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**"Rubber Bands and Old
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Rubber Bands and Old Ladies

There is indeed a rubber band in this paper, many old ladies, a sheep, and a gummy.

I.

The spectre of a Victorian old lady can be seen haunting contemporary thinking about culture and gender. I'd like to begin exploring this admittedly extravagant hypothesis by introducing a Victorian old lady who emerges in a debate between two of British cultural studies' ancestor figures--Raymond Williams and E.P.Thompson--over what culture, and cultural criticism, should be. In his 1961 New Left Review essays on The Long Revolution and Culture and Society, Thompson raises some crucial questions about the notions of culture that emerge in those books. He wonders whether Williams' "culture" places too much stress on a shared, coherent community of ideas and feelings, and argues for a concept of culture that could instead embrace conflict and difference. Williams' culture is in Thompson's view simultaneously too broad and too genteel: he points out the costs of Williams' engagement with a single "Tradition" of cultural thought. For Thompson, the figure who characterizes Williams' vision of culture is an old lady:

At times, in Culture and Society, I felt that I was being offered a procession of disembodied voices--Burke, Carlyle, Mill, Arnold-- . . . the whole transmitted through a disinterested spiritual medium. I sometimes imagine this medium . . . as an elderly gentlewoman and near relative of Mr. Eliot, so distinguished as to have become an institution: The Tradition. There she sits, with that white starched affair on her head, knitting definitions without thought of recognition or reward (some of them will be parcelled up and sent to the Victims of Industry)--and in her presence how one much watch one's LANGUAGE! The first brash word, the least suspicion of laughter or polemic in her presence, and The Tradition might drop a stitch and have to start knitting all those definitions over again.¹

Thompson is trying to portray the tradition Williams describes as disembodied, detached from the social, and incapable of accomodating conflict. He casts the "disembodied" quality of this view of culture by, conveniently, embodying it in a woman. Vaguely spiritual, mildly neurasthenic, and certainly archaic, this figure is both hypersensitive and maddeningly complacent. She bespeaks the elitism of a culture that gets parcelled out to the uncultured masses; and she represents both the intractable, persistent quality of this view of culture (she is like a "near relative" you can't shake) and its fundamental fragility. In an essay that brought this passage to my attention, Laurie Langbauer comments, "A polemic so brash that she would drop her yarn completely, Thompson implies, is the very antidote to the outdated and elitist malaise of history this figure represents." He uses the figure of the old woman, she points out, to "conjure and dispel Williams' Leavisite reliance on the great tradition and to assert instead a culture that really is ordinary."² Appearing at the opening of his long essay on Williams, the old lady allows Thompson to begin to replace the vestiges of a reverential, high Arnoldian culture he detects in Williams' work with a culture that might include the "Victims of Industry" as well as its captains.

Why should this debate take place through the figure of a Victorian old

lady? Where does this old lady come from, and who exactly does the old lady in Thompson's conceit actually represent? On the one hand she is "The Tradition," high culture's quite masculine parade of Carlyle, Arnold, Eliot and company strangely cross-dressed. But on the other hand she represents Raymond Williams himself. Williams is the one who is, famously, "knitting definitions" in Culture and Society--tracing out the histories of "culture," "class," "industry," and other key terms. Thompson's criticism of Williams' concept of culture is inseparable from his objections to Williams' tone and Williams' method--including, pointedly, his predilection for definitions: "he must be aware that definitions alone are sterile. . . to adumbrate a theory of culture it is necessary to proceed from definitions to evidence and back from the evidence to definitions once again" ("Long Revolution," 30). For Thompson, however, the fundamental methodological and conceptual weakness of Williams' excavation of the history of culture is his strategic refusal to engage explicitly with a socialist tradition of cultural thought. Later he casts the battle between Williams' "Tradition" and the social theorists he neglects as a match between a team of sissies and a team of real men:

If Williams had allowed himself to look beyond this island, he might have found a very different eleven of Players fielding against him, from Vico through Marx to Weber and Mannheim, besides whom his own team might look, on occasion, like gentlemen amateurs. ("Long Revolution," 30)

The subtext of the old lady passage is quite similar: there Thompson challenges Williams' inattention to class and class struggle by casting it as feminine. The gendered language forms part of the debate over Williams' and Thompson's relationships to Marxism.³

But it is worth dwelling, one moment longer, on the question of who exactly this old lady is: Where has Thompson gotten her from? She is indeed

a relative of Mr. Eliot; Thompson is probably remembering Eliot's early poem "Aunt Helen," which muses on the passing of a "maiden aunt" who "lived in a small house near a fashionable square / Cared for by servants to the number of four." The interest of this poem lies in the way its lines keep making deliberate, small readjustments in what it is saying about the marginality or centrality of this figure in her world; and the story of the poem is the story of the passage from Thompson: the replacement of an old high culture--embodied in the Victorian old lady--with something at once more banal and more vital. It ends with the footman sitting on the dining room table, the housemaid on his knees.⁴ In addition to being T.S.Eliot's aunt, Thompson's old lady is also the sister--if she is not positively the same dame--of another endlessly knitting old lady, the "uncanny and fateful" figure who sits outside the Company office in Heart of Darkness. The "white starched affair" that Thompson's lady wears is, on Conrad's lady's head, a "starched white affair" ("She wore a starched white affair on her head, had a wart on one cheek, and silver-rimmed spectacles hung on the tip of her nose"). In the midst of his mission in Africa, Marlow recalls, "the knitting old woman with the cat obtruded herself upon my memory as a most improper person to be sitting at the other end of such an affair."⁵ Like Thompson's gentlewoman, the Fate-like figure in Conrad's book is a ludicrously genteel, feminine figure for an institution she would seem to be antithetical to.

