

**The Amazon Warrior Woman and the De/construction of Gendered Imperial Authority in  
Nineteenth-Century Colonial Literature**

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<1>In 1864, Sir Richard F. Burton published an ethnographic account of his *Mission to Gelele, King of Dahomé*. Burton, the accomplished linguist, orientalist, explorer and colonial officer, was chosen “by Her Majesty’s government” as an official “commissioner to Dahomé,” a West African state that had been central to the slave trade (Burton I: viv). His “principle object” was, however, to report on the Kingdom’s “mixture of horrors and meanness...[and sketch a] picture of its mingled puerility and brutality” (Burton I: xiv). Burton devoted a large portion of his two-volume account to describing, with the aid of detailed engravings, the chief proof of Dahomé’s barbarian under-civilization: its army of women warriors, or “so-called ‘Amazons’” (Burton I: iii).

<2>While the text reports generally on Burton’s impressions of the West African state, the frontispiece and gilt-seal illustrations on the cover of each volume focus the reader’s attention on the Dahoman “Amazon.” She is pictured kneeling, with rifle in hand, in an aggressively militaristic pose [**Figure 1**].(1) Over the course of the text, Burton describes his fear of and fascination with the Dahoman women warriors. In doing so, he contributes to a large body of Victorian colonial literature and visual art, in which the Amazon warrior appears as a trope and archetypal commonplace. We find the Amazon in ethnographic accounts like Burton’s *Mission* and F.E. Forbes *Dahomey and the Dahomans* (1851). We also find her in accounts of live exhibitions and performances of “Amazon” warriors held in nineteenth-century London; graphic representations printed in popular periodicals, like *Punch*; and fictional texts, like Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford*, the first line of which states, “Cranford is in possession of the Amazons; all the holders of houses above a certain rent are women” (Gaskell 1).

<3>In these various contexts, the Amazon takes on many different forms. African and English women, including Queen Victoria, are both represented as “Amazons.” Colonizers are represented as Amazons, as are the colonized. According to the Victorian writers and artists that I survey, the figure of the Amazon also transgresses distinctions between traditional male and female roles. She is a woman and yet also a soldier. Representations of the Amazon do not consistently or strictly adhere to the ways in which colonial ideology divided up the world into the powerful (white men) and the powerless (everyone else). The Amazon is a mobile archetype that appears, at times, to challenge the fixity of those boundaries. Some representations of the Amazon appear to endorse colonialism by showing, for example, that African Amazons need

saving from their incivility. Representations of her extraordinary powers (martial and sexual) appear to offer an implicit critique of the assumptions about gender and race that underwrite colonial ideology. To modern critics, at least, these representations reveal some limits of colonial ideology within a body of colonial literature and art that otherwise seems to support colonialism. (2)

<4>In the sense that the Amazon did not conform to gender and racial stereotypes, the Amazon is not unlike two other figures, which Elaine Showalter identifies as “twin apostles of social apocalypse”: the homosexual and the New Woman (Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, 170). Like the figure of the homosexual and the New Woman, representations of the Amazon suggest her capacity to disrupt the patriarchal socio-political order. She threatens to destabilize normative conceptions of sexuality, gender and power and thus to suggest the possibility of socio-political change.

<5>The Amazon, as an archetype, is drawn from classical mythology in which the single-breasted warrior women of Sarmatia founded an independent kingdom devoted to killing men and foiling Greek imperial expansion.(3) In nineteenth-century writing and visual art, the figure of the Amazon functions as a metaphor: all women, who possess types of martial, political and financial power that are normally reserved for men, are represented as part of a single and recognizable socio-political phenomenon. Rather than representing unique challenges to colonial authority, all of these women appear to represent the Amazonian challenge. Writers, comic artists and curators made available the figure of the African and English Amazon in nearly every nineteenth-century media form: leather-bound volumes, inexpensive periodicals and live public exhibitions. Burton and Forbes’ two-volume illustrated texts might have only reached the wealthiest readers. Readers of lesser means could find the Amazon in *Punch* cartoons or *Household Words*, where Gaskell’s *Cranford* was first published in nine installments between December 1851 and May 1853. Otherwise, audiences might find them in live exhibitions, like the Great Exhibition of 1851, or in performances around London and Paris.

<6>In the ranging contexts that I examine in this essay, the African and English Amazon remain consistent objects of fear as well as fascination. On the one hand, the Amazon appears to shore up the need for masculine imperial authority. In Burton’s account, the civilizing mission of Empire would save Africa from its Amazon problem. In *Cranford*, the return of men to England from the colonies saves English women, who have ‘gone-Amazon’ (read also: gone native), from tragicomic self-destruction. On the other hand, the Amazon warrior woman symbolizes a repeated challenge to masculine imperial authority that is represented, often pruriently, with joyous excitement. In the frontispiece to Burton’s text, the Amazon holds a rifle, a weapon of modern European warfare, and threateningly glares out at the reader.(4) Performances around London and Paris, which I will discuss below, likewise showcased the Amazon as a fierce and indomitable warrior. Writers and artists seem unable to contain their excitement and desire for these women. In these representations, we can detect a tension between the Amazon’s presumed need for imperial civilization and her alluring ability to thwart it through an assertion of her own alluring authority.

