

■ Management and Care in a Victorian Community: The Community of Women in Elizabeth Gaskell's Letters and *Cranford**

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Abstract

In response to the disparity between the rich and the poor of Victorian Britain that worsened due to the laissez-faire economics of the time, numerous philosophers proposed ideology-based solutions to the plight of the poor. Anglican sisterhoods of unmarried women were formed to provide charity to individuals of the lower classes. In contrast to male philosophers who often spoke of the need for mutual care and improvement in communities under the aegis of patriarchal hegemony, Anglican women's organizations, such as Priscilla Sellon's Sisters of Mercy, provided charitable care in practices, as well as created a community in which unmarried women could establish an identity by participating in public affairs outside of the domestic sphere. The importance of these female sisterhoods is indicated in the letters and novels of Elizabeth Gaskell. In her letters, Gaskell indicates that she approves of Sellon's community of single women where women are given the opportunity to assume a role other than that of the wife and mother expected in Victorian Britain. In addition, Gaskell's *Cranford* presents the story of an Amazonian community under a system of female leadership and governance in which older women are empowered to manage community care. *Cranford* conveys Gaskell's thoughts and concerns regarding female public identity through the

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problems and interactions of the women in *Cranford* in a time of economic transformation. The novel presents the strategies that women and men employ for community management, where management is initially patriarchal and eventually shifts toward a more gender fluid form in response to social change and as a means of solving the problems encountered by citizens of the town. At the beginning of the novel, when the community is run by Deborah Jenkyns, governance of the community is authoritarian and paternalistic. After Deborah dies, however, class and gender expectations begin to shift, and the community functions more like a cooperative. Through this transformation, Gaskell addresses the topics of gender identity, class ideology, and participation in community affairs.

Keywords: Victorian era, community management, female community, Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford*

In the nineteenth century, numerous political and cultural philosophers adopted laissez-faire economics and self-help perspectives in formulating solutions to the difficulties encountered by impoverished individuals in British society. In addition, at this time, religious organizations, such as Sisters of Mercy, founded by Priscilla Sellon in 1848, were providing both charity care and a space in which unmarried women could participate in public affairs; this space led them to develop a feminine identity that was not limited to the domestic sphere. This concern for community care and management is also prevalent in many literary works in Victorian Britain.

Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) was a Victorian author known for writing industrial and social novels that demonstrate concern for the life and welfare of the working class. In her most well-known industrial novels *Mary Barton*, *North and South*, and *Ruth*, Gaskell describes the feelings of and evokes sympathy for the workers who were toiling under the harsh working conditions of early industrial Britain; her novels served as a means of drawing attention to the need for the protection of workers' rights. In most of Gaskell's works, although paternalistic care often functions as a mediating force that relieves class tension (Nash 96), this form of care is depicted as being absurd and ineffective to the point where the protagonists must overthrow the patriarchal and classist system embedded in Victorian society (Bodenheimer 54, 55, 58, 61-62). Gaskell's novels have a strong focus on the roles of women, the female identity, and the challenges women face when participating in public affairs and community care programs.

The present study analyzes the complex connections between gender and community governance both in Victorian Britain and in Gaskell's letters and the novel *Cranford*, written in 1853. In *Cranford*, Gaskell creates a utopian society in which women have autonomy, a future, and the ability to participate in community affairs and community care. In Gaskell's imagined society, this community of women exists beyond the system of patriarchal hegemony that Gaskell was subject to. They naturally shoulder the responsibility of handling public affairs and taking care of members of the community, which are tasks that are depicted to be beyond what the paternalistic care system can handle, with that paternalistic system illustrated through the character Deborah Jenkyns. However, Gaskell's *Cranford* does not present a female paternalistic society as a replacement for the traditional male-dominated one. Instead, she maintains the characteristics and practices of women within her maternalistic community to present a utopian society that is free of patriarchal or class restrictions and further establishes a continually evolving society that transgresses her contemporary gender norms.

Victorian Beliefs regarding Community Care and Governance

The prevalence of laissez-faire thinking in Victorian Britain was foundational to the economic and religious ideologies underpinning Victorian capitalism, which in turn was responsible for a widening gap between the rich and poor. This led to a widespread recognition of the need to help individuals in the lower class, including issues of social relief and paternalistic care. Many Victorian paternalists believed that “individual failings caused and individual reform lessened poverty and misery” and that “social betterment [could be achieved] through individual reform” (Roberts 140). With a trend for these paternalists to improve the situation of the poor, many schools were established from the 1840s to the 1860s that offered education to the poor on achieving economic self-support (Cunningham 68), and the reformist journalist Samuel Smiles published a popular pamphlet entitled *Self-Help* (1859), which emphasizes the importance of knowledge and education and differentiates between the deserving and the undeserving poor. On the first page of the pamphlet, Smiles states that “heaven helps those who help themselves,” and that people should be expected to acquire an education or knowledge in general, even if it is not provided to them (Smiles 1). To achieve social betterment, individual reform and knowledge acquirement depends much on one’s effort, and social relief could discourage individuals from actively pursuing a better future for themselves.

Despite doubts regarding the effectiveness of social relief, discussions of social reform gradually began to focus more on paternalistic care. Lord Sydney Godolphin Osborne (1808-1889), a Victorian cleric and philanthropist, consistently argues against “the New Poor Law’s basic assumption that easy relief had corrupted the poor—an assumption at the core of many an early Victorian’s illusions about self-reliance” (Roberts 181). According to Osborne, social relief is believed to be ineffective because it may create a false sense of self-reliance. A false sense of self-reliance can easily lead an individual to lose their determination to change and improve their conditions. Osborne believes that to prevent the development of a false sense of self-reliance, society and the government must offer aid and exert influence. Self-reliance must begin with disadvantaged individuals being provided with instruction and guidance.

Osborne’s belief in the requirement for teaching and guidance from external sources reflects the paternalistic culture underlying Victorian capitalist society. This underlying culture led to paternalistic care being the prominent approach to providing community care, with the approach being implemented “by a powerful gentry, a nationalised Church, and a stronger monarchy, three pillars supporting a firmly hierarchical and authoritarian society” (Roberts 12). The gentry, the

Church, and the monarchy collectively held paternalistic power within Victorian society. Roberts describes the Victorian paternalistic government as follows:

(1) It protected the weak, helpless, and poor; (2) it promoted the development of industry; (3) it guided and instructed faith and morals; and (4) it protected life, property, and the social order. "Protection" was a key word—protection of industry, morality, order, and most particularly, the weak and helpless. (415)

These four points reveal that the crucial elements of Victorian paternalism were protection and guidance, that is, the protection of individuals from external harm from a progressive society and guidance through moral instruction regarding that which Victorian society considered to be acceptable and true.

