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**“The Grey Woman”: Gaskell Sensationalizes the Servant**

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Among the stories included in the 2000 collection of *Gothic Tales* by Elizabeth Gaskell is “The Grey Woman” (1861), a fascinating but understudied novella.<sup>1</sup> While other stories in the collection remain in the “Gothic” tradition suggested by the title, “The Grey Woman” is not easily classified as such. Although the story has many Gothic elements—among them, a framing narrative featuring a mysterious portrait and a hidden letter, and a plot concerning a heroine trapped in a castle with a villain—it does not conform to the conventions of either “male” or “female” Gothic modes.<sup>2</sup> Diana Wallace’s 2004 article on “The Grey Woman” describes it as a revised Bluebeard tale, a story in the “female Gothic” tradition, and an “uncanny story” in which the “ghost” is the symbolically “murdered” Anna.<sup>3</sup> It is the hybrid nature of Gaskell’s story that makes it so difficult to categorize, but as Shirley Foster has observed, “The Grey Woman” may be best considered as part of the “sensational” school of fiction of authors like Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Ellen Wood.<sup>4</sup>

Although the sensation fiction canon is considered to comprise primarily novels, Gaskell’s novella utilizes many of the key conventions of the sensational school. The story lacks unexplained or supernatural phenomena, but relies on suspense and “shocks” to the nervous system; it offers the “secret history” of women with agency; and it concerns detection, spying, and the exposure of family secrets. As Laura Kranzler observes in her introduction to Gaskell’s *Gothic Tales*, stories such as “The Grey Woman”

“[suggest] that this domestic arena which Gaskell is so keen to preserve and prioritize is also precisely the place where women are at their [most] vulnerable and in most danger,” another characteristic of the sensational (xiv). The only major sensational element missing is a modern setting, although, while Anna’s story is set in the eighteenth century, the first-person framing narrative takes place in the 1840s.

Here, as in other sensation (and, later, detective) fiction, there is a servant who watches at the keyhole – but, as with Rosanna Spearman of *The Moonstone* (1868), it is to protect, rather than to expose, her employer/love. One of the most “sensational” elements of the story, in fact, is the relationship between the servant Amante and her mistress Anna. In much fiction of the era, servants are depicted as “internal intruders” within their house of employment and as the “publicists to the outside world” of their employers’ secrets.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, sensation fiction was seen by contemporary critics as the great equalizer of mistress and maid; W. Fraser Rae famously claimed that Mary Elizabeth Braddon “may boast, without fear of contradiction, of having temporarily succeeded in making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing room” (Rae 204). The plot of “The Grey Woman” not only renders mistress and maid equals, but makes the maid a heroine in the sensation mode. Anna, the mistress of the house, initially acts much as a Gothic heroine might – she screams, she “nearly faint[s],” and she cannot take action (315-16). On the other hand, her servant Amante is clever and quick to act – and, much like the eponymous character in *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), Isabel Vane of *East Lynne* (1861), or Magdalene Vanstone of *No Name* (1862), she is not afraid to use deception and disguise to achieve her desired goal.

Kranzler identifies Gaskell’s grappling with a “split self” “between successful woman writer” – a working woman like Amante – and “committed mother [and] wife” – like Anna – as the source of “gothic doubling” in her fiction (xvi). Even Amante’s name, as Wallace notes, “echoes” Anna’s own (Wallace 61). Other critics have pointed out the fair treatment of working women, somewhat unusual for the time, in Gaskell’s novels.<sup>6</sup> Servants in particular have significant roles in several Gaskell works, such as *Cranford* (1853), *North and South* (1855), and *Cousin Phillis* (1864).

Surprisingly, however, “The Grey Woman” receives little more than two pages of attention in Julie Nash’s book *Servants and Paternalism in the Works of Maria Edgeworth and Elizabeth Gaskell*.<sup>7</sup> It merits a closer look, particularly since it offers one of the most unusual servant characters outside the more canonical sensation novels. This essay will explore the “sensational” relationship between the mistress Anna and her maid, Amante, and how it blurs the boundaries of class, gender, and family.

