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Re-Vision and Transformation: Deephaven and Cranford

by Judith Bryant Wittenberg

The question of a literary work’s relationships to other texts is a provocative one, whether considered under the rubric of traditional source studies or by reference to the current ruminations on intertextuality that have grown out of Julia Kristeva’s theoretical work. In “The Bounded Text,” Kristeva speaks of any text as “a permutation of texts, an intertextuality” in which discourses from other texts “intersect” one another, and in “Word, Dialogue, and Novel,” her commentary on Bakhtin’s conception of fiction as polyphonic in nature, dialogic and multidetermined, Kristeva asserts that “any text is the absorption and transformation of another.” Or, as Barthes says, “Every text is an intertext... a new fabric woven out of bygone quotations” (cited in Gresset). Thus a text palimpsestically bears the “traces” or “echoes” of anterior works even as it attempts to position itself in the long tradition of literature as an “original” (Morgan, Stein). In this dynamic process, the text simultaneously recognizes and reconstrues previous texts.

A consideration of this transformative operation at work and of “intersections,” specific intertextual resonances, is of particular interest in a text such as Sarah Orne Jewett’s Deephaven, published in 1877. The first book in a significant but critically marginalized oeuvre, Deephaven has multiple connections to prior and subsequent texts that are rendered more complex by issues of gender, genre, and canon. While it is impossible in a short space to explore the entire range of these, an assessment of Deephaven in terms of the ways in which it absorbs and revises one important antecedent work—Elizabeth Gaskell’s Cranford—assists in our understanding of both the dynamism of intertextuality and the nature of Jewett’s originality.

This is not to say that Cranford is the most—or only—significant predecessor to Deephaven. Critics have discussed several literary forebears who influenced Jewett’s work in general ways (see, e.g., Westbrook, pp. 10–12). In her 1893 preface to Deephaven, Jewett herself paid specific homage to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s The Pearl of Orr’s Island, speaking of the way it taught her “to see with new eyes” the “decaying, shipless harbors of Maine” (p. 3); she also acknowledged George Sand’s Legendes rustiques (p. 5). And the text of Deephaven itself is sprinkled with references to a wide array of fictional and nonfictional texts, many of which undoubtedly resonate in one way or another.

Nevertheless, the distinctive relationship between Cranford and Deephaven merits close consideration as an instructive example of “active intertextuality.”
to use Ann Jefferson’s term for the poetics of fiction in a specific context. In the first place, *Deephaven* virtually invites such a comparison because it directly invokes Elizabeth Gaskell’s 1853 book and therefore calls attention to the fundamental similarity between the two works in the passage where the narrator compares the Widow Tully’s position in Deephaven to that of Betty Barker in Cranford and admits that she and Kate were “often reminded of that estimable town” (p. 86). Indeed, it becomes clear that *Cranford* played a crucial role as what might be called an “enabling text,” one which made possible Jewett’s work on her own first book. Equally important, a comparative exploration of the two texts reveals not only a number of likenesses, some of which raise basic questions about characterization, structure, and genre, but a series of major divergences. These disclose the revisionary operations at work in *Deephaven* and show it to be a more revolutionary work than has perhaps been hitherto recognized, particularly in terms of its depictions of issues related to gender identity and its subversions of prevailing social codes.

Works such as *Deephaven* and *Cranford* have long been marginalized by dominant critical assumptions about narrative structure, largely because neither is what Nina Baym characterized as a “melodrama of beset manhood.” However, in the past several years, such works have been appropriately brought to attention by critics considering their treatment of “communities of women” (Auerbach), their tacit proponency of a “countertradition” in opposition to the prevailing ideology of marriage (Boone), or their status as a “narrative of community” (Zagarell). All of these commentators have recognized in one way or another that such texts have been excluded from the British and American fictional “great tradition” as a result of their failure to fulfill expectations about the nature of narrative or, in Jewett’s case, because of her “regionalism” (see Renza). Their recent retrieval from the margin to which they had been consigned by earlier literary historians has been part of an effort not simply to relocate the center of the tradition but to explore some basic questions about genre and canon. In that respect, *Deephaven* and *Cranford* are, like other comparable works discussed in the critical studies cited above, significant for their episodic structure, their focus on the daily details of village life, and the centrality they accord to older unaffiliated women—in short, their nonadherence to the linear dramatic plot and typical characters of classic narrative. This divergent construction and emphasis may even be seen as constituting a rebellion against the prevalent literary norm.