<7>As I mention above, Queen Victoria was herself represented as a “so-called Amazon.”(5) Adrienne Munich has shown that representations of the Amazonian Victoria struck an ideal balance that allowed her “[to stand] for both fierce warrior and sheltering mother” (Munich 219). The Queen’s image was, of course, a carefully devised social, cultural and rhetorical construct, which ultimately smoothed over the fact that, as Adrienne Munich has shown, “[I]inking the queen’s maternal role to her monarchical roles transgressed boundaries in the cultural imagination, as if the two kinds of authority inherently contradicted each other” (Munich 187). Other representations of the African and English Amazon were not such well-devised constructs at least insofar as they did not so successfully shore up the coherence and stability of imperial authority or ideology.

<8>Representations of the Amazon affiliate her with the many other female archetypes that populated colonial literature and that, as many critics have discussed, helped rationalize aspects of imperial authority. As Catherine Hall has shown,

colonial discourse was always gendered, articulating men and women as having different characteristics, and mapping hierarchies of racial difference on to those of gender difference, and vice versa...there were no essential meanings of blackness and whiteness, of masculinity and femininity, only discursive practices which articulated and organized particular sets of relations through the workings of knowledge and power. (50)

Hall provides an apt summary of the ways that many critics have talked about the figuration of European women and her colonized counterparts in Africa, India and the Caribbean. As Hall observes, the representation of these female types helped legitimize colonial power relations by associating whiteness and masculinity with authority. The Amazon does not, however, conform to the qualities of other familiar female character-types that populated colonial literature and endorsed its concepts of masculine imperial authority. Her military prowess thwarts the conventions of, for example, the madwoman in the attic,(6) the victimized foreign woman,(7) the temple dancer(8) and the Angel in the House.(9) The figure of the Amazon occupies an unusual place in the ranks of female archetypes. She is hyper-sexualized, but her sexual prowess is figured as part of her extraordinary and indomitable political and martial power. She possesses many of the features of the “madwoman in the attic,” and yet her domain is the battlefield, where she cannot entirely be contained.

<9>According to modern critics, a wide variety of character-types helped to codify the relationships between gender, race and power in colonial literatures. As Ann McClintock has argued with respect to “the porno-tropic tradition,”

women figured as the epitome of sexual aberration and excess...In the minds of these men, the imperial conquest of the globe found its shaping figure and its political sanction in the prior subordination of women as a category of nature...Women were planted like fetishes at the ambiguous points of contact, at the borders and orifices of the contest zone...In myriad ways, women served as mediating and threshold figures by means of which men oriented themselves in space as agents of power and agents of knowledge. (22-24)

McClintock's focus is not exclusively on colonized women. Her discussion of Hannah Cullwick demonstrates the ways in which representations of European women also worked to legitimize patriarchal authority: men ruled women in the home at the same time (and for many of the same reasons) that they ruled men and women abroad. Female archetypes also typically distinguished European women (domesticated, sexually modest and subordinate to her male counterparts) from colonized women (sexually immodest, morally inferior, victimized by their own male counterparts and thus subordinate to white men and women). The mobility of the Amazonian archetype undermines this rigid opposition and thus challenges the racial and gender binaries that rationalized features of imperial authority.

### **The African Amazon, Abroad and at Home**

<10>In Burton's account of the African Amazon, the narrative shuttles back and forth between an effort to legitimize British imperial power and an acknowledgement of real challenges to that power. His representation of the African Amazon participates in both parts. Burton recognizes that the Dahoman women are not typically called Amazons in West Africa. He admits the locution is a European invention: the "Amazons" of Dahomey are "miscalled" and their prowess is thereby exaggerated (Burton II: 42). However, Burton doesn't mention this fact until the second volume, after he has utilized the name "Amazon" for more than half of the complete two-volume text. The mythological allusion has two effects. It makes sense of an otherwise inexplicable socio-cultural phenomenon by associating contemporary women warriors with an older, familiar mythological narrative. The mythological allusion also, however, grants them the kind of power associated with the mythological Amazons, who did, at least partially, resist colonial domination. On the one hand, Burton asserts that we already know the Amazon's power and might therefore more easily control it. On the other hand, readers are left to wonder what this knowledge gets them.