Amante has several strikes against her as Anna’s potential confidante and savior – she is a woman, she is masculine, she is one of M. de la Tourelle’s servants, and she is French. Anna is German, and she recalls how her brother “Fritz could hardly bear the name of a Frenchman; and it had nearly been an obstacle to my visit to Sophie that her mother preferred being called Madame to her proper title of Frau” (295).

At her childhood home, Anna was close to the servant Kätchen, who would “help [her] in the housework,” and who is one of the only people who tries to dissuade her from going to Karlsruhe (292, 293). Once at her husband’s home, however, Anna no longer feels comfortable among his servants:

I had no pride to keep me from associating with the domestics; it would have been natural to me in many ways to have sought them out for a word of sympathy in those dreary days when I was left so entirely to myself, had they been like our kindly German servants. But I disliked them, one and all. I could not tell why. Some were civil, but there was a familiarity in their civility which repelled me; others were rude, and treated me more as if I were an intruder than their master's chosen wife; and yet of the two sets I liked these last the best. (301)

It is especially interesting that Anna claims to most dislike the servants who show “familiarity,” since later Amante will address her mistress as “my child” and treat her accordingly (334). The other servants are complicit in keeping Anna confined to one part of the house, and Anna explains that she had “the feeling that all the domestics, except Amante, were spies upon me, and that I was trammelled in a web of observation and unspoken limitation extending over all my actions” (308, 309). Anna further admits that she “never dared to give orders” to the servants (306).

In her article proposing "The Grey Woman" as "a feminist palimpsest," Maureen T. Reddy sees an often overlooked "feminist rage evident in [Gaskell's] short fiction" (Reddy 183). From this standpoint, Reddy describes the novella's male characters thus:

The miller and Anna's husband are simple variations of a single type, as are their homes; the suggestion is that Anna's husband is in fact representative of all husbands/jailers, and his home is not an extraordinary example of a house that is intended to imprison women. Anna was imprisoned first in that same mill by her father, then in her husband's manor, and finally in the mill by the miller, who controls her story; Ursula died in the mill; and, finally, the miller's wife is imprisoned there as an invalid. (186)

The female characters' isolation and lack of control identified here is evident throughout the text, but this particular reading overlooks other aspects of the story.

The character whom Anna most condemns is not M. de la Tourelle, but her sister-in-law, Babette. Early in the tale, she states simply, "That Babette Müller was, as I may say, the cause of all my life's suffering" (292). It is difficult to see the story wholly as a "feminist palimpsest" when Anna pinpoints Babette, not her own murderous husband, as the source of "all [her] life's suffering". Anna explains that Babette "looked upon [her] as a rival," criticizing Anna's clothes as unfashionable and spending Anna's father's money to buy new garments (292). Next, Anna is manipulated by Madame Ruprecht, whose "one great object [in]...life was to retain her position in society," as both she and Babette attempt to push a reluctant Anna into marriage (294). Even years later, after Anna's miraculous return, Babette will only "[scan her] with a cold, distrustful eye" and will not allow Anna to stay in her home with Fritz (292). The self-serving, perhaps even misogynistic actions of these women demonstrate that the story does not, as Reddy suggests, carry the message that "[o]nly in a community composed entirely of women can any one woman hope to escape the destructive influences of patriarchal power" (Reddy 191). It is implied that these women are partly motivated by jealousy of Anna's beauty—just as Anna's cruel husband is: she notes that he was "proud of my beauty, I dare say (for he often enough spoke about it to me)—but he was also jealous, and suspicious, and uninfluenced by my wishes, unless they tallied with his own" (302).

However, most of the male characters are depicted in a positive light. Anna loves her brother Fritz and wants to return to live with him after Dr. Voss dies (292). Among her “several people [who] love [her]” at her family home, one is “the old servant Kätchen,” but the rest are all men—her father, her brother “Fritz,... and Karl, the head apprentice at the mill” (292). Her father is further described as “always gentle and indulgent towards us women” (292). Dr. Voss, too, acts kindly toward Anna and she calls him a “dear husband and father” (340).