In this respect *Cranford* is a predecessor to *Deephaven*, crucial for its fundamental difference from other works with which the latter’s creator could have been familiar, such as popular melodramas or the novels of, say, Hawthorne, Melville, Eliot, or the Brontes; Jewett’s 1877 text, like that of Gaskell’s, proceeds from less normative literary assumptions about what is newsworthy and how it should be (re)presented. Because of this, finding grounds for approbation of the texts has been challenging for even some of their sympathetic critics; one of these speaks about the “little, leisured lives” and “inconsequential” events depicted in *Cranford* (Pollard, pp. 63, 85), while another cites the “disjointed pattern of events” in *Deephaven* (Cary, p. 133), and many make not
altogether successful efforts to discern unity or universal significance in the works. Others, however, have more fully accepted the works on their own terms and have recognized that they evince a memorable style (Gerin on Cranford),
great veracity of detail (Donovan on Deephaven), or striking power (Horn on Deephaven).

A wide range of similarities is evident in the two books. Some of these, such as their episodic structure, may be attributable to their inception as magazine pieces either expanded to book length (Cranford; Gaskell lamented that she had “killed” Captain Brown before realizing a longer work was in store [Letters, pp. 747–48]) or, in the case of Deephaven, collected and revised for publication as a book. Intertextual parallels are evident in social, economic, and geographic aspects of the two villages, in the depiction of characters, and in elements of the method.

That Cranford and Deephaven are both small towns is fundamental to the operations and significance of the texts which present them, and, although one is British and the other American, the similarities between the two are striking, which tacitly raises the question about the appropriateness of approaching the two national literatures as separate and distinctive. Jewett herself was an Anglophile, yet contributed significantly to the development of American local color literature. The Maine town depicted so memorably in her first book, though distinctly a regional American locale, elicits the narrator’s disclaimer that Deephaven “was not in the least American,” being instead “more like one of the lazy little English seaside towns” (p. 117).

Both Cranford and Deephaven are relatively isolated and in a state of economic decline, although the villagers cling to their memories of a more prosperous past and pay careful homage to those among them deemed to be “aristocrats” in one way or another, a tendency mocked in and by each text. Cranford’s collective sense that “though some might be poor, we were all aristocratic” and its accompanying stress on finite manifestations of social class, such as the strict “rules and regulations for visiting and calls” (pp. 4–5), is affectionately satirized; many of these same propensities are also evident in Deephaven. Only slightly more socially destratified than its fictional English predecessor, Deephaven is a place where, as the narrator notes, “the gradations of society were [clearly] defined” and the local populace feels a “deep... interest in the affairs of the English nobility” (pp. 80–81). Such concerns, pervasive and seeming somewhat pointless in both communities, are revealed to have a more pernicious influence in Deephaven, where they reach their pathetic culmination in the figure of Miss Chauncey. Her ruined house and rusty satin gown bespeak her unswerving allegiance to a more prosperous and more elegant past which has brought her to the brink of insanity and proves ultimately responsible for her death when she insists on spending a harsh Maine winter in her decayed and unheated home.

The economic plight of the inhabitants in both towns is delineated by their activities and by the commentary of the narrators; in Cranford it leads to evasive strategies such as the assertion that economy is “elegant” and money-spending
“vulgar and ostentatious” (p. 6) or that walking from one house to another is a choice rather than a necessity created by the inability to pay for a carriage. In the Deephaven of the 1870s depicted by Jewett, the economy has been pervasively damaged by the Embargo of 1807, which seems to have permanently idled all the shipping activity of the port. Moreover, compensatory measures are rendered difficult by the isolation of the community and by the poor soil, which makes farming marginal at best. Some inhabitants are able to evade the harsh economic realities by relatively harmless delusionary means, but others are openly defeated by them, often destructively resorting to the solace of alcohol and thus ensuring greater difficulty for their families.

