

From Serial to “Novel”: Elizabeth Gaskell Assembles *Round the Sofa*

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In 1859 Elizabeth Gaskell gathered together short works which, with one exception, had appeared previously. These she published with Sampson Low in a two-volume collection titled *Round the Sofa*. To link them Gaskell created a metafictional frame that places their telling in a dramatic setting and provides each with an occasion and an audience.<sup>1</sup> In 1861 this collection was re-titled, emphasizing the lead story, and issued by Sampson Low as *My Lady Ludlow and Other Tales*.<sup>2</sup>

Publishing these stories with the addition of a metafictional frame does more than simply reissue them. It approaches the creation of what Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris have referred to as a “composite novel,” a form developing during the nineteenth century from historical precedents such as medieval and Renaissance frame stories.<sup>3</sup> Gaskell had published a similar collection once before, in 1853, when she issued her Cranford sequence from *Household Words* in book format. Unity in this instance was provided by a common cast of characters and by a common setting. *Round the Sofa*, though, has no such internal unity. In this collection unity is provided by the frame.

Joining these stories in a framed collection realizes an artistic vision not possible in their serial format. Gaskell achieved this vision by imposing a circular, not a linear movement on the reading of her collection, by linking her stories thematically, by making the narrator of the frame a transcriber-editor as well as a narrator, and by focusing on the meaning of history as her principal subject.

## I

By their nature periodicals are linear constructions that extend in time for as long as people in sufficient numbers continue to purchase them. Their contents, generally, have a shorter life span, in most cases existing only as long as reading them requires. As members of this Society know, reading stories serially was not the same as reading them in a book edition. In the magazine format, for instance, the reading of individual texts was shaped both by time and by their surroundings: “we need . . . to see a serial taking place amidst many different texts and many different voices.”<sup>4</sup>

In the case of the stories included in *Round the Sofa* weeks separated the beginning of longer stories from their conclusion, and years separated the reading of one story from the reading of the next one. In *Household Words* the stories could not be either thematically linked or otherwise

connected to each other. They existed singly, published over periods of varying length in the midst of the other materials of the magazine.

In *Round the Sofa*, by contrast, the movement is not linear but circular—as the title implies—forming a series of loops that return at the end of each story to the setting and characters of the frame. Readers begin in the frame, read straight through a story, return to the frame, and then move into the next story in the sequence. Reading ends when the book is finished. Furthermore, the “metafictional frame” becomes a small drama in its own right, providing continuity, as readers move through the edition.

At least one story in the collection was improved structurally by book publication. When *My Lady Ludlow*, the opening story in *Round the Sofa*, appeared serially, its plot presented Victorian readers with a problem in unity. The source of the problem is its parts publication. The plot consists of two narratives, the main outer narrative told by Margaret Dawson, and an inner subordinate narrative told by Lady Ludlow. In *Household Words* the story appears alongside material which treats both France and the French Revolution. For example, in the same number of *Household Words* containing the opening chapter of Gaskell’s story on 19 June 1858, and appearing immediately after it is an installment in a series titled “The Eve

of a Revolution.” The previous installment had appeared on June 5. A grimly ironic introduction sets its tone:

In several numbers of this journal an attempt has been made to throw a little light upon the details of this eventful period, more particularly upon the strangely quiet eve of the convulsion, when the high nobility were sleeping placidly in their gilt fauteuils looking for anything rather than for so vulgar and plebian an exhibition as a revolution.<sup>5</sup>

Placing *My Lady Ludlow* alongside articles concerning the French Revolution of 1789 prepares readers for the appearance of such materials in Gaskell’s story. There they establish its central theme: in contrast to the French Revolution, a single cataclysmic event, the English “revolution” was incremental. However, when the French Revolution occurs as a several-weeks-long element in the periodical text of her story, it threatens its unity by seeming to become a separate plot.<sup>6</sup>

Parts publication of *My Lady Ludlow* aggravated this problem.<sup>7</sup> Approximately halfway through the main narrative, Margaret Dawson interrupts it to permit Lady Ludlow to relate in her own voice her personal experience with the French Revolution. By lasting as long as it does, however, her story threatens to become separate and complete in itself. In

the serial Lady Ludlow's story begins in the fourth installment and ends in the early paragraphs of the ninth, occupying nearly five weeks before returning to the main narrative. Consequently, Victorian readers coming to *My Lady Ludlow* in *Household Words* not only would have read each week's episode in the context of other matter expressed in other voices but also would have had to cope with a lengthy interruption of the principal narrative. One can agree with Edgar Wright that *My Lady Ludlow*, like the earlier *North and South*, did not adapt well to publishing in weekly installments.<sup>8</sup>