My point in noting these echoes in Thompson's transformation of Williams' "culture" into an old lady is not simply to argue that Thompson's imaginary is shaped precisely by the high culture he wishes to displace, or even to tar him with the brush of modernism--though the early modernist resonances of Eliot and Conrad give Thompson's ambivalence further historical

substance. For Thompson's purposes (as for Eliot's and Conrad's), this figure's femininity is inseparable from her obsolescence. The phrase "Victorian old lady" always threatens to become triply redundant.⁶ Rather my point is to suggest the availability of this figure for such discussions, her ubiquity. What these old ladies share is a logic through which they come to centrally embody institutions--high culture, imperialism--to which they seem to be, from that very perspective, marginal.

The second section of this paper will be devoted to a Victorian book populated entirely by knitting old ladies who wear starched white caps on their heads--who are likely to drop a stitch when provoked or disturbed. Originally published serially between 1851 and 1853 in Dickens' periodical Household Words, Elizabeth Gaskell's novel Cranford is about life in a town of genteel spinsters. Like Thompson's gentlewoman, the ladies of Cranford often parcel up the products of their knitting for the "Victims of Industry"; or they may be victims of industry themselves. Like Thompson's old lady, they must be seen as figures in a larger discussion, embodiments of conflicts over conceptions of British culture. But I'd like first to suggest briefly that contemporary feminism, like cultural studies, may have its own Victorian old lady problem. The Victorian old lady seems to appear in popular accounts of the kinds of feminist thinking that are derived from "cultural feminism." Cultural feminism, as is well known, is generally taken to be a product of the 1970's, evolving out of a political crisis in the women's movement: it was originally a feminism that conceived of culture as the realm of women's oppression, and held that women could be liberated through an alternative "women's culture," a post-revolutionary, authentically female way of life that could itself bring about social transformation.⁷ Over the years,

interestingly, the term "cultural feminism" has come to be applied not only to lifestyle feminisms but also to any number of feminisms that believe in and seek to preserve fundamental difference--cultural, moral, psychological, even biological--between men and women. Thus for example the widespread dissemination of Carol Gilligan's notion of a feminine "ethics of care" is seen to be an instance of the dominance of cultural feminist ideas. The political costs of this kind of feminism are well-known: it seems to renounce political struggle, as well as the principle of equality, and by imagining "woman" as a culturally unified group, minimizes differences of race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality.

Recently, popular media critics of cultural feminism have attacked it by drawing an analogy between its valorization of women's difference, and ideas which are believed to be Victorian: the idea that women and men inhabit "separate spheres," that women's fundamental differences are to be cherished and preserved for the sake of society. Discussing Gilligan's work and Sara Ruddick's Maternal Thinking in The Nation last year, Katha Pollitt locates this kind of thinking by arguing that

The peaceful mother and the "relational" women [put forth by Ruddick and Gilligan] are a kinder, gentler, leftish version of 'family values,' and both are modern versions of the separate-spheres ideology of the Victorians. In the nineteenth century, too, some women tried to turn the ideology of sexual difference on its head and expand the moral claims of motherhood to include the public realm.

In Backlash, Susan Faludi makes very much the same argument, warning that feminists who celebrate women's special characteristics "risked clothing old Victorian conceits in modern academic dress." And in a New York Times op-ed piece that served as a warm-up for her loathesome Times Magazine article about how we are all too worried about rape, Katie Roiphe suggests that the sexual

morality of the "feminists" penning date-rape manuals "sound like Victorian guides to conduct."⁸

The old Victorian lady, it seems, can represent either a bad version of culture, or a bad version of feminism. Such accounts of cultural feminism are certainly right to see a long and problematic history behind current appeals to women's moral superiority, separate-sphere thinking, and sexual vulnerability; nothing is easier to criticize than cultural feminism. In both the discourses of popular feminism and the debates of cultural theory, moreover, the Victorian old lady is likely to evoke and problematize a feminism--or a "culture"--that is very white. My interest is in the following questions: why does the spectre of Victorianism seem so compelling as an argument against cultural feminism? Is it convenient to cast the enormous sway of cultural feminism as a version of a past we think we understand, rather than having to articulate exactly what kind of intervention cultural feminism is in contemporary culture? Does it have to do with feminism's struggle to find a usable past?

II.

