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**Text of paper:**

**Class Act:  
Servants and Mistresses in the Works of Elizabeth Gaskell**

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In the first chapter of Gaskell's *Cranford*, the narrator describes a party at Mrs. Forrester's "baby-house of a dwelling" (3). While Mrs. Forrester is obviously poor and has only a small charity-school girl to help her, both she and her genteel visitors maintain the fiction that they are "aristocratic" and "that our hostess had a regular servants' hall, second table, with house-keeper and steward...though she knew, and we knew, and she knew that we knew, and we knew that she knew that we knew, she had been busy all the morning making tea-bread and sponge-cakes" alongside her one young servant. Servant, mistress, and visitors all act the necessary roles that maintain their class positions, poverty and reality notwithstanding.<sup>1</sup>

This incident is emblematic of a central tension in Gaskell's work, the contradiction between the actual relationship between servants and mistresses and the necessary fictions that preserve the mistress's class position. In her representations of servants in both her letters and her fictional works, Gaskell frequently portrays them as "friends" whose relationships with their mistresses are based on loyalty, respect, and affection. Women who treat their servants as paid employees, such as the second Mrs. Gibson in *Wives and Daughters*, are seen as morally suspect and vulgar rather than truly genteel. However, Gaskell's depiction of ideal servant-mistress relations characterized by mutual respect and regard is also a fiction that covers over the power differential, market relations, and competition that

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are built into dealings between servants and mistresses. The tension between her desire to represent and treat servants as equals and friends and the necessity of having servants who were willing to act the role of subservient, loyal dependent in order to maintain her own class position—as well as her ability to write professionally—is ultimately unresolvable. Thus, in her representations of servants, Gaskell comes close to recognizing that social class is constructed and fictional, but she ultimately backs away from that recognition.

Gaskell's description of the Cranford ladies taking tea at Mrs. Forrester's is significantly placed in the first chapter. It foregrounds, from the very beginning of the story, the fictions these poor but genteel older women know they are performing in almost every aspect of their current lives. The repetition of "she knew, and we knew, and she knew that we knew, and we knew that she knew that we knew" destroys any direct correlation between the social ritual they are performing and the reality that ought to lie underneath it. In what is literally an **act** of desperation, the women pretend to each other that their social position is stable and invulnerable, though they all know that this is not the case. The other key player in the scene, of course, is Mrs. Forrester's "little charity-school maiden." Without her, in fact, the play could not be performed. She stands in for the "regular servants' hall, second table, with housekeeper and steward" that are absolutely necessary but significantly absent from Mrs. Forrester's "baby-house." Whether the charity-school maiden is a willing or self-conscious actor in the scene is uncertain. But her "request that she might get the tea-tray out from underneath" the sofa on which the ladies are sitting is the only visible act of labor in the scene. The Cranford ladies "perform" class by pretending not to work; the servant performs in another sense, by actively doing the work that marks her class position as different from theirs.

In her important study of nineteenth-century middle-class women, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture*, Elizabeth Langland makes a crucial point about the duties of middle-class women like the Cranford ladies and Gaskell herself:

Running the middle-class household, which by definition became 'middle class' in its possession of at least one servant, was an exercise in class management, a process both inscribed and exposed in the Victorian novel. Although the nineteenth-century novel presented the household as a moral haven secure from economic and political storms, alongside this figuration one may discern another process at work: the active management of class power (8).

Although Mrs. Forrester can only afford a "charity girl," that is, a very young girl—probably nine or ten years old—fresh from a charity school or the workhouse, who would be at the rock bottom of the servant scale both in terms of skills and pay, it is vital to maintaining her position as a "lady" that she retain at least this one servant. This enables her to meet the minimum criterion for the middle-class. A more affluent woman like Gaskell, with "five women-servants, and an out-of-doors-man, or gardener," was constantly preoccupied with hiring, firing, training, and managing her servants, as her letters make manifest (*Letters*, 618). As Langland makes clear, this meant that Gaskell was not only a professional

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writer, but a professional employer and manager, of labor, but also of the signs of class.<sup>ii</sup> Decoding the signs of the middle-class home makes it recognizable "as a theater for the staging of a family's social position, a staging that depends on a group of prescribed domestic practices" (Langland, 9). Langland's reference to the home as a "theater" emphasizes not only the constructedness of the ideal home, but also the performative nature of mistress-servant relations. Langland focuses most of her attention on representations of class difference. Gaskell, on the other hand, tried to minimize difference in her portrayals of mistresses and servants; significantly, though, even that is another way of performing her own privileged position.