Roberts identifies the many key elements constituting paternalistic ideals in Victorian society. However, there is a wide variance in the paternalistic ideals underlying the political, economic, and social practices that many philosophers of the Victorian and preceding eras are proponents of. Generally, Victorian paternalistic thinking usually emphasizes the responsibilities of legislative and administrative institutions as forms of "familial and community responsibility" (Lawes 1); most Victorian paternalists support the implementation of systems of care in states or communities in which the poor had limited access to government assistance, although their beliefs regarding the implementation of such systems differ. For example, Robert Southey (1774-1843), a Romantic poet laureate prior to the Victorian age, comments on Thomas More's idea regarding management in 1829, remarking that politicians "in well-ordered communities" should "keep things as they are" (Southey 73). Maintaining the status quo, he claims, does not indicate noninterference; maintaining a balanced state of affairs requires "constant vigilance and care" and intervention, with a need for strong legislation and interference in places without community support (Southey 73). Southey's ideas regarding governance indicate that a powerful community organization or social legislation is required to ensure societies are properly managed and just. To ensure the provision of justice and reasonable care in a community, an "old-paternal social order" or guiding system of power needs to be implemented as a foremost consideration before the development of social legislation (Lawes 19).

Although legislation and administration are frequently discussed political features of paternalism both prior to and during the Victorian age, many paternalist thinkers also consider features such as individual spiritual satisfaction and education to be key aspects of paternalistic community governance. Another well-known Romantic poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), argues that paternalism should involve three goals: to "make the means of subsistence more easy to each individual," to provide each individual with hope of "bettering his

condition or that of his children,” and to help each individual develop “those faculties which are essential to his humanity” (qtd. in Lawes 12). Coleridge’s paternalistic social ideology heavily involves maintaining the economic and mental well-being of each member of a community. Similarly, in *Rural Rides* (1830), William Cobbett (1763-1835), an English journalist and social reformist, presents a nostalgic framework for a paternalistic British community in which community members are closely interdependent. Cobbett’s ideal society is considered to be based on a “rural, community-based, hierarchical, and integrated social structure; a society where obedience, duties, obligations, and reciprocal relations are paramount” (Lawes 24).

Cobbett’s emphasis on mutual assistance and an organized social structure was later manifested in the management practices implemented in the New Lanark mills in Scotland. The textile manufacturer and social reformist Robert Owen (1771-1858) was a conservative paternalist who managed the mills from 1799 until his death, and he placed considerable emphasis on education and community care. The New Lanark mills were considered educational institutions in which Owen provided instruction to both adults and children (Lawes 20-21); Owen’s teachings at the mills revolved around an ideal where “the interests of the community were placed above those of the individual, whose self-fulfillment and happiness would come from serving the community” (Lawes 23). The community Owen created was based on “unity, co-operation, and mutual respect” (Lawes 23) and led to fewer class conflicts because each member was encouraged to “unite his interests individually and generally with society,” as was indicated in Owen’s *Report to the County of Lanark* in 1820. The paternalism of Coleridge, Cobbett, and Owen, therefore, involves a sense of nostalgia for a traditional community in which each community member’s economic and mental well-being are considered, and such nostalgia enables the development of a community structure built on mutual respect and interdependence.

Gaskell and Victorian Female Communities

Elizabeth Gaskell, a well-known author of the Victorian era, also demonstrates keen awareness of the influence of community management. However, Gaskell approaches such management from the perspective of a woman. Gaskell’s writing often centers around class conflict and working conditions, with many of her most well-known industrial novels, such as *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, describing the feelings of members of the working class and evoking sympathy for these members as a means of rousing a call for worker protection

policy (Bossche 197). Gaskell, the wife of a middle-class clergyman, is a novelist who explores and presents her opinions regarding women's concerns about female social roles, class distinction, public identity, and public participation in community affairs and care.

The letters that Gaskell wrote during her lifetime indicate that she considered Priscilla Sellon (1821-1876), a leading figure in the women's movement toward greater participation in public affairs and the founder of the Sisters of Mercy in Devonport in 1848, to be representative as a woman who participated in community management and to be the embodiment of a new female public identity. Sellon was considered "a restorer of religious orders in Anglicanism" ("Sellon") and became known for establishing female organizations where women were able to autonomously develop their own community and to devote themselves to public charity work. Within two years of the establishment of the sisterhood in Devonport in 1848, Sellon had established a series of institutes with divisions completing various forms of charity work.¹

Although the Sisters of Mercy was not the first Anglican sisterhood in the Victorian age,² it became widely recognized because it was unique for its empowerment of women and because of its controversial leader, Sellon. Sellon, who is considered to be the founder of the Society of the Most Holy Trinity, empowered single women by providing them with freedom and respect and by providing them with the opportunity to lead an unfettered life that differed from the Victorian patriarchal ideal for middle-class women. Sellon's belief that women should not be restricted in their actions by virtue of their gender is apparent in her conversation with a priest of the Church of England—a conversation she had in the midst of rendering aid to the needy. She indicated that the women of her organization should not be considered "mere ladies"; she stated, "[We are the] Sisters of Mercy . . . [and] if you refuse our aid, we must offer it elsewhere" (qtd. in Liddon 200). These words reveal that Sellon had a strong sense of self-respect and had a strong desire to achieve the goals of the Sisters of Mercy. Furthermore, they indicate that Sellon believed the religious charity and public affairs that the women of her sisterhood participated in should not be

¹ These institutes included five ragged schools, affiliated with charitable organizations. The ragged schools were established to provide free education to orphans and poor children so that they can have food, clothing and learn skills: "[a] Home for Orphans, St. George's College for Sailor Boys, the House of Peace, A Home for Old Sailors and Their Wives, an Industrial School, six Houses of Hope, Lodging Homes, [and] a Soup Kitchen" (Anson 263).

² The first Anglican sisterhood was organized and located in London in 1845 by Jane Ellacombe, Mary Bruce, and Sarah Anne Terrot, with Terrot joining the project one week after Ellacombe and Bruce, and was under the guidance of a religious committee of fourteen members (Williams 350-52).

considered lesser because of the members' gender.