<11>Michel Foucault is famously credited with positing a binding relationship between power and knowledge (or power-knowledge) in his writings on sexuality and madness in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Archetypes like the madwoman in the attic provide an example of the way that shared knowledge about groups of people can legitimize power over those groups.<sup>(10)</sup> Roland Barthes offers a more specific interpretation of the function of mythology as a kind of knowledge that he associates with domination. In "Myth Today," Barthes argues, "myth has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us" (Barthes 117). Barthes goes on to say, "it transforms history into nature" (Barthes 129). In this sense, re-presenting the African warrior woman *as* the mythological Amazon explains her role within the context of familiar European narratives about empire, gender and power. If the Greek empire could know/(partly) control its warrior women, so too could the British Empire. The mythological narrative signals what Ann McClintock calls "a new global order of cultural knowledge" that is a "governing [theme] of Western Imperialism" (2-3). That narrative explains the Amazon's power and offers instruction in how to neutralize it. These narratives ultimately legitimize imperial intervention because, borrowing Barthes' terms, they make the history of that intervention and domination seem like a natural outcome.

<12>The Amazon, however, also appears repeatedly in Victorian cultural production to resist domination. In Burton's description of a martial display, organized by King Gelele for his reception, he reveals both the fears, which the existence of woman warriors represented to the Victorian mindset, and the nearly equal fascination they inspired. The Amazon creates confusion rather than contributing to a coherent "order of cultural knowledge" to borrow McClintock's phrase. In his "confession," Burton reveals one of the contradictions inherent in the discussion of Amazons: their challenge to European authority was compelling and seductive. Burton says,

I confess to have enjoyed the "demonaic [sic] scene." All the best looking girls were habited in men's straw hats, with breast cloths girt crosswise to imitate the soldieresses of the capital, and a little attention paid to them took wonderful effect. The airs were simple but harmonious, and could reform any recitative save that of the Gran' Maestro Verdi, on whom all Europe delights beyond the *minimâ contentos nocte Britannos*. And when we clapped palms to the measure, the bouyant gaiety of the caboceers knew no bounds; it became a *manifesta phrenesis*... The crisis was when double flasks of gin were presented to the danseurs and the danseuses: we retired deafened by the din. (*Mission*, I, 99-100)

These women proceed from a "demonaic" state to "*manifesta phrenesis*" (clear lunacy). "Demonaic" in this context might refer to devilish, but it also derives from the Greek daimon, which signifies any figure of spiritual devotion.<sup>(11)</sup> From this state, they descend into seeming madness and discordant noise, which Burton represents as opposed to sense and civility. Burton's confession, however, also reveals his exuberant fascination. Their "buoyant gaiety" has dominated over him. The fact that he must "confess" implies that his feelings do not conform to the normative speech of the Queen's colonial representative and yet his official colonial account accommodates and acknowledges those feelings.

<13>In Burton's account, the Dahoman Amazons deviate from normative concepts of sexuality and power: they have power despite, and indeed because of, their deviance. This fact is an object of attraction as well as censure. In one case, Burton reports that the King and Dahoman people insist that the Amazons must remain celibate under penalty of death (Burton II: 46). However, he goes on to repeatedly speculate about what he believes to be their doubtful, although mandatory, celibacy (Burton I: 184 and II: 46). Burton cannot repress his prurient fascination:

Though opportunity, which makes the thief, is decidedly deficient, there have been, there are, and there ever will be, occasional scandals. As a rule, these fighting *célibataires* prefer the *morosa voluptas* of the schoolmen and the peculiarities of the Tenth Muse. (Burton II: 45, note 4)

His playfully veiled and latinate prose reveals the pleasure he takes in speculating about their sexual habits. "The Tenth Muse" is a reference, drawn from Plato, to the poet Sappho.<sup>(12)</sup> "*Morosa voluptas*" translates roughly to mean 'sexual deviance' and, in connection with Sappho, most likely refers to lesbianism.<sup>(13)</sup> Burton disturbingly offers these speculations as evidence for a tongue-in-cheek argument that female soldiers might be beneficially employed in the British army on one condition: "a sprinkling of youth and beauty amongst the European Amazons would

make campaigning a pleasure to us” (Burton II: 44, note 1). Given the sexual form of his evidence, the “pleasure” he anticipates seems all the more prurient.

