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The Needle Not the Pen:

Fabric (Auto)biography in *Cranford*, *Ruth*, and *Wives and Daughters*

Women's self-writing, their autobiography, was particularly problematic in the second half of the nineteenth century. Their presence in this male-dominated genre was characterized by evasions, disguise, and downright fabrication. For good reason. With the ascendance of separate spheres and the feminine ideal of self-sacrifice, modesty, and selflessness at its height between the late 1830s and 1860s, any ground that women autobiographers in the eighteenth-century like Laetitia Pilkington, Teresia Constantia Phillips, and Frances Vane had captured was lost.<sup>1</sup> By mid-century male professionals such as DeQuincy dominated the genre and were succeeded by intellectual (and professional) giants Carlyle, Mill, Newman, and Ruskin. Unwilling to declare their professionalism for fear of losing feminine status and unable to shake the perception of intellectual inferiority—'women have equal parts, but are inferior in wholeness of mind'<sup>2</sup>—women naturally entered this arena with trepidation.

As Linda Peterson has shown, models established by Augustine and Rousseau dictated that the spiritual autobiographer trace his evolution of 'spiritual waywardness or malaise, conviction of sin, and eventual redemption' using a system of biblical hermeneutics. Lacking the formal schooling or the temerity to employ the language of the Bible to interpret their own experiences, says Peterson, women writers minimized and disguised their self-expression. A common practice was to label their autobiography 'recollections', 'journals', and 'memoirs'. Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, Sara Coleridge, Mary Russell Mitford, and later Mary Somerville and Mrs. Humphry Ward all effected

this stratagem.<sup>3</sup> No less than Queen Victoria, the most powerful woman in the empire, albeit the paradoxical model of domesticity, deferred to convention, calling her autobiographical accounts 'journals': *Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands* (1862) and *More Leaves* (1883). Not doing so meant facing the derision of critics and readers who charged the author with 'egotism' and 'vanity', as they did Harriet Martineau and Annie Besant. Jane Welsh Carlyle, noted for her *bons mots*, quipped that 'decency forbids' she should write an autobiography.<sup>4</sup> Inexplicably, Margaret Oliphant (herself the writer of an autobiography), condemned Martineau's effort for its 'self-applause'.<sup>5</sup> Recent research has shown that a handful of Quaker women did write spiritual autobiographies between the late 20s and 40s and frequently titled their work as such; however, their purpose was religious conversion and affirmation, and these works were marginalized publications.<sup>6</sup>

A safe bet for women who could not suppress the urge to record and interpret their lives was not only to mask their attempts through belittling nomenclature—recollections, memoirs, journals—but also offer elaborate reasons for daring to write their supposedly trifling accounts: a 'friend' had insisted that the writer share their 'letters' in order to help others.<sup>7</sup> The autobiographer could thus remain behind the barricades of a feminine genre and womanly impulse in responding to a friend's wishes. Safer still was the author's fictionalizing of her life and shaping it into a novel. Critics like Peterson argue that Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and *Lucy Snow* are avatars through whom the author could interpret her experiences 'without exposing her private self' to the world.<sup>8</sup> Valerie Sanders sees *The Mill on the Floss* as George Eliot's attempt to manipulate the facts of her life and tie up loose ends, noting, 'Art, inevitably, is tidier than life'.<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, too, falls into the category of autobiography tweaked into fiction. More pertinent to this paper, was not Elizabeth Gaskell's first novel a 'fictional' vehicle for coming to grips with the loss of a child, her dear Willie? What are

the death of so many young children and loved ones in *Mary Barton* if not the author's expression of grief and endeavor to interpret what it means to lose a child?

