Wisconsin Read: *North and South*

I was going through my Elizabeth Gaskell file in preparation for our recent Madison Group discussion and found the following 1996 write-up by my Mother. Since Suzy Clarkson Holstein provided the impetus for the Milwaukee group to read *North and South* the first time, I asked her to follow up this initial article with an updated essay. Thanks Suzy!

— Liz Philosophos Cooper

**North and South**

By Joan Philosophos

The Milwaukee book group met on April 18 for a lively discussion of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* led by Marilyn Flaig. Suzy Clarkson Holstein whet our appetite for Gaskell when she spoke to us about her. Enthusiasm was very high for this largely undiscovered author (by us). One of our members, Thelma Greene, enjoyed *N&S* so much that she read four other Gaskell’s before our meeting. She spoke so favorably of them that we decided to read *Wives and Daughters* next year.

*North and South* contrasts the rural, agrarian culture of southern England with the industrial life in northern England exemplified by Manchester, as well as the urban, vacuous elements of London. Gaskell also looks at male and female roles. She created in Margaret Hale a strong, intelligent, and admirable heroine. Like Jane Austen’s heroines, Margaret has to grow and mature. She must lose her inaccurate illusions, rid herself of prejudices, and get to know herself and others. Margaret is a serious woman in the manner of Dorothea Brooke and Maggie Tulliver from George Eliot’s pen.

It often seems that Jane Austen’s motto is “Know thyself.” Gaskell’s motto is, “Know one another.” She believed that communication between individuals could bridge gaps such as those between classes. John Thorton is not of the same class as Margaret. In 1854 when the novel was written such matters were very important. Gaskell does not think class distinctions are as separating as most people did then nor does she share the typical views of that time about trade and work. She looks forward to more current attitudes about character, work, education, and human nature.

The two sides of industry and labor unions are both presented with balance. There can be tyranny on either side just as there can be right and good people on both sides. Owners and workers should have much in common, but in 1854 they did not always realize it. We still see the same in 1996. Both industry and labor unions can exploit but Gaskell also points out how the British Army and Navy could exploit people on their service. She looks at authority, tyranny, individualism, rebellion, loyalty, and repression, as we see her characters play these themes out.

The novel has many other interesting characters. Margaret’s father, Mr. Hale is a clergyman who gives up his living for his principles. Mr. Bell, Margaret’s godfather, is a counterpoint to her father and becomes in many ways her “real” father. Mr. Higgins is a factory worker with leadership skills and strong beliefs. His daughter, Betsy, is a victim of working conditions at that time. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Thorton, the two mothers, although from different backgrounds are...
first and foremost mothers and similar in most ways. Edith, Margaret’s cousin, in contrast to
Margaret is simply an ornamental woman.

In Jane Austen’s novels society does not change; it seems very stable. Gaskell’s society is in
contrast to that. Many things seem to be changing and as readers we expect Margaret and John
Thorton to change and improve their community. Gaskell firmly believes in progress and does
not look back nostalgically. She has a sense of humor but not the sparkling wit of our Jane. Both
give us happy endings of hope and promise.
A reading of the notes following the novels impress on one how well read Gaskell’s original
audience was. They know mythology, religion, and literature better than the reading public today
does. North and South is a book to be recommended to anyone who wants a good read. An added
bonus is that the reader will be left with interesting ideas to contemplate.

Austen and Gaskell Or
Would Emma Try to Match Up Her
Father and Miss Matty?
By Suzy Clarkson Holstein

When I began graduate school in English 30 years ago, I
had never heard of Elizabeth Gaskell. However, Dr. Ruth
Yeazell, a professor with an excellent reputation, was
offering a seminar on "Austen and Gaskell," so I signed
up and hoped for the best. That class not only introduced
me to a delightful "new" writer, but it also became the
impetus for my dissertation. During the course, the
connections we began to tease out between the 18th
century Austen and the Victorian Gaskell fascinated me
and propelled me into further research on the latter.
Gaskell's canon is not much more extensive than
Austen's. Yet if one reads Gaskell's short stories and novellas as well as her novels, one might
be surprised at the variety in tone and subject matter. I sometimes think of the fable of the six
blind men trying to describe an elephant, each holding on to a separate part of the animal as if it
were the whole. So a reader of Gaskell who begins with "Cranford" finds a fond portrait of a
vanishing past, tinged with both amusement and longing. But those who first encounter Gaskell
through North and South or (Mary Barton) meet an earnest exploration of British social problems
in the 1840s. The full spectrum also includes Sunday school tales, ghost stories, vividly
mournful stories of lost love and blighted lives, as well historical romance.