Despite rigid social stratifications and depressed economies, both towns are sustained by a communal spirit and by periodic expressions of group benevolence; barriers are overcome in moments of crisis. In Cranford emotional and/or financial support is elicited by events such as the death of Captain Brown or the illness of Signor Brunoni, which arouse the town’s “kind feelings” (p. 197), or the failure of the Town and County Bank, which decimates Matty Jenkyns’ small capital but brings forth a communal outpouring of concern and fiscal assistance. In Deephaven the manifestations of collective support are less frequent, tending to occur more at the individual level, such as the aid rendered by Aunt Brandon to the Widow Jim or Helen and Kate’s hiring of the wagon to take local children to the circus, but can be seen in the actions of the group of East Parish inhabitants who “take care that [Miss Chauncey] does not suffer” (p. 274).

These various parallels between the communities which are at once the backdrop and the subject of Cranford and Deephaven are amplified by a number of similarities between characters in the texts originating either in the fact that Gaskell’s work had a direct influence on Sarah Orne Jewett or that the writers shared a common understanding of the sorts of individuals likely to be found in such isolated and impoverished towns. Some of the comparable figures function as obvious narrative devices, such as the long-vanished brother who is a locus of family concern and the exotic visitor from outside who galvanizes community interest and reveals the circumscription of local possibilities for excitement.

The prevalence of strong women is a highly suggestive element in both texts. Both the tone and the social dynamics of Cranford are established by the well-known opening passage:

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 the 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. (p. 1)

Similarly, the narrator of Deephaven and her friend notice “how many more old women there are than old men” and wonder “if the husbands and brothers had been drowned” (p. 89), and the work, like virtually all of Jewett’s subsequent fiction, is filled with strong and “mateless” women, most of them past middle age but leading independent and fulfilling lives (see Johns). Mrs. Kew, the Widow
Jim, and Mrs. Bonny are the most memorable—and most positively rendered—of those to be found in Jewett’s first work, but others make brief appearances or are the subject of discussion. Virtually none has the intimidating “Amazonic” quality of Gaskell’s Miss Deborah Jenkyns or Mrs. Jamieson, comic figures whose strength of will is depicted in mostly negative terms. Nor are any as timorous as the maiden ladies who fear any “normal” man almost as much as they do the imaginary robbers who lurk in the bushes or under their beds. Even though both works demonstrate a concern for the plight of a woman alone, particularly its economic aspects, Gaskell’s satiric intent nearly always forecloses the possibility of complete readerly approbation of her single women, while Jewett’s depictions of the same general category of females, rendered solitary by widowhood or spinsterhood, elicit admiration or sympathy more often than detached amusement.

Apart from this difference, which is related to a crucial divergence between the two texts, many aspects of their methods are comparable. Both make use of a “homodiegetic” narrator, one who is both an observer and a participant in the action; her femaleness allows her to understand and to some degree empathize with the woman-centered world she describes, while her relative youth and her urban origins provide a degree of judgmental detachment, giving a double-voiced quality to the presentation. The narratorial blending of positive emotional response and objective intellectual appraisal may be the combination the texts were intended to produce in their readers, who were undoubtedly urban, as suggested by Cranford’s intermittent addressing of “you . . . in London” and Deephaven’s reference to locations in Boston such as King’s Chapel. Not only the narrators but the depicted events of the two works are alike: they include routine daily procedures such as taking tea or choosing ribbons for caps, or more communal happenings such as a luncheon or lecture. None of these is particularly dramatic; their function is rather, as Sandra Zagarell points out in her discussion of a group of works she identifies as “narratives of community,” to present the details integral to the “semiotic system” of the group and to depict the occasions that both sustain it and disclose the complex nature of its interdependence.