Early in the story, it appears that the sexual threat to Anna may come from a stock character common to plots from previous centuries—Karl is the “young male apprentice” who has his eye on his master’s daughter.<sup>8</sup> Surprisingly, Anna’s father encourages the union, but Anna confesses, “The more Karl advanced, the more I disliked him. He was good in the main, but I had no notion of being married, and could not bear any one who talked to me about it” (293). As this suggests, Anna seems more afraid of marriage itself—the “net,” as she calls it—than any other kind of imprisonment (298).

On the journey to her new husband’s chateau, Anna says she first “[wakes] up to a full sense of what marriage was,” and she sees it as the loss of her father, her brother, and her rights (299). She cynically observes, “I understood that I had made what Madame Rupprecht and her set would have called a great marriage, because I lived in a chateau with many servants, bound ostensibly to obey me as a mistress” (301-02). Anna’s concerns about marriage prove to be well-founded after she discovers her husband is the leader of the feared gang Les Chauffeurs, who likely murdered the woman who was Anna’s predecessor. Reddy sees the entirety of Anna’s story, which takes the form of a letter to her daughter Ursula, as “a cautionary tale, a warning from an experienced woman to an inexperienced one, which describes what marriage really is for women; that is, Ursula ought not to marry because the institution of marriage itself is a terrible trap for women, regardless of the individual man involved” (Reddy 186).

The “man involved” in Anna’s marriage proves to be a terrible husband—he is controlling, relentless, and violent—but his most remarkable defining feature is his effeminacy. In her initial meeting with M. de la Tourelle, Anna describes how:

His features were as delicate as a girl’s, and set off by two little “mouches,” as we called patches in those days, one at the left corner of his mouth, the other prolonging, as it were, the right eye. His dress was blue and silver. I was so lost in admiration of this beautiful young man, that I was as much surprised as if the angel Gabriel had spoken to me, when the lady of the house brought him forward to present him to me. (295)

M. de la Tourelle thus enters the tale passive and “beautiful,” and seems a fitting counterpart to Anna. By the end of the evening, however, she “became a little tired of the affected softness and effeminacy of his manners,” and later she “[finds] an amount of determination, under that effeminate appearance and manner, for which [she] was not prepared” (295, 299). After their marriage, Anna sees how a delicate exterior masks a hard interior:

For, while M. de la Tourelle behaved towards me as if I were some precious toy or idol, to be cherished, and fostered, and petted, and indulged, I soon found out how little I, or, apparently, any one else, could bend the terrible will of the man who had on first acquaintance appeared to me too effeminate and languid to exert his will in the slightest particular. I had learnt to know his face better now; and to see that some vehement depth of feeling, the cause of which I could not fathom, made his grey eye glitter with pale light, and his lips contract, and his delicate cheek whiten on certain occasions. (301)

Numerous critics have written about how Gaskell frequently subverts gender norms in her fiction, and Wallace sees “The Grey Woman” as “one of [Gaskell’s] most radical statements about the ways in which male power erases or represses women, about the redemptive possibilities of female relationships, and about the ambiguous nature of gender itself” (Wallace 61). M. de la Tourelle and Amante share “gender-bending” traits and behaviors, although the feminine man is depicted as perverse and monstrous, while the masculine woman is primarily portrayed as heroic and resourceful.

Amante’s initial description is nearly as masculine as M. de la Tourelle’s is feminine: “She was tall and handsome, though upwards of forty, and somewhat gaunt”

(302). Even Amante's voice sounds like that of a man (319). Anna likes her immediately for her "look of straightforwardness" and the fact that, while Anna "was afraid of everybody, Amante feared no one" (303). Amante holds her own with the men of the château, and seems to earn their respect on a kind of equitable, masculine footing:

She would quietly beard Lefebvre, and he respected her all the more for it; she had a knack of putting questions to M. de la Tourelle, which respectfully informed him that she had detected the weak point, but forbore to press him too closely upon it out of deference to his position as her master. (303)