What, then, is the basis for a connection to Austen? Perhaps more importantly, what intrinsic
interest does Gaskell's work arouse on its own merits? The first question has several fairly
specific answers; the latter is, of course, much more a matter of personal taste, but I will try to
provide a few suggestions and, I hope, encourage you to continue the exploration on your own.

Many readers have noted the structural similarities between Pride and Prejudice and North
and South: the contrasting principles suggested in the titles are carried through by the initially antagonistic couple in each novel. Each man and each woman must overcome their preliminary repugnance towards the values represented by his or her eventual mate, and each couple comes to represent an ideal synthesis of those opposing positions. Yet I am more drawn to the other types of links between the two writers. The common ground they inhabit also helps illuminate the important differences between them. That is, seeing their convergence prepares us to appreciate their divergence.

"Cranford," especially, has often been recognized for its indebtedness to Austen's focus and style. The village is inhabited by characters Austen would have certainly recognized as familiar types, as those of you who viewed the two recent series on Masterpiece Theatre probably noted. ("Cranford" and "Return to Cranford") As creators of those series perceived, other Gaskell works also present characters who would feel at home in Cranford. Thus, the series integrated some of those other stories and novellas into the script: most notably, "My Lady Ludlow" and "Mr. Harrison's Confessions." (Therefore, if you open up "Cranford" to read expecting to find all the plots and subplots that were on television, you may be disappointed! And in a purely trivial side note, I was pleased with myself when I scanned my old reading notes recently and found "very Cranford-like" included in my description of both those other works from when I first read them in the 80's).

Gaskell's gently humorous treatment of her characters might also remind readers and viewers of Austen, although the wit usually has different tones for the two writers. We see, for example, that Miss Matty and Emma's father share similar sentiments about marriage: "'Marry' said. Miss Matty once again. 'Well! I never thought of it. Two people that we know going to be married. It's coming very near! . . . One does not know whose turn may come next. Here, in Cranford, poor Lady Glenmire might have thought herself safe,' said Miss Matty, with a gentle pity in her tones" (166).* Matty's attitude toward marriage is more ambivalent than the quotation indicates, but this suggestion of marriage as some sort of infectious epidemic one must protect loved ones against echoes Mr. Woodhouse's fretful pleas: "'pray do not make any more matches, they are silly things, and break up one's family circle grievously'" (44). His laments for "poor Miss Taylor" are partly self-pity, of course, but he and Matty are clearly kindred spirits in this matter.

As I watched the recent PBS production of Emma following on the heels of the "Cranford" series, I again noted more of the shared space of the authors. Gaskell chooses a different social class for her central focus, but Mrs. and Miss Bates might be quite comfortable as major actors in Cranford (both the book and the village). Indeed, Austen treats Mr. Woodhouse and the Bates ladies much as Gaskell treats almost all her mildly flawed characters: with gentle, only slightly mocking affection. Miss Bates garrulousness, like Mrs. Barker's decision to dress her poor cow in flannel after a fall into the Cranford lime pit, is simultaneously ridiculous and understandable, given the women's circumstances. Austen, of course, often skewers foolish or
pompous characters sharply: one need only look to the Eltons for examples in *Emma*. Perhaps only in *Wives and Daughters* does Gaskell create a character who would fit into that part of Austen's spectrum: Molly's stepmother Hyacinth. Throughout most of her writings, Gaskell's undergirding principle seems to be that to understand all is to forgive all. Readers of Austen find, I think, a different disposition in her works.

Further, when we examine the trajectories of the main characters in some of the two writer's works, we find what I believe to be the authors' most important connection as well as their most striking difference. In Austen's last two completed novels especially, the heroine begins to confront the insecurities of her seemingly stable world and her own lack of control over that world. For most of her novel, Emma labors under the delusion that she can shape and direct the lives of others. Although she is stripped of that illusion by the end of the work, she nevertheless remains firmly planted in a completely secure and traditional world. In *Persuasion*, however, that secure order has all but vanished. The patriarchal estate, the symbol of the inherited security, has been lost to Anne. The novel, then, presents her character's response to such uncertainty. While she does not regain the world of the estate, Anne is granted a second chance at happiness with Captain Wentworth.