Because the participation of the Sisters of Mercy in public affairs did not comply with patriarchal expectations that women ought to be confined to the domestic sphere, the members of Sellon's sisterhood were frequently criticized for not being as feminine and modest as other Victorian women were considered to be. This criticism directed toward the women in the Sisters of Mercy was partially due to the fact that single women in the sisterhood freely chose to live an unmarried life, which ran counter to the Victorian ideal of women as what Coventry Patmore calls "the angel in the house." By joining the Sisters of Mercy, members were indicating that they chose to serve God rather than the men in their lives. Within this all-female community of the sisterhood, women adopted a unique lifestyle in which they were free from the influence of domestic patriarchy, and therefore, this community was considered to be a threat to patriarchal authority and Victorian conceptions of masculinity.

Sellon's governance and authority with respect to the management of the sisterhood also indicated that the influence of patriarchal hegemony was blunted in the aspects of public affairs that the sisterhood became involved in. Sellon's sisterhood differed from past Anglican sisterhoods, such as that established by Jane Ellacombe in 1845, which were planned and governed by external, male supervisors, not Ellacombe herself. Sellon's authority within her sisterhood community influenced the community members' impressions of her way of governance, as indicated by their remembrances of community life. Members praised Sellon for being "the wise and inflexible guardian of our laws—our tender and loving Superior and Mother—our guide and our leader" (qtd. in Williams 297). However, many described her governance as authoritarian, stating "[she] thought fit to develop such conventional rules as pressed too heavily upon many of us" (Goodman, *Experiences* 1) and "[she] required a personal obedience to herself on her own sole authority, which was very perplexing" (Cusack 73).

The Sisters of Mercy was frequently criticized for sending solitary women to complete tasks alone at night, which was considered dangerous and caused doubts among the public regarding the modesty of the women in the organization (Vicinus 69). However, this criticism was eventually dismissed after a clerical investigation reported that "these ladies [of Sisters of Mercy] who superintend it are sincerely attached to the Church of England" (Stockman 124). This investigation provided justification for the existence of the Sisters of Mercy because it indicated that it was a religious group comprising upright and decent women dedicated to serving God and people in need.

As indicated by the reception toward the Sisters of Mercy, the empowerment stemming from participation in a woman-led female community was unique

and controversial because of its unprecedented implications related to gender and governance. As a female writer who was highly concerned with gender ideals, Gaskell was aware of the controversy surrounding Sellon's organization and mentions her twice in personal letters. According to Chapple and Pollard's edited collection of Gaskell's letters, Sellon is first mentioned in Gaskell's letter to Lady Lay-Shuttleworth on May 14, 1850. In the letter, Gaskell indicates her respect for "Miss Sellon's conduct in many things" (*Letters* 117) and expresses curiosity regarding the difficulties of the lives of single women and the "painful . . . *purposelessness*" of such lives (*Letters* 117). Gaskell writes, "I think I see every day how women, deprived of their natural duties as wives & mothers, must look out for other duties if they wish to be at peace" (*Letters* 117). In this letter, Gaskell exhibits sympathy for the suffering and purposelessness she believes single women feel because of their inability to devote themselves to married life and domestic affairs. This letter indicates that she considers the desire to identify a purpose outside of domestic life to be natural for single women. For Gaskell, Sellon's participation in public affairs and the sisterhood³ is justified because it provides a means through which single women can maintain their mental health and avoid feelings of negativity, suffering, and purposelessness.

The second time that Gaskell mentions Sellon's sisterhood was in a letter to her eldest daughter, Marianne, dated July 13, 1851. Gaskell tells Marianne that inclement weather affected her plan to visit Richmond; she visited instead the Convent of the Sisters of Mercy in Bermondsey. In the letter, Gaskell indicates that she admires the work of the convent because of its efforts toward helping the poor and establishing the school in Bermondsey, which she considers to be "a very bad part of London." She tells her daughter that she walked through the convent and heard about the plans the women of the community had made. She reports, "I think I liked it even better than the Convent of the Good Shepherd" (*Letters* 158).⁴ This letter indicates that Gaskell approved of the devotion to social concerns exhibited by the single women of the sisterhood.

These two letters reveal that Gaskell developed a keen interest in and

³ A Victorian sisterhood usually refers to an Anglican society of women, as indicated in an anonymous document entitled "Sisterhood Life" (1867). The document states that the women of such sisterhoods were "united together for the purpose of obeying that vocation to the best of their powers; separated from the world, not for the mere intention of carrying on some work of mercy, but for the higher purpose of treading the narrow path of Poverty, Obedience, and Chastity" (174-75).

⁴ The Convent of the Good Shepherd was a Roman Catholic community in which the "sisters mingle with the penitents in every occupation" and remain continually aware of whether anything appears "improper"; the convent was considered to provide "the constant example . . . [that] the walk and conversation of pure, gentle, educated and self-controlled women must be a most important element in the raising of a vitiated mind and character" (Goodman, *Sisterhoods* 122).

exhibited support for the development of a female identity within the public sphere and the lives of unmarried women, and they demonstrate the difficulty women experienced in participating in public affairs during the era. In Tonya Moutray McArthur's study of religious attitudes toward women's participation in public affairs, she indicates that Gaskell was aware that not all women were willing or able to join women's organizations and that sisterhood organizations did not sufficiently recognize the "need to remain flexible and adaptable to the real needs of the women and the larger communities they serve" (60). McArthur indicates that although sisterhoods were independent institutions that enabled women to participate in community care outside of the influence of patriarchal hegemony, the participants of these organizations were generally Catholic, and in Gaskell's hometown of Manchester, the residents had a general antipathy toward Catholicism (60).

However, Gaskell clearly recognized the disapproval generally aimed at women who assumed public responsibilities other than those domestic duties of a mother and wife (McArthur 61). In Victorian society, according to the prevailing gender ideology, women's natural roles and duties were those of a wife and mother. The activities associated with these roles primarily occurred in the domestic sphere; the public sphere was considered to be reserved for men. Women's involvement in public affairs was often regarded as a transgression of gender norms and damaging to their reputation and virtue. Women at the time were frequently criticized when they did not assume the roles of wife and mother, which were considered to be God-ordained and natural, as indicated by the writings of Sarah Lewis, Coventry Patmore (1823-1896), and Sarah Stickney Ellis (1799-1872). According to Lewis's popular book regarding appropriate conduct, *Woman's Mission* (1840), women were expected to assume the responsibility of living for others with selfless devotion (46). Coventry Patmore's book *The Angel in the House* (1854) contains a similar concept; he defines the ideal woman as an angelic figure in the house, and this becomes the archetype for the ideal woman in Victorian literature. The Victorian angel in the house offers "love and moral guidance to her family" without feeling disturbed "by wayward personal desires" (Adams 129).