<14>In Burton’s account, the Amazon’s seductive qualities occasionally resemble those of the temple dancer, who as Nancy Paxton has shown, possessed many kinds of power normally reserved for men or denied to women: “the *devadasi* marks a threshold of several of the most contested boundaries in the colonial imagination that separate the inner from the outer, the private from the public, and the sacred from the sexual” (Paxton 85). The Amazon does not stand at precisely these thresholds, but she does stand at others that are perhaps more obviously pertinent to the colonial imagination, including the thresholds that separate the battlefield from the domestic sphere(14) as well as thresholds that separate a non-European zone of women’s oppression from a European zone of women’s freedom. The Amazon’s martial power grants her authority outside the limited realm of the domestic sphere. It also holds her apart from what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identifies as the trope of “white men...saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak 92). If, as Spivak insists, this trope of the brown-woman-who-needs-saving is an example of “imperialist subject-production” (92) that effectively silences (or dis-empowers) the colonized, then the Amazon provides a different example of the limits of this production. Unlike the figure of the Hindu widow, on whom Spivak focuses, the Amazon is *produced* as an imperial subject who actually has power, even when she is represented as a brown woman. In this regard, the Amazon obviates the need for rescue and discredits the power of the white male savior, who, in the case of Burton at least, is for the most part too busy lusting after her to care if she needs saving.

<15>The African Amazons bends the rules of conventional female sexuality and she also challenges the distinctions between male and female roles that critics have found represented in other colonial literatures. F.E. Forbes’ *Dahomey and the Dahomans* (1851) foregrounds the Amazonian challenge to gender distinctions. In his translation of an Amazonian war-chant, Forbes writes, “[a]s the blacksmith takes an iron bar and by fire changes its fashion so have we changed our nature. We are no longer women, we are men” (Forbes V.II: 119). The illustrations that accompany Forbes’ two-volume go on show that Amazonian androgyny does not merely reverse gender roles, but also redraws the cultural boundaries that separate men from women. Like Burton’s frontispiece, the majority of Forbes’ illustrations depict women in various military situations, standing prepared for battle or holding the evidence of martial victory. For example, one of Forbes’ illustrations, “Seh-Dong-Hong-Beh: An Amazon in the Dahoman Army” (Forbes I: facing p. 23) [Figure 2], shows a woman warrior with a rifle in her right hand and a severed male head in her left. Her eyes are wide and expressive in contrast to his, which are closed and lifeless. She stands with feet firmly planted in a wide and domineering stance, whilst his head seems to float, bodiless, near the ground, at the end of her extended arm. The image signifies the prowess of the woman warrior, who has dominated over her male counterpart. She has not simply inverted gender roles. She has literally and figuratively redrawn the boundaries separating men from women. The preeminently powerful female body has effaced the male body and usurped its place on the battlefield.(15) Despite the fact that colonial literature had previously identified a limited role for women on the colonial battlefield, as in the case of Florence Nightingale, the Amazon’s function was not restricted to nursing or maternal care-giving. As Mary Poovey has shown, the writings about Florence Nightingale and nursing in Victorian literature “provided some resistance to the male domination” of the medical profession, but they

also “helped preserve the domestic ideal” by representing women in “a supporting subordinate position” (166). In Forbes’ account, the Amazon flouts the “domestic ideal” by obviating the role of men on the battlefield and confidently declaring her superiority over them.

<16>Live performances of the warrior women around Europe similarly showcased the Amazon’s martial skills. In February 1891, John Wood, a British entrepreneur, organized a dance troupe, supposedly composed of “Dahomean Amazons,” which toured Europe for two years. It opened in Paris at the exhibition hall of the Jardin d’Acclimatation, in the Bois de Bologne. As Stanely Alpern notes in *The Amazons of Black Sparta*, the women were dressed “with leather diadems and snug bodices, both adorned with cowries, and rings lines with little bells round their knees. Their hair was arranged in cornrows” (196). The costumes hyper-sexualized the women, making them appear like dancing girls. Unlike the similar archetype of the Indian temple dancer, however, the African Amazon could not be contained within the domestic confines of a harem. (16) Like Burton’s description of the martial displays, a reporter at the event said, “[The Amazons’ faces] at first calm and almost smiling, gradually become severe and hard, and end up reflecting a sort of martial ecstasy resembling delirium. (A. Pilgrim, “Les Amazones au Jardin d’acclimatation,” as quoted in Alpern, 196). The delirious ecstasy of their marshal displays made the Amazons appear enticingly erotic if not also dangerous.

<17>Many other similar exhibitions displaying African Amazons were held in the nineteenth century in Paris and London. As Robert Edgerton notes in *Warrior Women*, Paintings of “Amazons” and real, live “Amazons” were exhibited throughout Europe in ethnographic expositions: for example, in Paris, in 1891, 1893 and 1900, the last of which was held at the Paris World’s Fair. There was a similar exhibition in 1893 at the Chicago World’s Fair (Edgerton 120). In *An Empire for the Masses*, William Schneider also notes that the 1893 Dahoman Exhibition, organized by Thomas Bruneau was the “largest undertaking of its kind since the beginning of the ethnographic exhibitions” and the first “sound and light spectacle” in Paris with an orchestra, lights and a simulated burning of the Dahoman capital (Schneider 142-45). Having perhaps read about or seen such exhibitions, Queen Victoria chose to adopt a Dahoman girl to raise in England and occasionally display to the public.(17)