Such masculine qualities make "Good, brave Amante" heroic as she protects Anna's life repeatedly throughout the story (312). According to Dinah Medlock Craik, a contemporary writer of *A Woman's Thoughts About Women*, "a sort of handbook for spinsters," the differences in gender performance between the two women make their friendship ideal.<sup>9</sup> Craik writes that women's friendships require "a difference – of strong or weak, gay or grave, brilliant or sordid – answering in some measure to the difference of sex" (Craik 163, quoted in Auerbach, 20). An 1870 *Saturday Review* article on "Friendship" similarly describes how, for two women to enjoy a successful relationship, one must have "a stronger character than the other": as Pauline Nestor observes, this means female friendship could only work "when the relationship conformed to conventional heterosexual roles" (12).<sup>10</sup> "The Grey Woman" is not the only text where Gaskell depicts such a masculine-feminine pairing of women; Françoise Basch cites others: Miss Matty and Deborah in *Cranford*, Phoebe Browning and Dorothy in *Wives and Daughters* (1865), and the younger and older Misses Tomkinson in *Mr. Harrison's Confessions* (1851) – although these are all pairs of unmarried sisters.<sup>11</sup>

Amante's masculine characteristics are not limited merely to her personality. She even uses her physical strength to remove Anna from danger. After the maid leads her mistress to safety with her voice, Anna describes how "I fell upon her neck, grasping her tight, till my hands ached with the tension of their hold. Yet she never uttered a word. Only she took me up in her vigorous arms, and bore me to my room, and laid me on my bed" (316). Maureen T. Reddy sees this scene as "crucial, and it marks the point in the

story at which Amante takes de la Tourelle's place as Anna's husband. Amante's carrying Anna to her bed and Anna's subsequent faint are a parodic enactment of a conventional wedding night" (Reddy 189-90).

Indeed, Anna and Amante's relationship goes beyond "female friendship" and becomes a kind of "marriage," which progresses from the "parodic" initial scene identified above to costumed role-playing and ultimately to an unconventionally conventional family arrangement. While the two women are hiding from Les Chauffeurs, Amante physically disguises herself as a man:

finding in one box an old suit of man's clothes... she put them on [and]... cut her own hair to the shortness of a man's, made me clip her black eyebrows as close as though they had been shaved, and by cutting up old corks into pieces such as would go into her cheeks, she altered both the shape of her face and her voice to a degree which I should not have believed possible. (323)

They become the "characters of a travelling pedlar and his wife" after "she stuffed a hump on her back, [and] she thickened [Anna's] figure" (324). On the road, Amante introduces herself as a tailor, adopting her father's profession for herself, since "as a girl she had often helped him with his work, and knew the tailors' slang and habits, down to the particular whistle and cry which in France tells so much to those of a trade" (288). Eventually, Anna gives birth to her daughter Ursula, and the three women live together as a "married couple" with a child until Amante is killed. As Nash observes:

neither character expresses any wish to revert to previous positions with regard to gender or class. The 'man' of the house is a female servant, and neither Gaskell nor her narrator seem to find that detail all that remarkable. Although the novella ends with Amante's murder and Anna's (bigamist) marriage to a male doctor, that relatively conventional ending does not change the story's premise that social (and gender) roles are better determined by aptitude and inclination than by birth. (69)

Through Amante's performance as a man, she reveals the degree of performativity that is socially expected of a marriage; she must "scold" Anna "from time to time" to continue acting the part (325). At a certain point, as Nestor observes, "it is clear that the threat of discovery is much less relevant than the fact that the relationship has



developed into one of mutual dependence and attachment, as valid in the love that nourishes it as any heterosexual relationship" (77).