In literary study, the theory of performativity is most often discussed in relation to gender or race. Among the most prominent of the theorists of performativity is Judith Butler, who argues that gender, traditionally perhaps the most basic aspect of human identity, is performed rather than naturally occurring in the body or consciousness. As she explains it, gender is not "a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a **stylized repetition of acts**" (179, emphasis in original). Similarly, race is now recognized as a "cultural category [that] cannot be sustained by its often purported basis in 'nature,'" but is, like gender, constructed, though in a different way (Schechner, 133). Social class too is constructed and performed, even more obviously than gender and race. In fact, in his *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, Marvin Carlson suggests that "social performance" is "the recognition that our lives are structured according to repeated and socially sanctioned modes of behavior" and thus "all human activity could potentially be considered as performance" (4, my emphasis).

While the formulation of gender as performance was a strikingly new idea in the 1980s, when Butler first began writing about it, theorists have recognized for some time that social class was constructed and performed. Combining insights from theatre and sociology, Erving Goffman, for instance, wrote in 1959 that social roles could be defined as "the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status." Each social role, Goffman continues, "will involve one or more parts and . . . each of these different parts may be presented by the performer on a series of occasions to the same kinds of audience or to an audience of the same persons" (16). Because it was evident that not only actors and con men, but also the newly rich or socially mobile person could learn the "part" of a new social position (or at least have it taught to their children by masters and governesses), many, including Gaskell, were at least close to recognizing that class is performative as early as the middle of the nineteenth century. When Gaskell has the Cranford ladies and their charity-school maid-of-all-work self-consciously perform a ceremony that affirms their social status, she demonstrates that their identities as genteel ladies and loyal servant are neither natural nor stable, but based on what Butler calls the "stylized repetition" of particular and mutually recognized acts.

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Despite the fact that they may have recognized that social class was not actually an identity rooted in nature, Gaskell and her contemporaries, as Langland and others emphasize, obviously had their reasons for continuing to perform the rites of class distinction in both their everyday lives and in the political and economic realm. Kevin R. Swafford points out that,

For Victorians of all sorts and conditions, the public discourse concerning class was articulated as anything but contingent and performative . . . [yet] the sense that one must **perform class**, through a host of symbolic actions, practices, beliefs, tastes, and desires, was an unspoken source of anxiety that was often avoided and repressed within the ruling classes of Victorian society and culture (46).

Thus, while they might not actually believe in the absolute correspondence between the social actions they perform and the reality of social status—when, for instance, ladies like the ones in *Cranford* know that they are too poor to be secure in their gentility—they nonetheless believe in the concept of gentility and the importance of maintaining the fiction that it is a God-ordained and thus natural system of establishing difference. The tension this paradox created appears both in Gaskell's fictional works and her letters and diaries. Representing mistress-servant relations as based on the performance of friendship rather than on economics or coercion was her way of resolving the paradox and was a logical extension of, among other things, her religious views.

For Gaskell, a professing Christian and the wife of a Unitarian minister, religion might ordain the God-given place of the poor and the rich, but it also argued for the equality of all souls before God.<sup>iii</sup> Believing in the responsibility this entailed to help the poor, Gaskell herself, like several of her fictional characters, was active in performing charitable works and supported various philanthropies. In her dealings with the poor, however, Gaskell felt strongly that they should be treated as friends, not inferiors. In an 1859 letter to Charles Eliot Norton, she praises her daughter Meta because she "has poor old people whom she goes to see regularly, as a friend not as a benefactor" (537). This attitude is also represented in *North and South*, where Margaret Hale must, like Meta, learn to visit the working-class Higgins family as a friend, not a patroness.<sup>iv</sup>

In addition to visiting "poor old people . . . as a friend," Gaskell's daughter Meta also "reads with and teaches Elliott every night," in the same spirit of friendship. Elliott was one of the Gaskells' servants, and Mrs. Gaskell's praise of Meta's friendship with the family's waiter echoes her representations in her letters of her own relationships with her servants. In the same letter, for instance, she mentions that Elliott often asks after Mr. Norton and gives Elliott's opinion about some photographs Norton has sent—discussing the servant much in the same way she does the rest of her family or other acquaintances (536). Biographer Jenny Uglow notes that "However much she joked or fretted, during all her married life Elizabeth was closely involved in her servants' lives"; she "cared for her servants" and "depended on them, . . . not merely for practical help" (263).<sup>v</sup> Of all her servants, Gaskell was particularly close to her

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children's governess, Miss Barbara Fergusson, and Ann Hearn, who was a servant of the Gaskells for over fifty years.

