UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Architecture and the Built Environment

Heterogeneous Spaces and Semi-Permeable Thresholds in Elizabeth Gaskell's Writing

Moore, B.

DOI
10.4324/9781003462095-15

Publication date
2026

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
The Routledge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell

License
Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act (https://www.openaccess.nl/en/policies/open-access-in-dutch-copyright-law-taverne-amendment)

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Moore, B. (2026). Architecture and the Built Environment: Heterogeneous Spaces and Semi-Permeable Thresholds in Elizabeth Gaskell's Writing. In E. Ludlow, & R. Styler (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell* (pp. 183-196). (Routledge literature companions). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003462095-15

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, P.O. Box 19185, 1000 GD Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (https://dare.uva.nl)

Download date:10 Nov 2026

12

ARCHITECTURE AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Heterogeneous Spaces and Semi-Permeable Thresholds in Elizabeth Gaskell's Writing

Ben Moore

In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), Elizabeth Gaskell begins not with the author herself but with the landscape in which she lived. This is a space in transition, where the population and importance of Keighley have been 'very greatly increased during the last twenty years, owing to the rapidly extended market for worsted manufactures,' so that it is 'in process of transformation from a populous, old-fashioned village, into a still more populous and flourishing town' (9). Partly as a result, it is a region that seems to Gaskell ambiguous and indefinite, where the town 'never quite melts into country on the way to Haworth' (10), since the road is lined with houses that are 'hardly in the suburbs' (10), yet not quite part of the countryside either. Such ambiguity of suburban space is also a topic of *North and South* (1854–5), the novel which preceded the *Life*. There, the Hale family takes a house in Crampton, an area described by Mr Thornton as 'by far the most healthy suburb in the neighbourhood of Milton' (64), with a view, when the thick fogs allow, of 'the plain in the valley, made by the sweeping bend of the river' (65). This seems to make Crampton semi-rural, but it is also 'a thoroughfare for the factory people' (71), surrounded by 'many mills, out of which poured streams of men and women two or three times a day' (71). In both cases, the suburban fails to settle into a clear or stable category.

As the opening chapter of the *Life* continues, it becomes apparent that we are being led gradually towards Haworth Parsonage, where the Brontë sisters lived and wrote, as if journeying alongside Gaskell:

> For a short distance the road appears to turn away from Haworth, as it winds round the base of the shoulder of a hill; but then it crosses a bridge over the 'beck', and the ascent through the village begins. The flag-stones with which it is paved are placed end-ways, in order to give a better hold to the horses' feet; and, even with this help, they seem to be in constant danger of slipping backwards. … The church lies a little off the main road on the left; a hundred yards, or so, and the driver relaces his case, and the horse breathes more easily, as they pass into the quiet little by-street that leads to Haworth Parsonage.
>
> (11)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003462095-15

After leaving the carriage evoked in this passage, we proceed on foot, with Gaskell taking us up to the threshold of the Parsonage, ready to step within:

> The house is of grey stone, two stories high, heavily roofed with flags, in order to resist the winds that might strip off a lighter covering. It appears to have been built about a hundred years ago, and to consist of four rooms on each story; the two windows on the right (as the visitor stands with his back to the church, ready to enter in at the front door) belonging to Mr Brontë's study, the two on the left to the family sitting-room. Everything about the place tells of the most dainty order, the most exquisite cleanliness. The door-steps are spotless, the small old-fashioned window-panes glitter like looking-glass. Inside and outside of that house cleanliness goes up into its essence, purity.
>
> (12)

Yet we do not go inside. At the last moment, Gaskell turns us away from the house and towards the church to which we have our back. Rather than entering this home which appears to exemplify the ideals of middle-class domesticity, with its 'dainty order,' 'exquisite cleanliness' and 'purity' (a morally loaded word), we are instead led into the church and up to a 'mural tablet on the right-hand side of the communion-table' (13), where the lives of six members of the Brontë family are commemorated. Alongside it lies another tablet recording the death of Charlotte, just two years before Gaskell's book was published. In place of a living family we find a dead one, and in place of a home we are faced only with a memorial. It will, of course, be the job of Gaskell's book to reinfuse life and memory into this stark record of loss, but it is striking that she chooses to begin not just by declaring 'Charlotte to be incomprehensible without an appreciation of her physical and social environment,' as Francis O'Gorman observes (*SL* ix), but with an ambiguous movement that at first proceeds towards the family home, as if towards its goal and purpose, then gets unexpectedly caught at the border, unable to progress within.[1]

My suggestion is that this extraordinary opening chapter, which first prioritises and then decentres the home, provides a key for thinking about Elizabeth Gaskell's engagement with architecture and the built environment across her writing. It invites us to reflect on the role domestic space plays in her work, as well as suggesting some propositions whose implications I will consider over the course of this chapter. These propositions are, firstly, that domestic space cannot be considered in isolation but is, like Charlotte Brontë as an author, always embedded in, and often constrained by, the natural and built environment in which it is located. Secondly, that this environment is not static but subject to continual change, including the shifting perspectives of those who move through and across it. Thirdly, buildings, especially houses, invoke other scenes, spaces, and times; this means they are not homogeneous but heterogeneous, making them fragile and precarious even when they seem to offer the prospect of safety. And finally, that the threshold where the home meets the world (the place, to risk oversimplifying, where public and private interact) is a highly freighted and ambiguous location for Gaskell. In the passage above, for instance, the spotlessness of the steps can be read either as inviting or as forbidding, while the window-panes that seem to promise a glimpse inside the Parsonage also 'glitter like looking-glass,' so turning the visitor's gaze back on itself and denying us entry. This interest in the threshold has a partly autobiographical origin, since, as Andrea Kaston Tange points out, Gaskell 'lived in the interstices between authorship and motherhood, wifely domesticity and professional pressures' (272), so that her life illustrates the need to think of 'Victorian middle-class identity as architectural' (272). As we will see, such interstitial

thinking also has significant implications for Gaskell's fiction, since it means that her characters are frequently embedded within shifting built environments which they must continually negotiate and renegotiate, without ever fully controlling.