<18>In reference to one of the many live exhibitions of “Amazons,” *Punch* featured a cartoon called “Closing of the Exhibition: Amazon Putting on her Bonnet and Shawl” in which the caption reads: “Amazon (to Greek Slave). ‘Well, my dear! I’m very glad it’s over. It’s very hard work keeping in one attitude for five months together, isn’t it?’” [Figure 3](18) Both the Greek Slave and Amazon are dressed in typical English dresses, but they are barefoot. In the fore- and background are other display pieces: an Asian man on a horse and an abnormally large cat. The Amazon and Greek Slave may look like English folk, but are presumably just as freakish as the other figures with whom the image groups them.

<18>Victorian writers like Burton often expressed overt concern about the danger posed by the matriarchal Amazons to the patriarchal structures of European empires. J.J. Bachofen, a Swiss writer, who was popular throughout nineteenth century Europe,(19) elaborates this concern in his *Myth, Religion and Mother Right* (1861), in which he posits a Hegelian timeline: on one end, we find Amazons, other “savages” and pre-civil Europe; and, on the other end, we find the western

nation-state, culture and their submissive women. He contends that the shift from “savage” society to the European state occurred because of a shift between matriarchal and patriarchal systems of governance. He represents this as a shift away from “Amazonism”:

Starting from a Demetrian ordered matriarchy, we have gained an understanding of ancient hetaerism and Amazonism. Having considered this lower stage of existence, we shall now be able to recognize the true significance of the higher stage and give the victory of the patriarchate its proper position in the history of mankind. This progress from the maternal to the paternal conception of man forms the most important turning point in the history of the relations between the sexes. (Bachofen 108-109)

“Amazonism” precedes western political rationality. According to Bachofen, it is only after the triumphant “patriarchate” tames the destructive warlike proclivities of these women that men can “build cities” and eventually go on to build nations and culture (Bachofen 106). The architecture of the western imperial nation is dependent on suppressing the Amazonian desire to dominate “the patriarchate.” Bachofen’s history does not, however, account for why the Amazon kept reappearing in European cultural production if “the patriarchate” had, in fact, been indubitably and thoroughly victorious over matriarchal “Amazonism.”

<19>It is difficult to square this representation of “Amazonism” with the representations of Queen Victoria as an Amazon, who ruled one of Europe’s presumably most modern and civilized nations. In *Queen Victoria’s Secrets*, Adrienne Munich discusses the ways that representations of the Queen shuttled between celebrations of her imperial might and “a spectral fear of ruling women, one the Ideal Couple [Victoria and Albert] vigorously countered” (Munich 214). The chief problem with representing Victoria as an Amazon queen lay in the fact that Victoria “should not be related to an ancient myth about women who refused to marry and bear children and assumed male prerogatives” (Munich 213). Some representations of Victoria attempted to resolve this problem by representing her as “[t]he mother-monarch” (Munich 190). According to Munich, Victoria’s ideally maternal femininity somehow tempered her association with the figure of the Amazon warrior. The mere fact that Victoria could be affiliated with Amazons, whom other writers represented as a threat to imperial authority, reveals the contradictory facets of this authority. As Elizabeth Langland has shown, the representations of Victoria as “woman, mother, wife...Empress of India, and Queen of England” are internally fraught” (Langland 13-14). Langland goes on to temper her argument by saying that “Victoria’s contradictory inscription as rule and mother/wife facilitated the process by which women, and the domestic sphere they ‘governed,’ were amalgamated to England’s imperialist mission yet also excluded from it by a positioning of the female body as ground and origin for male achievement” (14). If we consider the representation of Victoria from within the context of other representations of Amazons (English and African), another more complicated narrative about women and empire emerges that does not position “the female body as ground and origin for male achievement.” The Amazon, in her distinctive guises, allows us to tell this other narrative and thus showcase the very fraught nature of imperial authority rather than having to smooth over its inconsistencies.