Sarah Stickney Ellis is a key figure in discussions of the ideal woman in the Victorian period. Ellis published many instructional books on how women ought to behave and founded Rawdon House School, a nonparochial school, in 1844 to instruct young girls in such behavior. She taught Victorians girls and women how to ensure their own happiness, manage a household, and even obtain positions of power and influence in the domestic sphere. According to

Ellis, the ideal woman serves as “the example and influence of a truly excellent man . . . render[ing] the very atmosphere in which he lives one of perpetual improvement and delight” (*Wives* 59) and “makes her society essential to their highest earthly enjoyment” (*Women* 203). Ellis endeavored to expand women’s influence and lead them towards a position of autonomy rather than subjection through her instructional books and novels, which she based on studies by Twycross-Martin, Chase, and Levenson. However, the feminine ideal she advocated for was limited by her belief in the Victorian gender ideology of a woman’s ideal role being that of a wife and mother. Ellis believed a woman should exhibit a “habitual subjection of self to the interests and happiness of others” (*Wives* 128) and should feel that “her own [existence] derives a remote and secondary existence from theirs” (*Women* 45).

Given that many Victorian books indicate that for women to be ideal wives or daughters, they should exert moral influence in the domestic sphere, concerns regarding sisterhoods such as Sellon’s Sisters of Mercy were not related to the community care organizations, themselves; rather they were related to the gender of the individuals participating in public affairs and serving as leaders within these organizations. That is, the concern was related to the unmarried women of the organizations assuming identities that conflicted with the Victorian ideal of women being confined to the domestic sphere. Moreover, single women’s participation in public affairs was perceived to directly threaten patriarchal hegemony in the public sphere; communities of women were considered to naturally subvert Victorian ideals and patriarchal hegemony.

Gaskell was aware of the problems faced by single women because two of her four daughters, Meta and Julia Gaskell, remained unmarried for the entirety of their lives. Gaskell describes Meta at the age of twenty-two years, that is, after her engagement with Captain Hill was cancelled, as of “a noble beautiful character,” indicating that she kept her composure, read books, taught “at the Ragged school,” and frequently visited the poor (*Letters* 536-37). Remaining unmarried was fairly common in Gaskell’s time. According to statistics reported in 1851, the female population of Britain was growing, and at least 42% of women aged twenty to forty years were unmarried and were therefore required to find a means of earning a living (Colby 67; Greg 18; Tilt 16). Gaskell “felt keenly for single women” and supported enabling “women to find work to give their lives meaning.” She also believed that “only in the future would women be able to attain the full satisfaction that would come from the recognition and free exercise of their capabilities” (Colby 65). In her letter to Charles Eliot Norton, Gaskell reports foreseeing “a time of trial to be gone through with women” with respect to gaining the right to participate in

public affairs and develop a public identity (*Letters* 598).

Gaskell's letters demonstrate her awareness of the lack of opportunities for single women to participate in community care and lead a fulfilling life. In addition, although Sellon's female community devoted themselves to helping the poor and bettering their living conditions, as had been recommended by male Victorian philosophers who advocated for paternalist solutions, Sellon's participation in society and governance of her community were perceived to be threats to patriarchal hegemony and Victorian gender ideals. As a writer who was highly aware of the social changes of her time, Gaskell was conscious of "the din of controversy, the clamour of tongues, the strife of words, the conflict of opinions" that Sellon wrote down in her book (Sellon 10) that revolutionary changes evoke. Because of this, in her novel *Cranford*, Gaskell centers the story on a community of women within a utopian rather than an actual society to avoid disapproval from those who were members of the middle-class patriarchal society.

New Form of Community Guided by Paternalistic Leadership in *Cranford*

Cranford presents a female-dominated society disconnected from Victorian industrial society. Gaskell characterizes the novel as an unconventional story to be read for amusement. *Cranford* was published in regular installments over eighteen months between 1851 and 1853 in *Household Words*, and it earned Gaskell a reputation of being a "charming and angelic" author (Nash 57). In a letter Gaskell wrote to John Ruskin in 1865, she describes *Cranford* as an unconventional story that amuses her, writing "whenever I am ailing or ill, I take *Cranford* and—I was going to say, *enjoy* it!" (Gaskell, *Letters* 747). *Cranford* is written with "kindly, tender, and considerate" humor and presents the loveable aspects of human nature and community (Carpenter xv, xvii). The life that *Cranford* presents is a demonstration of Gaskell's desire "to put upon record some of the details of country town life," as she expresses in her article "The Last Generation in England" of 1849. She writes, "The phases of society are rapidly changing; and much will appear strange, which yet occurred only in the generation immediately preceding ours" ("Last Generation"). In the article, she expresses a desire to write about a changing provincial town, which likely led her to write *Cranford*. *Cranford* is a satirical, comical story of village life with a loose narrative structure (Auerbach 78; Jaffe 46-47; Lupton 236; Meir 1). Studies of *Cranford* also include focuses on materiality conveyed in the novel,

with material goods often holding significance within the context of the story (Lupton 235; Miller 1). These features distinguish *Cranford* from Gaskell's other works, which are tightly structured.

The narrator in *Cranford* is Mary Smith, a former Cranfordian who frequently receives invitations to visit Cranford after moving away. The novel is presented as the narrator's records of her interactions with the residents of and daily life in the town during her visits. *Cranford* begins with a brief, direct description of the village as being home to an Amazonian, preindustrial society in which women hold power and establish codes of behavior on the basis of an elegant economy.⁵ "Cranford is in possession of the Amazons; all the holders of houses, above a certain rent, are women" (Gaskell, *Cranford* 1). It is a town where "the marginality of spinsters and the submergence of wives" are treated as natural (Huber 38);⁶ men in this town are subordinate to women, and women are responsible for paternalistic management, which is "an unusual situation under the patriarchal property customs of the day, and one that immediately identifies the women as spinsters or widows" (Knezevic 409). The government of the town is ineffective, and this has led to the development of the community of women as a governing body of sorts, with residents not passing anything resembling legislation but frequently discussing issues surrounding community leaders, governance, and management. The unique situation presented in *Cranford* differs considerably from the separate sphere concept of conventional Victorian society, which led many readers at the time the novel was released to label the ageing women of Cranford as eccentric and marginalized and to miss the rich, personal meaning underlying their management of community care. Despite the community of women in *Cranford* being a constant in the town, the town governance undergoes change throughout the novel; Gaskell presents three models of community management: a model of hierarchal governance involving paternalistic leadership, which is presented at the beginning of the novel, and two revised models of community management involving mutual aid, which develop in the later chapters of the novel.

