secrets that initiates her is as much from her own tacit observations as from any statements told to her.
39. *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*. See, respectively, letters 110, 195, and 562 (pp. 174, 290, and 747).
40. See Weiner 8, for her astute comment that “The paradox inherent in the process of keeping-while-giving creates an illusion of conservatism, of refashioning the same things, of status quo. [But] The problems inherent in ‘keeping’ nurture the seeds of change.” We might also consider Youmans’ earlier formulation of a similar thought: “Although at each stage of individual growth the forces of the organism . . . have each a certain definite amount of strength, yet these ratios are constantly changing, and it is in this change that development essentially consists. So with society” (xxxviii).

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