In women's writing there is, then, an acknowledged relationship between fiction and (auto)biography, 'the fictional guise of the novel'<sup>10</sup> being an alternative to riskier forms of self-expression. Novel writing had the advantage of claiming kinship with other feminine arts like needlework, supposedly a natural vocation for women. And Victorian culture seemed determined that if women would give up the 'needle for the pen', to evoke a metaphor employed by Harriet Martineau and Margaret Oliphant in their autobiographies, they should do so in a manner that would not 'unsex' them.<sup>11</sup> Martineau recounts the mixed messages she received from male family members. Her brother James had advised her to 'leave it to other women to make shirts and darn stockings; and...devote [her]self' to writing, while 'the husband of a cousin...a literary man in his way', lectured her on the 'rashness and presumption in supposing that [she] was adequate to such work as authorship', suggesting she 'eke out [her] earnings by [her] needle'.<sup>12</sup> Oliphant describes how she 'had no liking...for needlework' so she 'took to writing'. However, in order to establish her domesticity, she repeatedly connects her writing with sewing and the domestic work around her: 'I had no table even to myself, much less a room to work in, but sat at the corner of the family table with my writing book, with everything going on as if I had been making a shirt instead of writing a book'.<sup>13</sup>

The needle/pen dichotomy draws a parallel between women as fabricators, workers of cloth, and as writers, dealers in words that fabricate lives. The former tool, symbol of womanliness in Tennyson's *The Princess*—'he for the sword and for the needle she'—elicits affirmation but little power, while the latter in the hands of women evokes scorn because of the potential manly power it confers. Women writers approached writing in general and (auto)biography in particular with a keen awareness of what they risked when they exchanged the needle for the pen and became perhaps more deft at

hiding themselves in the garb of stories, letters, diaries, or, as I will shortly discuss, in fabric.

## II

Few women writers of the mid-nineteenth century were as openly conscious of the schizophrenic lives women writers led as they struggled to balance two conflicting roles and hide their professionalism as was Elizabeth Gaskell. Writing to Eliza Fox, Gaskell noted, 'women must give up living an artist's life, if home duties are to be paramount', and continued, 'The difficulty is where and when to make one set of duties subserve and give place to the other',<sup>14</sup> demonstrating an awareness of the choices women writers faced each day and the threat many believed the profession posed to the traditional family structure. Gaskell's passionate defense of Charlotte Brontë in the *Life* is simultaneously motivated by Arthur Nicholls' imperative 'No quailing Mrs Gaskell! No drawing back!' <sup>15</sup> and the autobiographer's compulsion to self-explain. According to Ira Bruce Nadel, her role as her friend's apologist suggests that she was also justifying and assessing her own career as a writer. Nadel puts it thus: 'Written at the end of nearly a decade of literary creativity and success, and standing almost at the chronological centre of Gaskell's own *corpus*, the *Life* is both a reassessment of her own writing as well as her position as a woman and novelist, wife and writer, mother and author'.<sup>16</sup> Gaskell was consciously or unconsciously (one can never be sure) engaging in a similar practice as other women writers; she was writing about herself indirectly.

There is ample evidence to suggest that because of her sensitivity to the sexual politics governing her chosen profession and the culture in general, Gaskell recognized that the safest and most expedient attempts at self-expression and interpretation come

through domestic subversions. (Witness Miss Matty's unexpectedly successful compassionate marketing in *Cranford*!) Though Gaskell had a 'reformist agenda', to use Diedre d'Albertis' phrase,<sup>17</sup> and came from a tradition of religious reform, she recognized that it is easier to work with the ideological grain than against it. Though she was connected with the most radical feminists of the time, women like Barbara Leigh Smith (Bodichon) and Bessie Parkes, she stuck to her own form of feminism by working within more accepted boundaries. For example, her philanthropic efforts with Dickens on behalf of women like Pasley, while commendably liberal, fell within the domestic duties of middle-class women, especially clergymen's wives. In her fiction, too, Gaskell demonstrates that attempts at self-expression in spheres peculiar to women customarily draw minimal scrutiny because of their relative unimportance to the status quo, bringing us back to the needle versus the pen conflict. If the needle, used for domestic rather than commercial ends, is assumed to be the 'natural' instrument of feminine creativity, then representation via this medium—fashion—might flourish, unchecked and almost unnoticed. As long as women did not use it to make political statements (like Barbara Leigh Smith's corsetless dresses) or professional advertisement (prostitutes in cheap finery like *Mary Barton*'s Esther) they might express and interpret themselves without fear of censorship. In three of Gaskell's novels, *Cranford*, *Ruth*, and *Wives and Daughters*, she explores fashion as a subtly powerful form of self-expression open to women.