In the early chapters of *Cranford*, community governance is strongly influ-

⁵ "Elegant economy" is used in *Cranford* to describe "this general but unacknowledged poverty" and "vulgar and ostentatious" money-spending (Gaskell, *Cranford* 4-5). The word "economy" is also defined by William Cobbett in *Cottage Economy* as "management" rather than as something related to commerce or to minimizing one's consumption in 1822 (5).

⁶ The marginalized and closely-knit community of women is not a key focus of the patriarchal society. Medical studies indicate that middle-class, surplus women were treated "as objects of case studies among the early sexologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" for their purported tendencies toward mental illness due to a lack of sexual and emotional outlets—according to a study regarding late-nineteenth-century German surplus women (Dollard 44).

enced by traditional paternalism. This form of governance remains influential prior to the death of Deborah Jenkyns, the most influential member of the community in the beginning. Cranfordian women have strict requirements regarding etiquette in their day-to-day lives and instruct others to follow their rules regarding, for example, hosting, visiting, and inviting others. Rules regarding manners and social interaction are ever present in the provincial town. As the narrator, Mary, observes, “there were rules and regulations for visiting and calls; and they were announced to any young people, who might be staying in the town, with all the solemnity with which the old Manx laws were read once a year on the Tinwald Mount” (Gaskell, *Cranford* 3). Even newcomers and visitors receive guidance on these behavioral codes. This strict set of codes has led *Cranford* to also be considered a manual of social instruction, in which the characters struggle to comply with the town’s conventions (Meir 1; Schor 296) because “nearly every chapter processes a theory of dining and visiting decorum” (Meir 6). The expectations regarding etiquette help citizens of the town maintain a routine and comfortable middle-class life (Dolin 195; Meir 2).

In her book, Julie Nash discusses the role of paternalism in the works of Gaskell and Edgeworth, a Victorian writer of children’s literature. Nash considers the word “paternalism” to refer to “the mutual duties of vassals and lords,” which is how the word is defined by the medieval religious leader Fulbert of Chartres (15). Nash explains that “every individual is obligated to serve the social order, but individuals serve in different and preordained ways” (12). That is, all members of society have their own set of responsibilities and sphere of influence, and servants play the role of integrating the workings of society: “social paternalism reinforced the class system, which depended on servants both for their work and for what was possibly their more important symbolic function as designator of middle-class status” (Nash 14). Social paternalism involves providing help to the poor under a laissez-faire economic framework; however, such paternalism also reinforces unequal class systems.

When Gaskell addresses worker freedom in a socially paternalistic society in her novels, she generally “refrain[s] from presenting any sustained vision for social change. Instead, she retreats to the paternalistic ideas that masters should be kinder to their workers in order to mitigate their anger and earn their respect” (Nash 96). The class fluidity of paternalistic societies is both barely observable in and strongly influences Gaskell’s novels. In these novels, class conflicts and dilemmas are resolved because of interactions between classes and mutual understanding rather than because of intense confrontation, which Gaskell appears to believe would result in deadlocks in which neither class is willing to work towards a solution. This solution to conflict that Gaskell seems to

prefer is similar to that proposed by Cobbett, who advocates for the development of a paternalistic community built on the basis of mutual assistance and an organized social structure, and is referenced in the first section of the paper.

In *Cranford*, Deborah Jenkyns is a leading figure among the citizens of the town and acts as a father figure, paternalistically monitoring the social acceptability of the behavior of others. As a child, Deborah is intelligent and possesses the “superior acquirements” of knowledge and ability. As she grows up, she assumes the role of helpful assistant to her father and “even once wrote a letter to the bishop” on his behalf (Gaskell, *Cranford* 82). Her outstanding abilities surpass those of the men of Cranford. After the death of her parents, Deborah cares for Matty, her younger sister, and begins to have some influence in the town, and using this influence, “Miss Deborah rules with an iron hand” (Auerbach 81). In Mary’s record of her time in Cranford, her correspondence with Matty frequently reveals Deborah’s authority and influence over Matty, with Mary stating that Matty would occasionally begin “venturing into an opinion of her own; but sudden pulling herself up, and [. . .] begging me not to name what she had said, as Deborah thought differently” (Gaskell, *Cranford* 16-17).

To Matty, Deborah is “a determined policer of class boundaries” (Kucich 487) as well as a paternalistic (albeit female) leader within the patriarchal system that the elder sister strictly adheres to. Matty’s hesitation when expressing her own thoughts reveals Deborah’s considerable influence over her thoughts and behavior. After Deborah’s death, Matty frequently feels the absence of her sister’s instruction and assistance when encountering difficulties that Deborah previously resolved for her. She admires Deborah for being able to handle financial and household matters more effectively than she could (Gaskell, *Cranford* 34). Mary reports, “Many a domestic rule and regulation had been a subject of plaintive whispered murmur to me during Miss Jenkyns’s life [by Matty]; but now,” after Deborah’s death, they are not changed and have been continued (Gaskell, *Cranford* 35). Mary states, “Miss Jenkyns’s rules were made more stringent than ever, because the framer of them was gone where there could be no appeal” (Gaskell, *Cranford* 37). Before her death, Deborah establishes codes of behavior for Matty that are based on her beliefs regarding propriety and instructs Matty on how she can lead a tranquil life, free of controversy. Deborah’s emphasis on propriety and her care for Matty indicate that Deborah is benevolent and wishes to provide guidance to others, which is in line with the spirit of domestic paternalism.

Deborah is an influential paternalistic leader both within her own family and within the town of Cranford. Upon learning of Captain Brown’s death in a

train accident, Deborah undertakes the responsibility of making the necessary arrangements for Jessie Brown, Captain Brown's daughter.⁷ Captain Brown and his daughter are newcomers to Cranford and are, therefore, seen as potential sources of disruption to the existing social order. Nevertheless, after Captain Brown's death, Deborah exerts her paternalistic influence over the other citizens of the town to care for his daughter. In response to Jessie's request to see her father, Deborah says, "It is not fit for you to go alone. It would be against both propriety and humanity were I to allow it" (Gaskell, *Cranford* 24). Although Deborah's words seem to indicate that she believes propriety should be valued above family relationships, she provides Jessie with a means through which she can satisfy her wish to see her father; that is, she indicates that Jessie can see her father if Deborah accompanies her. Deborah helps Jessie hold a funeral for Captain Brown and adhere to rules of propriety that are expected of a girl of her social status. Through these actions, Deborah leads the townswomen to care for Jessie, a resident of the town affected by a traumatic event, despite Deborah having had serious arguments with Jessie's father. Deborah voluntarily assumes the burden of caring for the townswomen and treats them as if they were her family.