Gaskell wrote in 1857 that her "dearest friends, all throughout [her] life, have been governesses, either past, present or future."<sup>vi</sup> While not exactly a servant, a governess like Miss Fergusson was an employee of the family who was not an equal. Although Gaskell eventually decided she had to let Miss Fergusson go because she was not qualified enough to teach Gaskell's daughters in the way she wanted them taught, she continued to write to the former governess frequently, calling her an old nickname—"Daddy"—and urging her to indulge the same level of intimacy and friendship they enjoyed while Miss Fergusson was still in her employ. In an 1845 letter addressed to "My dearest Daddy," Gaskell chastises her for the formality of a previous letter: "Don't be mine 'very sincerely,' again there's a good girl" (sic, *Further Letters*, 27). Gaskell ends the letter with "Goodbye, dear—Ever your very affect friend" (28). In a letter of 1846, Gaskell, who was away from home, sent the governess a whole list of instructions to give to the servants, ending with a concern that the governess will "not think me very troublesome in making you the medium" (*Further Letters*, 32). Her solicitude suggests that Gaskell wanted to preserve the relationship with Fergusson as one of friend asking a favor of a friend, not a mistress dictating to an employee. When she was about to fire Miss Fergusson, Gaskell wrote at length to her friend Fanny Holland about her complicated sense of friendship for her governess:

...so few people can understand how **deeply** I, personally, regret her loss, and yet how desirable I feel it to be on the children's account....I disapprove and see more and more the bad effects of her mode of treatment; and yet I, my own self, scarcely dare to look forwards to the time when she will no longer be our intimate, and my dear household friend...However I do try to look stedfastly [sic] to the **right** for my children; and I am comforted by Miss F's **own** right understanding of my different feelings, and own agreement of judgment with mine, as to her not managing the girls well" (*Further Letters*, 34, emphasis in original).

Here Gaskell overtly describes the inherent tension between the friend and the employer. Only by assuring herself that her "friend" agrees with her decision as "employer" can she convince herself that she is doing the right thing. Representing her "real" self—"I, personally" and "I, my own self"—as a friend, she attempts to neutralize what seems the more crass performance of her duty as an employer, a duty which she also justifies using the rhetoric of motherhood. Miss Fergusson, at least in Gaskell's account of it, performs her part by approving her mistress's decision and accepting her own incompetence.

While Gaskell's splitting of herself into two personae, a "real" self and an employer-self, emphasizes the performative nature of her role as mistress of servants, it does not mean that she was insincere or hypocritical in her performance of friendship. Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which "turn[s] the question [of performance] around and look[s] at the individual's own belief in the impression of reality that he attempts to engender in those among whom he finds himself,"

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notes that "the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality"—and that it is the "typical case" for the audience to be convinced as well (17). While Gaskell's Cranford ladies, including Mrs. Forrester, the chief actor, are certainly not "taken in" by her performance of affluence, it is difficult to tell whether Gaskell herself recognized that her "I, my own self" was also a performance that involved the counter-performance of her consenting and believing audiences, Miss Fergusson and Fanny Holland. As one of her letters to her friend Eliza Fox reveals, Gaskell was certainly aware that her "self" was split into many roles:

. . . thats [sic] the haunting thought to me; at least to one of my 'Mes,' for I have a great number, and that's the plague. One of my mes is, I do believe, a true Christian—(only people call her socialist and communist), another of my mes is a wife and mother, and highly delighted at the delight of everyone else in the house . . . . Now that's my 'social' self I suppose. Then again I've another self with a full taste for beauty and convenience whh [sic] is pleased on its own account. How am I to reconcile all these warring members? (*Letters*, 108)

While a recognition that the self is multiple is not quite an awareness of its constructedness, Gaskell certainly realizes that she performs different roles and that her relationship to those for whom she is performing them determines to a large extent which "me" is in play at a given moment. In the case of Miss Fergusson's dismissal, at least three of these "mes"—the employer, the mother, and the attached friend—are acting as "warring members."

The performing of the mistress-servant relationship as friendship is even more evident in Gaskell's association with Ann Hearn over more than 50 years. Gaskell's letters are peppered with references to "our dear Hearn" as an indispensable part of the "family" (*Letters*, 631, 107, 180).<sup>vii</sup> In 1859, for instance, Hearn was trusted as sole chaperone and attendant for Gaskell's oldest daughter Marianne when she fell ill and was left in Germany for an extended period (*Letters*, 632). There are several mentions of Hearn going on holiday, leaving Gaskell in "an unusual state of **busy-ness** and the house in "a continual Panic" (*Letters*, 344). Later, in a letter to her sister-in-law Anne Robson in 1865, Gaskell wrote that "Hearn is not well at all just now, as much depression of spirits as anything, I think.— She wants some change of thought and scene, & we have a variety of plans for giving her it, as she has no home to go to, now-a-days [since the death of her mother]. She is a dear good valuable **friend**" (*Letters*, 760, emphasis in original). Gaskell emphasizes that, although Hearn is a valuable servant, she is even more important as a friend.