The Critical Field

From the start, critics have paid attention to the role of space in understanding Gaskell. Her first biographer, Esther Chadwick, writing in connection with Gaskell's centenary in 1910, subtitled her book *Haunts, Homes, and Stories*, organising it into chapters named after major locations Gaskell had lived in or visited (Knutsford, Chelsea, Manchester and so on). More recently, critics interested in space and architecture in Gaskell have tended to focus on some combination of her industrial novels (*Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1854–5)), *Cranford* (1851–3), and the question of the domestic. The industrial novels in particular began to attract renewed attention in the 1970s and 80s, with Raymond Williams describing Gaskell as 'the only novelist of the mid-nineteenth century who comes as close as Dickens to the intricacies and paradoxes of city experience' (219). Catherine Gallagher reads *North and South* as relying on 'the initial and enduring separation of the public and private spheres' (178), which the novel's social and romantic resolutions attempt to conceal.[2] In both cases, the novels' spatial dynamic is, in line with their political position, read as one of paradox or unresolved tension.

In the 1990s, Andrew Miller read the private spaces of *Cranford* in light of the display culture inaugurated by the Crystal Palace in 1851, influenced by Walter Benjamin's critique of nineteenth-century bourgeois domesticity. Arguing against previous accounts of the book's stasis, Miller proposes that in *Cranford* the 'heterogeneity of everyday life' (96) is registered by its 'recursive and fragmented' rather than 'developmental and narrative' (96) domestic environments. This replicates Gaskell's own fragmented personal life, revealed in her letters, as a woman with many competing demands upon her time (97; a similar reading of the letters appears in Tange, 264–78). For Miller, the 'fragments and small opportunities' (102) of domestic life in *Cranford* cannot be read apart from the commodity culture that was becoming increasingly dominant at mid-century. Christoph Lindner (2003) also addresses the life of commodities in Gaskell but argues that she positions her industrial narratives 'on the outside looking in' (20), depicting the places where consumer fantasies fail, and so critiquing domestic and industrial spaces where 'material goods are collected, placed on display, and privileged over living beings' (26).[3]

Elaine Freedgood's influential *The Ideas in Things* (2006) extends this approach of reading material objects in the context of wider spatial arrangements by putting the local in relation to the national and global. Freedgood continues to think about the conflict between the homogeneous and heterogeneous, which is prominent in Gaskell's novels and which was the subject of many social and political commentaries during her lifetime, such as Thomas Carlyle's *Signs of the Times* (1829), John Ruskin's 'The Nature of Gothic' in *The Stones of Venice* Vol. II (1853), or Marx's distinction between use-value (a form of the heterogeneous) and exchange-value (a form of the homogeneous). According to Freedgood, Gaskell is unlike Marx in identifying the persistence of social and spatial values that resist the power of the 'cash nexus' (see Carlyle, 58) in industrial Manchester, so that in spaces like Alice Wilson's cellar and the home of the Barton family, 'the country still resides in the town' (60). Freedgood's reading of the Bartons' calico curtains aims to unravel 'the ideological work of domesticity as Gaskell tries to deploy it' (57), by drawing attention to Lancashire cotton's successful challenge to the pre-eminence of Indian textiles and its reliance on the products of enslaved labour in the

Americas. In Freedgood's reading, the concept of home begins to fail as 'a totalizing or definitive social, political, and geographical concept' (70), despite Gaskell's best efforts. Yet, as the failed entry into Haworth Parsonage I have quoted above indicates, we can identify an interrogation of domestic space already at work within Gaskell's writing itself, as part of its internal dynamic, albeit one with less emphasis on global imperial and capitalist networks than in Freedgood's account.

A number of critics since Freedgood have recognised this internal spatial critique that seems to operate across much of Gaskell's fiction. Emily Blair (2007), for instance, argues that the category of the domestic is subtly troubled in *Wives and Daughters* (1864–6), in ways which are extended and expanded by Virginia Woolf, who reviewed Chadwick's *Mrs Gaskell: Haunts, Homes, and Stories* in 1910 (see Blair 74), and whose essay 'A Room of One's Own' (1929) Tange relates to Gaskell's domestic situation (see Tange 270). Gaskell's focus on details and on questions of aesthetics make the domestic 'a disruptive force, resisting the dominant power structures that it seems to endorse,' Blair argues (73). For Lindsay Fincher (2012), as for Gallagher, in *North and South* the 'politics of place are inseparable from the action of the plot,' with both being preoccupied by questions of sanitary reform and the class-coded dirt which threatens to penetrate everywhere in Milton-Northern. Gaskell here comes close to Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–5), mentioned by Fincher (22), which describes the houses and inhabitants of Rotherhithe in London as the 'accumulated scum of humanity' (21). John Kanwit (2009) is another critic who links place and plot in *North and South*, addressing the way household taste intertwines with politics and morality in the novel. He reads Gaskell as in dialogue with comments by both architects (A.W. Pugin, Charles Eastlake) and female writers on household taste (such as Lady Mary Anne Barker). Following a similar line to Blair, several essays in the collection *Place and Progress in the Works of Elizabeth Gaskell* (2015) also address questions of disjunction and fragmentation in Gaskell's domestic spaces. These include Nóra Séllei on how, in *Cranford,* 'the apparent homeliness of the home is destabilized as a result of the appearance of memories and experiences that are uncontainable within given frames' (23), arguing against Patsy Stoneman's contention that the women of Cranford are characterised primarily by their 'stasis' (Stoneman 91). In another chapter, Divya Athmanathan places emphasis on the 'heterogeneity' (41) of spaces in *North and South*, arguing that Gaskell 'found homogeneity in a space anathema' (51) and sought to reorient homogeneous domestic spaces across the novel via Margaret Hale.