### **English Amazons and Gaskell’s *Cranford***

<20>Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*, published serially in 1851 in *Household Words*, provides one example of the ways in which some writers used representations of the Amazon to position women in the way that Langland describes. The novel narrates the social and mental disorder produced by a community of English Amazons and the resolution offered when the protagonists' long-lost brother, Peter Jenkyns, a colonial official, returns from the colonies. These women's exclusion from the empire both occasions their distress and justifies the reinstatement of the imperial patriarch. While other texts, illustrations and exhibitions revealed in the indomitable power and seductive fascination of the Amazon, Gaskell's novel offers an unfamiliar and simplistic portrait of the English Amazon's absurdity and powerlessness. In this way, Gaskell's novel provides an example of how truly fraught these representations of Amazons (and Victoria) were. The novel was exceptionally popular, resulting in multiple editions throughout the nineteenth century and various other fan-fiction spin-offs about aspects of life in "Cranford."<sup>(20)</sup> As the first line of the novel states, Cranford is a town "in possession of the Amazons" (Gaskell 1). This statement could have two meanings: it suggests that Amazons *possess* Cranford, as in a military taking, and also that the town *possesses* Amazons, as if they were artifacts in an exhibition. The former would accord with the novel's parody of the community of spinster women, who take over Cranford. Although there are plenty of laboring men (doctors, carpenters, etc) in the town, there are no male "house holders above a certain rent" (Gaskell 1).

<21>The latter meaning, that Cranford *possesses* or exhibits Amazons, is likewise revealing. The novel exhibits the Amazonian nature in the British context and humorously dramatizes the welcome return of patriarchal sway. For the 1891 edition, Anne Thackeray Ritchie wrote the Preface, which states, "Cranford is further removed from the world [than Austen's ladies would have ventured], and yet more attuned to its larger interests than Meryton or Kellynch or Hartfield." (vii). The novel functions like an exhibition showcase, locally containing the foreign. The Amazon may seem to be a foreign invader, "removed from the world," in this English town. But, the archetypal persona is simultaneously at the centre of England's "larger interests" and its gendered imperial projects.

<22>According to the story, the women of Cranford have achieved a kind of financial independence and socio-political authority that they do not (and should not) typically possess. In Cranford, "all the house holders above a certain rent are women. If a married couple come to settle in the town, somehow the gentleman disappears" (Gaskell 1). The disappearing men of Cranford recall in less gruesome terms the absent male bodies in Forbes' illustrations. The narrator, Mary Smith, who stays with the Jenkyns sisters, reports of "our society" that "we had congratulated ourselves...in our love for gentility, and distaste of mankind, we had almost persuaded ourselves that to be a man was to be 'vulgar'" (Gaskell 5). In the absence of these vanquished gentlemen, the gentlewomen of Cranford manage all matters pertaining to parish politics, culture and local economy:

For keeping the trim gardens full of choice flowers without a weed to speck them; for frightening away little boys who look wistfully at the said flowers...for deciding all questions of literature and politics without troubling themselves with unnecessary reasons or arguments; for obtaining clear and correct knowledge of everybody's affairs...for kindness

(somewhat dictatorial) to the poor, and real tender good offices to each other whenever they are in distress, the ladies of Cranford are quite sufficient (Gaskell 1).

These English Amazons manage social, political and legal matters with the same fastidiousness that they tend their gardens. Yet, the methods and objects of their socio-political governance are eccentric: political questions are answered without recourse to “reasons or arguments;” the content of “clear and correct knowledge” is, in fact, mere gossip; and social welfare is described oxymoronicly as “kindness (somewhat dictatorial).” Their methods are as perplexing as the periphrastic, Latinate sentence that describes them. The narrator suggests that the main characters, spinster-sisters Miss Matty Jenkyns and Miss Deborah Jenkyns, might have been spared these responsibilities if their brother had returned in a more timely fashion from his colonial post in India. The narrator explains his failure to return: “[having] been taken prisoner by the Burmese; and [having] somehow obtained favour and eventual freedom...he proposed to spend the remainder of his life in the country to whose inhabitants and modes of life he had become habituated” (Gaskell 121-122). Peter Jenkyns has essentially ‘gone native,’ and, as a result, his sisters have ‘gone Amazon.’

<23>*Cranford* implies that women, who ‘go Amazon’ by refusing the joys of marriage, child-bearing and male governance, will descend into a state of intellectual and political chaos. The novel dramatizes the women’s descent into anarchy on a verbal level: the Cranford women, obsessed with speaking properly, descend over the course of the text into verbal incomprehensibility. From the beginning of the novel, they provide somewhat random classificatory systems for identifying words that are socially indecorous and that thereby betray a disorder of their moral and social faculties. According to Miss Matty and Miss Deborah Jenkyns, one shouldn’t utilize words like “vulgar” (Gaskell 3) or “hoaxing” (Gaskell 40). “Winding sheets” should be replaced by “role-y-poleys” (Gaskell 67). In spite of their studious linguistic typology, their speech slips increasingly into disorder. For example, Mary comments on an unreadable letter she receives from Miss Matty:

Late in November—when we had returned home again, and my father was once more in good health—I received a letter from Miss Matty; and a very mysterious letter it was. She began many sentences without ending them, running them one into another in much the same confused sort of way in which written words run together on blotting paper. (Gaskell 64)

