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Practices of Protectiveness in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*

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Małgorzata Nitka (University of Silesia)
ORCID: 0000-0002-3155-7624

Abstract. The article analyzes the theme of protectiveness in Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *Cranford*. A close reading of several episodes focuses on the examination of different forms and functions of protective gestures that belong in the provincial community. Some of them are discrete and selfless expressions of female kindness and considerateness, aiming to protect the dignity or comfort of a distraught individual. Others, where the protective action is collectively undertaken, turn out to be informed by social significance. While they entail kind concern for an individual in need, they also have in view the need of the community and serve as a means of securing its cohesion.

Key words: protection, protectiveness, provincial, Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford*

Of various labels affixed to Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* the most tenacious one proved to be that of "miniaturist charm," (Blake 2009, 174) and for decades *Cranford*, "charm," and "charming" have seemed to be caught in a metonymical stranglehold, favoring an "appreciative rather than analytic" approach (Boone 1987, 296) to the novel. "In literature," John Gross observes, "charm can often be a dubious asset," (1971, 217) and so, liked, loved, and therefore undervalued, *Cranford* may have replicated the situation of Miss Matty, its major character, similarly treated by the local community.

This affectionate approach is partly courted by the narrator, Mary Smith, who calls Cranford "the dear little town," (Gaskell 1976, 51) and who herself is usually addressed by the local ladies as "my dear," (47, 77, 80, etc.) thus setting the sentimental keynote. Responsible for the miniaturist quality are the novel's small-scale setting and its assemblage of socially peripheral, elderly, quaint, female characters, living plain lives, occasionally only embroidered by magic shows, arrival of spring fashions or some grander visitors. It is a diminutive world of small houses with small rooms and little maids, "small talk" (Gaskell 1976, 41) as well as "small slights" and "small sarcastic compliments," (43), "small opportunities," (54) "small pieces of butter," (83) "small ...

lumps of sugar," (124) "small economies," (83) and - last but not least - small incomes. Indeed, many of these smallnesses have an economic(al) aspect.

Economy is one of several themes included in the academic reclamation of *Cranford,* starting in the 1970s. Many new readings come from feminist critics who treat the novel as a study of "collective heroineship" (Schor 1992, 6) or "the cooperative female community," (Auerbach 1978, 87) to see in it "both subversive text and feminist utopia" (Kuryllo 1989, 102). Utopia is another new label attached to *Cranford*; endorsed by such components as the apparent seclusion and self-sufficiency of the town with its homogenous female demographic, it seems a more serious equivalent of the "miniaturist" category. The already mentioned "miniaturist" factor, i.e. small incomes, Enid L. Duthie uses to define Cranford as "that Utopian community where there is hardly any money and very little ill-will," (1990, 48) though "small slights" and "small sarcastic compliments" may indicate less innocence she wants to acknowledge.

The subject of money, or the scarcity thereof, belongs also to the ethnographic scheme. Several researchers read *Cranford* as a social document, exposing the problems of respectable, single, middle-class, and middle-aged or elderly, impoverished women; e.g. Borislav Knezevic calls it "Gaskell's most determined experiment in ethnographic narrative" (2003, 70). It is just as apt to view it as a provincial novel, "distinguished by its ... setting ... *distinctive*, differentiated from the metropolis or from other regions within the nation, and that it is at the same time *familiar*, a more or less spacious version of what Raymond Williams (1973) has called the 'knowable community'" (Duncan 2002, 321). While in Gaskell's fictional country town, inhabitants know one another well, similarly evident is its cultural "difference from the metropolis –the fact that it is not London (or, secondarily, not Edinburgh or Manchester)" (Duncan 2002, 322). Difference matters here more that the physical distance of so many miles; the essence of the province is, Ian Duncan states, its "archetypal alterity" (2002, 329).

For Cranford the obvious point of contrast should be Drumble, nearby commercial town, where the novel's narrator lives, yet in the early chapters in which she acts as an ethnographic reporter, she, curiously, evokes the far more distant London: "Have you any red silk umbrellas in London?", "Do you ever see cows dressed in grey flannel in London?" or "Do you make paper paths for every guest to walk upon in London?" (Gaskell 1976, 40, 44, 53). London functions here as both the standard against which the provincialism of Cranford is defined and the assumed location of the reader. For Alyson J. Kiesel the questions indicate the narrator's affiliation, temporary, with the "masculine, city-dwelling, and modern" reader (2004, 1006), yet Mary usually aligns herself with the Cranford ladies and tends to choose the inclusive pronoun "we*"*: "*We* [emphasis added] had a tradition of the first [red silk umbrella] that had ever been seen in Cranford" (Gaskell 1976, 40). These "we" do not mean her unconditioned loyalty to Cranford, nor do the questions position her closer to the metropolitan reader. Possibly, at work here is her ambivalent status of an impermanent insider who when in Cranford, does as the Cranford Amazons do, even if this may contravene her explicit youth and implicit modernity.