By contrast, almost all of the women of Cranford find themselves in the situation Austen heroines glimpse only as a potential fate. Whether or not the residents of Cranford have been married, most have very limited financial resources and no land, and instability lurks behind every potential crisis. They have power only over very small social decisions, and thus decisions that seem comically overwrought to readers represent the women's only chance to exert any influence in the world. In Austen, such characters as the Dashwood sisters and the Bennett sisters (among others) face such futures without the intervention of fortunate marriages.

The renewed proposal of Wentworth and the traditional comedic ending of union through marriage clearly sets up the distinction between Austen's work and many of Gaskell's shorter works, including "Cranford." In that novella, there is no second proposal, no conclusion rife with marriages. Miss Matty loses her suitor to family pride, in a case very similar to Anne's. (One could also place Harriet Smith here if one substitutes "Emma's pride" for "family pride.") But unlike Captain Wentworth (and Robert Martin), Mr. Holbrook dies before he can renew his suit to Miss Matty. The novella ends with a party, but with no new marriages. The lack of young (or old) heroines marrying in Cranford maintains the stasis of the village and moves the novella away from a traditional resolution.

As readers and viewers, we undoubtedly crave closure, and we revel in resurrections and second chances. The recent PBS series made a few telling alterations in Gaskell's work, some of which create more drama and appeal to these desires. The changes also provide Miss Matty with more power and influence that she has in the novella and transform Mary Smith (the narrator) into a published author. While Miss Matty demonstrates bravery and integrity in the novella, she does not
organize the women to accept a new rail line. The ambiguous embrace of progress, symbolized in the production by the railroad, is absent in this Gaskell work, although it is a theme of some of her other novels. Further, the television version of "Cranford" allows Captain Brown a major role as an agent of change, both public and private, while in the novella he dies in the second chapter, "killed by them nasty, cruel railroads"(55) as he saves a child's life. Therefore, while the novella does end with Peter's (not Matty's) cleverly planned entertainment that reunites Cranford, Captain Brown is of course not present and Miss Matty is not tearfully reunited with Jem and baby Matilda (in Gaskell's work, Martha does not die in childbirth and the entire family remains in Cranford throughout). The alterations made for the screenplay ultimately produce a more conventional comedic form, pushing us into the future with marriage and rebirth. By contrast, the novella's tone is more elegiac: the Cranford that Mary Smith loves will certainly fade away. One scene from the book that has always stood as emblematic for me occurs as Mary tries to help her friend preserve her carpet: "Oh, the busy work Miss Matty and I had in chasing sunbeams as they fell . . . on the carpet. . . . We spread newspapers over the places and lo! in a quarter of an hour the sun had moved and was blazing away on a fresh spot: and down again we went on our knees to alter the position of the newspapers" (53). Mary will chase the sunbeams cheerfully and Gaskell will write of Cranford with deep affection, but both recognize what the residents of Cranford cannot: the brightness of Miss Matty's carpet and the customs of the little village will pass away together.

The elegiac tone that resonates in "Cranford" is a distinctive, lovely one, and it pulses through other Gaskell works as well. I especially recommend two other novellas: "Lois the Witch," a mournful tale set during the Salem witch era (Gaskell's only work with an American setting, I believe), and "Cousin Phillis." The latter is a true gem, an idyllic, haunting story. All of Gaskell's major novels are worth reading, even the somewhat didactic Ruth and the often overlooked but lovely historical romance Sylvia's Lovers. That work has memorable scenes and characters drawn from a completely different world than her other major works. However, if you have already delved into the social problem novels (Mary Barton and North and South) and have read Gaskell's masterpiece Wives and Daughters, or if you want to begin with something shorter, try the two novellas. Elizabeth Gaskell offers some of Jane Austen's brightness, but the darker hues give her work an enchanting, memorable texture of its own.

*All quotations are from Penguin editions of Emma(rpt. 1978) and Cranford/Cousin Phillis (rpt. 1978).