Miss Matty’s language has become an indecipherable palimpsest, a collection of layered “words run together.” The deranged text betrays the mental decay of its author. In this community of English Amazons, the desire for order does not result not in the logical systems and classifications that, as Robert Young and others have shown, are generated within colonial discourse.(21) The women’s isolation from men has stripped them of reason and, consequently, of governance—political, financial and intellectual.(22)

<24>Gaskell’s novel narrates the restoration of social order when British men return from the colonies to save English women from themselves. In Gaskell’s novel, English women more closely resemble their colonized counterparts, who (to recall Spivak’s formulation) need to be saved by white men. Peter returns from India, after receiving a letter from the narrator, bringing

with him, as the chapter title indicates, “Peace to Cranford” (123). Unlike the other texts I discuss, Cranford’s Amazons appear ultimately to legitimate the patriarchal structure of imperial power. In the context of the various representations I have discussed, Gaskell’s resolution seems trite and unsatisfactory. Despite the fact that *Cranford* offers a rather tidy resolution to the problem of English Amazons, that single text could not silence the pervasive and persistent fascination that writers maintained for the woman warrior.

<25>For modern critics, the mobility of the Amazonian archetype seems to foretell the revolutionary end of imperial power. After the late-Victorian period, the Amazon continued to suggest the possibility of socio-political change in subsequent feminist representations of her. In the writing of Vernon Lee (the pseudonym for Violet Paget), the African Amazon is refigured as the New Woman, an androgynous figure with the economic freedom and social mobility of men. In her political tract “The Economic Parasitism of Women,” Lee discusses the warrior women of Dahomey and how their participation in the state’s defense is evidence of an increasing, if rudimentary, equality between men and women (Lee 17-18). Emmet Densmore’s *Sex Equality* (1907) likewise invokes the Dahoman Amazon as a metaphorical model for the modern feminist (Densmore 106-124). These are the daughters of the Victorian Amazon. Far from being vanquished, as Gaskell’s plot suggests, the Amazon continued to exert an influence on the cultural imaginary of colonial and postcolonial Britain. She also continues to provide a vehicle for unmasking the truly fraught practices of representing imperial power and its underlying assumptions about gender and race.

#### Endnotes

(1)Burton presents *Mission to Gelele* as a political document to be used in an advisory capacity to European imperial governments as well as an ethnographic text, detailing the history, culture and customs of the region. In Burton’s 1864 Preface he says, “My principle object, it may be frankly owned, has been to show, in its true lights, the African kingdom best known by name in Europe” (*Mission*, I: xiv). Burton goes on to say that “her Majesty’s government had been pleased to choose me as the bearer of a friendly message to King Gelele” (*Mission*, I: xiv-xv). In Isabel Burton’s 1893 Preface, we learn that this “friendly message” contained an injunction to “abandon these cruelties,” the first of which was the army of “many thousand Amazons, women crueller and fiercer than men” (*Mission*, I: xi). She describes the narrative as containing “a modest account of that mission [to Dahomé] and information concerning the country, which I think and trust may prove infinitely useful to the French Army now occupying Dahomey” (*Mission*, I: xii).(^)

(2)Despite the fact that Victorian readers might not have interpreted these texts in exactly this way, modern critical practices can help us to think through the ways in which colonial literature does not simply endorse colonial discourses but also offers a lens through which to critique their underlying assumptions.(^)

(3)In Book IV of *The Histories*, Herodotus describes the martial threat of the Amazons. In Book XI of *The Aeneid*, Virgil describes “the Volscian Amazon[, who] / Contains an army in herself alone” (lines 666-667).(^)

(4)A contemporary readership, who had recently read about or witnessed the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857, might have perceived a connection between the threat of women warriors and the Indian revolt, which began when Indians turned English guns against the English. Representations of women played an important, but different, role in literature about the Sepoy Rebellion as well. As Maria Jerinic and Nancy Paxton have separately shown, stories about the Indian Rebellion focused on the role of English women in order to legitimize “the assertion of British male power at the very historical moment when that power is threatened” (Jeric 127). Paxton makes a similar claim in *Writing Under the Raj: Gender, Race, and Rape in the British Colonial Imagination, 1830-1947*. (^)

(5)In the second volume of *Life of Her Most Gracious Queen* (1884), Sarah Tytler describes a portion of the Great Exhibition of 1851, which contained statues that were meant to represent Queen Victoria and/or her accomplishments. One of these statues was August Kiss’ “Mounted Amazon defending herself from, the attack of a Lioness” (Tytler 112). Tytler reports also that the Prince of Prussia confirmed the comparison by giving Victoria a miniature replica of the “Amazon” at the exhibition’s opening (Tytler 114).(^)