Changing the publishing format from serial to book helped to unify the story. First, it significantly reduced the amount of time readers spend on Lady Ludlow's narration, enhancing unity simply by making the plot connections more apparent. Second, it brought closer together in reading time the small climaxes placed at the conclusion of each episode and designed to draw readers to the next issue of the magazine. Paradoxically, therefore, the plot structure is enhanced by a requirement of the original magazine format. Moving rhythmically through a series of small climaxes, instead of building to a major one near the end, the plot structure metaphorically embodies the central theme: the superiority of the gradual English "revolution" to the cataclysmic French one. Furthermore, bringing readers back to Mrs. Dawson in the frame at the end of the story returns

them to a comfortable setting that prepares them for the next story in the sequence.

To establish the frame Gaskell brought forward Margaret Dawson, the narrator of *My Lady Ludlow*, and expanded her role by making her the organizer of a “round” of storytelling. She also created a setting for the sessions and a cast of characters who become teller and audience in turn. She invented Miss Greatorix, the narrator of the frame. Miss Greatorix, when young, was placed under the care of the physician Mr. Dawson in Edinburgh and invited to attend Monday evening storytelling sessions in a house he shared with his sister. Miss Greatorix, amused at her memory of herself as a bored young woman “stuck” in Edinburgh with her governess, establishes the situation and introduces the characters who appear in it.

Central to the frame is Mrs. Dawson herself, the narrator of the first story. Intelligent and observant but restricted by infirmity to reclining on a sofa in darkened quarters, Mrs. Dawson is a convenient fictional device. Each Monday evening the cream of Edinburgh’s intellectual society gather round her to entertain each other before departing to attend other events. Margaret Dawson’s character brings the group together and establishes the circular metaphor that gives the shape and title to Gaskell’s collection.

Margaret Dawson, established in the serial publication of *My Lady Ludlow*, is an ideal reference point for the frame. Although intellectually active, she says she does not interpret but only observes and reports other people's lives. She is an audience in both the serial and the collection. In *Round the Sofa*, however, she becomes an audience with authority to direct the order of the stories her guests choose to tell. She becomes, in effect, the "conductor" of the stories told in her presence and recorded by Miss Greatorix, in a way that reminds one of Dickens as "conductor" of *Household Words*.

The storytelling in *Round the Sofa* begins with Miss Greatorix prompting Mrs. Dawson to tell the first story. When *My Lady Ludlow* began its run in *Household Words*, it occupied the lead position. Readers moved into the first installment without preparation, and at the end of it, they moved into the second installment of Percy Fitzgerald's "The Eve of a Revolution." In the book format readers begin in the frame. There, Mrs. Dawson reposes cozily in her drawing room where, encouraged by a young friend, she tells those assembled a story about her early life. From this setting they move into the story itself, advancing straight through it. At the end they return to the domestic setting where they began.

At the conclusion of Mrs. Dawson's story, the frame's narrator, Miss Grestorix, makes two lighthearted critical remarks. First, she wonders whether Mrs. Dawson's tale could properly be called "a tale."<sup>9</sup> In voicing this criticism, however, Miss Grestorix simply echoes Mrs. Dawson's own earlier assertion that her story lacks definition.<sup>10</sup> Miss Grestorix's second criticism, however, is more genuinely her own. She notes laconically that Mrs. Dawson's story was so long that over the weeks consumed by its telling, the audience "had grown so accustomed to listen to Mrs. Dawson" that they do not know what to talk about once the story has ended.<sup>11</sup> Because Gaskell "is" both Miss Grestorix and Mrs. Dawson, this interplay in the frame allows her to offer a self-deprecatingly humorous critique that disguises her careful arrangement of this problematic first story in the sequence.

Responding to the request of Miss Grestorix for another story, Mr. Dawson volunteers a paper, "An Accursed Race," which he has prepared for the Philosophical Society. At this point the youthful Miss Grestorix editorializes: "I did not think I should like hearing this paper as much as a story; but, of course, as he meant it kindly, we were bound to submit, and I found it, on the whole, more interesting than I anticipated" (II, 2).<sup>12</sup> Following Mr. Dawson's paper, Miss Grestorix's nervous, self-conscious



governess Miss Duncan is called upon. Miss Duncan is hesitant. And again Miss Grestorix is critical:

when on the point of beginning, her nervousness seemed to overcome her, and she made so many apologies for its being the first and only attempt she had ever made at that kind of composition, that I began to wonder if we should ever arrive at the story at all. At length, in a high-pitched, ill-assured voice, she read out the title: “THE DOOM OF THE GRIFFITHS.”<sup>13</sup>

However, as if not really having her heart in developing the little drama she had begun in the links between the stories, Gaskell allowed her metafictional narrator gradually to become less critical, satisfied with ever-briefer comments on her companions.