The prestige of the cultural feminism of the 1970's was crucially extended by pioneering work in feminist literary criticism of that decade, much of which looked to nineteenth-century literature and identified a woman's tradition. 1970's Feminist criticism transformed Gaskell's Cranford from quaint satire to a novel about women's community. The book is devoted to an almost entirely female village ("Cranford is in the possession of the

Amazons," the first sentence tells us) in the 1830's and '40's, and its relation to "the great neighboring commerical town of Drumble" (read Manchester) located a distance of "twenty miles on a railroad."⁹ To the women who run Cranford--hardly Amazons, but rather proud, impoverished, shabby-genteel spinsters--that relation is one of difference: they pride themselves on their independence, their cultural superiority to the world of Drumble, and the world of men. The few masculine figures who do appear pop briefly in and out of the novel in alarming ways. One unfortunate man who moves to Cranford gets run over by the train; another dies promptly after a trip to Paris, only pages after he appears. "'A Man," observes one of the Cranford old ladies, "'is so in the way in the house'" (39). While E.P.Thompson casts his Victorian old lady as a reverent guardian of a high literary culture, Gaskell's old ladies' relation to the masculine world of letters combines strong opinion and utter indifference. One of them, Miss Deborah Jenkyns, affiliates herself with Samuel Johnson; but the book's narrator points out repeatedly that Cranford society as a whole simply does not read. Their lives are an endless round of charitable acts and formal social occasions at which they all deludedly conceal their poverty from each other.

Not surprisingly, Cranford appears as a crucial text in Nina Auerbach's Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction (1978). For Auerbach, Cranford adjudicates between the powers of a "separatist" female community and those of the masculine world.¹⁰ The novel represents a world in which a "cooperative female community defeats the warrior world that proclaims itself the real one" (87). Speaking of the end of the novel, in which Gaskell might seem to set up an alternative economy by setting up the town's main old lady, Matty Jenkyns,

with a tea shop (as rumours filter in of businesses collapsing in Drumble), Auerbach sees the town "triumph"ing "over the failure of economic and masculine reality": "the atomized city of Drumble lacks the power that makes Matty's tea shop thrive on love and incompetence and the silent cooperative gifts of 'our society'" (86). While Auerbach carefully balances such moments of her analysis with a sense of the fragility and complexities of this "power," her discussion of Cranford and her book as a whole is quite explicitly situated within cultural feminist goals: establishing the legitimacy and the distinctiveness of feminine community. For Auerbach as for other critics and historians writing in the 1970's, the study of nineteenth-century culture could serve to prove "that female self-sufficiency is not a postulate of this or that generation of feminists, but an inherent and powerful component of our shared cultural vision" (6). Describing women's writings can help fill in and create an adequate picture of the specificity of a woman's culture: "we lack," she laments, "an agreed-upon common denominator of womanhood" (31): critical activity is designed to create a consensus. From such a perspective Cranford's old ladies, with their knitting needles, starched caps, strange rituals and genteel sociability, do indeed come--bizarrely--to stand for a feminist's vision of a separate culture.

A shift in historical perspective, however, can yield a rather different view of the relationship between Cranford and Drumble. If we see the twenty miles of railroad that spans them not as the distance between a fading, feminine way of life and the new masculine world of industry, but rather as the distance between the new manufacturing city and the railway suburbs they spawned, this relationship changes. While Cranford is often said to be based on the small town of Gaskell's youth, it clearly also represents the new

railway suburbs that by 1850 had become home to a significant portion of the urban-based middle class. The novel's narrator, a shadowy young woman named Mary Smith, describes herself as having "vibrated all my life between Drumble [where her father is a man of business] and [the woman's world of] Cranford" (211). In their massive study, Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall document the ways in which provincial middle-class cultural identity in the first half of the nineteenth-century was consolidated precisely through the "vibrations" between the commercial and manufacturing center, and the "separate sphere" of the home increasingly located at a spatial distance in the suburb and organized around elaborate concepts of gentility, femininity, and domesticity.¹¹ From this perspective, Cranford's "women's culture"--its quaintness, its domestic concerns, its obsession with creating gentility in the absence or defiance of the "cash nexus," its disdain for the ways of men--is significant not for the promises it holds of a separatist culture, but as an instance of the gendered nature of mid-Victorian middle-class identity-formation. When pushed, moreover, the Cranford women will identify with Drumble rather than against it, as for example when Miss Matty assumes personal responsibility for a Drumble bank in which she holds shares. In a study of transgression in Gaskell's fiction, John Kucich has stressed the aggressive, competitive, and mendacious aspect of the old ladies' world: "Female Cranford society is a world that aggressively pretends to be better than it is, or ever was. Its fundamental lie is that it is different from the commercial world of men in its freedom from competition, in its solidarity and compassion."¹² "It's coming very near!" exclaims Miss Matty on hearing, in another scene, that the prospect of marriage is closer to the spinster world of Cranford than she

imagines (166). Perhaps, we could say, it is the world of Drumble, with its banks, its men, and its "'horrid cotton trade'" (106) that comes much nearer to Cranford than the Cranford ladies like to think.