(6)Most famously, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss the figure of the “madwoman in the attic” in their *Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Their focus is primarily on the ways that women and women writers are generally figured as one of two types: angels or monsters. In *Rule Britannia*, Deirdre David extends their point to consider its implications within the historical framework of colonialism by arguing that “Jane and Rochester become a symbolic couple, produced by and producing Britain’s culture of empire, and defined by their complete difference from native tropical sexuality” (116). David goes on to say that “[f]or Jane to achieve agency in the rehabilitation of Rochester’s past, she must be licensed to effect this transformation, must be given the authority associated, on the grandest level, with Victoria, the disciplinary colonial mother of her domestic subjects and subjugated native children” (117).(^)

(7)See Catherine Hall on the “degraded ‘Hindoo’ woman” in “Of Gender and Empire: Reflections on the Nineteenth Century,” 46-76.(^)

(8)See Nancy Paxton, *Writing under the Raj: Gender, Race, and Rape in the British Colonial Imagination, 1830-1947*, ch 2.(^)

(9)Carol Christ’s early essay on this topic, “Victorian Masculinity and the Angel in the House,” addresses the conception of Victorian masculinity in relation to the trope of the “Angel in the House.” Jenny Sharpe has also discussed the centrality of this figure to colonial ideology in *Allegories of Empire* (Sharpe 54).(^)

(10) In her article on “‘The Blank Page’ and the Issues of Female Creativity,” Susan Gubar extends an argument that she and Sandra Gilbert make in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. She shows that by turning women into “characters” or character-types, like the “madwoman in the attic” or the “Amazon,” writers impose a kind of textual control over any woman, who might be made into a “character.” According to Gubar, women thus become the objects rather than the agents of that creation.(^)

(11) See “Demonic” in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).(^)

(12) In the *Anthologia Patina*, ascribed to Plato, an epigram reads “Some say of nine Muses, how neglected! / Behold, Sappho, from Lesbos, is the tenth.”(^)

(13) Burton partially explains this rather obscure reference to “the *morosa voluptas* of the schoolmen” in the “Terminal Essay” to his translation of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night* (Volume 10) in Section D, on “Pederasty”: “Narcissus and Hippolytus are often assumed as types of *morosa voluptas*, masturbation and clitorisation for nymphomania” (215, note 1). Hippolytus was also, of course, a queen of the Amazons.(^)

(14) In *Uneven Developments*, Mary Poovey shows that nurses like Florence Nightingale were represented as negotiating this boundary by combining “a domestic narrative of maternal nurturing and self-sacrifice and a military narrative of individual assertion and will” (Poovey 169).(^)

(15) The illustration of the female decapitator (and castrator) also fits within a well-known iconography, including representations of Judith and Salome. Nineteenth-century European literature and art frequently returned to these figures. Gustave Moreau, the French painter, contributed to the pervasively available story of Salome in paintings that show her holding the head of John the Baptist. Aubrey Beardsley, the English illustrator, continued this tradition in his illustrations for an edition of Oscar Wilde’s play *Salome* (1894). The voluptuous, and often scantily-clad, body of Salome highlights both her feminine bodily presence and the bodily absence of her male victim. In Beardsley’s *Enter Herodias*, the eroticized body of Salome, with breast exposed, stands next to the floating bodiless head of Herodias. In Moreau’s *Salome in the Garden* (1878), Salome holds the head of her victim on a platter. The victim’s eyes appear to look down in horror at the headless body, which lies bleeding on the ground.(^)

(16) On the representation of the harem, see Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire*, esp. ch. 2 and Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*.(^)

(17) See Walter Dean Myers’ *At Her Majesty’s Request: An African Princess in Victorian England*.(^)

(18) The image is maintained online at *The Victorian Web* in “The Greek Slave in *Punch*.” While the image is most certainly in the style of *Punch*, they have been unable to identify which issue printed it.(^)

(19)See Josine Blok's *The Early Amazons: Modern and Ancient Perspectives on a Persistent Myth*, ch. 1.(^)

(20)Among the many texts inspired by *Cranford* are the following: Beatrix L. Tollemache's *Cranford Souvenirs, and other sketches* (1900); Agnes Adam's play *A Cameo from Cranford* (1900); Beatrix Hatch's play *Scenes from Cranford*; and Mary Bernard Horne's play *The Ladies of Cranford: a Sketch of English Village Life, in three acts* (1899).(^^)

(21)As Robert Young suggests in *Colonial Desire*, the imperial yearning for order manifested in obsessive classification and organization of knowledge about the colonies and the colonized (Young 62-8; 164-6).(^^)

(22)Instead of an effective policing system, these women also construct their own farcically useless investigative and penal procedures. They construct elaborate theories about criminals and spies posing as Italian or Turkish magicians and cross-dressing Irish vagrants (Gaskell 72-75). The women even invent crimes in order to make sense of their theories (Gaskell 76-83).(^^)

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