One of the most sustained readings of how Gaskell's fiction destabilises domestic space appears in Susan Fraiman's *Extreme Domesticity* (2017). For Fraiman, influenced by earlier work on precarity, 'instability in *Mary Barton* is not backstory so much as ongoing reality woven into the very fabric of domestic life' (45). While Fraiman's reading is particularly detailed in its analysis, it in many ways collects and consolidates concerns that motivate the critics I have mentioned above, for instance in its emphasis on the way domesticity in Gaskell takes 'multiple, shifting forms' (51), the way it draws in and rethinks various forms of unpaid and feminised labour, and the way it is active rather than 'inert' (62), relying on 'daily little actions' (61) to resist entropy. In a similar vein, Fraiman adds extra layers to Freedgood's reading of the Bartons' calico curtains, finding in them 'a record of diverse labor histories,' as well as 'a domestic boundary' (67) that helps protect working-class community.

Many of these critics can be considered part of a reassessment of the 'apparent conventionality' (Kanwit 190) of Gaskell's spaces and settings that has taken place during the last fifteen to twenty years.[4] This has involved paying closer attention to architecture and perception in Gaskell, as in my own earlier article on 'invisible architecture' in *North and South* (2018), and forms part of a

wider interest in rethinking the interactions between literature, structure and the built environment during the Victorian period, as in books such as Barbara Leckie's *Open Houses* (2018) and Jody Griffith's *Victorian Structures* (2020).

Heterogeneous Spaces and Semi-Permeable Thresholds

Productive as these previous readings have been, in almost all cases their focus has been heavily upon *Mary Barton*, *Cranford* and *North and South*, with the result that the rest of Gaskell's fiction has been relatively neglected. In the following sections, I attempt to demonstrate how putting these more 'privileged' spatial texts from Gaskell's oeuvre in conversation with other work by her, including some of the short stories, can expand our understanding of how she uses architecture and space. In particular, I want to suggest that alongside the widely observed concern with heterogeneity that saturates Gaskell's writing, there is a preoccupation with semi-permeable threshold spaces across her work. I also want to show how intertextual comparison can draw out the ways her writing returns again and again to the topic of temporal change as a force that continually shapes and reshapes space. This occurs on multiple levels, ranging from the 'little actions' (Fraiman 61) of daily life to world historical transformations that take place across centuries.

We might start by thinking about some of the ways heterogeneous space emerges in Gaskell's fiction. The opening of *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), for instance, recalls *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* in its description of the geography of Monkshaven, based on 1790s Whitby. Monkshaven exists in a kind of liminal or border state, between the moors and the sea, so that 'the whole town had an amphibious appearance, to a degree unusual even in a seaport' (6). At the same time, it is, like the Manchester of the industrial novels, wholly dominated by a single industry, since 'every one depended on the whale fishery, and almost every male inhabitant had been, or hoped to be, a sailor' (6). The proto-industrial waste of this town has thoroughly reshaped its hinterland:

> For twenty miles inland there was no forgetting the sea, nor the sea-trade; refuse shellfish, seaweed, the offal of the melting-houses, were the staple manure of the district; great ghastly whale-jaws, bleached bare and white, were the arches over the gate-posts to many a field of moorland stretch.
>
> (8)

The products of the sea, including the remains of hunted whales, are not only present but inserted into the land (as manure) or incorporated into its architecture (as arches for gateposts). Yet Gaskell's novel does not take us to sea, unlike Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), but rather remains at its threshold, along with Sylvia herself, so that it, in effect, supplies 'the female presence absent' in Melville (Lawson 37). The novel's interest in what it might mean to live at the threshold of the sea, and of its industry, is repeated on the level of history, since the novel is set during the Napoleonic wars, a world-historical turning point, and at the turn of the nineteenth century. It is replicated, too, at the level of domestic space. Foster's shop, for instance, is 'an old-fashioned dwelling-house, with a sort of supplementary shop with unglazed windows projecting from the lower story' (23). This image of the shop as a supplement to the home recalls *Cranford*, where Miss Matty's small dining-parlour is 'converted into a shop, without any of its degrading characteristics; a table was to be the counter; one window was to be retained unaltered, and the other changed into a glass door' (140). In this earlier text, small alterations have shifted the meaning and use of the parlour, turning it into a hybrid space, a 'shop-parlour' (147), as Mary Smith calls it, which is reminiscent

of a pre-industrial era when home and labour spaces were not separated. Both shops produce semi-permeable thresholds by giving customers access to a particular, limited section of the building.[5]

In such places, Gaskell's writing seems to track the large-scale historical shift in which a relative lack of separation between public and private spaces was replaced, by the turn of the nineteenth century, with an impetus to demarcate them as two separate spheres, with significant implications for gender. This supposed development of a 'separate spheres' ideology has, however, been frequently contested and revised by critics and historians (for an overview, see Eibach and Lanzinger 5–8). One recent handbook argues that it is vital to 'define the domestic space as an open, porous and permeable space' and to account for both 'its mutual inside/outside relations' and 'changing linguistic, legal, social and cultural environments' (6). This, I suggest, is precisely where we should position Gaskell's writing. Indeed, Gaskell not only depicts the (partial) permeability of domestic space but also recognises it as both a necessity and a risk, especially for women involved in some kind of business or trade. For such women, public and private spaces are often wound together in intricate ways that shift depending on the environments surrounding them.