Drumble may come closest to Cranford, however, in the form of the manufactured goods--the cotton umbrellas, dresses, and starched white caps and, as we shall see, the rubber bands--it provides; and it is to these goods that I would like to turn our attention. I will argue that in order to determine the place of old ladies in British society, Gaskell had to write a book about things. Cranford seems at times to be about the petty tyranny of the material world over the human. Goods frequently displace and overwhelm people. Take for example the history of an umbrella on the second page of the novel:

I can testify to a magnificent family red silk umbrella, under which a gentle little spinster, left alone of many brothers and sisters, used to patter to church on rainy days. Have you any red silk umbrellas in London? We had a tradition of the first that had ever been seen in Cranford; and the little boys mobbed it, and called it a 'stick in petticoats.' It might have been the very red silk one I have described, held by a strong father over a troop of little ones; the poor little lady--the survivor of all--could scarcely carry it. (40)

The language of testimony here reflects the narrator's role as reporter to the civilized world about the quaint ways of Cranford. Her question--"Have you any silk umbrellas in London?"--signifies how utterly outmoded this umbrella is: by the mid-nineteenth century, silk umbrellas had largely been replaced by cotton umbrellas in drab shades.¹³ Vigilant about the social semiotics of objects, the Cranford women are militantly, rather than indifferently, unfashionable: "Their dress is very independent of fashion; as they observe, 'What does it signify how we dress here at Cranford, where everybody knows us?' And if they go from home, their reason is equally cogent: 'What does it

signify how we dress here, where nobody knows us?'" (40). Their unfashionableness, I will suggest later, is itself testimony to how seriously the women take material things, their recognition of their uncanny life. Antiquated as it might be, the red silk umbrella is more socialized than the old spinster, the only member of her family left. Decked out and personified, a 'stick in petticoats,' it takes center stage in this family history, dominating and replacing the woman who totters under it as the subject of narrative.

Gaskell persistently subordinates persons. Cranford is a book about the transformations and histories of things rather than people: there is very little human event in Cranford. Men appear and disappear precipitously; the women, with the exception of one discreet death and one notable marriage, persist. (It has been argued that the book's narrator, Mary Smith, develops into a character over the course of the novel, but she remains very much a Mary Smith, a faceless voice). Things, however, like the red silk umbrella, have life histories. There is the history of the "decline and fall" of a certain muslin gown, now recycled into a window-shade (164); the history of a twenty-five year old pair of boots (169); the narrative of a lace collar that gets cycled through the digestive system of a cat (125-6). We could call the narrator's tendency to put things before people a species of fetishistic digression. After two paragraphs describing the caps and brooches of the ladies at a particular party, the narrator checks herself: "But I am getting on too fast, in describing the dresses of the company. I should first relate the gathering" (120). But Mary Smith is more interested in the hallucinogenic lifelikeness of the brooches, which seem to contain a whole world, and seem to travel around the wearer's body, while the ladies are strangely non-present,

described as ostriches with their heads buried in their caps, unconscious of the rest of themselves.

Gaskell's experiment in narrating the histories of things takes place amidst a general perception that England was witnessing an unprecedented flow of stuff. During the years Cranford was appearing serially in its pages, Household Words was full of articles about about things, particularly about things as they cycle about in often unpredictable and errant ways. Dickens' essay "Railway Waifs and Strays" evokes a country being crisscrossed, via train, not so much by people but by objects, as lost or forgotten items pursue their own sad journeys. The bundles in the terminal "depositories" or lost and founds "tie up unwritten histories, and journals of travel." "Valentine's Day at the Post-Office" itemizes the many things (toothpicks, fishing flies, samples of hops and corn, a greek manuscript, pawn tickets, etc) to be found at the Dead Letter Office, sent unsuccessfully through the mail.¹⁴ 1851-- the year Cranford began its serialization--was crucial year in the history of things. It was the year of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, held in the Crystal Palace in London's Hyde Park. In six months, it was estimated, one-fifth of England's population came to the Crystal Palace to witness its vast display of goods. The Exhibition, organized under the auspices of Prince Albert, was designed to exemplify a new spirit of international peace and diplomacy, a world in which science, entrepreneurship and industry replaced war. Though the exhibits of things themselves were organized according to an elaborate taxonomy which grouped things according to both origin and kind (so that, for example, all rubber products appeared together), the Exhibition effectively divided the world up through the world of things.¹⁵

The power of things to redscribe and reorder the globe is in evidence in Cranford. One of the advantages of seeing the novel as book about goods is that its things can reveal how the distance between Cranford and Drumble is mediated by a third place: India. The fortunes of the Lancashire cotton trade were completely intertwined with overseas markets, and increasingly, Indian markets. And goods from India crucially cycle into Cranford. When she is ruined by a bank failure, Miss Matty Jenkyns sets up to support herself as an agent of the East India company: the selling of tea from her parlour-turned-shop is deemed to be dramatically less damaging to her gentility than any other business. At the end of the book, Cranford is visited by the Jenkyns' brother Peter, who has been living mysteriously as the "Aga Jenkyns" in India, who returns to rescue Matty and to restore the town to tranquility and harmony. Cranford thrives not only on infusions of cash and goods from the empire, but on a cultural logic that makes the production and accumulation of such goods appear untainted by the masculine, ungentle world of Drumble trade. It thus recalls a long history in mercantilist thought that associates women with imported luxury goods. The story things tell, then is that the Victorian old lady's ability to stand for a female culture may be connected to her ability to represent an imperial economy: Nina Auerbach's Victorian old lady and Joseph Conrad's may be closely related.¹⁶