Amante's redefined gender role seems to suit her and she lives out the rest of her life posing as Anna's husband. It is only on her deathbed at a hospital that "the fact of her sex was made known" (338). However, initially, Anna did not plan to maintain their charade indefinitely and hoped to bring Amante to her father's home in Germany. She tells the maid

of the safety and comfort of the home that awaited her in my father's house; of the gratitude which the old man would feel towards her; and how there, in that peaceful dwelling, far away from the terrible land of France, she should find ease and security for all the rest of her life. (333)

It is unclear what role Anna expects Amante to play in such a scenario. Would she continue her role as Anna's maid or "retire" and live there as an equal and friend? Is it possible that Amante would become an adoptive sibling to Anna, a surrogate mother, or perhaps even a new wife for Anna's father? As "husband" and "wife" their requisite household roles are more clearly delineated.

Reddy sees the insistence of a male/female division of labor in Anna and Amante's relationship as "a failure of imagination on Gaskell's part; that is, she can imagine a non-traditional relationship—a family made up of two women—but she cannot fully imagine an entirely new order, in which people create new ways of assigning responsibilities" (190). However, Thomas P. Fair suggests that when the author

balances... a rebellious individual with a conventional figure.... Gaskell *appears* to be reinforcing the hegemonic paradigm when, in fact, she is subverting it to allow her rebellious heroines agency and the opportunity to fashion their own success from within the system that would attempt to contain them within its traditional boundaries. (218)

Nash claims that "the two women create their own family, based on the paternalist ideal, but with a twist: "Amante becomes the strong husband that Anna clearly wants, one who uses 'his' strength to nurture and lead, not to frighten and brutalize".<sup>12</sup> However, Anna's early rejection and fear of the apprentice Karl would suggest that it is not merely a "strong husband" that Anna wants. Anna is drawn to her maid's strength,

but much of Amante's appeal seems to be her maternal nature. Laurie Buchanan sees male and female protagonists in many of Gaskell's novels as "striving toward an androgynous ideal" to "allow a marriage of partnership rather than one of dominance and passivity". She describes how Gaskell's heroes learn to embrace "feminine" traits to become more caring and sensitive, and heroines become more assertive and strong, but neither sex must give up their gender identity. Buchanan believes Gaskell's novels show an "ideal Victorian marriage" as "a balancing of typical [sex] roles within each individual in the marriage," which seems closest to the arrangement depicted in "The Grey Woman" (98, 107).

However, for most of the story, Anna remains legally married to M. de la Tourelle, who shows early signs of jealousy toward the woman who will replace him as surrogate husband to Anna. It is noteworthy that when M. de la Tourelle seeks a maid for his wife, he specifically requests a woman "of middle age" (302). Before long, Anna observes that "he was jealous of my free regard for her – angry because I could sometimes laugh at her original tunes and amusing proverbs, while when with him I was too much frightened to smile" (303). Anna even admits, "I daresay it was true what M. de la Tourelle said – before many weeks had elapsed – that, for a great lady, a lady of a castle, I became sadly too familiar with my Norman waiting-maid" (303). Anna rationalizes away the differences in their status, claiming that "by birth we were not very far apart in rank: Amante was the daughter of a Norman farmer, I of a German miller" (303). Like Braddon's Lady Audley and other sensation heroines, Anna has "married up" to achieve wealth and status. As is the case in much sensation fiction, while the plot itself reveals rank and class as arbitrary constructs, the blurring of boundaries in a cross-class romance proves nearly as sensational as blackmail, bigamy, or adultery.

M. de la Tourelle's hunt for, and eventual murder of, Amante suggests, as Reddy has noted, that in his mind Anna and Amante may have even committed the latter two crimes (Reddy 191). As he spins a tale of woe during his search for them, he claims:

"Once a happy husband, now a deserted and betrayed man, I pursue a wife on whom I lavished all my love, but who has abused my confidence, and

fled from my house, doubtless to some paramour; carrying off with her all the jewels and money on which she could lay her hands.... she was accompanied in her flight by a base, profligate woman from Paris, whom I, unhappy man, had myself engaged for my wife's waiting-maid, little dreaming what corruption I was bringing into my house!" (327)