## II

Although the metafictional frame is minimal, it does unify the collection by establishing themes that in some way concern the question of justice and address the meaning of history, for how relationships between past and present reverberate during their telling. Reading Gaskell’s stories, linked by a frame in their book format, creates interplay among them that reading them serially over the course of years cannot produce. In *Round the Sofa* the stories are “historical” in the sense that either they or their materials

were old when the tellers found or first heard them. Miss Grestorix herself emphasizes in the frame that the stories are those she had heard and recorded years earlier as a governess-assigned exercise when she was young and living in Edinburgh.

Gaskell makes her not only the narrator of the frame but also a transcriber-editor of oral tales assembled by the tellers from much earlier materials and presented before their Edinburgh audience, several complete perhaps for the first time. Each of the tellers in turn becomes an historian attempting to make the past coherent by reconstructing it either from personal memory, in the case of *My Lady Ludlow* and “The Half-Brothers,” or from written texts, in the case of the other three. At least four of the stories--*My Lady Ludlow*, “An Accursed Race,” “The Doom of the Griffiths,” and “The Poor Clare”—feature the meaning of history itself as the subject.

Presenting the subject at two contrasting levels, *My Lady Ludlow* provides the most complex treatment of history: the personal played out against the background of the French Revolution, contrasted with the personal played out against the background of gradual social change in a small English community. Most of the stories in *Round the Sofa*, however, also concern the history of families conceived of as artificial constructions,

genealogical lines, or ethnic groups. In *My Lady Ludlow*, “The Doom of the Griffiths,” and “Half a Life-Time Ago,” a family comes to an end, thus extinguishing a genealogical line. In “An Accursed Race” the subject is the suffering and near-extermination of an entire ethnic group, a national “family,” as it were; and in “The Poor Clare” a woman utters a curse that unintentionally settles on her granddaughter. In “The Half-Brothers,” emotionally tangled family relationships are clarified and laden with guilt by the self-sacrifice of the older brother for the sake of the younger.

First, she constructed *My Lady Ludlow* so that it contrasts Carlyle’s presentation of revolution in *The French Revolution* as “violent confrontation” with his view of it in *Past and Present* as “adaptation and accepted reform.”<sup>14</sup> Second, Gaskell portrays an almost Hegelian mechanism--thesis-antithesis-resolution--by which inevitable and gradual change occurs in the English community of Hanbury.

In the outer narrative of her story Margaret Dawson portrays Lady Ludlow as embodying the best of a particular class that exists as a living memory only in a generation about to die. And she places within her own story Lady Ludlow’s narration of two young French aristocrats inadvertently betrayed to revolutionary fanatics by a young peasant who had been taught to read. Lady Ludlow recalls this event when she discovers that her estate

manager, Mr. Horner, has taught a village lad, Harry Gregson, to read. She fears such acts of apparent kindness will cause the excesses of the Reign of Terror to be repeated, only this time in England. Gaskell deliberately contrasts Lady Ludlow's internal narration with Margaret Dawson's external narration. Whereas Lady Ludlow fears that history moves cyclically, with key events repeating over time, Margaret Dawson implies it is linear. In both instances the narrators are concerned with the relationship of past to present either because they fear a repetition of the past or because they explain the present in terms of the past.

Placing Mrs. Dawson's tale first in *Round the Sofa* begins the implicit debate concerning the movement of history. Its overall endorsement of history as steady forward movement is tempered by other stories in the collection. Several of them elaborate ways in which—as Lady Ludlow herself had feared—the past might haunt the present, reappearing as a destructive force. The question of historical repetition is posed again in the gothically inspired “The Doom of the Griffiths” and “The Poor Clare.” In these stories curses uttered in the past find fulfillment years later in unforeseeable ways and, in the case of “The Poor Clare,”—which features the past haunting the present, à la Carlyle, in the form of a doppelgänger--undesired consequences.

Both stories present Lady Ludlow's fear writ large: once the historical conditions have been established, events in the past may recur with tragic consequences in the present. "The Doom of the Griffiths" parallels *My Lady Ludlow* in another way as well; at the conclusion of both stories, family lines have ended and estates have passed to strangers.