Belonging to the provincial versus the metropolitan convention, Mary's questions also emphasize the idiosyncrasy of Cranford, but once this benign eccentricity becomes affirmed, further highlighting of the provincial and peculiar, is superfluous. The tone has been set, London fades out in its referential function, and so does the metropolitan reader. This change marks the novel's shifting focus and the shedding of the ethnographic

aspect; the result is the revaluation of Cranford so that it acquires a more representative and familiar status (not that it becomes suddenly cleansed of its quirks). Such a revision reflects fluctuating attitudes to and uses of the epithet "provincial" in the second half of the 19th century. Provincialism, Duncan notes, was implicated in derogatory semantics of "inferiority and backwardness" at the same time, when many remarkable fictional studies of provincial life were published. In Gaskell's, George Eliot's or Anthony Trollope's works, this kind of location gains a wider, national even, significance: "the provincial county town or parish becomes the generic and typical setting of a traditional England, responsive to the pressures of modernity (politics, debt, fashion, crime) that have overwhelmed metropolitan life, but resisting or absorbing them – if only ambiguously, if only for a time" (Duncan 2002, 323). It is exactly the pressures of modernity, Duncan argues, that transform a locality into a province, conceived as a self-contained place, "an island, or reef in a rising tide of wholesale economic and social transformation," (2002, 323-324) whose community assumes a defensive spirit and commitment to cohesion.

In an early "ethnographic" episode, Mary returning to Cranford after a longer spell in Drumble, depicts the country town's distinctive stasis: "There had been neither births, deaths, nor marriages since I was there last. Everybody lived in the same house, and wore pretty nearly the same well-preserved, old-fashioned clothes" (Gaskell 1976, 52). The only change is a new carpet in the drawing-room of the Jenkyns sisters:

> Oh, the busy work Miss Matty and I had in chasing the sunbeams, as they fell in an afternoon right down on this carpet through the blindless window! We spread newspapers over the places and sat down to our book or our work; 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. We were very busy, too, one whole morning, before Miss Jenkyns gave her party, in following her directions, and in cutting out and stitching together pieces of newspaper so as to form little paths to every chair set for the expected visitors, lest their shoes might dirty or defile the purity of the carpet. (Gaskell 1976, 52-53)

The ostensibly amusing scene has serious undertones, not least because the somewhat absurd measures taken to keep the carpet in perfect condition indicate the ladies' poverty or because these preventive strategies hint at Cranford's unease with the external world associated with destruction (here the aggressive sunshine or dirt brought in on the visitors' shoes). I would like to use this vignette, showing the carpet as the object of assiduous attention and care, as a metaphorical introduction to the theme of protectiveness. Of course, one needs to differentiate between protective measures exercised on material objects, important as they are for the impoverished households, from the gestures of socio-economic or relational protectiveness. In what follows I shall focus on the latter to examine different forms and functions of protective practices that belong in the provincial and female community of Cranford. Only sporadically referring to some feminist and sociological concepts, rather than employ any clearly defined methodology, I rely on close reading of some episodes from the novel.

While protectiveness may involve watchfulness combined with the sense of vulnerability, it also presupposes affection, kindness, care, and sympathy. These are

traditionally regarded as female traits, often contrasted with calculation and utilitarianism, associated, in turn, with the male environment and urban, competitive society. In the case of *Cranford*, the emphasis on protectiveness comes from the conflation of two factors: on the one hand, the provincial location, identified as a community, which "always carries a connotation of kindness" cultivated within its bounds (Killham 1977, 382), on the other, its population dominated by women, not only stereotypically conceived as kind and benevolent, but also considered "the preservers of community," (Graver 1984, 21) committed to its wholeness.