It is not only the beloved governess Fergusson and the faithful Hearn who are represented as friends in Gaskell's letters and diaries. In 1837, when her oldest daughters were still very young, Gaskell wrote of losing her "servant Bessy, who was obliged to leave us, being wanted at home, in consequence of the death of a sister. But we still keep her as a friend, and she has been to stay with us several weeks this autumn" (*Diary*, 63). When Mary, the cook, became engaged to a "very suitable" widower in 1851,

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the family dined early "altogether, so as to make less work while the gentleman is here" (*Letters*, 162). The thoughtful consideration for Mary and her fiancé, as well as the involvement of the whole family, is apparent: "Mary's 'husband' as the children will call him is arrived, & meets with Flossy & Baby's approbation. Papa is to marry her, \ from here of course/ & there is some talk of Flossy & Baby being bridesmaids!!!" (163). In Gaskell's representation, Mary seems to have no family or friends of her own, the Gaskells supplying all that she needs in the way of true friends. In all of her references to servants, and there are many in the letters and the diary, Gaskell represents herself as a kind, understanding, and thoughtful friend, as well as a fair, if firm, mistress. The exchange of money seems to have little or nothing to do with their relationships. A rare reference to how much the servants are paid displaces any concern about money onto her husband: if a new cook is not allowed to come by a certain date, they "should have to pay her 8s a week till she came; which **Papa** in his present frame of mind does not like" (*Letters*, 620, my emphasis).

Like the representations of her own servants in her letters and diary, the servants and mistresses in many of Gaskell's fictional works are depicted as friends rather than employed and employer.<sup>viii</sup> The most obvious are Martha and Miss Matty in *Cranford*, Dixon and Mrs. Hale in *North and South*, and Sally and the Bensons in *Ruth*. Martha, though a country girl with rough manners, gradually becomes a devoted friend to Miss Matty, especially after Miss Matty's encounter with her old lover Mr. Holbrook leads her to identify with the girl and lift her lifelong rule about "no followers" (40). Martha is so devastated at the news that her mistress has become bankrupt because of the failure of the Town and Country Bank and can no longer afford to retain her as a servant that she compels her fiancé, Jem Hearn, to marry her and rent Miss Matty's house so that they can provide her a home as lodger. This in effect causes a complete inversion in their relationship; instead of servant and mistress, they are now landlady and lodger, though Martha continues to serve Miss Matty as she did before. When Mary Smith, the narrator, breaks the news of Miss Matty's change of fortune to Martha, she says, "I tell you this, Martha, because I feel you are like **a friend** to dear Miss Matty" (129, my emphasis). Later, when Martha has borne her first child, named "Matilda" after Miss Matty, the former mistress becomes the god-mother of the child, which is "as much at home in her arms as in its mother's" (155). When Miss Matty's brother Peter returns from India to take care of her, she will not hear of a separate household for Martha and Jem. Martha has become the daughter she never had and baby Matilda her granddaughter, but their official relationship is restored to its original basis of mistress and servant.

Like Gaskell's servant Hearn, Mrs. Hale's servant Dixon in *North and South* stays with her throughout her life. When the Hales, like Miss Matty, experience a reversal of fortune, Dixon insists on staying on, even though she must now perform the much more lowly role of maid-of-all-work instead of lady's maid. Margaret, Mrs. Hale's daughter, who desires to nurse her mother through her fatal illness, has to argue against the force of her mother and Dixon's relationship as friends with Mrs. Hale's doctor:

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"My dear young lady, your mother seems to have a most attentive and efficient servant, who is more like her friend—"

"I am her daughter, sir" (125).

Once Margaret and Dixon share the secret of Mrs. Hale's terminal illness and have joined forces instead of doing a jealous dance around each other, Dixon says to herself about Margaret, "Bless her! ... She's as sweet as a nut. There are three people I love; it's missus, Master Frederick, and her. Just them three. That's all. The rest be hanged, for I don't know what they're in the world for" (130). Dixon's proclamation identifies her with those she serves and distances her from any in her own class. Her mistress, and then her mistress's children, have become her only friends. Significantly, though, as Gaskell represents it, Dixon does not want to be an equal. She finally comes to respect Margaret enough to see her as her mistress when Margaret shows "a bit of a spirit. It's the good old Beresford blood"—the blood of the "last Sir John but two" who shot his steward for some just criticism and advice (130). Dixon wants to be a friend, but she also wants her mistress to play the role of superior.