### III

Each of the stories in *Round the Sofa* except "The Doom of the Griffiths" and "The Half-Brother" had appeared in Dickens' *Household Words* before being gathered into this collection and linked by a frame. In their magazine format they are attractive tales with the sort of social message Dickens enforced through his editorial policy. In that context each is a voice among other voices, and it adapts to Dickens' purpose and meets his editorial requirements.

Moved into the context of *Round the Sofa*, each story plays off those before and after it as well as off the small drama in the frame. We change from the disparate voices of *Household Words* to the voice of Miss Grestorix, who presents us with defined narrators and an immediate audience for a thematically related group of stories. In this collection the first story, *My Lady Ludlow*, establishes the central themes, the middle

stories develop them, and “The Half-Brothers” brings the collection full circle by ending in personal reminiscence, where the collection had begun.

“The Half-Brothers” is an appropriate story for Gaskell to choose as a conclusion. Mr. Preston, described in the frame as “grave, reserved, and silent,” tells it.<sup>15</sup> His story, like the others in the collection, concerns troubled family relationships. Unlike “The Doom of the Griffiths” and “The Poor Clare,” however, these relationships are charged not by a curse, something gothically outside the realm of ordinary experience, but by the cruelty of a stepfather and his uncomprehending son toward an older stepson. Like the narrators of the other stories, Mr. Preston has acted as an historian; he has done this by reconstructing the early parts of his family history as well as he could through interviews with his mother’s surviving friends. Although Mr. Preston’s reconstruction has led him to understand and regret his faults, it has not lessened his sense of guilt.

The story recalls by contrast at the end of the collection, first, Lady Ludlow’s formal but genuine affection at the beginning of the collection for the “family” of young women she had gathered round her and, second, her impeccable sense of justice and accommodation. The guilt Mr. Preston expresses is likewise a dramatic contrast with the evening-of-life satisfaction of both Lady Ludlow and Margaret Dawson. “Half a Life-Time Ago” is a

fitting conclusion to *Round the Sofa*, for it draws together the central themes of the collection in a tone of melancholy retrospection.

*Round the Sofa* is not simply a reissue of stories Gaskell had published earlier in Dickens' magazine. Instead it constitutes a new artistic vision of an important body of her work that in another context, surrounded by other voices, had served other purposes. In each story we see the present illuminated by the past and find emphasized Gaskell's stern moral lesson that the consequences of one's behavior are often unforeseeable. The present offers opportunities for progress if people meet it with Lady Ludlow's good manners and innate sense of justice and responsibility, but it also threatens cycles of destruction and grief to those who burden the future with intolerance or a curse.

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<sup>1</sup> J. R. Watson, "'Round the Sofa': Elizabeth Gaskell Tells Stories'. *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 26 (1996), p. 90.

<sup>2</sup> Of this group *My Lady Ludlow* (fourteen installments in 1858, "An Accursed Race" (one installment in 1855, and "The Poor Clare" (three installments in 1856) had appeared serially in Charles Dickens' magazine *Household Words*. "The Doom of the Griffiths" had been published first in the United States in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. "Half a Life-Time Ago" had first appeared as "Martha Preston" (one installment in 1850) in the United States in *Sartain's Union Magazine of Literature and Art*. Then Gaskell had completely rewritten it and published it in *Household Words* under the title "Half a Life-Time Ago." Only "The Half-Brothers" had apparently not been published before and is very likely the story referred to in the Preface as having "obtained only a limited circulation" (Sampson Low edition, Vol. 1). However, its serial appearance came hard upon its book publication, appearing in the United States in *Harper's Weekly* on April 29, 1859, just a month after Sampson Low had published *Round the Sofa* (see John Hodgson, "Mrs. Gaskell and *Harper's Weekly*: in *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter*, Vol. 11 (1978), p. 26). Although J. R. Watson ("Round the Sofa': Elizabeth Gaskell Tells Stories'. *The Yearbook of English*

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*Studies*, Vol. 26 (1996), p. 89) reports the story as having appeared in the *Dublin University Magazine* in 1858, it did not. The story "The Half-Brothers" published there (Vol. 52 (1858), pp. 586-98) is a different story with the same title as Gaskell's.

<sup>3</sup> *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*. (New York: Twayne, 1995), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund. *The Victorian Serial*. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Household Words*, Vol. 17 (June 5, 1858), p. 589.

<sup>6</sup> That the French Revolution was on Dickens' mind as well as Gaskell's at this period was confirmed in 1859, when he began *A Tale of Two Cities* in the first number of *All the Year Round*.

<sup>7</sup> Edgar Wright, "My Lady Ludlow: Forms of Social Change and Forms of Fiction (1)," *Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 3 (1989), p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Round the Sofa* (London: Sampson Low, 1859), Vol. II, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 276.