Because the aesthetics of mourning fashion with their potential for self-expression appealed to her—considering her detailed letter to Marianne Gaskell in May of 1859 on mourning for young ladies, there is no doubt about this<sup>18</sup>—Gaskell's most intriguing

fabric (auto)biographies involve widow's weeds, the most pitiful garb a Victorian woman could wear and the most nuanced. These often-quoted words by Miss Jenkyns, head Amazon of Cranford, about the good Mrs Fitz-Adam's rustling silk gown, 'Bombazine would have shown a deeper sense of her loss' (*CD*, ch.7, p.63),<sup>19</sup> attest once again to Gaskell's familiarity with the codes of mourning. Comedy notwithstanding, Miss Jenkyns' fashion decree and the Amazons' ludicrous attempts to ostracize Mrs Fitz-Adam underscore that mourning fashion was a discourse as eloquent as a well-written story. (The newly-widowed Mrs Fitz-Adam ought not be wearing silk so soon after her husband's death, exposing her not-quite-genteel lineage.) Eulogizing the dead through ponderous biographies and funerals had become a Victorian obsession, fueling satellite industries, including the very lucrative one of mourning fashion. Like the hagiography that passed for biography and followed hard on the heels of many funerals, the widow's fabric text, too, could write the wearer's history. With magazines like *The Queen* and *Woman's World* reinforcing the etiquette of mourning and advertising the fabrics, colors, and fashions for widows, women (and many men) were conversant with the signifiers worn to show grief, respect for the dead, and respectability. Each stiff band of crepe, each ugly cap or disguising veil, each fastidious (and easily soiled) weeper, each yard of flat black bombazine was a word in the story of the wearer's grief. When flat black gave way to shiny black, and then to whites, greys, and violets in more luxurious fabrics, the wearer signaled her half mourning and her entry back into society.<sup>20</sup>

Obviously, the fabrics and fashions of mourning were a viable means of self-expression, though one fraught, as in Mrs Fitz-Adam's case, with possible unsympathetic review by critics. What I would like to consider in this paper is how Gaskell shows the

intriguing possibilities for feminine (auto)biography through sartorial choice in *Cranford*, *Ruth*, and *Wives and Daughters*. She is not, of course, the only Victorian to examine self-writing by ‘widows’. Anne Brontë’s Helen Graham in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* dons weeds to reinvent her life and escape criticism, and Trollope would excel in featuring widows, notably Mrs Greenow, Lizzie Eustace, and Emily Lopez, who express themselves most eloquently through their weeds. In examining the women’s attempts to revise or enhance their lives through widow's weeds, I assume, like other Gaskell critics, that her narrators while not to be confused with the author herself, share her sympathies towards those whom they describe. I hold the view of critics like Patsy Stoneman and Jenny Uglow who have demonstrated Gaskell’s unusual sympathy towards the plight of women, and I interpret her narrators’ indulgence towards their feminine subjects as akin to, if not synonymous with, Gaskell’s.

### III

Of all Gaskell’s heroines, perhaps the most charming and innocent is Miss Matty, younger sister to the Miss Jenkyns who boldly declared of Mrs Fitz-Adam’s silk gown, ‘Bombazine would have showed a deeper sense of her loss’. She too in this tale resonant with altered biographies by men who change the course of their lives through fabrication, literally through the dress or costume they wear, attempts to rewrite her own maidenly history. Gaskell must have been thinking of the dramatic changes dress could initiate in a life when she has soldier Samuel Brown don mufti and reinvent himself in lavish costume and turban as Signor Brunoni, and young Peter Jenkyns choose exile and a new identity as Aga Jenkyns after incurring the wrath of his father for cross-dressing in his elder sister’s clothes. For both men, operating outside their sphere, the reinvention induces