Many Gaskell critics have noticed the delightful characterization of the faithful servant Sally in *Ruth*. According to Winifred Gérin, "Sally, with her forthright manners, northern dialect, and rough independent honesty [is] a creation of real genius" (128). Coral Lansbury deems her "a magnificent creation in the long tradition of comic domestics" (63). Again like Gaskell's own servant Hearn, Sally is a lifelong member of the Benson family, having been in their service for 49 years at the beginning of the time period covered in the novel, waiting on Thurstan and Faith in both their childhood and adult homes (*Ruth*, 145). From the first mention of Sally, as a topic of discussion for Mr. Bradshaw, Thurstan Benson's wealthiest and most self-righteous parishioner, we learn that the Bensons "might get a far more efficient and younger servant for the money" (125). Money, though, however scarce it might be with the Bensons, has nothing to do with their relationship to Sally, who is, of course, seen as a friend, not a servant. Indeed, Sally speaks to Miss Faith Benson "quite in the tone of an equal, if not of a superior," and Miss Faith, in turn, confides in Sally her secret worries about beginning to look old (137, 206-7). When Ruth comes into their lives and becomes a part of the family as well, Sally takes it into her own hands to cut Ruth's hair and buy her widows' caps to sustain her new image as a young widow, and she is second only to his mother in influence over Ruth's young son Leonard. Gaskell devotes many pages to Sally's storytelling, another factor that emphasizes her important role in the family and the novel. She in essence takes over narrative authority when she recounts her experiences with her sweethearts and her youthful spiritual realization of the worth of her work as a servant (165-70; 174-76; 192-96). The Bensons are as respectful of Sally's opinion and solicitous for her needs and feelings as they are for anyone in their circle, making the line between friend and servant very thin. Significantly, however, in company, Sally diligently performs her role as servant. When Ruth first arrives, for instance, we are told that after the stranger is put in a chair in the parlour, Sally drops "the more formal 'you,' with which at first she had addressed Miss Benson, and thou'd her quietly and habitually" (137). And, while Sally is

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definitely a part of the family, she does not join them when they sit in the parlour; she acts as "hostess" when she is in the kitchen and sits as an equal only when Miss Benson and Ruth join her there (192, 381).

While most readers have noticed Gaskell's portrayal of Sally as the loyal servant-cum-friend of the Bensons in *Ruth*, another character who plays that role is Ruth herself. Although she helps with the housework, often under Sally's direction, she is not considered a servant by the Bensons; rather, they treat her as an equal, though they know little of her background and she certainly has no economic claim to middle-class status. When she becomes nursery-governess to the Bradshaws, however, she performs the part of employee and servant there. She is hired there in the first place because Mr. Bradshaw wants to free his own daughter from supervising her younger sisters' education and wants "some one above a nursemaid to sit with them while their masters are there—some one who would see about their learning their lessons, and who would walk out with them" (197). In other words, he wants someone to train them in performing the manners, bearing, and etiquette of the upper middle class. Exactly why Ruth fits this description is somewhat unclear; her own parents were small farmers and she was trained briefly as a seamstress, but has no particular claims to gentility except her natural beauty and grace. She has received a bit of education from Mr. Benson, in order to teach her son, but in outward qualifications, she seems to have little more claim to being a lady than Sally, who was, as she is proud to remind people, the daughter of a parish clerk (148). It is difficult to tell where Ruth has gotten her ability to perform gentility, whether it is indeed innate, along with her beauty, or learned. The novel suggests that she has learned it from the Bensons, although the Bensons treat her as a lady from the beginning, implying that perhaps she acquired some of her outward gentility from being the mistress of a gentleman. The narrator is clear, however, about her being a lady after Leonard is born:

And although she had lived in a very humble home, yet there was something about either it or her, or the people amongst whom she had been thrown during the last few years, which had so changed her, that whereas, six or seven years ago, you would have perceived that she was not altogether a lady by birth and education, yet now she might have been placed among the highest in the land, and would have been taken by the most critical judge for their equal, although ignorant of their conventional etiquette (209).

