Title of Paper: **CHALLENGING THE VICTORIAN PATRIARCHAL ETHOS: THE ROLE OF THE AMAZONS IN ELIZABETH GASKELL’S CRANFORD**

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Section: Articles
Date of Publication: March, 2014
Issue: Volume 2, Number 1

Abstract:

Quite popular throughout the nineteenth century, well known and loved by its Victorian readers, Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* has often been unfairly dismissed by literary critics for its apparent lack of structure and dull sentimental overtones. Even though the rise of feminist criticism in the 1960s did some justice to the author, it nevertheless continued to cast shadows on some of her literary work. For the militant feminist movement of the late twentieth century, *Cranford* was old-fashioned and a tributary to a strong, oppressive set of patriarchal values. More recently, the 2007 BBC production and its two-part sequel, *Return to Cranford*, broadcast in 2009, wronged Gaskell even more by presenting the viewer with a mélange of three texts (the novel and two short stories) forcibly re-articulated to add some romance into the mix. Thus, the aim of this paper is to re-contextualize and re-evaluate this Victorian novella with an eye to revealing the way in which the "genteel society" of Cranford struggles with gender stereotypes, fights male conventional claims to centrality and challenges the domestic ideology which bespeaks women’s submissiveness, frailty and ignorance.

Keywords: antagonism; conflict; gender roles; masculinity; otherness; polarization; *Cranford*; Mrs. Gaskell

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**Introduction**

For centuries, the mythical race/tribe of warrior-women, the Amazons, has bewildered and fascinated many generations of writers and, more recently, it has stirred the imagination of dozens of dubious ‘artists’ and film-makers. Despite the contemporary use and abuse of the theme, the Amazons have never ceased to preserve a certain aura of aloofness and mystique constantly nurtured by their emblematic alterity and, consequently, by their ambivalent identity.

In the classical Greek culture, many stories were in circulation on these warrior-like women and “the frequency with which these belligerent women were visually represented also gives an impression of the important role played by the Amazons in the Greek imagination.” (Blok 1) Despite their transgressional status i.e. the Amazons stand outside the traditional norms of the Greek gender system, these female heroes have succeeded in capitalizing on their promiscuity and gynocentricity (or, to a certain extent, gyno-eccentricity) up to the point of creating an archetype and, more recently, a post-modern gender stereotype soon to evolve into a pop cultural phenomenon (consider only the popularity of Xena, the Warrior Princess and of her friend, Gabrielle).

Thus, “the earliest strand of story-telling in which the Amazons can be found” (x), Josine Blok observes, is the Homeric epic. The *Iliad* contains two references, the earliest mentions of the Amazons in Greek literature, to “Amazones antianeirai”*: ‘Amazons equivalent to men’, ‘men’s equals’ (according to Blok) and ‘men-doubles’ (“semblable au mâle, et hostile à l’homme”) according to Detienne 1977a.85-86 quoted in Carnes (18). The Homeric phraseology, itself ambiguous (the word *Amazones* has a masculine form ending whereas the epithet ‘antineirai’ is feminine), encodes two important ‘identity tags’. First of all, the identity of the Amazons is strictly referential; they can only be identified through association to their male counterparts, a hardly surprising fact considering the subordinate role played by women in Ancient Greece. Secondly, the Amazons are simultaneously described as men’s peers or men’s likenesses and hating men. At first glance, this may seem paradoxical but it ceases to be self-contradictory if we consider it carefully. All translations have emphasized the essentially equal or equivalent nature of the Amazons to men. At no point were the Amazons said (mostly pejoratively) to be mannish or to simply copy men’s conduct. In fact, by granting them a status equivalent or similar to men, the Amazons were endowed with the prerequisites necessary for a worthy opponent eligible to challenge the Greek hero. Henceforth, the Amazons will often be referred to as fierce warriors, extremely skilled equestrians and hunters, in short fearsome enough opponents for the Greek heroes (Bellerophonites, Herakles etc.) to make their reputation by confronting and slaying them.²

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1 The prefix ‘anti’ is highly ambiguous. It can mean ‘equal to’ or ‘equivalent to’ or ‘a match for’ and, conversely, it can also mean ‘opposite to’ or ‘antagonistic to’. Hence, the paradoxical nature of the Amazons who are said to be at one and the same time equal and antagonistic to men.