fear and shock. Signor Brunoni, 'magnificent gentleman in the Turkish costume' (*CD*, ch. 9, p. 86), stirs much suspicion as the perpetrator of several Cranford burglaries, only sinking into the quotidian when he is unveiled as harmless Samuel Brown. Once the conjurer is seen without his costume, 'The Cranford panic', notes Mary Smith, 'occasioned by his...Turkish dress, melted away into thin air' (*CD*, ch.11, p.104). Likewise, Peter's cross-dressing in his sister's 'old gown and shawl, and bonnet' induces a rage in his father, who, reacting to his son's cross-gender disguise, 'tore his clothes off his back—bonnet, shawl, gown, and all' (*CD*, ch. 6, p.52-53). However, when Miss Matty chooses to rewrite her life story through fabrication, she has greater success. Knowing her way around the discourse helps, and she always has plausible deniability.

In middle-age Miss Matty adopts mourning wear to claim a relationship not allowed during her youth. Denied the love and companionship of Mr Holbrook by family snobbery, Miss Matty wishes to rewrite the past and show her love for Mr Holbrook like a good widow. When she hears of his death she asks the milliner 'to make her caps something like the Honorable Mrs Jamieson's' (*CD*, ch. 4, p.39). However, her quick insistence that she only wishes caps 'in that style' to the milliner's shocked retort, 'But she wears widows' caps, ma'am', is an uncharacteristic untruth from that honest lady. Miss Matty understands that her widow's cap will still express the grief, respect, and regret she feels, even if those around her cannot quite read her intention. Moreover, in a community where economy has become a fine art and most Cranford residents express themselves in 'fragments and small opportunities' (*CD*, ch. 2, p. 15) like caps rather than whole gowns, Miss Matty's statement is rendered less conspicuous.<sup>21</sup> Her choice of cap is deniable and far more discreet than the parental love letters and family correspondence

she reads to Mary Smith then tearfully burns, potential fodder for a lachrymose pen-and-ink biography. Narrator Mary Smith reveals the cost of this subterfuge to the ingenuous spinster when she declares, '[t]his effort at concealment was the beginning of the tremulous motion of head and hands which I have seen ever since' (*CD*, ch.4. p.39).

Much like the status-saving arrangement that allows her to run her tea enterprise from the home and her sympathetic collaboration with Mr Johnson, choices that mark her efforts as domestic rather than commercial, Miss Matty's autobiographical expression also falls within the safety of the domestic sphere. She can quietly assert her revisionist life story within the Amazonian code of fashion—a world of red silks, grey flannels, prints, bombazines, mousseline-de-laine, sarsenet, and Paduasoy—where the needle rather than the pen speaks for her. Not linguistically adept, she 'always coughed before coming to long words' and had 'out-of-the-way' spelling (*CD*, ch.14, p.131), Miss Matty would not choose to express her life in writing nor enter that arena of male voices and opinions. It is worth noting that one of the few conflicts in *Cranford* occurs between Captain Brown and Miss Deborah Jenkyns in a debate over the stylistic superiority of Dr Johnson and Mr Boz. Despite this 'memorable dispute' (*CD*, ch. 2, p.11) having the nature of a storm in a little teacup like many events in the village, it nevertheless touches on the theme of antagonism between men and women in the literary word and male intolerance for feminine opinions. Also relevant to this paper is that Deborah, who 'considered herself literary' (*CD*, ch. 1, p.8), confines her talents to epistolary writing, 'her forte' (*CD*, ch.1, 9), as did so many gifted women writers to avoid controversy and stay within safe boundaries.