One example is the Brontë sisters, who in Gaskell's description followed a habit of 'putting away their work at nine o'clock, and beginning their steady pacing up and down the sitting room' (*LCB* 247), during which they 'talked over the stories they were engaged upon, and discussed their plots' (247). This change of bodily activity within the room—the putting away of needlework, the pacing up and down—transforms its function, finding a way round the fact that these women did not have a Woolfian 'room of one's own' in which to write. The scene becomes a female and rural counterpart to the male and urban night walks of Dickens, which, he claims, gave him 'a fair amateur experience of houselessness' (*Uncommercial Traveller* 126). For the Brontës, as for Gaskell, if women cannot respectably wander the streets at night, they can nonetheless alter the conditions of the house, including opening it up to undomestic activities and so hybridising it across the course of the day.

Similar dispositions of space occur even when no obvious business activity is present, as in 'Half a Life-Time Ago,' which tells the tale of Susan Dixon, a woman living an independent life near Coniston in the Lake District during the early nineteenth century. Her farmhouse has an intermediate room known as a 'house-place,' beyond which strangers are not permitted to pass:

> You might have eaten off the floor; you could see yourself in the pewter plates and the polished oaken awmry, or dresser, of the state kitchen into which you entered. Few strangers penetrated further than this room. Once or twice, wandering tourists, attracted by the lonely picturesqueness of the situation, and the exquisite cleanliness of the house itself, made their way into this house-place, and offered money enough (as they thought) to tempt the hostess to received them as lodgers. … But no liberal sum – no fair words – moved her from her stony manner, or her monotonous tone of indifferent refusal. No persuasion could induce her to show any more of the house than that first room.
>
> (*CP* 90)

The house here reflects the character of Susan Dixon, who seeks to protect her privacy and independence by means of spatial partition. This desire recurs in different forms across Gaskell's writing. We might think of Miss Jenkyns and Miss Matty in *Cranford*, who after dinner 'used to rise up, possess themselves each of an orange in silence, and withdraw to the privacy of their own rooms to indulge in sucking oranges' (27). Reading is also a predominantly private rather than public practice in *Cranford*, in contrast to Dickens's vision

for *Household Words*, as Lucina Schwartz has recently pointed out. In *North and South*, Mr Thornton gives a political economist's articulation of the desire for spatial separation, telling Margaret that 'the masters would be trenching on the independence of their hands, in a way that I, for one, should not feel justified in doing, if we interfered too much with the life they lead out of the mills' (121). The dining room that Thornton and his workers establish towards the end of the novel is, by contrast, another kind of semi-permeable space, which provides opportunities for exchange in a circumscribed way, since Thornton attends only when invited, on hot-pot days (362).

Such desire for privacy and concomitant fear of exposure are fundamental to the plot of *Ruth* (1853), whose central character attempts (ultimately unsuccessfully) to avoid being uncovered as a 'fallen woman.' Yet the spaces of that novel are again blended or layered in ways that invite us to rethink the possibility of drawing stable boundaries. In the house shared by siblings Mr and Miss Benson, who take Ruth in after she is deserted by her lover Mr Bellingham, Mr Benson's study doubles as a kind of reception room for those seeking help, echoing both Gaskell's own lack of domestic privacy and, perhaps more pertinently in this case, her husband William's role as a minister:

> There were only two sitting-rooms on the ground-floor, one behind the other. Out of the back room the kitchen opened, and for this reason the back parlour was used as the family sitting-room; or else, being, with its garden aspect, so much the pleasanter of the two, both Sally and Miss Benson would have appropriated it for Mr Benson's study. As it was, the front room, which looked to the street, was his room; and many a person coming for help – help of which giving money was the lowest kind – was admitted, and let forth by Mr Benson, unknown to any one else in the house. … There was no room over the kitchen, which was, in fact, a supplement to the house. The sitting-room was called by the pretty, old-fashioned name of the parlour, while Mr. Benson's room was styled the study.
>
> (110–11)

As Carolyn Lambert notes, William's study at Plymouth Grove (where the Gaskells lived after 1850) was 'immediately to the right off the entrance hall' (34) and, although dedicated to his use, unlike Elizabeth's workspace, was 'not entirely divorced from the activity going on in the rest of the house' (38). In a similar way, the Bensons' home in Eccleston, a factory town whose first visible sign is 'the smoke of the town hanging over the plain' (108–9), will become a haven for Ruth, but it is not cut off from the outside world. Rather, it is a house whose front room is explicitly semi-public. In fact, the novel layers private and semi-public space several times, in ways which advert to the shifting uses of space across time. For instance, the Dissenting chapel where Mr Benson preaches is located up a narrow street, or rather *cul-de-sac*, close by. It stood on the outskirts of the town, almost in fields. It was built about the time of Matthew and Philip Henry [i.e. the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century], when the Dissenters were afraid of attracting attention or observation, and hid their places of worship in obscure and out-of-the-way parts of the towns in which they were built. Accordingly, it often happened, as in the present case, that the buildings immediately surrounding, as well as the chapels themselves, looked as if they carried you back to a period a hundred and fifty years ago.