2 No matter how formidable enemies were the Amazons thought to be in ancient Greek culture, they had their share of detractors. According to Lefkowitz (qtd. in Meeder), Lysias, an Athenian author and orator,
The Victorian approach to the Amazons’ myth

For many centuries after its first literary and visual manifestations in classical antiquity, the myth of the Amazons continued to baffle the minds of many and in far wide-raging contexts. In the nineteenth century, the Amazons’ professed refusal to conform to both gender and racial stereotypes took on new meanings. As Adams has keenly pointed out, the continual fear and fascination with women warriors led to the creation of a large and diverse body of Victorian colonial literature and visual art, “in which the Amazon warrior appears as a trope and archetypal commonplace.” Thus, we encounter the Amazons in ethnographic accounts, we come upon them in graphic representations printed in satirical periodicals (Punch magazine), we are invited to read about them in various accounts of live exhibitions and performances, and we finally get to meet them in literary texts as well. But we are far from recognizing them because the ‘lifestyle’ of the proto-Amazons, always geared to fighting and waging war, has dramatically changed. The exclusively martial character which the classical Greek imagery endowed them with was substituted for the more genteel and restrained conduct of Cranfordian nature. To be an Amazon in the Victorian Age would require a different set of qualities and an appropriate milieu for their manifestation.

“In 1855”, as Hilary Schor notes “the remarkable Barbara Leigh Smith organized the first feminist committee, writing the pamphlet A Brief Summary in Plain Language of the most important Laws Concerning Women and then submitting it through a friend to the Law Amendment Society which drafted a resolution and a petition3 supporting the reform of the laws governing married women’s property; laws which kept married women from owning property, acting as independent economic agents, protecting their wages or writing wills without their husband’s permission” (qtd. in Brantlinger and Thesing 175). Property, everything a woman owned at the time of her marriage, earned or inherited, belonged entirely to her husband who was free to dispose of it however he pleased. Without ownership, women were supposed to succumb to housewifery and remain confined to the sanctity of the domestic habitat. Consequently, the Victorian patriarchal ethos assigned women the same conventional roles as the Athenian society did; they were supposed to act as obedient and dutiful daughters and wives, give birth to legitimate children and bring them up, nurse the ill family members; in short cater for the happiness, comfort and well-being of their families.

was highly disdainful of the Amazons’ allegedly prowess in battle: “When matched with our Athenian ancestors they [the Amazons] appeared in all the natural timidity of their sex, and showed themselves less women in their external appearance than in their weakness and cowardice.”

3 Although Elizabeth Gaskell was never actively involved in the women’s rights movement, in 1856 she was among the other famous signees (together with Jane Carlyle, Elizabeth Barrett Browning etc.) of the petition endorsing the Married Women’s Property Act despite her pessimism that no bill could actually protect a wife’s property.
It becomes evident that female identity has never lost its referentiality and has continued to revolve around (I use the word in its double meaning: ‘centre upon’ and ‘move around’) a ubiquitous father figure. Hence, it is at one and the same time centered on and key to its immutable point of reference i.e. the dominant male identity: father, husband, brother just as it is moving around it, capable of changing position but only within a fixed system of constant referentiality. The early Victorian patriarchal society had relied on this system of gender dependence to avoid the threat of female anomie. Unless women are under the constant guidance and surveillance of their male counterparts, they are bound to deviate from their social and moral prescribed paths and eventually they will cease to cope with their carefully designed roles. This, in turn, would lead to isolation and mutiny, and, what is more, to a highly perilous reversal of referentiality, which posited a serious threat to the existing patriarchal society. In other words, women might tend to segregate and take the lead and by denouncing and devaluing the established patriarchal norms, bring about the decay and demise of the lawful society.

Therefore, from a patriarchal point of view, the Amazonian challenge of the nineteenth century was less associated to an open confrontation between ‘equal’ or ‘equivalent’ opponents and more to an anomalous /unnatural rendering of female identity. For the female-rights supporters and writers (C. Brontë or E. Gaskell), the Amazonian challenge represented a means of voicing their inadequacy in a society which refused to acknowledge their ‘equal’ existence:

What is a woman’s proper sphere of duty? How can a woman of passion find her equal in a society which disapproves of strong women and their (romantic) ardor? Can a woman find her own way in patriarchal culture without inheritance, property, and the legal rights denied married women in particular? (178)