As Nina Auerbach explains, there was some fear evident at the time that when women remain together in close quarters for an extended period of time, their effect on each other could be a kind of "subtle sexual contagion" (14). As other critics have noted, Amante's name suggests the Latin word for "lover," and while no critic wants to claim that Gaskell is explicitly suggesting the women have a sexual relationship, there is a strong love connection between them. They are able to easily communicate without words—"Touch was safer and as expressive" (317)—and at one point, Anna specifically comments on the nature of her affection for her maid:

I cannot tell you how much in these doubtings and wanderings I became attached to Amante. I have sometimes feared since, lest I cared for her only because she was so necessary to my own safety; but, no! it was not so; or not so only, or principally. (325)

The women's potential romantic relationship is further complicated by their positions as mistress and maid.

There are other literary instances of servants posing as spouses—in Thomas Hardy's sensation novel *Desperate Remedies*, Manston's housekeeper, is forced to pass as his murdered wife; Grace Poole is blamed for Rochester's wife's actions in *Jane Eyre*—but there is no love present among such "couples." Conversely, there are also spouses who pose as servants, but their motivations tend toward personal gain, not mutual love: the eponymous heroine of Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* (1863) is blackmailed by her horsegroom to keep their marriage secret from her most recent husband, and *East Lynne's* Isabel Vane returns to her husband and his new wife's home to see her children. Generally in Victorian fiction, any romantic love between lower-order servants and upper-class masters or "betters" remain taboo, as with Heathcliff and Cathy in *Wuthering Heights* (1847) or Rosanna Spearman and Franklin Blake in *The Moonstone*. This subject remains anathema even decades later; Bruce Robbins suggests that it is the

“open secret of trans-class sexuality” that is the source of corruption and mystery in James’ *Turn of the Screw* (1898) (Robbins 200).

Kristina Straub, in her *Domestic Affairs: Intimacy, Eroticism, and Violence between Servants and Masters in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, showcases some literary homosocial relationships between master and servant, from Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* (1794) to *The Memoirs of an Eighteenth-Century Footman*—but most of them concern men, not women. In literature from the eighteenth century, when Anna’s story is set, male servants were frequently depicted as sexually predatory whereas maids were alluring but sexually passive, which counterbalances their ability to attempt “sexual class-climbing” (Straub 37). In “The Grey Woman,” however, Amante is an active force, while Anna appears to be more sexually passive. Anna describes how, after their initial flight from M. de la Tourelle’s home:

I lay like one stunned; my body resting, and renewing its strength, but I myself in an almost idiotic state—else surely I could not have taken the stupid interest which I remember I did in all Amante's energetic preparations for disguise. I absolutely recollect once the feeling of a smile coming over my stiff face as some new exercise of her cleverness proved a success. (323)

Anna’s gaze here is somewhat voyeuristic and reminiscent of a master eyeing a new parlor maid. Amante, as an unmarried woman, is likely less sexually experienced than Anna.<sup>13</sup> When Anna describes how Amante knew of Anna’s pregnancy although her own husband did not, the language she uses is provocative:

And with all her shrewdness to others, she had quite tender ways with me; all the more so at this time because she knew...that by-and-by I might become a mother—that wonderful object of mysterious interest to single women, who no longer hope to enjoy such blessedness themselves. (303-04)

The “object” itself here is ambiguous—but it could encompass motherhood, pregnancy, and even sexual knowledge.

Anna’s close relationship with Amante has an unexpected parallel in her husband’s relationship with his “principal male servant” Lefebvre, whom M. de la Tourelle describes as “most valuable and faithful,” although Anna is “very much afraid

of him" (301). Anna even says, "it sometimes struck me that Lefebvre ruled his master in some things" (301). Just as M. de la Tourelle is jealous of Anna's relationship with Amante, Lefebvre acts like a jealous lover toward Anna. As Anna describes it:

One thing I remember noticing, that the more M. de la Tourelle was displeased with me, the more Lefebvre seemed to chuckle; and when I was restored to favour, sometimes on as sudden an impulse as that which occasioned my disgrace, Lefebvre would look askance at me with his cold, malicious eyes, and once or twice at such times he spoke most disrespectfully to M. de la Tourelle. (302)

It may be the complex combination of social roles they play that allow the characters to experiment with power dynamics. As leader of Les Chauffeurs, M. de la Tourelle has the power of life or death over his gang's members, which secures his control over Lefebvre and thus allows for more leniency in his treatment of Lefebvre as a servant.