(125)

This chapel is positioned in the suburbs not for reasons of comfort and health, as with the Hale family's house in Milton, but as a means of avoiding attention, echoing Ruth's own situation. It has hardly changed since its construction, as 'the congregation had been too poor to rebuild it' (125), and so transports visitors back to a pre-industrial moment. This is emphasised by its blending with the natural world:

> the casement windows of the chapel were made of heavy-leaded, diamond-shaped panes, almost covered with ivy, producing a green gloom, not without its solemnity, within. This ivy was the home of an infinite number of little birds, which twittered and warbled, till it might have been thought that they were emulous of the power of praise possessed by the human creatures within.
>
> (125)

It might seem like Gaskell places this chapel in a form of stasis, letting it dwell in a romanticised state of unity with nature. Indeed, Ruth seems destined for some form of peace when she is buried there as the novel closes (369). Yet the chapel should be read in relation to the wider distribution of spaces, both domestic and non-domestic, that exist across the novel. In this context, it makes more sense to read this chapel scene as merely one moment in a wider pattern of spatiotemporal layering and uneven historical development, rather than an absolute escape from historical forces.

This pattern is perhaps most obvious in the novel's opening. When we first encounter Ruth, she is living in 'an assize-town in one of the eastern counties' (3), whose importance has faded. Reflecting on the town's way of life a hundred years earlier leads the narrator to remark that 'the daily life into which people are born, and into which they are absorbed before they are well aware, forms chains which only one in a hundred has moral strength enough to despise, and to break when the right time comes' (4), so that 'it is well to know what were the chains of daily domestic habit which were the natural leading-strings of our forefathers before they learnt to go alone' (4). The past thus provides both a model to learn from and a warning about the overwhelming force of social constraint. The settings for this 'daily life' of an earlier era, the grand houses of the town, have now been broken up into smaller dwellings or turned into shops. In one case, 'the whole front of one side of the street was pulled down, and rebuilt in the flat, mean, unrelieved style of George the Third' (4). It is in one of these repurposed houses that Ruth works as a seamstress, alongside 'more than a dozen girls' (5). The scene can be compared to Charles Kingsley's depiction of sweatshop tailoring in *Alton Locke* (1850), where Alton works above a shop in 'a street off Piccadilly' (22), among 'some dozen haggard, untidy, shoeless men' (23). In *Ruth*, the former house has entirely reversed in its function, from a place where luxury goods are consumed to one where they are produced under harsh conditions, and in the process both domesticity and concern for aesthetic form have broken down (ironically so, given the 'beautiful ball-dress' (5) being made there). This dual breakdown is evident when two or three girls huddle

> over the scanty fireplace, which, with every possible economy of space, and no attempt whatever at anything of grace or ornament, was inserted in the slight flat-looking wall, that had been run up by the present owner of the property to portion off this division of the grand old drawing-room of the mansion.
>
> (5)

The drawing room has been altered to suit its new purpose, but instead of the intermingling of uses in Miss Matty's shop-parlour, or Mr Benson's sitting room, the domestic has been suppressed entirely in favour of the monological demands of clothing manufacture. Here, as in *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, and to some extent *Sylvia's Lovers*, permeability and heterogeneity come under extreme pressure from the forces of capitalist production, which tend to flatten out and homogenise space, stripping it of the multiplicity I have traced above.

A striking example of this pressure placed on heterogeneity is Mr Thornton's house in *North and South*. Unlike in *Ruth*, this remains a home, but it is located 'in the continual whirl and din of the factory' (*NS* 111), exposed to the view of the workers, though concealed from external traffic by the 'factory lodge-door' at the end of a 'long dead wall' (111). The house is resolutely of the town rather than the suburbs, but it adopts an entirely defensive posture. When Margaret enters the drawing room, 'it seemed as though no one had been in it since the day when the furniture was bagged up with as much care as if the house was to be overwhelmed with lava, and discovered a thousand years hence' (112). It lacks the personal care of a figure like Margaret, who MacLure calls the novel's 'sympathy mill' (76), acting as an 'emotional support machine' (77) to compensate for capitalist conditions which have suppressed the possibility of interpersonal connection. By contrast, when Mr Thornton visits the Hales' house in an earlier chapter, the drawing room is not only made homely by Margaret's 'graceful cares' (*NS* 79) but is symbolically open to the outside ('with country habits, they did not exclude the night skies, and the outer darkness of air' (78)). Such openness is not without risk, however, given the '"unparliamentary" smoke' (59) that fills the air in Milton, producing fog even in Crampton. As Anna Burton has shown, the 'floating phenomena' (127) of miasma and smoke are a threatening presence throughout Gaskell's novel, though this does not imply 'a simple binary of places and perspectives' (127) that would prioritise the rural. In *North and South*, then, we see that possibilities for the permeability of domestic space are not fixed but determined largely by geographical and sociohistorical conditions, even as different kinds and extents of permeability seem to (and in fact do) represent differing cultural attitudes. If spatial heterogeneity remains a preference for Gaskell, she also recognises in this novel that domestic space must always be adapted to circumstance.

At times, the spatiotemporal heterogeneity I have been exploring becomes a structural and meta-textual feature of Gaskell's writing. This is the case in 'The Manchester Marriage,' published in a special Christmas number of *Household Words* in December 1858, under the general title *A House to Let*. The issue was organised by Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, with Dickens, Collins, Gaskell and Adelaide Anne Procter contributing items. The conceit of the issue is that it tells the stories of a series of previous tenants of a house in London which has stood empty for many years: 'some said six years, some said eight, some said ten. It never did let, they all agreed, and it never would let' (*Household Words* 575). In the frame narrative, the building is 'a ten-roomed house, very dirty and much dilapidated,' whose 'area-rails were rusty and peeling away' (574). In Gaskell's tale, the first one after the framing story, a couple called Mr and Mrs Openshaw move to London from Manchester, only for Mrs Openshaw's first husband, her cousin Frank, who is long presumed dead, to return dramatically at the door of the house. He is met by a servant rather than his wife, however, and ends up apparently committing suicide after having briefly seen his disabled, angelic daughter Ailsie for the first time. Though the house itself is not especially significant in Gaskell's text, the theme of past and present colliding is prominent, reinforcing the layering of different stories across time which the issue as a whole relies on. The story seems in some sense to echo or invert *Mary Barton*, since