**How have the ladies of Cranford ‘gone-Amazon’?**

For Elizabeth Gaskell’s Cranford ladies, the last question does not seem to elicit too much inquiry, at least at the beginning. According to the story, they have achieved a kind of financial independence, atypical of ordinary women, coupled with some sort of social and administrative self-governance. Moreover, as most of them are aging, their ‘romantic ardor’ has slackened as well. Unsurprisingly, the interests of these ‘quite sufficient’ ladies are far from the hustle and bustle of both capitalist enterprise, epitomized by “the great neighbouring commercial town of Drumble” (3), and romantic adventure. To what extent have the ladies of Cranford managed to fulfill their Amazonian dream is revealed from the very first lines of the novel by Mary Smith, the young female narrator:

In the first place, Cranford is in possession of the Amazons; all the holders of houses, above a certain rent, are women. If a married couple
come to settle in town, somehow the gentleman disappears; he is either fairly frightened to death by being the only man in the Cranford evening parties, or he is accounted for by being with his regiment, his ship, or closely engaged in business all the week in the great neighbouring commercial town of Drumble, distant only twenty miles on a railroad. In short, whatever does become of the gentlemen, they are not at Cranford. (3)

Apparently, the ladies of Cranford, in the manner of true Victorian Amazons, have secured their possession of the town by extending their ownership / occupancy over all its important estates. Under the patriarchal property customs of the day this would represent an unusual and, at the same time, disquieting situation. Cranford is not simply inhabited by the Amazons; these remarkable women have managed to take this small provincial town into their command. As for men, they are deemed absent not because they are deeply hated or have turned extinct after some sort of heroic confrontation with them (in the tradition of the ancient Amazonomachy); the reason for their absence is aptly identified by one of these ladies: “A man (...) is so in the way in the house!” (3) So, uprooted from their traditionally established milieu (which consecrated property as an exclusively masculine appanage), men have willingly left the premises and agreed to relegate their sense of possession to their ‘regiment’, their ‘ship’, or an atomized and distant Drumble. They have been dislocated from their positions of authority and denied immutable referentiality by associating them with things in motion: the regiment, the ship or the fluctuating money-driven world of Drumble.

Nevertheless, Gaskell, who was not a fetishized champion of women’s rights as most of the feminists today would have liked her to be, was not willing to let her Amazons indulge in their easily gained independence. Consequently, she smartly allows for another reading of the first sentence, which reverses the relationship between our Amazon society and the town which ‘housed’ them. To say that “Cranford is in possession of the Amazons” may also imply that Cranford, like some sort of ‘old curiosity shop’, exhibits its collection of Amazons as if they were simple artifacts put on display for the public to see and marvel at their oddity. This objectification of the Amazons leaves no doubt as to Gaskell’s flexibility of judgment and witty irony, her capacity of remaining detached from both the constraints of the ancient myth and those of contemporary mystification. In other words, she mocks both the residual character of a distant mythological past (Amazones antianeirai) and the Victorian commodification of the myth i.e. the transformation of an iconic message into a palatable and easy-accessible object of desire.

If we accept that the novel has been conceived from the very beginning on two reversible levels, then it will not seem inappropriate to ask ourselves: how have the ladies of Cranford ‘gone-Amazon’? Was it their own desire of social and financial independence which prompted men to leave Cranford, or should
absentee men (fathers, husbands, brothers) be considered responsible for their unwanted self-governance?

The critical literature on Cranford has stressed the polarization of the novel without necessarily looking into the reasons which led to this phenomenon. For Elizabeth Langland (118):

Cranford the novel and Cranford the place are, quite simply, worlds structured by women’s signifying systems: calling and visiting, teas and dinners, domestic economies, charitable activities, and management of servants. Cranford, with its cultural capital, contrasts explicitly with the neighbouring city of Drumble, a world marked by expanding material capital based on factories and production, money and investments.