The most dramatic instance in Gaskell's *oeuvre* of a life rewritten in widow's weeds, is, of course, Ruth, a heroine whom Gaskell staunchly defended. With a bit more melodrama than she used to garner support for Pasley, Ruth's real-life fallen sister, Gaskell contrives a narrative in which she is once again bent on rescuing a young woman. In real life, Gaskell arranged with Dickens for Pasley's passage to Australia in the care of a schoolmaster and a 'whole nest of good ladies'.<sup>22</sup> In *Ruth* the rescue is more subtle. A superior reworking of the mawkish story 'Lizzie Leigh' which appeared three years earlier, *Ruth* nevertheless returns to a theme near and dear to the author's heart: social responsibility and compassion for women like Pasley/Ruth victimized by older, more experienced men. Remember her words to Mary Green on the novel: 'I did feel as if I had something to say about it that I must say'.<sup>23</sup> The sympathetic Bensons (dissenters like the author herself) orchestrate Ruth's social and moral redemption through revisionary fashion. With this social agenda in mind, and despite moral misgivings (echoes of Gaskell's own nervousness about the critical reception of the novel), the Bensons adopt the rhetoric of cautious biographers in their bid to save Ruth, while their maid Sally collaborates initially only to save her employers' reputation. To all, Ruth passively acquiesces. Indeed, until after Leonard is born her history is more biographical than autobiographical, her passivity being a deliberate artistic decision by the author that critics are still debating. As has been noted before, Gaskell saw Ruth's passivity as the best way of indicating her natural innocence.

The new and improved biography begins with Miss Benson's repeated references to the 'story' she must invent for Ruth and how to make it believable (*R*, ch.14, p.148).<sup>24</sup> However, sharp-eyed Sally understands that the story itself is not enough. She realizes,

unlike the novice biographers, that Ruth's appearance must match the story or it will undercut their efforts. Rebelling against poor 'sham[ming],' Sally sweeps into Ruth's bedchamber with these words:

Missus—or miss, as the case may be—I've my doubts as to you. I'm not going to have my master and Miss Faith put upon, or shame come near them. Widows wears these sort o'caps, and has their hair cut-off; and whether widows wears wedding-rings or not, they shall have their hair cut off—they shall. I'll have no half work in this house. I've lived with the family forty-nine year come Michaelmas, and I'll not see it disgraced by any one's fine long curls. Sit down and let me snip off your hair, and let me see you sham decently in a widow's cap to-morrow, or I'll leave the house. (*R*, ch.13, p.144-45)

Sally's tonsorial efforts in shearing Ruth's magnificent locks and her present of 'two widow's caps of commonest make and coarsest texture' transform Ruth into a believable widow (*R*, ch.13, p.144). These fabrications and Miss Benson's embellished story with Ruth widowed by a ship's surgeon convince the conservative watchdogs of Eccleston to accept Ruth.

So successful are the Benson's and Sally's efforts, that more than a decade passes before the unvarnished truth of her sexual affair and illegitimate child challenges the revisionist biography. The lower-middle class Ruth who began her life in the novel as an apprentice seamstress gains respectability and higher status as a 'widowed' nursery governess instructing the Bradshaw children in the severely simple dark grey gowns (colors of ordinary mourning) that become her trademark. Fashion alone cannot, of

course, claim victory for Ruth's successful transition from fallen innocent to moral matron, but it does allow Ruth to express genuine sorrow at her fall while also providing the necessary cover that facilitates spiritual self-discovery. Ironically, the needle that dooms her to a life of exploitation at the hands of Mrs Mason and Mr Bellingham whom she bewitches while stitching ladies' dresses at the ball, becomes the instrument of sewing her life back together. Not only is Ruth's sewing domestic rather than commercial—for herself, the Benson household, and the poor—but she signals the beginning of her life as reflective penitent and self-sacrificing mother by cutting and 'daintily stitch[ing]' into baby clothes the 'fine linen and delicate soft white muslin' given her by her lover (*R*, ch.15, p.159). Gaskell returns here to the needle/fabric motif she employed in *Cranford* when, according to Andrew Miller, Mrs Jenkyns (Miss Matty's mother) signals her shift from 'vanity to maternal pride by turning her 'box full of finery', notably the 'white Paduasoy', into a 'christening cloak for her baby'.<sup>25</sup>