Deborah's concern for and assistance to her own family and the townswomen indicate that she is a paternalistic leader who manages and instructs others and shows concern toward them. However, Deborah contrasts with the Victorian ideal woman; she differs from the ideal described in instructional books, such as those published by Lewis and Ellis, of a female figure who directs most of her energy towards exerting a moral influence in her married, domestic life. Deborah chooses not to marry; instead, she symbolically assumes her father's role as a cleric and devotes herself to correcting and managing the community, in the public sphere. Deborah exemplifies how although the Cranfordian women can be perceived to be prejudiced spinsters (Krueger 18), these older women—despite continuing to demand that people adhere to their rules of propriety—exhibit "authentic concern [for] a catastrophic event" and function as "subjects of respect rather than objects of ridicule" due to their age (Krueger 25). Deborah's name is a reference to a female prophet and judge in Judges 4 and 5 in the Old Testament. According to the Hebrew scriptures, Deborah is "a charismatic counselor (judge) and prophet (she predicts that the glory of war will fall to a woman, which it does—to Jael)" (Tikkanen). The biblical Deborah is described

⁷ According to Nestor's study of the men in *Cranford*, in Cranford, "the male has a power which cannot be resisted" (53). For example, Captain Brown stuns the female residents but also gradually receives their respect. Nevertheless, Nestor argues that "violence is also male-centered" in the novel (54), as demonstrated by Captain Brown's train accident. This masculine connection to violence ostensibly contrasts with the feminine connection to kindness.

as “assert[ing] women’s spiritual and moral equality with men,” and the question of whether her position is one of a “private advisor” or “public speaker” in the public sphere has been controversial since the second century (Schroeder, “Judging Deborah”).

Schroeder analyzes the biblical Deborah’s characterization and significance from the first to the twentieth centuries. Schroeder explains that Deborah “is the only female judge in the book of Judges” and indicates that “the role of judge usually refers to a warrior who leads the Israelites in battle against their enemies” (Schroeder, *Deborah’s Daughters* 1). This Deborah is originally regarded as a unique, man-like woman who serves as a protector. In the nineteenth century, this female figure was referenced in campaigns to gain support for women’s “right to preach, lecture publicly, vote in elections, petition congress, hold political office, and enter the political sphere as men’s equals” (Schroeder, *Deborah’s Daughters* 139). Schroeder reports that Deborah’s biblical title in Judges 5.7 is “mother in Israel,” and this title alludes “to women who offered charity, hospitality, and spiritual leadership in their communities” (Schroeder, *Deborah’s Daughters* 159).

Therefore, this biblical figure, Deborah, exemplifies how women can both participate in public affairs and play the role of community caretaker. Schroeder’s interpretation of the political importance of the biblical Deborah offers insight into the character Deborah in *Cranford*. She is a paternalistic leader in her family and community, and she exerts more influence and offers more assistance than do other individuals in the community. Paralleling Schroeder’s description of the Deborah of Judges, Gaskell’s use of Deborah reflects a female paternalistic leader in a God-ordered structure to offer community assistance. The biblical Deborah symbolizes a woman’s right to participate in public affairs, although she does so by imitating patriarchal masculinity, and the Deborah of *Cranford* acts as the caretaker of the community, assuming the noble missions of guiding others and alleviating their pain within a hierarchical system.

Deborah’s contributions to and influence in Cranford are undeniable, and her importance within her community persists after her death, as revealed by the narrator, Mary, in the first two chapters. However, Deborah serves as a female paternalist who provides a patriarchal, masculine form of community care, and she is not the main focus of Gaskell’s novel. Paternalism involves hierarchical governance, with only the leading figure of the system being allowed to make decisions: “It is a matter of faith, not reason. The hero acts in our stead; his mission among us is to make the decisions that we have already proved incapable of making ourselves” (Brantlinger 73). The presence of such a paternal hero leads to silence and powerlessness in the other citizens of a class-ordered society that

may falsely appear to have a natural and harmonious order.

In *Cranford*, the loss of Deborah represents the loss of the Amazonian, hierarchical paternalism that Deborah symbolizes and “the waning of Cranford’s strict code of gentility” that Deborah sought to maintain (Auerbach 82). Deborah’s passing is significant because it creates a gap that is filled by different, more unconventional modes of community management in the town. *Cranford* comprises sixteen chapters, and Deborah is only alive in the first two. The remaining fourteen chapters present a post-Deborah era of community life in which the residents of Cranford cross the class and gender boundaries that characterize Victorian Britain.

Class Crossing and Gender Transgressing in the Community of Cranford

The female community that develops after Deborah’s death undergoes considerable changes with respect to female public identity, class, and gender. The self-reliance order of economy and class structure that Deborah maintains when she is alive is vanishing. Deborah’s absence creates a community with no fixed leader, and in her place are community members who continue to assume the paternalistic tasks of guiding and helping. Management of the female community in the post-Deborah era becomes increasingly fluid and dynamic, with no single leader, that is, no leader until the return of Peter Jenkyns, who is Deborah and Matty’s younger brother.

With regard to female public identity, after Deborah’s death, the female community of Cranford no longer grants the power of female governance to a single person. Instead, the community engages in co-management, with various community members assuming the responsibilities of guiding and helping others. For example, after a robbery occurs in chapters 10 and 11, the older women who co-manage Cranford hold a women’s meeting to discuss methods for preventing subsequent robberies. The ageing women who host this meeting, including Miss Pole, Mrs. Forrester, and Betty Barker, accept collective responsibility for ensuring town security. This group of co-managers ensures that all community members, including the male members, are cared for and protected and that their lives are comfortable. In this new community model, when a community member encounters difficulty, an emergency community meeting is held. Such a meeting is held to address Matty’s sudden bankruptcy, and at the meeting, the co-managers secretly solicit donations to provide Matty with financial assistance. These examples demonstrate that despite losing Deborah,

their strong paternalistic leader, the women of Cranford believe that they should shoulder the responsibility of managing public affairs and caring for the residents of the town. In the new system of community management, power becomes decentralized among the female members of the community.

This shift from a community with an authoritarian form of governance, similar to that of Sellon's Sisters of Mercy, toward a community of mutual assistance in which individual community members are empowered to participate in public affairs is crucial. It demonstrates the difference between a female-led community in which power is centralized versus a community in which power is distributed among several women; in the latter community, public participation by women is considered to be natural. This transformation of the management of the Cranfordian community demonstrates Gaskell's hopes of women being empowered to participate in public affairs without any fear of being met with restrictions or prejudice.