Indeed, Cranford represents a closed female society carefully organized around a set of strict social practices and a binding code of linguistic propriety and decorum; whoever happens to come to Cranford is promptly informed of the “regulations for visiting and calls” (4), the amount of time given to each (never to exceed a quarter of an hour) or of the appropriate ‘eatable’ or ‘drinkable’ refreshments to be served at evening entertainments. For the ladies of Cranford “economy was always ‘elegant’ and money-spending always ‘vulgar and ostentatious’” (6) which, by extension, led to the axiomatic belief that “to be a man was to be ‘vulgar’” (10). In contrast to the professed ‘gentility’ of Cranford, the commercial business town of Drumble — with its insolvent Town and County Bank which pauperizes Miss Matty — epitomizes the world of rapacious tradesmen and unscrupulous bankers fallen prey to the lures of Mammon. Whereas the female world is clustered, cooperative and philanthropic (when Miss Matty is on the verge of bankruptcy, all the other ladies secretly pool their resources to help her out) the male world is individualistic, combative and unaccommodating. And it is precisely this lack of assistance from their male counterparts, which may elucidate how the ladies of Cranford have ‘gone Amazon’.

At the opening of the novella, we are led to believe that the society of the Amazons is much larger than it actually is; in fact, as Malcom Pittock has noticed “the ‘Amazons’ consist of half-dozen or so women: Miss Jenkyns and Miss Matty (though the former dies during the course of the novel), Mrs. Forrester, Miss Pole, the Honourable Mrs. Jamieson and those who are tolerated though not of genteel birth: Miss Betty Barker and Mrs. Fitz-Adam” (100-101), whom we can refer to as Amazons of second rank. Two of the Amazons of the upper echelon, Mrs. Forrester and the Honourable Mrs. Jamieson, are childless widows who have been unhappily married; although not much is said about Mrs. Forrester’s married years, there is a hint to her living a “not very happy or fortunate life” (147) while the Honourable Mr. Jamieson (Mrs. Jamieson’s late husband) is remembered to have drunk “a good deal and occasioned [his wife] much uneasiness.” (144)
Of special interest is the relationship with male authority experienced by the two spinster sisters: Miss Deborah and Mathilda (Matty) Jenkyns. Deborah's relationship with male authority is highly prescriptive and idolatrous. Her role models throughout her life were her father, the Late Rector, and Dr Johnson whose pompous epistolary style she diligently copies. From the former, she has inherited a code of severe patriarchal values and some sort of callous insensitivity to the misery of her own siblings e.g. she and her father prevented young Miss Matty from marrying Holbrook because he was considered to be not 'good enough' for a rector's daughter and eventually the maiden will end up a spinster herself. From the latter, she has acquired a stately and grand pathos in writing Latinized pastiches and a ceremonial gravity tantamount to elitist snobbery.

As for her sister, Miss Matty, she has experienced both the coercive and unemotional facets of male authority. First of all, when young and with serious prospects of marriage, she has been dissuaded from accepting Mr. Holbrook's proposal by both her stern father and highbrow sister. After both her staunch guardians had died, she was left adrift between an old heart-stricken and half reproachful bachelor, Mr. Holbrook, ("I should not have known you!"), himself soon to die in Paris, and a self-exiled brother whose infantile mutiny against his father has driven him away from the rest of his family. Now, it is well known that in the Victorian Age a very special connection existed between women and their brothers. Sisters had to treat their brothers as they would treat their future husbands. Women were dependent on their male family members as the brother's affection might secure their future in case they did not get married. Peter Jenkyns's self-imposed banishment and Deborah's death (Miss Matty's surrogate brother) left Mathilda with no other choice but to turn 'Amazon' in order to cope with the effects of her elder sister's ill-judged financial investments and the ominous threat of bankruptcy. Not even Peter's long-awaited return to Cranford and the subsequent easing of the financial burden could fully resolve the tension between male and female relationships.

Afraid that Peter's invitation to Mrs. Jamieson to patronize one of Signor Brunoni's magician shows would portend Peter's intention to marry the old widow, Miss Pole alarmingly exclaims: "If Peter should marry, what would become of poor dear Miss Matty!" (192) Thus, the prospect of Peter's marriage (a false alarm as it finally turns out to be) would again throw Miss Matty into an 'Amazonian' condition. As to male insensitivity and inconsiderateness, Peter's words towards his hapless sister, loudly uttered by the end of the novel, are more than telling:

I could have sworn you were on the high road to matrimony when I left England that last time! If anybody had told me you would have lived and died an old maid then, I should have laughed in their faces. (...) Well, that's long years ago; more than half a lifetime! and yet it seems like yesterday! I don't know a fellow I should have liked better as a
Two instances of otherness: the Amazonian Queen and the Oriental Drag-Queen