While the parallels between Cranford and Deephaven are extensive, ranging from general aspects of method or characterization to revealing small details, their differences are equally significant. Moreover, it is in and through these disparities that one sees the ways in which Jewett’s book departs more drastically from conventions of narrative and gender than does Gaskell’s. Unquestionably, the efforts of critics such as Joseph Boone and Sandra Zagarell to place works such as Cranford (and Jewett’s Country of the Pointed Firs) in a “countertradition” or to define them as “narratives of community” have been extremely valuable. Yet a careful look at Cranford reveals that it is perhaps more traditional in crucial ways than these critics recognize. Boone says that the work is “divorced from the context of patriarchal marriage” (p. 303), and Zagarell, that it is about women’s culture (p. 510). Both assertions, however, are qualified by important aspects of Gaskell’s text, which proves on close examination to be both more orthodox and more “patriarchal” than it may appear.
The limited nature of Cranford’s heterodoxy is apparent in its structure, its characterization, and its language. It is an orderly and rather “centered” work, unified by its tone, its highly consistent narratorial presence, and its dominant character, Matty Jenkyns, whose crises and emotional development serve to focus the work. Moreover, its series of plot resolutions marks Cranford as to some degree a “well-made novel” (the prodigal brother returns, marriages take place, babies are born, and the members of the community come together for a final celebration).

At the same time, despite the work’s seeming emphasis on single women living communally, the strength of more conventional assumptions is equally obvious. Romance is a recurrent motif; even the crotchety Miss Deborah Jenkyns early concedes that “the most proper place in the world for [Major Gordon’s] arm to be in” is around the waist of the woman for whom he cares (p. 40). No less than three marriages take place during the course of the work, and the long-ago thwarting of another is lamented throughout. Fear of the opposite sex is shown to be laughable or crippling, whether it is Miss Pole’s humorous “diatribe against the [male] sex” (p. 176) or her “congratulation” to Miss Matty “that so far they had escaped marriage” (p. 195) or the rector’s tendency to be “guarded by troops of his own sex from any approach of the many Cranford spinsters” (pp. 160–61).

The normality of romance and marriage is thus validated in ways that counterbalance the nontraditional lives of many of the women; in similar fashion, so is maternity. In an 1860 letter Elizabeth Gaskell said that, while an unmarried life may be happy, “women . . . naturally yearn after children” (Letters, p. 597), and Cranford may be seen as at least a partial embodiment of this view. A rare note of pathos enters the work when Mrs. Brown narrates her loss of several offspring and subsequent epic walk through the Indian countryside to Calcutta in order to save the one survivor. At least three sets of “normal” loving mothers and children are depicted at various points in the work, and the unmarried Matty evokes sympathy when she describes the powerful “yearning at my heart whenever I see a mother with her baby in her arms” (p. 198), a yearning finally fulfilled when she becomes a surrogate mother to the child of her former maid.

Other aspects of the structure and language of Cranford also serve to validate social norms of the era. Fathers, however absent they may be in fact, are psychically omnipresent. Both of the Jenkyns women are devoted to the memory of their father, the rector, who is as powerful a presence dead as alive, and the father of Mary Smith, the narrator, though safely offstage in Drumble, is a major force in her life. Her ability to come and go from Cranford is subject to his wishes, and the shirts of his that she brings along to sew function as a symbolic, if tacit, reminder of his importance. Mary readily criticizes one of her father’s communiqués as “just a man’s letter . . . very dull” (p. 222), yet acknowledges that her astuteness is an “hereditary quality” gained from him. She also looks to her father for guidance in assisting Matty to set up her tea-selling project.