It is also in the period of co-management performed in the community that Matty's identity and class undergo changes as the community evolves. When Matty experiences bankruptcy, she refuses financial assistance from others, tries selling tea to earn a living, and endeavors to survive without assistance and starts a new mode of self-reliant life with a new class and national identity. She does not fear that she will be perceived as vulgar for engaging in a trade or that selling tea is beneath her class identity. Rather, she fears that she will be unable to effectively manage her business. During this time, Matty does not seek assistance from men or the government, indicating her wish to distance herself from truly managing business and accessing patriarchal or governmental power. Instead, Matty maintains her feminine power by selling imported tea. Because tea was a common beverage in Victorian middle-class families in Great Britain (Fromer 95), Matty's decision to sell imported tea symbolizes her acceptance of her Britishness, and her acting in a manner considered beneath her class by opening a tea shop symbolizes her willingness to sacrifice her station to overcome bankruptcy in a manner that enables her to retain control over her life.

With regard to class, although the post-Deborah community remains middle class and continues to practice the elegant economy, class distinctions are less prominent. This is exemplified by Matty having friendlier interactions with her servant Martha after the death of Deborah. In several of Gaskell's works, servants are treated as friends by their mistresses, and when a relationship between a servant and her mistress is one based on contract rather than friendship, then the mistress is portrayed as "morally suspect and vulgar rather than truly genteel" (Elliott 113). Elliott demonstrates this by analyzing Mrs. Forrester's interaction with her maid during a tea party she hosts in the first chapter in

Cranford (114). Although Mrs. Forrester pretends that she has not been working alongside her servant to prepare food for the tea party, her guests know that she has, and Mrs. Forrester knows that they know. Elliott interprets Mrs. Forrester's pretense as a form of "performance," as defined separately by Judith Butler and Marvin Carlson. In Butler's words, "performativity" occurs because one's gender is neither fixed nor changed through individual action; "rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (179). Carlson considers social performance to involve "recognition that our lives are structured according to repeated and socially sanctioned modes of behavior" (4). According to Butler and Carlson, "performativity," or "social performance," involves a sanctioned code of behaviors that one engages in to meet the expectations of one's social status. Mrs. Forrester's behaviors indicate that she wishes to maintain socially sanctioned class differentiations despite her financial difficulties. Although Mrs. Forrester and the women who attend her party are aware that her declining economic status prevents her from offering food that is expected from someone who is part of the middle class, Mrs. Forrester and the women pretend to be unaware of this and adhere to middle-class behavioral codes.

Mrs. Forrester's performance of gentility helps her maintain her status as a mistress despite becoming poor and losing her social status (Elliott 116). Gaskell's private letters and novels indicate that she believes the class distinction between servants and mistresses could be reinforced through social performance. However, these writings also indicate Gaskell believes that the relationship between servants and mistresses should be based on friendship rather than contract. In Elliott's studies investigating performance and friendship, she investigates the relationship between Matty and Martha, with the mistress and the servant protecting each other from the financial difficulties Matty experiences. In *Cranford* in general, social performance maintains the distinction between the middle and working classes (that is, between master and servant) that threatens to disappear as a result of the town's sluggish economic development.

Matty treats her maid Martha well, and prior to her financial difficulties, Matty, despite having initially refused, allows Martha's suitor to visit Martha. Matty tells Martha, "I did say you were not to have followers; but [. . .] I have no objection to his coming to see you once a week" (Gaskell, *Cranford* 56). Matty's acceptance leads Martha to admire her and feel grateful to her, indicating that when Matty does not continue to enforce conventional class distinctions, she gains support from her maid. Later, Matty suddenly receives a bank notice revealing that the Town and County Bank, where she keeps her money, "had stopped payment. Miss Matty was ruined" (Gaskell, *Cranford* 179). She faces

insolvency and cannot afford to maintain her comfortable life. Subsequently, Martha volunteers to pay for the ingredients to make a pudding that Matty enjoys but has stopped eating to save money. Matty is deeply touched upon seeing the pudding that Martha makes “in the most wonderful representation a lion couchant that was moulded” (Gaskell, *Cranford* 187). Martha refuses to leave Matty after her bankruptcy and offers to rent a room from her to enable her to generate additional income. This transformation of their relationship into one involving a financial contract symbolically disrupts the class dichotomy that is present when Deborah is alive, when the female leader exerts strict control over her servants. The interactions between Matty and Martha indicate that their master-servant relationship has changed into a more egalitarian employer-employee relationship in which Martha lives and works as ever but without receiving work payment and paying for her accommodation. Their interactions demonstrate that they feel strong concern and affinity for each other and that the community of Cranford is transitioning from a hierarchal to a classless, cooperative system.

With regard to gender, after Deborah's death, the community of women encounters financial challenges as a result of external circumstances and seeks support from men who previously lived in Cranford. Although the female community attempts to mitigate the influences of Matty's bankruptcy, they are unable to solve Matty's financial problem by themselves. Therefore, the women of Cranford and Mary ask two men who previously lived in the town to return to help with Matty's bankruptcy. These men are Mr. Smith, Mary's father, and Peter Jenkyns, Deborah and Matty's younger brother. Mr. Smith stays in Cranford for only a short time, and he takes stock of Matty's remaining property in a rational and practical manner. However, his words are harsh, and this elicits discomfort and anxiety in Matty and Mary. Within the story, Mr. Smith represents the combined threat of patriarchal hegemony and laissez-faire economics that govern the world outside of Cranford, and he is portrayed as an overbearing guest, disturbing the harmonious and self-sufficient life that the women of Cranford lead.

Peter, the other man asked to return to the town, stands in contrast to Mr. Smith. Peter helps Matty understand her present financial status, and by working with and accepting the female community in Cranford, he brings about a change in both Matty and the community at large. The community then enters into a new state of mutual cooperation with fewer gender-related restrictions. Peter's return to Cranford has a considerable influence on the economy, community, and gender expectations of the town. Peter, an imperial soldier and colonial plantation owner, solves the problem of female community

members being required to achieve self-sufficiency due to problems involving capitalist speculation. This change being brought about by such a man indicates that the women of the provincial town cannot remain isolated totally and that their lives must change with external changes, particularly with respect to their understanding of community management and gender roles.