Whatever prompted the ladies of Cranford to go ‘Amazon’, their decisiveness in proving themselves different and independent has resulted either in some sort of muffled opposition against “the invasion of their territories by a man and a gentleman” (6) or in a tacitly agreed “distaste of mankind” (10) as a whole. Among them, the only one fully ‘equipped’ to stand out and lead this ‘genteel’ company is Deborah Jenkyns, the strong-minded “doyenne of the Cranford society.” (Pittock 98) Even if she is alive only in the first two chapters of the novella, her influence can be felt throughout the remaining fourteen as an iconic image of unflinching authority: “Miss Jenkyns had so long taken the lead in Cranford, that, now she was gone, they hardly knew how to give a party.” (30)

Inspired by the Hebrew prophetess whose name she bears, Deborah falls naturally into the dominant group position as Queen of the Amazons⁴. She is the one to whom the other ladies always look up to for guidance (although the matters requiring counseling are nothing but trivial); she is the one who, armed with a sharp Johnsonian passage from Rasselas is ready to charge Captain Brown and skirmish the Dickensian cavalry of the Pickwick Papers; and, finally, when poor Captain Brown is killed in the railway accident, she is the one to put on her headgear, “that hybrid bonnet, half-helmet, half-jockey cap” (23) and thus clad, like a ‘dragoon’ as Mary describes her, accompany her former literary opponent to his grave. Ironically, the conflict between Deborah and Captain Brown, each of them championing their literary icons, Samuel Johnson and Charles Dickens, is the only open confrontation between the female and male signifying systems. But against the ancient versions of the myth, the Amazon warrior is not the challenger. Instead of opposing the patriarchal rules and conventions overbearing the feminine ethos, Deborah prides herself on observing those very principles which acknowledge male domination. Her “strict code of gentility” has become a means by which her dead father, the Late Rector continues to rule the community of women as a “dominating patriarch” (Tarratt qtd. in Snowman 88) while her combative stance in defense of Dr. Johnson’s superiority is indicative of her blind subordination to patrimonial authority.

The real challenger in the literary battle is Captain Brown. He is the one who “threatens to dislodge the uniform idiom of gentility in favour of Dickensian polyphony” (Knezevic 107) and by introducing linguistic variety into the lethargic world of Cranford reanimate and fluidify it. Again in a reversed reading of the myth, Captain Brown is the varvaros who does not speak the language of ‘gentility’ and who attempts to vulgarize the tastes of the community. The fact

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⁴ According to Bishop Donald R. Downing, in Hebrew, “Deborah’s name means ‘Speaking bee’, one who is eloquent and speaks as to hum, one who sits among a swarm of bees and rules the beehive.” (61)
that he dies a half-anecdotal and half-heroic death (unmindful of the train approaching and too absorbed in reading the latest number of the *Pickwick Papers* he is felled by it not before he manages to save a child from suffering a similar death) is not without significance.

First of all, by combining in the episode of Captain Brown’s tragic demise two metonymical elements of progressive and, at the same time, intrusive masculinity i.e. the train which threatens to allow the rumble of the new and speedy world of Drumble to reach Cranford and the *Pickwick Papers* with its all-men club and dissonant polyphony, Gaskell makes the soon-to-die Deborah the concession of seeing her opponent killed by those things he praised the most. Surely, as Rae Rosenthal has keenly pointed out:

Had Brown been a benign invasion, he would have been allowed to remain; instead, Brown is eliminated and for good reason – he is dangerous, as Deborah Jenkyns knows instinctively. Accordingly, after his death, Deborah quickly assumes governance over Brown’ daughters, conveniently burying one and marrying off another, so that Cranford is as though the Browns never existed. As a result, Cranford is once again ‘in possession of the Amazons, and Deborah can now leave her sister, Matty, a legacy intact. (qtd. in Donawerth and Kolmerten 85)

Moreover, the saving of ‘a little lass’ before the occurrence of the tragic event serves as a redemptive coda for Captain Brown’s short life among the Cranfordian Amazons and as a promise that the future of the female warrior community was secured. Despite his ‘revolutionary’ outbursts, Captain Brown ends up being a too timid opponent for Deborah who, on her deathbed, was still convinced that “poor Captain Brown was killed for reading – that book by Mr. Boz, you know – ‘Old Poz’” (28). Hence, the only two things that Captain Brown truly accomplished were throwing Deborah into a state of mental confusion and tickling the old spinsters’ appetite, who did not eschew to read and enjoy Dickens’s novels but “made sure they keep quiet about it, publicly still paying homage to the dictates of taste issued by Deborah Jenkyns.” (Langland 109)