Mrs Openshaw's maiden name is Alice Wilson, a character in that novel who seeks to keep the past alive. It is also notable that domestic space is consistently vulnerable for Alice throughout this short text. She has to enter lodgings with her first husband due to his stepmother's displeasure at their marriage (*CP* 131), though this is eventually overcome, and she later has to 'remove to a smaller house' (134) with her mother-in-law (who is also her aunt) due to a lack of lodgers. When Frank returns, the servant Norah's overwhelming sense is that he threatens the family and 'must leave the house' (142). The permeability and changeability of domestic space is thus prominent on both a plot and structural level.

'Our Old Hall Is to Be Pulled Down'

The concept of tracing the life of a building through time, which animates *A House to Let*, also appears in Gaskell's short story 'Morton Hall,' first published in two parts in *Household Words* in November 1853. In this final section, I want to take this story as a case study for thinking in more detail about intertextual resonances between Gaskell's texts. The story begins strikingly with the line 'our old hall is to be pulled down, and they are going to build streets on the site' (*CP* 32). Morton Hall is described as a grand family home dating back to 1554, 'situated about five miles from the centre of Drumble' (33), the name given to Manchester in *Cranford* (first published as a single volume in June 1853), so putting the story in relation to that novel. The story is narrated by Bridget Sidebotham, from a local family who has an old connection to the Mortons. It is told at a moment when the site of Morton village and hall is being swallowed up by the growing city, becoming its suburb, as Bridget explains:

> [E]ven I can remember when there was a long piece of rather lonely road, with high hedges on either side, between Morton village and Drumble. Now, it is all street, and Morton seems but a suburb of the great town near. Our farm stood where Liverpool Street runs now; and people used to come snipe-shooting just where the Baptist chapel is built.
>
> (33)

After telling the story of the Mortons and the Carrs (the latter of whom take possession of the house during the upheaval of the Civil War), Bridget describes the once wealthy family's descent into debt and poverty, culminating in Miss Phillis's eviction from the Hall and removal to 'a little cottage in the village, at the end of the property, which the lawyer allowed her to have because he could not let it to any one, it was so tumble-down and old' (46). Miss Phillis's final scene makes this cottage a tragic or pathetic echo of the Hall's formal glories:

> What little furniture was there, it was clear to be seen were cast-off fragments of the old splendour of Morton Hall. No fire. Grey wood ashes lay on the hearth. An old settee, once white and gold, now doubly shabby in its fall from its former estate. On it lay Miss Phillis, very pale; very still; her eyes shut.
>
> (50)

The 'doubly shabby' settee and Miss Phillis mirror one another, both fallen from their high estate. All that remains of Miss Phillis's old aristocratic life is 'fragments.' This is not the 'elegant economy' practised by the ladies of *Cranford* (5), but an upper class equivalent of the Carson family's descent into total degradation in *Mary Barton* (58–61).

Paralleling this descent of the family, the story ends by returning to the Hall's destruction in the face of the growing city and the loss of historical memory this entails:

> There is no one living in Morton that knows the tradition of Sir John Morton and Alice Carr; yet the very first part of the Hall the Drumble builder has pulled down is the old stone dining-parlour where the great dinner for the preachers mouldered away – flesh from flesh, crumb from crumb! And the street they are going to build right through the rooms through which Alice Carr was dragged in her agony of despair at her husband's loathing hatred, is to be called Carr Street. (*CP* 67)

The references to Sir John Morton and Alice Carr recall events that took place during the Restoration, when Alice Carr, from a Puritan family, is left in sole possession of the house, despite her hatred for the returning Stuarts. These events are no longer remembered by anyone except our narrator, but they are still uncannily embedded in the city by the naming of Carr Street. Not only is Gaskell reflecting here on the way older, aristocratic ways of life are being swept aside by the growing industrial cities of England, she also invites us to think about the ways spaces shift radically through time, and about how historical events continue to reverberate in the present. Symbolically, the story's conclusion brings to pass a curse that Alice Carr laid on the Morton family towards the end of her life, when 'she used to have visions and dream dreams: and some thought her a prophetess' (42). She dooms the Mortons to 'die out of the land, and their home to be razed to the ground, while pedlars and huxters, such as her own people, her father, had been, should dwell where the knightly Mortons had once lived' (42). The destruction of the family home thus becomes a kind of class revenge by the rising bourgeoisie ('pedlars and huxters'), who will dominate nineteenth-century Manchester, upon the aristocracy, as well as deferred revenge for Alice's brutal treatment at the hands of her royalist enemy-turned-husband, Sir John Morton.