But if exotic, foreign commodities afford Cranford a fantasy of its difference from the economy of Drumble, they also speak forcefully of the alien, uncanny ability of things in a commodity system to be transformed, to circulate illicitly, and live endlessly. A mysteriously foreign, turbaned magician comes to Cranford to perform; his visit is closely followed by a panic about a roving band of household thieves, and the old ladies go to

strange measures to prevent their things from doing disappearing acts like the magician's props. We might consider the white shawl that the Jenkyns' mother is buried with. When Peter Jenkyns runs away to India, his mother dies of grief. The day after she dies, a shawl arrives: "'a large, soft, white India shawl, with just a little narrow border all round; just what my mother would have liked. . . just such a shawl as she wished for when she was married, and her mother did not give it her'" (102). The shawl is not simply just what she would have liked; the white shawl that Peter sends also appears as the repetition and transformation of other objects of desire associated with the mother. This sad piece of family history emerges, for example, when Miss Matty and Mary Smith set themselves to sorting through the preceding generation of Jenkyns' letters. The future Mrs. Jenkyns always ends the letters of her courtship by reminding her suitor of a "white 'Paduasoy'":

His letters were a curious contrast to those of his girl-bride. She was evidently rather annoyed at his demands upon her for expressions of love, and could not quite understand what he meant by repeating the same thing over in so many different ways; but what she was quite clear about was her longing for a white 'Paduasoy'--whatever that might be; and six or seven letters were principally occupied in asking her lover to use his influence with her parents. . .to obtain this or that article of dress, more especially the white 'Paduasoy.' (86)

In typical Cranfordian fashion, the white Paduasoy--which the bride succeeds in getting--has its own life history: it turns up in a later letter, recycled into a christening gown (87). The white India shawl that arrives too late, moreover, documents a historical transformation of the earlier object of desire, the passage of the typically eighteenth-century luxury good, a white Padua silk, of Mrs. Jenkyns' youth, to the archetypical nineteenth-century luxury good: as all readers of Victorian novels know, the India shawl is a recurrent object of desire.¹⁷ But the white shawl turned shroud is also like

another pale, fluttering thing, the ancient letters themselves, which Miss Matty decides to burn, watching each one as it rises up the chimney, "in faint white, ghostly semblance" (86). Buried with the dead mother, the shawl is an anomaly. This commodity finds the terminus to its life history in a dead woman's coffin; it is not handed down, passed on, recycled further, like most of the things in Cranford. The white shawl is an angel of death, a ghost, and we can't help sensing that it itself has killed Mrs. Jenkyns, or that at least the decision to bury it with her stems from a recognition of the paradox of material things. The more things are perceived to have a kind of life, the more deathly they become. I am reminded of something Norman Bryson says about the everyday objects in still-life paintings: "they have the look of dead man's clothes."¹⁸

In Gaskell's novel, things' power to explain a social world is inseparable from their appearance as often alien intrusions. We may further specify the status of the thing in the text--Gaskell's particular economies of representing them--by focusing our attention on the passage where she most explicitly explores what people actually do with small things. In this passage, an object is withdrawn from circulation and buried, not in a woman's coffin, but in a woman's pocket. I focus on the "India rubber ring," or rubber band, in this passage because unlike the feminine shawls, umbrellas, brooches and bonnets that make up much of the catalogue of Cranford's fetishized objects, the rubber band seems so indifferent to gender, and thus poses a particular problem of a study of women's relation to the material object. I quote this digression into rhopography (the depiction of the small or trivial) in full because it suggests the interplay between the literary paradoxes of representing things and the politics of such an enterprise.¹⁹

The passage begins by defining what the narrator calls the "private economies" that people practice in their everyday lives, putting forth the example of a man who hates the waste of paper:

I have often noticed that almost every one has his own individual small economies--careful habits of saving fractions of pennies in some one peculiar direction--any disturbance of which annoys him more than spending shillings or pounds on some real extravagance. And old gentleman of my acquaintance, who took the intelligence of the failure of a Joint-Stock Bank, in which some of his money was invested, with stoical mildness, worried his family all through a long summer's day, because one of them had torn (instead of cutting) out the written leaves of his now useless bank-book; of course, the corresponding pages at the other end came out as well; and this little unnecessary waste of paper (his private economy) chafed him more than all the loss of his money. Envelopes fretted his soul terribly when they first came in; the only way in which he could reconcile himself to such waste of his cherished article, was by patiently turning inside out all that were sent to him, and so making them serve again. (83)

(The discussion of envelopes refers of course to the fact that until the early nineteenth-century, letters were folded up, sealed, and mailed without envelopes.) This brings the narrator to a confession of her own in this regard:

I am not above owning that I have this human weakness myself. String is my foible. My pockets get full of little hanks of it, picked up and twisted together, ready for uses that never come. I am seriously annoyed if any one cuts the string of a parcel, instead of patiently and faithfully undoing it fold by fold. How people can bring themselves to use India-rubber rings, which are a sort of deification of string, as lightly as they do, I cannot imagine. To me an India-rubber ring is a precious treasure. I have one which is not new; one that I picked up off the floor, nearly six years ago. I have really tried to use it; but my heart failed me, and I could not commit the extravagance.