Just as the absence of actual fathers from Cranford is counterbalanced by their forceful psychological presence, so the limited number of males depicted is
offset by the positive manner in which they are pictured. Captain Brown dominates the early part of the book and is described as evincing “manly frankness” and “excellent masculine common sense,” with an appealing “deep bass voice” (pp. 8, 30); a hero in the past, with his rescue of Lord Mauleverer, Captain Brown dies completing another heroic act, the saving of a child from an onrushing train. Other males are presented in equally approbatory terms: Major Gordon, notable for his appearance—“a tall, fine, frank-looking man” (p. 39)—and his years of devotion to Jessie Brown; Matty’s aging suitor, Mr. Holbrook, memorable for his honesty, his warmth, his appreciation of both nature and poetry, and his adventurous spirit that impels him to visit Paris at an advanced age; and even the otherwise daunting Mr. Jenkyns, whose youthful letters to his fiancée show him to be “full of eager passionate ardour” and capable of expressing himself “right fresh from the heart” (p. 80). Along with such positive descriptive language (largely withheld from the female characters), the men are also accorded privilege by the structure; powerful presences in the early portions of Cranford, they are also strongly in evidence at the last with the return of Major Gordon and his family, of Signor Brunoni, and of the prodigal Peter Jenkyns, who “rescues” his sister from her tea shop. (It is true, though, that the potentially patriarchal nature of Jenkyns is distinctly qualified by his earlier “cross-dressing,” his masquerading as a female around the town, to the infinite horror of his stern father.) In such ways are the females of Cranford structurally framed and rhetorically subordinated by and to the males, just as their mateless culture is challenged by the strong presence of heterosexual liaisons and normative gender assumptions.

This is far less the case in Deephaven, which seems more “radical” a text in several respects. Some of its unconventional qualities have been—and perhaps should be—seen as flaws: the unevenness of tone, the heterogeneity of the episodes, and the occasional discrepancies between the perceptions and the responses of the narrator and her friend. Others, however, mark an intriguing departure from standard assumptions about plot and behavior. The structure of Jewett’s work has an openness that many of its reviewers and critics have assailed, but which may be responsible for some of its mimetic “fidelity” that commentators such as Howells and Whittier praised and which also serves to question some of the orderliness evident even in a text like Cranford. In Deephaven the prodigal brother, whose return knits up Gaskell’s work, is never found. There are no solacing marriages and babies at the end, no reassuring expression of the communal spirit; economic and spiritual losses remain unexplained and uncompensated; and the young women depart without having “grown” or having absorbed the “lessons” of the town, whatever they may be. This is not of course to claim that Deephaven is a precocious “writerly” text of which Roland Barthes would approve. These nonresolutions probably came about because the author was not altogether comfortable putting together a book-length work and disliked the arduous process of attempting to make it cohere. They are, nevertheless, suggestive.

Deephaven also fails to fulfill other normative expectations, most strikingly
those having to do with heterosexual behavior and gender identity. Many of these have been pointed out by critics and are characteristics that recur throughout Jewett’s work, but they take on particular significance when viewed as a departure from an important parallel and enabling text such as Cranford. Males in general are far less dominant—indeed the power of female lineage is suggested early on by the fact that it is Kate Lancaster rather than one of her brothers who visits and takes charge of the Brandon estate, which had passed from its female inheritor to Kate’s mother. Nearly all of the fathers and brothers are absent or irrelevant—dead or overseas or crippled by despair or alcohol dependency—and the one brother-sister pair in Deephaven lives apart. Even a good husband is readily left behind on occasion: Mrs. Kew is first seen miles from home and spouse, traveling alone in a stagecoach as she returns from a visit to her mother.

Only a handful of marriages are depicted, and just two of these are presented in positive terms. On one occasion the narrator compares a troubled married life to a series of military battles (p. 67). Romantic liaisons are entirely absent from the text, evident only in the brief mention of the country couples at the circus and of Miss Brandon’s long-ago suitor. Indeed, the narrator and her friend, both in their twenties, never mention the subject of romance, either in relationship to themselves or to others. Moreover, in another suggestive reconstruing of a narrative element in Cranford, when presented with the possibility of reading the letters to Kate’s great-aunt from her suitor, the young women ignore them in favor of those from a close woman friend. They disdain even to untie the packet from Miss Brandon’s “sailor-lover,” instead reading and quoting those from her “dearest friend, Dolly McAllister” (pp. 34–35).

Manifestly, Helen Denis and Kate Lancaster are more interested in friendships between women, themselves exemplifying one of those intense female relationships that Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Martha Vicinus see as having been not uncommon during the nineteenth century. They meet with a kiss, spend virtually all of their time together during the narrative, and at the end propose emulating perhaps the most well-known female couple of history, the Ladies of Llangollen, and removing themselves “from society and its distractions” (p. 290). Some of the men of Deephaven also have close relationships, but these are characterized primarily by intellectual competition. The Messrs. Lorimer and Carew spend long pleasurable hours trying to best each other in discussions of theology, and the old sea captains endlessly tell each other stories from the past and have “violent altercations” about the tonnage of long-vanished vessels (p. 104).