By the time Ruth's secret is known, her ersatz widowhood has metamorphosed into genuinely modest and moral mourning, not for a dead husband, but for virtue and love lost. The Bensons' and Sally's modest biographical labors provide a scaffolding upon which Ruth can rebuild herself stoutly enough to withstand the crucible of social ostracism. Furthermore, Ruth's fabric biography, unlike the posthumous pen-and-ink variety, ironically enables her to become the heroic figure that received biographical convention tried to make of most of its subjects and the townspeople would employ on her life. Following Ruth's selfless heroism during the fever outbreak, Eccleston's high and low come together to write the last chapter of her life and expunge unpleasant truths. The city fathers' written testimonials to *Mrs* Denbeigh (a fiction of which the entire town

is now aware), and the poor's hysterical oral accounts of her courage create a life that is only part hagiography. These written and oral testimonials swell to a crescendo until, upon her death, she is canonized as one of Eccleston's saints. Her bitterest enemy, the arch-conservative Mr Bradshaw, announces her canonization when he pays for a stonemason to write her epitaph. One is reminded that without the initial fabrication of widow's weeds, Ruth would never have had the chance to express herself and evolve into a bona fide heroine/saint.

Another woman who chooses to write herself through her weeds is Mrs Kirkpatrick, later Gibson, of *Wives and Daughters*. In a departure from the emotional and spiritual motivations of Miss Matty and Ruth, Mrs Kirkpatrick's impetus is economic survival. Though this lady, the only one of the three discussed here, is a real widow, she manipulates—no, exploits—mourning conventions to advertise her eligibility. Not one of Gaskell's more sympathetic matrons, Mrs Kirkpatrick nevertheless needs every bit of help she can get to reenter the marriage market following the death of her curate husband. As Cynthia Curran and Pat Jalland have documented, middle-class widows often descended from positions of status and comfort to lives as superannuated dependents in dire economic need.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Gaskell chronicles just such a fall in Mrs Kirkpatrick's movement from relative security and comfort to a widow's life of dependence on pupils to earn her bread and on the largesse of the imperious Lady Cumnor, employer from her unmarried days. She introduces the reader to Hyacinth Kirkpatrick's economic perils and her losses in material terms when she has the widow reflect wistfully on the 'toiling and moiling for money' that she has had to engage in since the death of her husband: 'Marriage is the natural thing; then the husband has all that kind of dirty work to do, and

his wife sits in the drawing room like a lady...[I]t's a sad thing to be a widow' (*WD*, ch.9, p.131).<sup>26</sup> Therefore, though Mrs Kirkpatrick's grief reveals her self-centered and superficial nature, it also foregrounds many a widow's lost security and physical comforts and exhibits a realist's instinct for finding the most expedient way to regain firm financial footing and stop social slippage. Hyacinth Kirkpatrick relies on her widow's weeds to achieve these goals. She perceives that the sartorial speaks more eloquently of her respectability and gentility (and without risk of seeming vain) than words.

Mrs Kirkpatrick lets mourning fashion and the grief that usually accompanies it create a persona quite different from her superficial self. Only the reader, with the help of the narrator's deft juxtaposition of facts, is aware of the discrepancy between the real widow and the autobiographical persona. Two incidents suggest the chasm between the mournful aspect of the widow and her actual robustness of appetite and attitude. In the first, Hyacinth Kirkpatrick 'ate up the chicken, and jelly, and drank the glass of wine' provided for the headachy Molly during her visit to Cumnor Towers (*WD*, ch. 2., p.48). By itself this is an ordinary act of satisfying hunger, but Molly notes that the lady hurried 'as if she were afraid of someone coming to surprise her in the act'. Mrs Kirkpatrick, whom Molly describes as 'so graceful in her deep mourning', allows her employers to think that Molly's sickness is the result of having 'over-eaten herself' (*WD*, ch. 2., p.49) remaining mum about who ate the large luncheon. She chooses to foreground an impression of languid grief. Similarly, Hyacinth Kirkpatrick positively holds forth in 'high good humour' on her status as a widow and her own beauty in the same breath. She tells Molly, 'I don't look as if I am married, do I? Every one is surprised. And yet I have been a widow for seven months now: and not a grey hair on my head, though Lady

Cuxhaven, who is younger than I, has ever so many' (*WD*, ch. 2, p.51). This moment of openness to the child allows the reader to glimpse the fancy stitching of Mrs Kirkpatrick's autobiography.