The next paragraph begins:

Small bits of butter grieve others. They cannot attend to a conversation, because of the annoyance occasioned by the habit which some people have of invariably taking more butter than they want. Have you not seen the anxious look (almost mesmeric) which such persons fix on the article? They would feel it a relief if they might bury it out of their sight by popping it into their own mouths, and swallowing it down. . . (83-84)

And the digression ends by describing Miss Matty Jenkyns' own particular

fixation, the proclivity of candles to melt away.

This passage begins a chapter of Cranford; its strings, rubber-bands, and small bits of butter have no relation to the narrative at hand. It raises some questions about what is at stake when one represents the trivial by quite noticeably drawing attention to its status as a digression. The narrator's practice bears a strange relation to the practices she muses on, insofar as she is getting stuck on small things herself, fixing on them an "almost mesmeric" look. That this digression begins with a man who dreads the wasting of paper--and I have left out one sentence in which this man frets whenever he sees his daughters wasting a whole sheet with a letter of a few lines--suggests that we reflect on the narrator's own writerly economy, or extravagance. From this perspective, the passage begins to look like a ludicrous digression on digression. My point is that Gaskell's representation of the small material world is quite different from, say, Dickens' catalogue-like evocations of a personified world of objects giddily circulating through the country. It is not, moreover, akin to the effet de reel that Barthes famously described in the work of other nineteenth-century realists--in which insignificant material details stand out to signify precisely that they are insignificant, empty, and hence signify "the real" that realist narrative aspires to. In this passage from Cranford, insignificant things interrupt narrative, digress; they get caught up in the non-figural aspects of the text. From Gaskell's perspective, nineteenth-century material culture--the bank-book, the newly invented envelope, the rubber band--demands a mode of attention that disrupts the formal, representational mode that is thought to be nineteenth-century capitalism's literary mode: the realist novel.²⁰ It suggests that the real workings of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism,

particularly as they affect the sphere of Victorian old ladies, may require an alternative to realist narrative, something more like narrative fetishism.

In its discussion of "small economies" this passage actually describes several different kinds of objects, and different investments in objects. Most notably, while the paper envelopes at the beginning of the passage, and the small bits of butter at the end, are to be used up, the narrator's own instances of a "private economy"--the string and the rubber band--consist of taking things out of use. In this respect the narrator's insignificant-things-of-choice stand out; and the rubber band, treasured and deified, particularly attracts our mesmeric attention. What is this woman doing with the rubber band?

For this we first need ourselves to go into a digression, on the history of rubber and rubber bands. India-rubber, or caoutchouc (which came not from India but largely from Brazil, as rubber plantations in the East Indies were not a significant source of European rubber until after 1870) was one of the miracle products of the nineteenth century. Though samples of "Indian" rubber were brought back as curiosities from South America by early explorers, its use as a manufactured good began in the late eighteenth-century. But it was the efforts of Thomas Hancock (inventor of "vulcanized" rubber) and Charles MacIntosh (of rubber rain-coat fame) in England in the 1820's (and of Charles Goodyear, of blimp fame, simultaneously in the U.S.) which transformed rubber into hundreds of everyday uses. Hancock and MacIntosh went into partnership in 1825 and established the largest rubber-manufacture in the country, located as it happens in Manchester (i.e. Drumble). Rubber goods earned their own display at the Great Exhibition in 1851, and contemporary accounts of rubber goods are full of excitement.²¹ An article on "India-rubber" appeared in

Household Words during the period of Cranford's serialization there; it is full of rubber's ubiquitous bouncings and stretchings:

Who is not familiar with the coats and capes, the wrappers and over-alls, the sou'westers and leggings, the gloves and gaiters, the air-beds and air-cushions, the neat little India-rubber bands or rings, the maps and prints, the bags and balloons? What with our elasticity and our impermeability, we are certainly becoming a redoubtable race in this nineteenth-century.²²

Both the writer's identification with rubber goods ("our elasticity and our impermeability") and his sense that all of this rubber qualifies his contemporaries as a specially modern race, comes out elsewhere as well:

To be elastic, to bend rather than break, is a good old Anglo-Saxon quality for India-rubber, and India-rubber users, to possess. We certainly live in an elastic age. If we cannot break that which opposes us, we bounce away from it with great agility and feel not much the worse for the encounter. There is a fair amount of caoutchouc in the human mind--a useful quality; else we should never bear the knockings and thumpings with the struggle through life brings to us. ("India-rubber," 29)

I hardly need to comment on the wonderful logic here, whereby the natural properties of the Indian material pass to the Anglo-saxon manufacturer, becoming perfectly expressive of an imperial, philosophical attitude, an English sang-froid. Rubber, with its flexibility, adaptability, and resilience, has an easily personified "character," and that character is an English one.²³ The passage culminates in a description of a Victorian Gumby:

Look at this little India-rubber gentleman, just purchased brand-new from a toy-shop: you may open his jaws to any extent you please; you can make him laugh, cry, yawn, grin, frown, simper, stare, doze--it is all one to him: he returns into himself again and to the original expression of his countenance, when the pressure from without is removed. He is a self-contained man; a man sufficient unto himself. ("India-rubber," 29)

The true essence of rubber goods for the Victorians lies in its flexibility--both its literal flexibility and a metaphorical flexibility that allowed it to accommodate a wide range of references. But in the description of the Gumby,

this supremely anthropomorphic flexibility is combined with an inhuman self-sufficiency. One last quotation from Victorian rubber-mania will further suggest the something of rubber's place as a wonder commodity, its relation to the human and the superhuman. In his Personal Narrative of his adventures with rubber, inventor Thomas Hancock recounts an old man's reaction to a slab of the stuff in the 1820's: "I remember at that time, when exhibiting a piece of my solid rubber to an old gentleman, he examined it, and on returning it made this remark (which bids fair to be realized): 'The child is yet unborn who will see the end of that'" (italics in original).²⁴ Finally, we should note that "elasticity"--the quality of rubber that for the Household Words writer typified the age--is exactly the term introduced by nineteenth-century economic theorists to describe the market itself.²⁵ Rubber was the apotheosis of the commodity, stretching to accommodate the entire commodity system in its image.

The centrality of rubber to the commodity imagination of mid-Victorian England could be confirmed by looking at the rubber band's place in Gaskell's "private economy" passage. What kind of logic is it that moves the narrator from paper to string, to rubber bands, to butter to candles? The sequence of the passage charts out very different kinds of material objects with different relations to the material world. Butter and candles are certainly unfortunate choices for the object fetishist: it is part of their essence that their sojourn in the material world is a brief one (all that is solid melts into grease?) Their malleability, their consistency, their relatively unprocessed nature, however, make them more familiar to the human; they are like bodily substances. In the context of this passage, paper and string occupy the other end of the spectrum: relatively durable, less anthropomorphical. In between

paper and string on one end and butter and candles on the other, the rubber band combines the fleshliness and flexibility of the latter, with a permanence that transcends that of the former: this rubber band is, we are told, nearly six years old. In this passage the India rubber ring is the overlooked, the idiosyncratic obsession, but it is also a historically resonant, handily capacious, ur-thing.

On the fleshliness of this particular rubber band: Cranford, as I've argued, concerns itself with the often magical processes through which things get recycled and transformed into other things. The rubber band itself appears to the narrator as a magical transformation--a "deification" of string. I must confess that as I thought about it, this used rubber ring picked off the floor and treasured by a woman began to transform itself, in my mind, into the latex ring of a condom. Have I stretched this rubber band too far? Certainly: there is a critic's as well as a narrator's fetishism. However, it is true that one of the uses to which the exciting new rubber of the nineteenth-century was put--though it does not appear in any of Thomas Hancock's exhaustive lists of rubber products, "domestic," "medical," or "nautical"--was contraception. Rubber was used for condoms, the capote anglais or female condom, and "womb veils" and pessaries inserted in to the vagina.²⁶ Rubber's association with fleshliness was close indeed. I point this out as a way of helping us hear the transgressive tinge of the fetish language in this passage. Where has the narrator kept this rubber ring for almost six years: in her pocket, along with the pieces of string? A "precious treasure," a guilty fetish ("my heart failed me"), a "human weakness" she must own to, the rubber ring carries some of the vaguely sexual energy that as William Pietz has argued always surrounds discourses of the fetish.²⁷

The overdetermined energies--imperceptibly sexual, vaguely transgressive--with which Gaskell invests this encounter between woman and rubber band must now be set back into the context of this digression as a whole. The digression on "private economies" in which the rubber band appears pretends that the practices it describes are, precisely, private; that they run completely counter to real economic rationality. But the passage itself is framed by a reminder of the volatility of the "real" economy: the first example of a "private economy" is a man's careful preservation of a bank book rendered useless by the failure of a joint-stock company. In other words, Gaskell composes this discussion of private economies in the margins of the larger economy, just as the man writes in the blank pages of the bank book.²⁸ The passage is particularly troubled by women's relationship to the economy represented by the bank book: it is the man's daughters who tear out its leaves. This passage reminds us that Cranford--which takes as its subject a community of "poor" spinsters--looks at the mid-Victorian economy from the perspective of a peculiar kind of poverty. The "poverty" that prompts people to practice private economies, irrational scrimpings and savings of the trivial, is obviously not to be measured in financial terms; it speaks of other needs. It redefines poverty in ways particularly appropriate to the paradoxes of the Cranford ladies' poverty. The Cranford ladies are "poor": they are spinsters with no incomes, redundant women who must recycle old dresses into curtains and hide tea-trays under the sofa. But they are solidly members of a middle class; their gentility is unassailable. And as the history of this novel and history of figure of Victorian old lady suggest, their very poverty--the extent to which they appear to be operating on the margins of the "real" economy--has conspired to make them and the gender-based gentility they