In an amusing way the irrelevance of prescriptive codes of gender behavior is underscored by the response to the lecture on the “Elements of True Manhood.” The pitifully small audience includes no young men, and its content is so boring that Helen feels “as if I had been there ever since I was a little girl” (p. 178) and has an impulse to break out into laughter. The definition of “true manhood,” so apparent in Cranford, is neither clarified nor exemplified in Deephaven; Danny’s lameness and tender feelings for his cat disqualify him, as does Captain
Sands’s willingnessness to be rowed out into the ocean by a young woman. Nor are any of the women of Deephaven likely to be designated as exemplars of the “Cult of True Womanhood,” as historians have named the nineteenth-century idea that women should be passive, submissive, and domestically defined, with the possible exception of a house-bound (and slightly mad) figure such as Miss Chauncey.

Kate and Helen are physically active and adventurous, rowing and hiking through the countryside, moving from sea to shore to inland with vitality. In their geographic mobility they stand in marked contrast to the women of Cranford, for in that narrative, with the exception of the narrator’s trips to and from the village, there is little physical movement or sense of adventure. Kate and Helen’s energy and ubiquity is never censured in or by the text. Instead, the local men praise them for their capacity to “pull a boat well, and swim like fish” (p. 196), and Captain Sands tells them it is important for a woman to be out in the fresh air and sun regularly. In their physical vitality the young women of Deephaven, like some of the energetic older women of the narrative, fulfill one aspect of what a historian recently identified as a hitherto unrecognized nineteenth-century American concept, the “Ideal of Real Womanhood” (see Cogan).

While Kate and Helen ignore some of the codes of “feminine” or “ladylike” behavior, they can be seen as adhering to others, in those moments when, for example, they pay polite social visits, notice local clothing fashions, respond sentimentally to sad tales, or cite housekeeping as one of their “chief pleasures” (p. 181). By contrast, a more extreme female figure, Mrs. Bonny, flaunts all social codes, living outside the town and outside all prescriptive boundaries. “Wild and unconventional” in every way, Mrs. Bonny’s lack of concern for social rules is, as Sarah Way Sherman points out (p. 137), embodied in her clothing, which includes both male items—a man’s coat and boots—and those which are female—skirts, aprons, and a cap. Mrs. Bonny ignores the indoor/outdoor boundary, allowing hens and a turkey to inhabit her kitchen; the Sunday/Monday demarcation, for she professes her religious faith every day; and the niceties, for she is “a great smoker.” She is a subversive figure, and a laudable one; her resourcefulness makes her entirely self-reliant, and her extensive knowledge of nature and superstitions makes her immensely entertaining to the young women, who visit her repeatedly. Mrs. Bonny’s crossing of all possible lines, more extensive than that of Kate and Helen, presents a provocative challenge to the norm; she is a femme seule living comfortably on the outer margins of civilization.

The radical nature of the character of Mrs. Bonny—a figure all but inconceivable in the world of Cranford—is but the most vivid example of the complex manner in which Sarah Orne Jewett’s first book both pays homage to a crucial antecedent text such as Elizabeth Gaskell’s Cranford and moves beyond it, absorbing and transforming much of its basic material, weaving a strikingly new fabric. Just as the narrator of Deephaven and her friend discover ever-expanding vistas as they move from Boston to Deephaven and beyond, to the tiny hamlets and rocky hills inshore to the lighthouse offshore, so does the text of Deephaven...
venture into uncharted territory with its fluid narrative strategies and subversive characterizations. Ignoring some of Cranford’s rather “conventional” assumptions and directly challenging others, Jewett’s inaugural fiction explores a fresh range of psycho-social possibilities. That it does so with a degree of unevenness in no way mitigates the originality of fundamental aspects of its approach; even as Deephaven overtly acknowledges one major predecessor, it manages to establish new fictional terrain.

Works Cited