Quite surprisingly for some of her contemporary and modern readers, instead of making ‘poor’, ‘honest’ Captain Brown, Deborah’s successor, Elizabeth Gaskell has preferred an Oriental Peter, “who loves performing identities and takes on racial difference.” (Langland 126) Peter’s transvestism is the first key to opening the Victorian puzzle:

Peter, who prefers dressing as a woman, announces thereby his identity and position in society, just as his sister Deborah, with her ‘helmet’ cap, declares herself her father’s logical heir. (ibidem)

Peter appropriates the status of the Other to destabilize social and gender encodings and by doing that he allows himself smooth access into the ladies’ genteel society. The prank he plays upon his father, Reverend Jenkyns, shatters
the solidity of the patriarchal edifice. His appearance in Deborah's clothes nursing the likeness of a baby and walking into the garden while a small inquisitive crowd was peeping through the rails is a blow at both Victorian morality which espoused sexual restraint (since the baby would be illegitimate) and intolerant patriarchal ethos. His father's amour proper, which Peter satirizes, takes its blind revenge, though as Pittock observes "the proximate cause of his rage is his [father's] disappointment when he discovers that the crowd are not looking, as he thought, at his prize rhododendron." (18) Having been publicly shamed by his unthoughtful son, the enraged father "tore his [Peter's] clothes off his back – bonnet, shawl, gown, and all – (...) and before all the people he lifted up his cane, and flogged Peter." (65) Again the metonymical loading of this episode is significant not only for encoding and antagonizing female and male identities ('bonnet', 'shawl', 'gown' vs. 'cane') but also for affirming masculine superiority over feminine identity and the coercive power of the first over the latter.

Peter's withdrawal to India after his humiliating public chastisement, functions as the second key to the story's denouement. By associating Peter with the mysteries of the East and by raising him from the status of 'poor Peter' to the dignity of 'Aga Jenkyns', Gaskell manages to create a corresponding Amazonian identity for unaccommodated male characters. In other words, were there to have been a land for male Amazons that, in Gaskell's imagination, would have corresponded to the mysterious, magical, disquieting realm of India. In addition, Peter's former impersonation of stern Deborah Jenkyns, despite being a carnivalesque rendering of female identity, functions as a sign foretelling Peter's succession to the lead of the Amazons. Thus, having experienced 'otherness' under its twofold form: as gender ambivalence and Oriental exoticism, Peter Jenkyns can subtly fill in the position left vacant by the death of his elder sister. And he does not need either Dr. Johnson or Dickens to provide him with a supporting narrative voice for he has his own stories to tell and his own fictional personae to convey. Unsurprisingly, the ladies of Cranford think of him as the "arrival from India" who tells "more wonderful stories than Sinbad the Sailor" (211) and it is this cumulative eccentricity and exceptionality which eventually brings "Peace to Cranford."

**Conclusions**

Despite its seemingly militant idealism, Elizabeth Gaskell's Cranford is not a fictionalized feminist manifesto. To view the Cranford ladies as a bunch of feminist activists campaigning for women's rights or subversively infiltrating the mighty patriarchal citadel would be far-fetched. These women are not overtly at war with the patriarchal culture and its expectations. Theirs is a war of resistance against dehumanizing industrial capitalism "that seeks to stabilize meaning and value in productivity, profit and use" (Langland 122) and assigns progress as its ultimate goal. Furthermore, theirs is a war of resistance against those rigid gender encodings which make both sexes equally vulnerable to their
alleged idiosyncrasies (see Captain Brown’s death in the railway accident or Peter’s flogging after assuming Deborah’s identity).

In fact, Gaskell’s solution to the fundamental war between sexes is not the substitution of female for male superiority as radical feminists would have liked. To this end, Mrs. Gaskell plays again with ambiguity when she makes Deborah, “who would have despised the idea of women being equal to men,” say: “Equal indeed! she knew they were superior.” (17) (they? which one: men or women?) Hence, by effacing gender boundaries and allowing her characters to assume different gender roles (Deborah Jenkyns as the Amazons’s Queen and Peter Jenkyns as the Oriental Drag Queen) Gaskell emphasizes the fluidity and mutability of gender identity. And it is precisely this openness overriding gender polarities which functions in the end as a medium of reconciliation in the eternal war of the sexes.

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