Indeed, early on Cranford ladies are defined by "many little kindnesses" (Gaskell 1976, 55) they perform: "the rose-leaves that were gathered ere they fell to make into a potpourri for someone who had no garden; the little bundles of lavender flowers sent to strew the drawers of some town-dweller, or to burn in the chamber of some invalid ... Miss Jenkyns stuck an apple full of cloves, to be heated and smell pleasantly in Miss Brown's room" (Gaskell 1976, 54). Here resourcefulness incorporates generosity and thoughtfulness; each of the apparently trivial things, meant as a gift, has been assembled with a recipient and their wants in mind, though Gaskell makes it clear that this brand of sympathy is, to borrow Jill Rappoport's phrase, "a limited commodity" (2008, 96), since shown towards those who are socially equal; the kindness offered by these same kind ladies to the poor is "somewhat dictatorial" (Gaskell 1976, 39). These self-contained charity practices in Cranford seem to have a socio-cultural function: they assert the boundaries of their genteel community, at the same time asserting the difference between itself and the increasingly faster, busier, self-centred modern world, embodied by Drumble, unappreciative or derisive of "tender good offices" (Gaskell 1976, 39).

Drumble curiously lacks material visibility in the novel. Mary "vibrat[es] all [her] life between Drumble and Cranford," (Gaskell 1976, 211) yet the action not once shifts to the manufacturing city, nor does she depict the town or her life there. It constitutes an inferred unrefined foil to the genteel reserve of Cranford. whose resentment is camouflaged in moral, and aesthetic, superiority, best expressed in such adjectives as "horrid" or "obnoxious," (Gaskell 1976, 106, 42). Hilary Schor interprets this response as the only form of defense left to "single, older women, no longer wealthy or important in a masculine, modern, money-minded world," who convert their dissociation from modernity "into its own kind of advantage," (1992, 89) fabricating and sustaining the appearance of independence and gentility that distinguish only neighborhoods like theirs. As an upstart commercial centre Drumble cannot become ennobled; it might boast a wealth of shops but Miss Matty is remarkably quick in her disparagement, when Mary fails to buy her a turban she desired, "I was foolish to expect anything very genteel out of the Drumble shops" (Gaskell 176, 129).

Like the carpet episode, the turban incident seems to illustrate "provincial" and old-maidish quirkiness. At its centre is Miss Matty who "heard that turbans were worn" in fashionable circles, and asks Mary to get one for her in "sea-green ... her favourite colour" (Gaskell 176, 128), so that she can sport it at the magic show of a Signor Brunoni. When Mary arrives in Cranford without the turban, Miss Matty complains to the other ladies about Drumble shops, neither genteel enough nor up to date: "I suppose turbans have not got down to Drumble yet?" (Gaskell 1976, 129). She might see the advantages of the "pretty, neat, middle-aged cap" Mary purchased instead, appreciate its color – "lavender will wear better than sea-green," but she rues the chance of having, for once, "something newer" and different from what "*all* [emphasis added] the ladies in

Cranford are wearing (Gaskell 1976, 129). Gaskell mixes here gentle entertainment, wistfulness and thoughtfulness, to ultimately turn the episode into a demonstration of consideration since Mary purposely and protectively fails to buy Miss Matty a ridiculous turban. If Mary knows better, it is because she cares for one whom she wants "to prevent ... from disfiguring her small, gentle, mousey face with a great Saracen's head turban" (Gaskell 1976, 129). On several occasions Gaskell has Mary show considerate care, attention, and protectiveness characteristic of what the feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick termed maternal thinking (Stoneman 2006, 142). Ruddick makes an important point, when she further links attention to empathy, which one may see as an attitude related to protectiveness, to state that "[a]ttention is akin to the capacity for empathy, the ability to suffer or celebrate with another as if in the other's experience you know and find yourself. However, the idea of empathy, as it is popularly understood, underestimates the importance of knowing another without finding yourself in her" (Ruddick 1990, 121).

That Mary's protective gestures are grounded more in attention, i.e. knowing another, than empathy is evident in the novel's most dramatic chapter "Stopped Payment." Gaskell lays the foundations for the complexity of the episode early on, when the visit to Mr Johnson's shop is shown as much anticipated by Miss Matty because it involves getting a new gown, a grand occasion in her frugal existence: "the spring fashions were arrived, and would be exhibited on the following Tuesday at his rooms in High Street. ... I had offered ... to send to Drumble for patterns, but she had rejected my proposal, gently implying that she had not forgotten her disappointment about the sea-green turban. I was thankful that I was on the spot now, to counteract the dazzling fascination of any yellow or scarlet silk" (Gaskell 1976, 170). Brought back are the discontent, on the part of Miss Matty, and the attitude of gracious guardianship, on the part of Mary, ready to act as her aesthetic chaperon. But what was to be the protection of Miss Matty's common sense will have to turn into the protection of her sense of worth, as Mary learns that "it would be really the first time in her life that she had to choose anything of consequence for herself: for Miss Jenkyns had always been the more decided character, whatever her taste might have been" (Gaskell 1976, 173). At issue is an aesthetic and economic, poignantly overdue, coming of age moment. As the scene unfolds, the autonomy trivially vested in the choice of silk and pattern gains momentum to become independence proper, when Miss Matty comes to rescue of the farmer and exchanges her gold for his worthless Town and County Bank note.