Accordingly, Ruth is hired by the Bradshaws for the gentility she can impart to her young charges, and she becomes first best friend and then bitter rival to the eldest daughter, Jemima—both positions of equality. Eventually, Mr. Bradshaw even invites her to the family's evening parties. Her former lover Mr. Bellingham, now Mr. Donne, is so impressed at her newfound gentility—she is "altogether a more refined-looking person" than he remembers—that he offers to marry her, though she takes the moral high road and refuses him, preferring her status as a good Christian woman and a nursery governess (278, 302). Ironically, when Mr. Bradshaw eventually learns about Ruth's past as a fallen woman and physically casts her out, he claims that she has been acting a part to deceive him: "I

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saw her daily—I did **not** know her. If I had known her, I should have known she was fallen and depraved, and consequently not fit to come into my house, nor to associate with my pure children" (350). The irony here, of course, is that what Mr. Bradshaw saw is not what the novel classes as a performance, but rather Ruth's "true self." Her performance of the role of genteel governess and family friend is seen as natural and God-given. Yet the source of her "natural" gentility is unclear, though even Mr. Bradshaw finally comes to believe in it. In any case, Ruth's gentility, whether learned or natural, strengthens the notion that servants should be treated as friends, not subordinates or inferiors. Ruth is clearly portrayed by the novel as superior to all of the Bradshaws, so any treatment of her as an inferior is clearly a performance and a bad one at that.

The faithful servant who is more a friend than a servant is also found in several of Gaskell's short stories, including Peggy in "Half a Life-Time Ago," Betty in "Cousin Phillis," and the narrator in "The Old Nurse's Story."<sup>ix</sup> In "Lois the Witch," even the half-civilized Indian servant Nattee becomes a friend when she and Lois share a prison cell and Lois devotes herself to comforting the frightened woman all through the night before her execution as a witch (189). Besides these and other portrayals of the servant and her mistress as friends, rather than employee and employer, Gaskell also uses her fiction to criticize women who do not treat loyal servants as friends. Most notably, the second Mrs. Gibson in *Wives and Daughters* fires Betty, the long-time servant who has been a friend to Mr. Gibson's daughter Molly—competing with the governess, in fact, for Molly's affection (33-34). Mrs. Gibson refuses to accept an apology from Betty for her "impertinence" and bargains for the services of a maid she considers "such a genteel girl!—always brings in a letter on a salver!" (183). Both Molly and the narrator clearly disapprove of such behavior, which implicitly marks the new Mrs. Gibson as vulgar in her slavish imitation of Lord Cumnor's family, where she herself formerly served as governess. Betty, who relies on her position as friend, loses her post to another servant who is willing to play a different servant part, the role of the stylish servant to the aristocracy—a sign of her mistress's pretensions to gentility that is too obvious to be genuine.

While sincere friendship between mistress and servant might seem, in Gaskell's representations of her own experience as well as those in her fiction, to meliorate mistress/servant relations, it also conceals key aspects of that relationship. Despite the appearance of genuine friendship between mistress and servant, the relation between the two still involved an exchange of money for service, a real difference in power, and a struggle over conditions of work and the control of representations, since the "character" the mistress gave of the servant determined her future as well as her present employment. Moreover, even if Gaskell herself had unusually cordial ties with her servants and believed in the model of friendship that she represented in her fiction as the best solution for class divisions, that model itself was a convention that she inherited from a long line of prior literary representations of servants. As Bruce Robbins has pointed out, "Rather than take up the life of the domestic as a subject in its own right, the [nineteenth-century] novel turned back to literary tradition: ... to the much-repeated master-servant tropes and devices that earlier novelists had already borrowed from Shakespeare and

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Moliere" (xi). One thinks especially of servants like the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, who, though certainly a comic character like Sally in *Ruth*, performs the role of friend and surrogate mother to the young Juliet. "Even Dickens and Gaskell," argues Robbins, "reinscribe and rejuvenate the conventions of the literary servant." If Gaskell's representations of servants, both literary, and, as I contend, her non-literary or autobiographical depictions, are "stylized repetitions" or reiterations of long-standing conventions, then the friendship between mistresses and servants is as much a performance as is the handing of letters on salvers or the pretence that a charity-school maid-of-all-work stands in for a houseful of well-paid retainers. While Gaskell may perform the part of friend under the assumption that she is treating her servants as equals, her performance nonetheless maintains the hierarchy of class relations just as surely as Lord Beresford shooting his steward.