Peter's participation in community affairs leads to the disappearance of the self-reliant and patriarchal community established when Deborah is alive. In addition, his gender fluidity, as exemplified by his occasionally wearing women's clothing in his past, presents a form of gender-based management for the female community. Since childhood, Peter has been fond of wearing women's clothing to tease his acquaintances and his sister Deborah, with Peter often dressing in Deborah's clothes and pretending to have a baby (Gaskell, *Cranford* 73-74). Peter's donning of women's clothing is dissonant with Victorian expectations for men and male leaders and is not accepted by his father and Deborah. In addition, Peter's refusal to "accept his role in [his father's] paternal narrative" (Miller 111) by attending a public school, Cambridge, and leading the clerical life that his father had planned for him contrasts with Deborah's masculine behavior.

Peter's father plans a path for him that would develop his social skills and socialization abilities as well as develop his sense of masculinity and self-confidence. In Victorian society, public schools were considered to be responsible for developing a boy's sense of masculinity, socialization ability, and sense of shared values (Honey xiv; Newsome 2). Through schooling, a boy's character was shaped into one that would be accepted by Victorian society. Peter's father likely wishes to shape his son's character to ensure it aligns with the mainstream Victorian expectations for men. However, Peter frequently wears women's clothing, defying this wish. Furthermore, this behavior "parodies" the feminine behavior that his sister Deborah does not exhibit and serves as a contrast to Deborah's "adoption of a masculine role" (Miller 112). Peter possesses "[g]enerosity, integrity, [and] concern for others" that Matty does (Huber 40). The femininity underlying Peter's wearing of women's clothing differs considerably with the strict Victorian ideals regarding gendered behavior and men and women belonging to separate spheres.

The organization of the chapters in *Cranford* seem to indicate that Peter's role is significant because he is caring for an ageing community. Peter's character is not revealed until Matty reads a letter in chapter 5. At this time, readers are informed of his running away from home and punishment for challenging gender ideologies and playing what was considered a disgraceful prank on his sister. Peter is mentioned again when he returns to Cranford in chapter 15, the second to last chapter of the novel. By the time he returns to Cranford, Peter's gender

fluidity and identity that he has had since childhood are precisely suited to the needs of the ageing town as it undergoes change. This enables Peter to gain recognition and support from the older women of Cranford. The patriarchal threat of a man's participation in the public affairs of the female community is weakened by these factors. He engages in active and humorous interactions with Matty and other members of the community and thereby successfully establishes a new social system of harmonious order in which untypical men such as himself are allowed to participate in the public affairs typically handled by the female community.

In *Cranford*, the community undergoes considerable transformation, which leads to the development of a unique utopian society. Initially, the female community is governed by Deborah, a woman who operates within a system of Victorian patriarchy and paternalistic hegemony. This version of the Cranfordian community was likely the most familiar to and easily accepted by the Victorian middle-class readers of the novel. As stated by Huber, "what could be a better 'cover' than a group discounted and derided by patriarchal culture?" (39). It is only behind the disguise of women minorities of spinsters, judged by Victorian standards of gender, that an experimental change can loosen the original patriarchal system. The utopian community slowly begins to evolve and challenges readers' understanding of class and gender dichotomies. In the final part of *Cranford*, Gaskell presents a novel form of female society in which community members are less concerned with maintaining class distinctions and members share the responsibility of handling public affairs with a man who does not adhere to gender-related codes of behavior. In doing so, the female community develops into a sustainable society that operates on the basis of mutual assistance.

Conclusion

Cranford was one of the frequently read books Gaskell chose with favor (*Letters* 747), and it presents a case in which the public identity, gender ideology, and class dichotomy of a community of middle-class women gradually evolves. The very fact that Cranford is a town ruled by women was revolutionary in Gaskell's time. As she admits in her letter to Marianne on July 13, 1851, society would need to undergo considerable change before exhibitions of female autonomy, such as that of Sellon's Sisters of Mercy, would be accepted (*Letters* 158). Because of this belief, Gaskell recognizes that many would likely object to a novel about a community of women. However, because the change that her utopian town undergoes is gradual, she is able to more effectively challenge

readers' beliefs regarding gender ideals. She creates a female community similar to those of many women's organizations in Victorian England in that it is under the patriarchal and paternalistic governance of a single woman, with power eventually being distributed to different members of the community, which empowers the women to participate in public affairs.

The utopian, female-led town of Cranford faces economic changes and therefore does not remain solely under the management of a single woman; the right to manage public affairs is shared with a gender-fluid man, establishing a community that is not confined by class and gender expectations. Community care and governance are co-managed, with the citizens of the community emphasizing reciprocal assistance and friendly interaction based on loose gender- and class-related codes of behavior. Through this novel, Gaskell uniquely presents both a change in the roles of women and men within their expected spheres and an experimental form of community governance in line with Victorian philosophers' beliefs regarding the need for a community of co-management and mutual care in the hope that her novel would slowly transform Victorian thought regarding women's roles.

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維多利亞社群的管理照顧： 伊麗莎白·蓋斯凱爾書信和 《克蘭福德鎮》中的女性社群

摘要

英國維多利亞時代的貧富差距因自由放任經濟而加劇，許多哲學家提出具有意識形態的解決窮困方案，聖公會未婚婦女姊妹會的成立也提供下層階層慈善援助。有別於男性哲學家常論及的父權社區關懷和改善，英國聖公會的婦女組織，如普里西拉·塞隆的慈悲修女會，在行動實踐中提供慈善關懷，並創建未婚婦女能夠參與非家庭領域內的公共事務來建立身分認同之社群。伊莉莎白·蓋斯凱爾的信件和小說表明了這些修女會的重要性。蓋斯凱爾在信中表示，她贊許塞隆的單身女性社區，讓女性有機會扮演除了當時社會所期待的妻子和母親之外的角色。此外，蓋斯凱爾的《克蘭福德鎮》講述了在女性領導和治理體系下的亞馬遜社區故事，在該體系中，年長婦女有權管理社區照顧；這部小說透過經濟轉型時期的小鎮女性所遭遇的問題和互動，來傳達作者對女性公共身份的想法和擔憂。小說亦呈現女性和男性在社區管理中所採用的策略，其中的管理最初是父權制的，最終因應社會變革，轉向具高度性別流動性的管理形式，並作為解決小鎮居民遇到的問題的一種方式。故事由黛博拉·詹金斯管理的獨裁和家長制社群生活開始，但隨著黛博拉去世後，階級和性別期望開始發生變化，社區的運作演變為合作式。透過這種轉變，蓋斯凱爾探討了性別認同、階級意識形態和社群事務參與等主題。

關鍵字：維多利亞時代、社群管理、女性社群、伊麗莎白·蓋斯凱爾、
《克蘭福德鎮》