Initially, Miss Matty displays her trademark lack of resoluteness, known from various earlier situations in which Gaskell showed her as "meek and undecided to a fault," (1976, 67). Occasionally, her vacillation could be almost enjoyable; Mary refers to Miss Matty's viewing of the silks as replete with "the delights of perplexity" (Gaskell 1976, 174). Indeed, she does become delightfully perplexed, relishing "the glossy folds" of so many colors; "happy sea-green" or "maize" are Miss Matty's declared options, while in the shop she considers also "lovely crimson," to then dangerously incline towards only slightly soberer "lilac with yellow spots" (Gaskell 1976, 174-175).

Savoring the opportunity of making a choice on her own only in part explains the procrastination, most of it comes from her faltering mind. Inevitably, the mood shifts from joy to doubt and regret, as she realises that "[w]hichever I choose I shall wish I had taken another," but also as hesitation takes over, she nearly resigns her newly acquired autonomy and reverts to type, seeking Mary's help: "I think, I'll only take one. But which must it be, my dear?" (Gaskell 1976, 175). Mary may be now stepping into a role once

assumed by the domineering Miss Deborah Jenkyns, yet this is no simple replacement. Her sensitive, tactful, and mature assistance exemplifies maternal thinking: she tries to respect Matty's right to eventually choose something for herself, as long as the color is not too garish, even though this choosing something for herself might not be entirely herself choosing something for herself. So she protectively imposes upon Matty who lingers over "lilac with yellow spots," and, rather than openly criticize the choice, counters the move by simply "pull[ing] out a quiet sage-green" (Gaskell 1976, 175).

The ruse fails not because of Miss Matty's refusal to be manipulated into a choice not of her liking but her attention shifted to the ordeal of another customer, whom Gaskell ushers in a well signposted parallel situation. Mr Dobson, a local farmer, comes into the shop to buy gifts for his family, making the most of the occasion, and Mary aptly wonders, "whether he or Miss Matty would keep their shopmen the longest time. He thought each shawl more beautiful than the last; and, as for Miss Matty, she smiled and sighed over each fresh bale that was brought out; one colour set off another, and the heap together would, as she said, make even the rainbow look poor" (Gaskell 1976, 175). The dramatic point of difference emerges when having at last chosen a shawl, the farmer has his five-pound note refused: "'Town and County Bank! I am not sure, sir, but I believe we have received a warning against notes issued by this bank only this morning ... I'm afraid I must trouble you for payment in cash, or in a note of a different bank'" (Gaskell 1976, 175). Left to radically edit his purchases, he takes only the "figs for the little ones" because he "promised them to 'em" (Gaskell 1976, 177), their imagined disappointment is beyond any emotional management. Gaskell skilfully clashes the promises unfulfilled and fulfilled, as she likewise clashes impersonal and personal transactions. There are other dramatic shifts at work: from one customer's delight to another customer's difficulty, from excitement to anxiety, from self-absorption to sympathy, and from one to another kind of protectiveness exhibited by Mary. First her protective manipulations concerned the sensible color of silk, now she tries to protect Miss Matty from learning the horrible news: "I don't think she had caught the name of the bank, and in my nervous cowardice I was anxious that she should not; and so I began admiring the yellow-spotted lilac gown that I had been utterly condemning only a minute before" (Gaskell 1976, 175-176).

While the man's unease becomes Matty's unease through her attention, it can actually become Matty's unease in a much weightier way, once she realizes that the customer's current pecuniary problem may mean for her a fatal financial trouble, if the, bank whose shares she has, collapses. The point is that Mary sees the two cases as analogical, but separate, whereas Miss Matty, on realising that the failure concerns her bank, will see not a parallel but a bond, her prospective problem is not *like* the man's problem but rather *is* her problem and responsibility.

Part of the scene is also Mary's unease in that forewarned by her father of the unpleasant rumors concerning the bank, she has concealed them from Miss Matty, so as not to ruin the much-awaited expedition. In the shop, Mary's protective obligation over Miss Matty forces her into an awkward ethical decision to withdraw sympathy for the farmer, for whom at first she felt pity. She strives to avert Miss Matty's interest in his predicament, realising how economic and ethical factors add weight to what was before an aesthetic and practical judgement: ""Yes . ... [t]his lilac silk will just match the ribbons in your new cap, I believe," I continued, holding up the folds so as to catch the light, and wishing that the man would make haste and be gone, and yet having a new wonder ...

how far it was wise or right in me to allow Miss Matty to make this expensive purchase, if the affairs of the bank were really so bad as the refusal of the note implied" (Gaskell, 1976, 176).