Continuing to perform the rituals of class involved in the employment and management of servants, however softened or mystified, was, of course, crucial to maintaining Gaskell and other middle-class women's own social status. As a number of historians have remarked, the middle classes were defined by their employment of servants.<sup>x</sup> However, as Langland argues, for middle-class women it was not only the actual employment and management of servants that mattered, but the way they were deployed as cultural signs of status: "Through precise signifying practices, servants were installed within a rigid class hierarchy where a moral vocabulary performed the function of naturalizing an elaborate system of beliefs about men and women, middle and lower classes" (15). While the "moral vocabulary" Langland refers to reinforces the differences, both moral and bodily, between working-class and middle-class women, for Gaskell the moral differences seem, at least in the case of her friend-servants, less pointed; in some cases, as we have seen, she even represents servants and mistresses as moral equals. This, too, however, is implicated in reinforcing class differences. As Langland states elsewhere, what women like Gaskell, who belonged to the "genteel bourgeoisie," were doing was not so much to prove their difference from the working classes as "to police the borders of polite society from the incursions of the vulgar middle class or the petite bourgeoisie" (17). Kind treatment that disguised the economic and power relations behind cordial servant-mistress relations, i.e., treating and representing servants as friends, was a way to stage or perform the family's status as not only middle-class, but **genteel** middle-class. This performance distinguishes truly genteel women like Margaret Hale from vulgar upstarts like Fanny Thornton, even though the real gentlewoman might not have as much money, or, as in the case of Mrs. Forrester, might even be very poor. Really genteel women avoided treating their servants as inferiors and in the process performed the role of natural and inbred gentility, rather than manners learned from etiquette books.

It was not only genteel middle-class women, however, who performed their class position through servant-mistress relations. The working-class women employed in domestic service were also willing to self-consciously perform their status because they needed the jobs or the security of the position, or because it gave them a measure of power and authority. Servants, too, had a stake in the way the drama of the middle-class home was staged. Dixon in *North and South* and Martha in *Cranford*,

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for instance, are willing to perform the role of loyal and devoted servant even when it may be to their economic disadvantage. Sally in *Ruth*, unbeknownst to her employers, saves up most of her earnings to leave to Mr. and Miss Benson in her will. Their knowing, self-conscious performance of the role of servant, especially the servant-as-friend, allows them to define their position as voluntary. If the servant's performance is voluntary and not forced, even by economic circumstances, then she can avoid defining herself as inferior to her mistress. While Dixon, Martha, and Sally seem, in Gaskell's representations, to be perfectly willing to acknowledge and perform their inferiority, in fact that very performance could be seen as saving them from the "reality" with which the performance supposedly corresponds.

One of Sally's stories in *Ruth* demonstrates the way that a servant could perform her position in a way that avoided "real" inferiority even in the process of acting it out. When Sally perceives Ruth moping about her household duties and lamenting her fate as an unwed mother, she tells her a story from her very young days as a servant when she, too, moped about her duties and performed them badly because she was concerned about her soul after having dropped her charge, Master Thurstan, and causing his lifelong deformity. Her kind mistress takes her aside and reminds her about the line in the Church of England catechism in which the catechumen responds, "to do my duty in that station of life unto which it shall please God to call me" (176). Proud of her standing in the Church of England, while her employers are all dissenters, Sally responds favorably to this principle. Her mistress continues, "well, your station is servant, and it is as honorable as a king's, if you look at it right; you are to help and serve others in one way, just as a king is to help others in another." While of course this line of reasoning is ideal for keeping people in their place by convincing them that inequality is God-ordained, as Mrs. Benson says, "if you look at it right" it can be used in another way. For Sally, a meal cooked well or a floor well-scrubbed gives her a certain kind of power—not only the internal advantage of feeling proud of herself for a job well done, but the right to talk back to her employers, as she does when Faith Benson tries to persuade her that having Ruth in the house will mean no extra trouble:

"Well, I never! As if I minded trouble! You might ha' known me better nor that. I've scoured master's room twice over, just to make the boards look white, though the carpet is to cover them, and now you go and cast up about me minding my trouble. If them's the fashions you've learnt in Wales, I'm thankful I've never been there" (139).

Sally goes on to tell her mistress to her face that she has half the sense of her brother and accuses Faith of treating her "like a babby," unusually blunt back-talk from a servant. Sally earns her right to say what she will and do essentially what she wants by the quality of the work she does. Independent enough to turn down two marriage proposals (though admittedly one was from a madman who went about "on all fours") and to lord it over her employers much of the time, Sally manages, at least in Gaskell's representation of her, to make her own choices and live as she wishes, only occasionally choosing to

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perform the role of inferior before strangers. Her performance of her class status seems to be under her own conscious control and her position as free a choice as any woman of her day had.