Anna is mistress of the house and Amante's employer, but even before her maid becomes her "husband," Anna allows her to play the role of her "mother" and exercise power in that way.<sup>14</sup> Early in the story, Anna repeatedly describes how Amante treats her like "a child," a trait that initially "annoyed" her—hinting at Amante's attitude being seen as "insubordinate"—but later the maid's maternal (or paternal?) treatment of her mistress seems to become part of her appeal (305, 317). This is a distinct reversal of roles, since servants themselves were often looked at and treated as children by their employers.<sup>15</sup> In a crisis, Anna unquestioningly obeys Amante as she gives "directions... without reasons—just as you do to a child; and like a child [Anna] obeyed her" (317). Anna seems to dislike adult responsibility; when Babette usurped her role as mistress of her childhood home, Anna says she did not mind, since she "always feared that [she] did not manage well for so large a family" (292). Thus, she seems more than willing to allow Amante to acknowledge her power over Anna and treat her like a child as she outlines the rules under which they will "play house":

"If madame will still be guided by me - and, my child, I beg of you still to trust me," said Amante, breaking out of her respectful formality into the way of talking more natural to those who had shared and escaped from common dangers - more natural, too, where the speaker was conscious of a power of protection which the other did not possess - "we will go on to

Frankfurt.... We will still be husband and wife; we will take a small lodging, and you shall housekeep and live indoors. I, as the rougher and the more alert, will continue my father's trade, and seek work at the tailors' shops." (334)

Amante continues her role as "parent" even after she becomes Anna's "husband," since Anna gives birth to her daughter Ursula. Although, as M. de la Tourelle's biological daughter, Ursula is described as a "poor worse than fatherless child," Anna explains how Amante shared in her parental joy:

It was a girl, as I had prayed for. I had feared lest a boy might have something of the tiger nature of its father, but a girl seemed all my own. And yet not all my own, for the faithful Amante's delight and glory in the babe almost exceeded mine; in outward show it certainly did. (335)

The last time Anna sees Amante, she is kissing "their" baby farewell "as if she never could leave off" (337).

Patsy Stoneman points out that Gaskell's fiction includes several similar "less conventional families" – among them *Cranford*, *Ruth* (1853) and *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863) – which "demonstrate that Gaskell's concern with the raising of children does not depend on a conventional concept of the heterosexual family, but rather on functioning cooperation" (143). In *Cranford*, for instance, Auerbach sees a similar scenario take shape by the novel's end:

"Like her sister, Matty replaces the openhearted dead with a proxy mate: Martha, her servant, is allowed a follower, the honest Jem Hearn, who, on the failure of Matty's investments, will obligingly marry his sweetheart to provide her mistress with a home and will father a daughter perpetuating Matty's name." (84)

Amante's legacy and Miss Matty's are ensured by the next generation, but while it may be flattering for a maid to honor her mistress through her child, it is more unusual for those roles to be reversed as they are in "The Grey Woman."<sup>16</sup>

Basch discusses how the "old maids" of Gaskell's fiction often must find new life through surrogate family or a job—as Miss Galindo in *My Lady Ludlow* (1859), Miss Matty in *Cranford*, and Libbie Marsh do in "Libbie Marsh's Three Eras" (1847).<sup>17</sup> Amante could be seen as one of the selfless unmarried women who are, in contemporary writer

George W. Burnap's words, part of a providential "corps de reserve," who are "stationed up and down in life to aid the weak, to take the place of those who are cloven down in battle, or of those who refuse to do their duty" (Burnap 124-125, quoted in Auerbach 25). Basch observes how "Mrs Gaskell's spinsters... never criticize the injustice and absurdity of the fate which is the lot of old maids. Once the most difficult sacrifice is accepted—renunciation of the condition of a wife-mother—a life of abnegation and altruism follows naturally" (176). Amante does demonstrate selflessness and compassion, but she also does not have to deny herself the experiences of being a spouse and parent.