But the silk is upstaged by the Town and County note, whose value keeps fluctuating, and not just in the obvious pecuniary sense. For the farmer it stands for so many hours of hard labor as he "earns every farthing with the sweat on his brow" (Gaskell 1976, 176) and so many commodities it was to pay for: the shawl, the cloak, the figs or the tobacco; each item ascribed to a particular member of the family. Not only is the uniquely personal worth attached to the note, but also the affective one. Miss Matty's offer - "I will give you five sovereigns for your note" (Gaskell 1976, 177) - subjects it to another, financial, shift, in which its the original worth is reclaimed. Disregarding the official banking system where the note has been devalued into a nought-pound note, her intercession transfers it into the territory of gift and generosity. Or actually loss and sacrifice, in that ensuring that the farmer pays for his purchases, Miss Matty has to forfeit hers. She does not necessarily see her gesture as a gift, let alone sacrifice; she insists on the completion of this counterfeit, white lie-like, transaction, convinced that things will be cleared up. When the shopman disillusions her, asserting that the note will not "be as good as gold again," (Gaskell 1976, 177), this is all the more reason to stand by her resolution. In the course of this exchange, Miss Matty makes a claim to the note, even before it physically changes hands, when she moves about possessive pronouns. The note is mostly referred to as "*your* [emphasis added] note" or "the note" (and analogically Miss Matty's cash is "my gold" or "the money") when she addresses Mr Dobson, but she breaks this pattern in a switch from the individual to the general, making her declaration of liability: "if it is going to fail, and if honest people are to lose their money because they have taken *our* [emphasis added] notes – … "only I would rather exchange my gold for the note" (Gaskell 1976, 177).

The shifting value of the note concurs with the shifting identities of Miss Matty who transcends her timid and domestic self and takes part in what, for her, is a very public scene. More than that, when she witnesses the farmer's trouble, she is remarkably quick and focused, sees through the cunning kindness of Mary: "Never mind the silks for a few minutes" (Gaskell 1976, 176), and herself acts in the protective capacity on behalf of a stranger. She chooses the more urgent matter of *his* banknote over *her* purchase, asks all the relevant questions, and gives the farmer *her* five sovereigns so that he can complete *his* transaction. She not only speaks in public but also as a public person, "one of the shareholders," (Gaskell 1976, 177) taking on, her hitherto inactive, public identity of a responsible investor, who must protect other people's finances. Exchanging her gold for the farmer's note, she aligns herself with the distant and abstract bank.

Certainly, Miss Matty sees the failure of the bank in terms of her liability. For her, not that she uses this very word, liability is "at once a moral and economic expression," (Miller 1994, 143) and while she may not understand business, she understands "common honesty" (Gaskell 1976, 177). Reflecting on her decision, she upholds it as incontestable: "I was very thankful to—I was very thankful, that I saw my duty this morning, with the poor man standing by me" (Gaskell 1976, 179). For Nina Auerbach her reaction is both essentially feminine as well as oddly "corporate" in that "rather than seeing herself as a helpless victim of the masculine "'system,' ... Matty firmly identifies herself with it" and "conceive[s] herself instantly as part of a whole" (1978, 85). She assumes that the corporate entails reciprocity, therefore the directors would naturally protect her,

informing her of the condition of the bank. Part of her discomfort is her conviction of the much greater discomfort and self-reproach of the directors who ruined so many people's lives. Her moral, economic and affective identification are equally misplaced. Her not understanding business is her not understanding the anonymous and the impersonal.

Mary's frustration at the unexpected discretion of Miss Matty's who took "the note to herself *so decidedly*" comes from the responsibility to protect her, hence an unkind question whether she would "think it her duty to offer sovereigns for all the notes of the Town and County Bank she met with?" (Gaskell 1976, 179). "So decidedly" belies the assumed woolly-mindedness of Miss Matty, as do her further actions following the bank failure. Rather than "wait and see" or "fidget [her]self," (Gaskell 1976, 179) as was her wont, she displays practicality and purposefulness, reviewing her account-books to announce that she will "lose one hundred and forty-nine pounds thirteen shillings and fourpence a year ... [and] only have thirteen pounds a year left" (Gaskell 1976, 179).