That there could be a real struggle over the meaning of the performance of class in the servant-mistress relation, however, is revealed in Gaskell's report in a letter to Miss Fergusson of her cook Anne's pregnancy. Gaskell had discovered that the unmarried Anne was with child and she and her husband had asked a Mr. Curtis to

...go & rummage up the man & tell him her state, and **ask** not **urge** him to marry her; for she had told us she had not seen him for months & that her [sic] knew nothing of her condition,--told it again & again and once most solemnly—Well! Mr. C went. The man of course refused to marry her, but worst of all it came out he knew all about her state—when she expected to be confined,--and she had been at his lodging only the Sunday previous, although she told me she had no idea where he was, & thought he had left Manchester ... (*Further Letters*, 37; emphasis in original).

Gaskell responded to Anne's lie with anger and hurt: "and all this when I was so full of sorrowful pity for her,--it makes one feel so angry to be deceived, & so uncertain as to where the deceit begins or ends that I was nearly throwing up the case in despair, but I did not—" (37).

Anne's lie is so significant because it exposes the relation of friendship that Gaskell portrayed in her novels and her correspondence as usually one-sided and unequal. While Gaskell supposedly performed the role of friend in good faith, the cook consciously manipulated that role for her own protection and mercenary gain. The cook chose to perform another role for her mistress, that of the wronged and abandoned fallen woman that Gaskell herself represents in *Ruth*. Gaskell's discovery that Anne's performance of this other role was not sincere undermines the performance of friendship that Gaskell uses to conceal the real power relations between the servant and her mistress. Presumably, Anne lied about her relations with her lover in order to retain Gaskell's protection and sympathy, and, more practically, to secure her mistress's financial help. Her consciously deceitful performance of the fallen woman narrative reveals that the mistress and servant are not "friends" but competitors. They are struggling over who will get the best bargain in monetary terms; in essence, they are competing for the right to earn money for their stories. In her own mind, Gaskell manages to win this battle by insisting on being Anne's friend even after the "truth" is revealed. As she says, despite feeling angry and hurt, she was "**nearly** throwing up the case in despair—but I **didn't**." So important is the performance of friendship to Gaskell's class position and her image of herself that she continues as Anne's benefactor despite her lies. She gives the servant money and removes her from Manchester to Knutsford, where her story will have no currency. Though it costs her money, Gaskell uses the friend story as a performance of power over her servant. The servant, however, apparently managed to get what she wanted out of Gaskell, so in essence, her manipulative and deceitful performance achieved its desired effect. Like Mrs. Forrester's party in *Cranford*, however, the incident clearly reveals the difference

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between the performance of mistress and servant roles and the realities that underlie the performances.

Gaskell's writings, both her fiction and her letters and diaries, indicate that she recognized that there was no real inequality between mistresses and servants. Both were God's children and it was the forces of economics, education, and position that differentiated them. Their roles as mistress and servant were performative and made it **seem** as if there were inherent differences between them, but those differences could be bridged through friendship. However, friendship itself was also a performance, played according to time-honored conventions that themselves signified distinctions within the middle class, as well as between the middle- and working-class woman. And for Gaskell, keeping up this class act enabled her not only to preserve her position as a genteel upper-middle class lady, but also to have the leisure to write stories about servants and mistresses.

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<sup>ii</sup> Julie Nash, in *Servants and Paternalism in the Works of Maria Edgeworth and Elizabeth Gaskell* (Aldershot, Hampshire, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007) also comments on this passage, 6. Nash's book contains many valuable insights into Gaskell's relationship with her servants, but unfortunately was not available before this article went to press.

<sup>iii</sup> Monica Cohen also writes about women's "professional domesticity."

<sup>iv</sup> Patsy Stoneman discusses how Gaskell's Unitarianism was "potentially subversive . . . of class and gender" (60).

<sup>v</sup> See my discussion in *The Angel out of the House*, pp. 135-58.

<sup>vi</sup> Pauline Nestor also comments on Gaskell's bonds with her servants (40).

<sup>vii</sup> Quoted in *Further Letters*, p. 28 note 1, from Chapple, p. 171.

<sup>viii</sup> Gaskell's biographers likewise mention Hearn frequently. See Gérin and Uglow.

<sup>ix</sup> On Gaskell's servant characters, see Stoneman, 47-48; Uglow, 263-64; Bonaparte, 40-41; and Lansbury, 65.

<sup>x</sup> All these stories are from *Cousin Phillis and Other Tales*.

<sup>x</sup> See Horn (17) and McBride (18).

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