A few years after Molly and the widow first meet, when Mrs Kirkpatrick is still eking out a barely genteel living as a school mistress, she must rely more than ever on her needle to express eligibility. Mrs Kirkpatrick's studied choices in dress once again suggest a keen awareness of the aesthetic advantages of grieving widowhood as well as an exploitation of the conventions in the service of economy. The narrator has this to say about the struggling Mrs Kirkpatrick, soon to attract the eye of Mr Gibson:

She was very pretty and graceful; and that goes a great way towards carrying off shabby clothes; and it was her taste *more than any depth of feeling*, that had made her persevere in wearing all the delicate tints—the violets and greys—which with a certain admixture of black, constitute half-mourning. This style of becoming dress she was *supposed* to wear in memory of Mr Kirkpatrick; *in reality because it was both lady-like and economical*. Her beautiful hair was of that rich auburn that hardly ever turns grey; and partly out of consciousness of its beauty, and partly because the washing of caps is expensive, she did not wear anything on her head (*WD*, ch 9, p.129, my italics)

Mr Gibson's courtship and marriage to the widow may be directly traced to Hyacinth Kirkpatrick's campaign of self-representation through fashion. Indeed, during the courtship she says little, allowing her appearance to speak for her. Rather like the often false connection made between cleanliness and godliness, Mr Gibson assumes that the

aesthetics of Mrs Kirkpatrick's costume signify moral integrity and, more appealing to him, a capacity for wifely devotion. Like the Cranford Amazons, he judges the lady by her dress, noting approvingly on more than one occasion their 'harmonious colours' (*WD*, ch.10, p.138).

The narrator explicitly connects Hyacinth's successful self-representation with her skills as a needlewoman and fabricator. The money her fiancé gives for her daughter's passage to the wedding, Mrs Kirkpatrick decides to spend instead on articles of dress that will 'make a show, and an impression upon the ladies of Hollingford', choosing to mend 'many a night long after her pupils were in bed' her stock of underclothing' (*WD*, ch. 12.p.175). She opts for surface appeal over depth in her wardrobe because she perceives it will represent her more flatteringly. More to the point, during the courtship she tolerates Lady Cumnor's insufferable countermanding of her decisions on dress and coiffeur, and endures hours of 'plain-sewing', because by so doing she has secured 'her wedding dress', 'a hundred pounds for her trousseau', and a lavish wedding breakfast from the Cumnors (*WD*, ch. 12, p.176).

Cynthia Kirkpatrick, not of course a widow, has still greater skill for self-representation through fashion, being beautiful and possessing considerable talent with her needle. However, this potential she thwarts through bitterness at her mother's neglect and the wish to deny (now) Mrs Gibson the pleasure of exploiting her perfection. The narrator remarks, 'She was a capital workwoman; and, unlike Molly, who excelled in plain sewing, but had no notion of dressmaking or millinery, she could repeat the fashions she had only seen in passing along the streets of Boulogne, with one or two pretty rapid movements of her hands' (*WD*, ch.19, p.255). Despite these talents, Cynthia

shows 'contempt' at the elegant results of her skills. Though Cynthia does not exploit her talent as her mother does, Gaskell would appear to be suggesting through the contrast between Molly's relative ineptitude with her needle and Cynthia's excellence the former's lack of artifice. Molly will not represent herself except through her kindness and intelligence.