"So decidedly," with which Mary characterizes Miss Matty's conduct in the shop further applies to the actions taken by the female community, in reaction to Matty's ruin. A string of resolute responses starts with Martha, Miss Matty's maid, who quickly overcomes her emotions to propose a range of protective and practical acts. Not only does she more carefully attend to various whims of her "good missus" (Gaskell 1976, 183) she previously ignored, but she also resolves to hasten her marriage, take a house and have Miss Matty as a lodger, in what is yet another subversive moment in the Cranford world. The ladies' response lacks such effusion or directness, partly in keeping with their gentility but also because it is a joint undertaking, which requires some deliberation and orchestration. Their scheme veiled in many layers of solemn confidentiality and eccentricity is to alleviate the misfortune of Miss Matty by giving her, in secret, such annual contributions the ladies could afford to "assist her" (Gaskell 1976, 191). They rely on the familiar – and genteel - institution of subscription, which Blake calls "characteristically feminine" (2009, 176), but in order to transcend its financial, and potentially vulgar, resonance, they need it to be economically upgraded into something more professional, yet also less visible, less personal, and less obliging.

It is not only Miss Matty who is not to know; the ladies write down "in a sealed paper" (Gaskell 1976, 192) the respective sums they could add to the pool, thus also tactfully concealing from one another their incomes. As Miss Pole explains, "in consideration of the feelings of delicate independence existing in the mind of every refined female … we wish to contribute our mites in a secret and concealed manner, so as not to hurt the feelings I have referred to" (Gaskell 1976, 191). In this more momentous act of elegant economy, secrecy is to protect both the object and the subjects of the collective act of generosity. It may respect the demands of delicate independence and elegant economy, but it cleverly defuses the possibility of competitiveness, a financial and emotional auction in which the individual contributors bid for recognition, taking at the same time care of both each other's livelihoods and feelings. Protective of Miss Matty, they diffuse the protective spirit over their circle. The pieces of paper upon which the ladies write down the sums are superior counterparts of the Town and County Bank bad notes, and far more than an attempt to make up for their current worthlessness. As Anna Lepine observes, the ladies' venture symbolically rewrites the process of bankruptcy for "the Amazons turn scraps of paper back into money within their private community of Cranford, proving their self-sufficiency" (2010, 133).

Financially, the reader must assume, the compensation cannot cover Miss Matty's annual loss, but the added value of affection and respect more than makes up for it. The secrecy surrounding the annual contribution to the rent as well as "a few evasions of truth and white lies" that conceal the existence of a reserve-fund set up as a security against "old age or illness" (Gaskell 1976, 201) may go against the reputation of Cranford as "an honest and moral town" (Gaskell 1976, 139); on the other hand, such deceits sustain this very reputation and sound priorities. The fund has to be kept secret so as to preclude a moral embezzlement that Miss Matty might commit, "if she were aware of any little reserve-fund being made for her while the debts of the bank remained unpaid" (Gaskell 1976, 202). Thus, deception is employed as a protective device against Matty's making a wrong, i. e. public, use of money that has been secured for her private purposes by secret private "investors" - the economic implication that the secret carries is that the fund is not properly hers. Miller highlights the paradox of the arrangement, by stating that "Matty's honesty is ... maintained by the dishonesty of her friends" (1994, 154). But perhaps not really, because keeping her ignorant of the fund, they in fact incapacitate her "common honesty" principle, so implicate her in dishonesty: "'Deceived' by a distant joint-stock bank, Matty is more intimately deceived by the stories of those closer to her" (Miller 1994, 154). These are benign, well-meant, tender, and protective deceptions - such as that which is proffered to spare the sick Miss Brown the news of her father's death - which have nothing crafty about them; quite the opposite, they attest to honesty and loyalty.

And yet one must not idealize the protection orchestrated by the Cranford ladies for the stake is not just the financial comfort of Miss Matty, but also their own interest, that is the preservation of gentility. Out of various gestures of kindness practised within and for the sake of the Cranford community this is the one that comes closest to an act of philanthropy proper. Philanthropy, a very wide category, usually involves charity that translates into some pecuniary assistance and is somehow organized, so often has the form of a collective effort, no matter whether publicized or not. In this sense, the subscription arranged by the ladies constitutes philanthropy, yet like so many practices in Cranford, it bears a stamp of insular idiosyncrasy. Since its addressee does not fall into the usual category of those socially inferior, the diseased or depraved destitute, it is a more substantial embodiment of the already mentioned "tender good offices to each other whenever they are in distress" (Gaskell 1976, 39). Miss Matty represents their own variant of the deserving poor, qualifying for benevolence as a dramatically impoverished middle-class person, but principally a kind and considerate friend, one of the Cranford ladies. As Jill Rappoport argues, in Cranford sympathy moves within the closed system, based on reciprocity: "every act of generosity becomes the direct (and nearly immediate) focus of reciprocal acts and gifts" (2008, 98). Although Rappoport never explains her use of 'sympathy,' it is evident that she employs the word less in the sense of the affective response to the distress of the other, e.g. compassion, and more in the material or practical manifestations of kindness that are triggered by such a feeling. She examines gift practices as a form of charity "that did not require money" (Rappoport 2008, 95), and therefore particularly suited for the impoverished genteel women of Cranford who use it so as to comfort and support one another. An act of intervention, assistance or philanthropy from which Miss Matty benefits is of such a closed kind, not because of the obvious reciprocity principle, but also because it involves the preservation of the group. Historians of philanthropy note that charitable actions undertaken out of sympathy for, e.g., distressed workers, were also accompanied by the concern for social stability (Owen