Just as the place name Drumble links 'Morton Hall' to *Cranford*, the novel that preceded it, I suggest that we should also read this story in dialogue with *North and South*, the novel that follows it. In particular, Alice Carr partially anticipates Margaret Hale and her role in the chapter 'A Blow and its Consequences,' where she confronts striking cotton-workers at the door of Mr Thornton's house, one of the most frequently analysed scenes in Gaskell's writing (see, for instance, David 41–3; Gallagher 172–4; Stoneman 136–8; Reeder; Hayes 105–7). Putting these two texts together also provides a new way of understanding Margaret's much-discussed gendered embodiment (see, for instance, Puri; Hayes; Wright 97–117). In 'Morton Hall,' Bridget describes Alice Carr as 'taller than most women, and a great beauty, I have heard. But, for all her beauty she was a stern, hard woman' (*CP* 34). Margaret is introduced as having a 'tall, finely made figure' (*NS* 9) and is initially perceived by Thornton as a 'proud, disagreeable girl' whose beauty is 'blotted out of one's memory by her scornful ways' (86). These surface similarities suggest a kinship, but it is the scene of Alice's confrontation with the returning Sir John, accompanied by his companions, at the door of his ancestral hall that especially mirrors Margaret's position in the better-known riot scene:

> Heavy as the great gate was, they swung it wide on its hinges, and up they rode to the Hall steps, where the lady stood, in her close, plain Puritan dress, her cheeks one crimson flush, her great eyes flashing fire, and no one behind her, or with her, or near her, or to be seen, but the old trembling nurse, catching at her gown in pleading terror. Sir John was taken aback; he could not go out with swords and warlike weapons against a woman; his very preparations for forcing an entrance made him ridiculous in his own eyes, and, he well knew, in the eyes of his gay, scornful comrades too. (*CP* 35–6)

Both women stand alone on the threshold of the respective houses, preventing forced entry by the presence of their noble but also vulnerable bodies. Alice's 'great eyes flashing fire' parallel Margaret's, as she appears before 'that angry sea of men, her eyes smiting them with flaming arrows of reproach' (*NS* 178). The emotional toll of the incident is strongly marked in each case: Margaret collapses onto Mr Thornton's shoulder, while Alice 'sat her down and wept as her faithful servant had never seen her do before' (*CP* 36) once the initial danger has passed. The contours of the encounters differ, however, in that Margaret successfully defends the house from the crowd of turned-out workers, provoking a declaration of love from Thornton ('dead – cold as you lie there, you are the only woman I ever loved!' (*NS* 181)), while Alice is eventually persuaded to marry Sir John, who thereby gains possession of the estate. Alice's end is tragic, unlike Margaret's, since her refusal to give up her religion and insistence on hosting Puritan preachers are met by violence. Sir John binds her and removes her from the Hall, ordering his men to 'throw the key … deep into the mere yonder. My lady may go seek it if she lists, when next I set her arms at liberty' (*CP* 41). It is this event which leads to her curse upon his family. Margaret's eventual marriage to Thornton, though it echoes the concept of opposing social groups coming together (this time the rural south and industrial north, rather than Puritan and Royalist), is harmonious in a way the Morton-Carr union is not.

Despite these differences, the central shared scene of a beautiful woman who is both 'queenly' (*NS* 23) and middle class confronting a threatening masculine presence at the boundary of the house is clearly one that Gaskell attached significance to in the 1850s. It points us again towards the threshold as a place of crisis and one which is both potentially permeable and associated with what Reeder calls the 'remarkably fragile female bodies' (para. 6) that appear across Gaskell's industrial novels. Yet rather than being only understood as fragile and permeable, these women's bodies can be better read as ambiguously semi-permeable, in ways that parallel the hybrid and heterogeneous domestic spaces I have discussed across the course of this chapter. Like Susan Dixon in 'Half a Lifetime Ago,' their presence restricts access in a manner that cannot be easily ignored or bypassed. This connection between bodies and thresholds returns us to the opening chapter of Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, published just two years after *North and South* and four years after 'Morton Hall.' Gaskell there puts us not in the position of the woman defending the threshold but of the visitor attempting, unsuccessfully, to gain entry. On the one hand, it testifies vividly to the fragility of women's bodies, since all three Brontë sisters, along with their siblings and mother, have died an untimely death. Yet, on the other hand, in their absence, the house itself stands in for their resisting bodies, allowing us to progress so far and no further. The *Life* begins by reminding us not only of how environment, both built and natural, deeply shapes those who inhabit it, or of how lived space is constantly produced and reproduced, but also of the limits of spatial penetration, especially for strangers. In this respect, the final chapter, describing Charlotte's funeral, is significant when it observes that 'the two mourners, stunned with their great grief, desired not the sympathy of strangers' (456). As well as recognising the precarity and permeability of Gaskell's domestic architecture and the female characters who inhabit them, therefore, we should also pay attention to the ways those spaces simultaneously encode various forms of privacy, invisibility and resistance.

Notes

1 Gaskell's approach to Charlotte here replicates Charlotte's explanation of her sister Emily's novel *Wuthering Heights*, which she calls 'moorish, and wild, and knotty as the root of heath. Nor was it natural that it should be otherwise; the author being herself a native and nursling of the moors' (*Wuthering Heights*, li).

2 Also influential in this period is Cazamian's *The Social Novel*, which was first published in France in 1903 but appeared in English translation only in 1973. Cazamian discusses both *Mary Barton* and *North and South*.

3 On this topic in relation to women's consumption, see Longmuir, 'Consuming Subjects.'
4 See also Julie Nash's argument that Gaskell often 'exposes the traditional family and social structures as inadequate remedies for the characters' struggles' (54); Emily Steinlight's observation that in *Mary Barton* 'the contrast between the well-kept home and the oozing slum is not durable' (101), since John Barton, the novel's 'supremely dependable and principled workman, from the vantage point of capital, has always been expendable' (101); and Jennifer MacLure's argument that in *North and South* Gaskell imagines a radical sympathy based on 'intimate, close contact between bodies,' which capitalism suppresses by 'restricting contact between masters and men' (68).
5 Somewhat similar to these examples is the 'little three-cornered room above a pastry-cook's shop' (156) where *Cousin Phillis* opens. The first part of this tale appeared in the same year, 1863, as *Sylvia's Lovers*.