Even on her deathbed, Amante ensures Anna's future: "she told enough to enable [Dr. Voss] to understand the position in which [Anna] was left; before the priest had heard half her tale Amante was dead" (338). Here, it could be argued that Amante is continuing to "parent" Anna by arranging her marriage as a father might, or that she has selected her own replacement as Anna's spouse. In fact, Anna's marriage with Dr. Voss feels less authentic and even more sexless than her "marriage" to Amante. Anna describes how while Dr. Voss called her "his wife," she never divorced M. de la Tourelle although their religious difference would have made a divorce "easily procurable by German law both ecclesiastical and legal" (339). They have a religious ceremony but are never legally married, even after her first husband is executed (339).

Amante's relationship with Anna goes beyond "old maid altruism" and ventures into previously underexplored literary territory. Nina Auerbach points to Mary Wollstonecraft's novel *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* as an example of a "postulate[d]" community of women, noting how "once Maria and Jemima have awakened to resist the degradation men and their laws impose, the novel can suggest that they will combine to raise and educate Maria's malleable little daughter" (15). Although this scenario is only sketched out as one of many possible endings for Wollstonecraft's unfinished work, in "The Grey Woman" Gaskell makes it a reality. Even the framing narrative relies on a cooperative female community to help Anna's story be told. Reddy points out that the "rescue [of Anna's memory] is actually a joint enterprise: the narrator needs her friend

to help with the translation. The sense of a solidarity among women is underscored by the situation: the narrator and her friend in a woman's private room, her 'inner chamber'" (185). Nestor offers several scenarios that describe the type of complex new relationship hinted at in "The Grey Woman":

This union of women can, as we have seen, take many forms. It can provide compensation for the absence of men, offer support in adversity and foster sisterly solidarity. As a further final possibility, that love between women can become not simply a substitute for heterosexual relationships, but a positive alternative, in which it is not so much a case of women without men as women repudiating men. (76)

"Alternative" female communities have been featured in Neo-Victorian novels like Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and *Fingersmith* (2002), but "The Grey Woman" may offer one of the closest analogues in mid-century fiction by a canonical author. As Gaskell is best known for her realistic novels, her story in the sensational mode merits critical reconsideration, particularly for its subversive takes on gender and class.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, "The Grey Woman." *Gothic Tales*. Ed. Laura Kranzler. New York: Penguin, 2000. Page references to Gaskell's story will be placed in brackets immediately after the quotation.

<sup>2</sup> As outlined in Anne Williams' *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> See Wallace 60-61.

<sup>4</sup> Foster 119. She further notes that borrowing records from the Portico Library in Manchester suggest that William Gaskell may have checked out some sensational titles for his wife (129).

<sup>5</sup> See Trodd 8.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Basch 180.

<sup>7</sup> See especially Nash 67-69.

<sup>8</sup> See Straub 42.

<sup>9</sup> See Auerbach 19.

<sup>10</sup> See Nestor 12.

<sup>11</sup> See Basch 178.

<sup>12</sup> See Nash 69.

<sup>13</sup> The text never addresses Amante's sexual past, and as Gaskell wrote a sympathetic, reformed "fallen woman" in *Ruth*, such a claim is problematic. However, there is a much larger cast of "old maid" characters in Gaskell's fiction who find a niche in life without sex, as will be explored later in the essay.

<sup>14</sup> Anna's mother presumably is dead.

<sup>15</sup> See Horn 109-113.

<sup>16</sup> After leaving M. de la Tourelle, Anna becomes part of a series of unconventional families: first her pretended husband Amante, then her so-called husband Dr. Voss, and finally, her own brother Fritz promises to be "father to...Ursula" when Anna dies (292). Ursula never knows her biological father, although as Herr Scherer says in the framing story, "The sins of the fathers are visited on their children" (290).

<sup>17</sup> See Basch 179.

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