1964, 166-167) in the understanding that without benevolence the rift and hostility between the classes would intensify. In Cranford, with its socially uniform community, the key philanthropic moment is a horizontal affair; charity proposed to protect Miss Matty will also protect the intraclass stability, maintaining the genteel cohort as an entity.

The protection of gentility, although not openly discussed when the ladies submit their contributions, becomes a conspicuous concern, when Mary comes up with the proper economic solution to Miss Matty's predicament, i.e. the tea-shop. While Mr Smith, "grasped at [the plan] with all the energy of a tradesman" and "immediately ran up the profits of the sales that [Miss Matty] could effect in Cranford to more than twenty pounds a year" (Gaskell 1976, 197), Mary is both cautious and critical of his calculations. Miss Matty may have to venture into the world of commerce, but she cannot be converted into an enterprising businesswoman, as aggressive trade is against her age, sex, experience, temperament, and principles. Hence her unease about impairing the trade of Mr Johnson, the shop-keeper long established in Cranford, which makes her actually inquire him in person and secure his approval. That she does it secretly, without telling Mary, let alone her father, is a clear sign of her awareness of breaching the economic rules as well as her determination to give the business a private, domestic aura. Mr Smith's response can be only that of disdainful incredulity at such "great nonsense" and of the sarcastic question: "how tradespeople were to get on if there was to be a continual consulting of each other's interests, which would put a stop to all competition directly" (Gaskell 1976, 200). Miss Matty's instinctive choice of the communal and cooperative over the impersonal and competitive is an instance of the formula described by Lepine in which "the public commercial arena is absorbed into the private domestic sphere that is Cranford, so that it becomes a different, kinder realm" (2010, 133). Financial protection she may gain from her shop is acceptable as long as Mr Johnson's business is protected by respect for the economic tradition of Cranford and the avoidance of Drumble-like rivalry.

While rivalry that is the hallmark of modern commerce can be managed, the trade itself poses a different kind of challenge, given the elegant pretensions of Cranford. Accordingly, "[the] small dining-parlour was to be converted into a shop, without any of its degrading characteristics; a table was to be the counter; one window was to be retained unaltered, and the other changed into a glass door" (Gaskell 1976, 197). Commercial edges thus become softened, a protective domestic veneer applied so as to make the shop look, both inside and on the outside, *not* like a shop, what with the table-counter and "A very small 'Matilda Jenkyns, licensed to sell tea,'" sign "hidden under the lintel of the new door" (Gaskell 1976, 200). Tea, likewise, is viewed as an acceptable commodity on the grounds of its "femininity" for, curiously, Miss Matty "did not think men ever bought tea" (Gaskell 1976, 198). Implemented for the sake of Miss Matty, these solutions and compromises also cater for the reputation of the Cranford female genteel community, which similarly to her requires protection, or actually preservation. Her economic "degradation" consists less in the impoverishment caused by the collapse of the bank and more in her involvement in the trade which is to more visibly alleviate her financial condition than the secret fund arranged by the Amazons. The fund represents the spirit of elegant economy, whereas the tea-shop, however well camouflaged, gravitates towards commercial crudity which may rub off on the other Amazons. While the economic stability, which does not mean independence, of Miss Matty seems secured (the fund is boosted by annual contributions, the shop proceeds are ensured by the

manipulation of the demand for tea), it still requires social validation; the shop-keeping constitutes a demeaning connection in the genteel circles, but what with the hesitant approval of Mrs Jamieson, “sister-in-law to the late Earl of Glenmire,” (Gaskell 1976, 42) Miss Matty retains her access “to the privileges of society in Cranford” (Gaskell 1976, 199).