Works Cited

Athmanathan, Divya. "'You Might Pioneer a Little at Home': Hybrid Space, Identities, and Homes in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*." *Place and Progress in the Works of Elizabeth Gaskell*, edited by Lesa Scholl, Emily Morris, and Sarina Gruver Moore. Ashgate, 2015, pp. 37–52.

Blair, Emily. *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel*. SUNY Press, 2007.

Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*. 1847. Edited by Pauline Nestor. Penguin, 2003.

Burton, Anna. *Trees in Nineteenth-Century English Fiction: The Silvicultural Novel*. Routledge, 2021.

Carlyle, Thomas. *Chartism*. James Fraser, 1840.

Cazamian, Louis. *The Social Novel in England 1830-1850*. Routledge, 1973.

David, Deirdre. *Fictions of Resolution in Three Victorian Novels*: *North and South, Our Mutual Friend, Daniel Deronda*. Columbia UP, 1981.

Dickens, Charles. *Our Mutual Friend*. 1864–5. Edited by Michael Cotsell. Oxford UP, 1989.

Dickens, Charles. *The Uncommercial Traveller*. 1860. Edited by Daniel Tyler. Oxford UP, 2015.

Eibach, Joachim, and Margareth Lanzinger, editors. *The Routledge History of the Domestic Sphere in Europe: 16th to 19th Century*. Routledge, 2020.

Fincher, Lindsay Mayo. "'Uncleaned Corners': Dirt and the Politics of Place in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*." *North and South: Essays on Gender, Race and Region*, edited by Christine DeVine and Mary Ann Wilson. Cambridge Scholars, 2012. pp. 21–38.

Fraiman, Susan. *Extreme Domesticity: A View from the Margins*. Columbia UP, 2017.

Freedgood, Elaine. *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel*. U of Chicago P, 2006.

Gallagher, Catherine. *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form 1832-1867*. U of Chicago P, 1985.

Gaskell, Elizabeth. *North and South*. 1854-5. Edited by Angus Easson, with introduction by Sally Shuttleworth. Oxford UP, 2008.

Gaskell, Elizabeth. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. 1857. Edited by Angus Easson. Oxford UP, 2009.

Gaskell, Elizabeth. *Cousin Phillis and Other Stories*, edited by Heather Glen. Oxford UP, 2010.

Gaskell, Elizabeth. *Cranford*. 1851–3. Edited by Elizabeth Porges Watson. Oxford UP, 2011.

Gaskell, Elizabeth. *Sylvia's Lovers*. 1863. Edited by Francis O'Gorman. Oxford UP, 2013.

Hayes, Laura. "The Body Plot: Self-Mastery and the Counter Narrative of Gaskell's *North and South*." *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol 18, no. 1, 2018. pp. 95–112. https://doi.org/10.17077/2168-569X.1510

Household Words, 1858 Christmas, vol. XVIII, 7 December 1858, pp. 537–608.

Kanwit, John Paul. "'Mere Outward Appearances'?: Household Taste and Social Perception in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*." *Victorian Review*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2009. pp. 190–210.

Kingsley, Charles. *Alton Locke*. 1850. Edited by Elizabeth Cripps. Oxford UP, 1983.

Lambert, Carolyn. *The Meanings of Home in Elizabeth Gaskell's Fiction*. Victorian Secrets, 2013.

Lawson, Benjamin S. "From *Moby-Dick* to *Billy Budd*: Elizabeth Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers*." *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 64, no. 2, 1999. pp. 37–57. https://doi.org/10.2307/3201981

Lindner, Christoph. *Fictions of Commodity Culture: From the Victorian to the Postmodern*. Ashgate, 2003.

Longmuir, Anne. "Consuming Subjects: Women and the Market in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2012. pp. 237–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/08905495.2012.691821

MacLure, Jennifer. *The Feeling of Letting Die: Necroeconomics and Victorian Fiction*. Ohio State UP, 2023.

Miller, Andrew. *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative*. Cambridge UP, 1995.
Moore, Ben. "Invisible Architecture and Social Space in *North and South*." *Gaskell Journal*, vol. 32, 2018. pp. 17–36.
Nash, Julie. *Servants and Paternalism in the Works of Maria Edgeworth and Elizabeth Gaskell*. Routledge, 2007.
Puri, Tara. "Indian Objects, English Body: Utopian Yearnings in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*." *Journal of Victorian Culture*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2017. pp. 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/13555502.2016.1258656
Reeder, Jessie. "Broken Bodies, Permeable Subjects: Rethinking Victorian Women's 'Agency' in Gaskell's *North and South*." *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2013.
Séllei, Nóra. "The Humanizing Transformations of the Space of the Home in Gaskell's *Cranford*." *Place and Progress in the Works of Elizabeth Gaskell*, edited by Lesa Scholl, Emily Morris, and Sarina Gruver Moore. Ashgate, 2015, pp. 23–36.
Schwartz, Lucina C. "'We did not read much': *Cranford*'s Critique of How *Household Words* Envisions Reading." *Gaskell Journal*, vol. 38, 2024. pp. 1–22.
Steinlight, Emily. *Populating the Novel: Literary Form and the Politics of Surplus Life*. Cornell UP, 2018.
Stoneman, Patsy. *Elizabeth Gaskell*. Indiana UP, 1987.
Tange, Andrea Kaston. *Architectural Identities: Domesticity, Literature, and the Victorian Middle Class*. U of Toronto P, 2010.
Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. 1973. Oxford UP, 1975.
Wright, Terence. *Elizabeth Gaskell, 'We are not angels': Realism, Gender, Values*. Palgrave, 1995.