#### IV

Things haven't changed much since Gaskell explored the potential for self-writing through fashion. Women who have not been able, or who have not wished, to write their histories have turned, often with great success, to the needle. For evidence of how formidable a factor fashion has been in the writing of lives and the formation of myths, we need look no further than the most recently notorious in a long tradition, Princess Diana. She transformed herself from gauche schoolgirl to fairy princess to sad martyr and, finally, to liberated royal through the clothes she wore. More eloquently than the authorized and unauthorized biographies about her, the Princess' choices in dress were studied attempts to express or conceal her feelings. Knowing as the women discussed above knew that her words might be mis-heard, she wrote her life through a fabulously versatile wardrobe. Those who sewed for her stitched out a life in pearls and sequins, gold and silver braid on luxurious fabrics. They simultaneously exploited a system of communication and were exploited by it. And on the other side of the Atlantic, before Diana became a princess, fashion also wrote lives into history. The myth of Camelot was perpetuated by, what else, a postmodern parody of Victoriana: a black-clad, heavily veiled widow grieving behind her husband's horse-drawn coffin. How many biographers armed with *fin de siècle* cynicism and knowledge of marital infidelity and unhappiness have tried, with limited success, to rend the veil?

## Notes

1. In Valerie Sanders, *The Private Lives of Victorian Women: Autobiography in Nineteenth Century England* (New York: St. Martin's, 1989), p.8, and Estelle C. Jelinek, *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography From Antiquity to the Present* (Boston: Twayne, 1986) chs. 3 and 4.
2. These words come from Hannah More's *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, one of the most popular guides to feminine education that influenced women in the nineteenth century and are quoted in Linda H. Peterson's *Victorian Autobiography: The Tradition of Self-Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986) p. 127.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 121, 130.
4. In Sanders, *The Private Lives of Victorian Women*, p.6.
5. *Ibid.* p. 76.
6. See Linda H. Peterson's "Institutionalizing Women's Autobiography: Nineteenth-Century Editors and the Shaping of an Autobiographical Tradition in *The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representation*, ed. Robert Folkenflik (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993), 80-103, notably 81-83. Peterson describes how Quaker historians William and Thomas Evans 'published a series of spiritual memoirs and journals' in a series called *The Friends' Library* which had a 'non-literary agenda'. Many of the women's autobiographies were contained in that collection to 'set the standard for Quaker self-presentation in life and in print'.
7. Sanders, *The Private Lives of Victorian Women*, p 13.
8. Peterson, *Victorian Autobiography*, p.132.
- 9 Sanders, *The Private Lives of Victorian Women*, p.16.
10. Peterson, *Victorian Autobiography*, p. 124.
11. Sanders, *The Private Lives of Victorian Women*, p.44.

12. Harriet Martineau, *Harriet Martineau's Autobiography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1877), vol. 1, pp. 92, 128.
13. Margaret Oliphant, *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990), pp. 24, 30. Oliphant goes on to say that she has always, like Jane Austen, done her writing around 'all the (feminine) life of the house', having chosen not to have a study per se, p.30.
14. *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997), p. 106.
15. *Letters*, p.361.
16. Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact & Form*. (New York: St. Martin's, 1984), p. 123.
17. Deidre d'Albertis, *Dissembling Fictions, Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Social Text* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), p.91.
18. *Letters*, 555-56.
19. Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford*, ed. Elizabeth Porges Watson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1972), p.63. All subsequent references to *Cranford* come from this edition.
20. See John Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1971) and Phyllis Cunnington and Catherine Lucas, *Costume for Births, Marriages and Deaths* (New York: Harper, 1972). Morley and Cunnington and Lucas describe at great length the intricacies of mourning fashion and etiquette.
21. Andrew H. Miller, *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), p.98.
22. Quoted in Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell. A Habit of Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), pp.246-47.
23. Quoted in Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, p. 236.

24. This and all subsequent references to *Ruth* come from the World's Classics edition, ed. Alan Shelston, 1992.
25. Miller, *Novels Behind Glass*, p. 100.
26. This and all subsequent references to *Wives and Daughters* come from the Penguin edition, eds. Laurence Lerner and Frank Glover Smith, 1969.