The economic environment created in Cranford so as to protect Miss Matty is an artificial construct governed by idiosyncratic (or sentimental) economic laws which - one has to agree with Mr Smith, the economist proper in the novel - “would never do in the world” (Gaskell 1976, 201). Kindness, while commendable, has in the long run little economic currency, and it is largely various protective measures or invisible conspiracies that keep Miss Matty’s business afloat. Symptomatically, its long-term financial viability never gets properly tested, the shop is a stopgap venture to be replaced with the more conventional and respectable protection provided by the return of the lost brother.

It is a characteristic property of a provincial town to insist on its cohesion and assiduously protect it. Cranford’s default mode is, as Auerbach reflects, “cohesion against the world” (1978, 80), an attitude once described by Georg Simmel in his seminal essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in which he indicated how in small towns, it went hand in hand with the sense of the “constant threat” and determination to keep “firmly closed against neighbouring, strange, or in some way antagonistic circles” (1950, 417, 416). The approach to the different which lies beyond its boundaries has a negative import, which is visible in such strategies as protest exemplified by Cranford’s (failed) petition against the railroad or disparagement levelled at that railroad or the commercial town on its other end. Equally negative is the attitude of distrust, aloofness, and suspicion most obvious in the response to the strangers and outsiders such as Captain Brown or Signor Brunoni.

However, cohesion is protected not only by the negative strategies, such as the efforts to ward off or contain any external forces or presences but also by means of the organisation of the inner structure, “the establishment of strict boundaries and a centripetal unity” (Simmel 1950, 417). Boundaries are not to be literally understood; rather in the case of Cranford, at work is the introduction and observance of the tight system of local rules and regulations, codifying so many significant and insignificant aspects of private and public life. To how integral these regulations are, even within the perimeter of the household, testifies Miss Matty’s conduct after her sister’s death, when first not only does she not relax the late Miss Jenkyns’s rigid rules but actually makes them “more stringent than ever” (Gaskell 1976, 67). Preservation of the deceased’s legacy, assertion of the inherited authority aside, rules are a means to unity and continuity. But so is another positive policy which is more obviously, or less subversively, feminine, and which inheres in care for or consideration of those who are emotionally distressed or even aesthetically confused. Protective gestures Mary shows towards Miss Matty may have an economic flavour in that she steps in to prevent her from imprudent spending her money on a turban or flamboyant silk, but the true object of Mary’s attentive consideration is the preservation of Matty’s dignity. While this dignity may have a certain social resonance in that Mary would not want Miss Matty to do anything that might detract from her gentility, here protectiveness has for its kind, and altruistic focus an afflicted individual, her personal and financial comfort.

But economically oriented protective actions, when exercised within the homogenous group, by alleviating the critical condition of the individual member of the group try not

to impair the condition of the community itself, thus becoming collective acts of *self*-protection. It is for a reason that Cranford's favorite pronoun is "we"; and so, as for instance Boone contends, "by 'resolving' to ensure Matty's self-sufficiency, the female community is in effect ensuring its own perpetuity" (1987, 300). After all, it is a very frail provincial community, socially and demographically, since "most of the ladies of good family in Cranford were elderly spinsters, or widows without children" (Gaskell 1979, 109). Thus, the permission, hardly gracious or elegant, that "Cranford was allowed to visit Miss Matty" (Gaskell 1979, 199) not only aims at the preservation of the genteel numbers but also the preservation of the social rituals that define this gentility. Miss Matty is to be embraced by social and economic protection so as not to lose caste, but it is also tacitly acknowledged that her losing caste would compromise the female elite of Cranford. In varied proportions, affection for Matty as well as self- interest and self-preservation play a part in the sundry strategies ultimately committed to keeping her in the privileged group. Keeping in an insider turns out to be more vital than keeping outsiders out. The privileged group, the self-appointed "social elite" (Lepine 2010, 129) may need Miss Matty more that she needs the group, which, as Miss Pole once observed, cannot easily maintain, let alone boost, its so very exclusive membership and soon may become "no society at all" (Gaskell 1976, 109).

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AUTHOR'S BIO: Małgorzata Nitka is an Associate Professor in the Institute of Literary Studies at the University of Silesia, Poland. Her research interests cover English literature and culture of the 19th century, particularly social and cultural aspects of the Industrial Revolution. Her major publication in this field is *Railway Defamiliarisation. The Rise of Passengerhood in the Nineteenth Century* (2006), an analysis of cultural changes following the development of the railway. She also published articles on Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Reade, Wilkie Collins, Anthony Trollope, and Andrew Ure. Her current research concerns Victorian urban studies.

E-MAIL: malgorzata.nitka@us.edu.pl