represent, culturally central.²⁹

"What is the proper labor of the consumer?", asks Susan Stewart: "It is a labor of total magic."³⁰ That the Cranford woman should find a rubber band a treasure, a deification of string, is surely a sign of her alienation from the world in which labor is exploited and rubber bands made, an impoverished or limited perspective on the world. For Marx writing about capitalism from the point of view of the factory, the labor of the consumer necessarily appeared as a mystification of production that caused things themselves to appear through a superstitious "mist". It may seem strange to invoke Marx on the fetishism of the commodity--a characterization of a systematic misrecognition of the relations between persons and things--in connection with the woman pocketing the rubber band. Surely this is something more rudimentary than what Marx means. Marx's chapter on the fetishism of the commodity and its secrets, however, is as much a Victorian exercise in rhopography ("the commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing . . .") as is Gaskell's novel. But what Gaskell can suggest to us is the extent to which Marx is descriptively right. That is, Marx may be right in pointing out that people are mistaken in trying to locate the source of value in the mysterious properties of things themselves (rather than in relations between persons); but he may also be right that this is what people do. To deify, to treasure, to give the ordinary object a history, to overinvest in it, to misread it, is to illuminate the ways in which things in capitalist culture are overinvested; from some perspectives, the thing may be the most visible--the only visible--form that such social relations take. Cranford can suggest ways of seeing commodity fetishism itself--even as it is described by Marx--not simply as a delusion of capitalism, but as a viable strategy for coping

with its effects.³¹

To be a single Victorian old lady, for example, is precisely to have such social relations mediated by and embodied in things.³² We might specify the "magic"--both the politics and the ontological status of the thing--in a commodity fetishism practiced by old ladies by drawing an analogy to the female fetishism theorized by psychoanalytic feminist critics. Naomi Schor and Emily Apter have found the possibilities of a fetishism that could be wrested from Freud's emphasis on the masculine fetishist, lurking in the very structure of Freudian fetishism itself. Freud's fetishism depends upon a logic of denegation--the fetishist attempts to disavow woman's castration by substituting an object for the "missing" phallus, an object he knows is a mere substitute, but which he believes in anyway. Schor proposes a female fetishism that appropriates the fundamental oscillations of the fetishist's denegation, turning his either/or predicament ("either I recognize the truth of women's castration, or I have the fetish") into an undecidable both/and: the female fetishist embraces wholeheartedly the substitute object in the knowledge that what it substitutes for ("the phallus") is itself a substitute.³³ Like the female fetishist, the Cranford women simultaneously denaturalize the commodity and refuse to dematerialize its fetish nature. They denaturalize things by focusing on their histories, their transformations, their substitutions rather than on their essences. And we can see their insistence on the materiality of things' powers in the women's rigorous unfashionability, their outmoded accessories. The Cranford ladies love to go shopping, but they always desire the wrong things: their sense of the magic of things exceeds those things' participation in a fashion system. Appropriately, one of the central episodes of Cranford involves (as I noted

earlier) a conjuror coming to town to perform magic tricks with things. The old ladies of Cranford respond to the magician in their usually contradictory ways: "Conjuration, sleight of hand, magic, witchcraft were the subjects of the evening" (131). They are alternately credulous, mystified and skeptical. One, Miss Pole, takes out the encyclopedia to read up on conjuring and declares, wonderfully, that "conjuring and witchcraft is a mere affair of the alphabet" (132). Conjuring is however, not something the Cranford ladies need to study up on; they are performing a labor of magic on things all the time.

Gaskell is pointing to some of this labor in her digression on private economies, and in particular by narrating the woman's pocketing of the flexible and overdetermined commodity, the rubber band. As we have noted, both the metaphorical concentration of rubber in Victorian culture, and the place of this rubber band along the syntagmatic chain of objects in this passage, point to its centrality, its status as an embodiment of the commodity market itself, and its ability to mediate between the fleshly and the industrial/global. A stretching thing, the rubber band is an exemplary embodiment of the way things get stretched. The woman who deifies and treasures the rubber band may be profoundly alienated, but in pocketing it she also articulating a relationship to an entire commodity system and a particular historical moment.

Can we stretch this rubber band even further, and suggest that this highly elastic object of fascination itself images women's flexible conceptual place in the novel? We should not forget that the woman in this passage is the book's narrator, Mary Smith, a not-yet-old Victorian lady, who spends her life "vibrating" between Drumble and Cranford. But more generally, is it not the flexibility of these seemingly unflexible Cranford ladies--the between-

ness that makes them both marginal and culturally central, that allows them, moreover, to keep snapping back, rubber band-like, as modernism's, or cultural criticism's, or feminism's image of culture?

III.

This paper ends with Victorian old ladies as fetishists; it began with the Victorian old lady as a kind of fetish in cultural criticism. Fetishism, as both Apter and Schor point out, engenders fetishism (and the critic who finds that she has written ten pages about a rubber band in a book begins to wonder what is the thing she is writing about).³⁴ It could be said that in this paper I have replaced Victorian old ladies I don't like--one representing a moribund, coherent, highbrow view of culture or a bad and regressive feminism--with one that I do. The relationship, or the difference, between these old ladies could be further situated within the ambivalent oscillations of fetishism described above. On the one hand, Cranford suggests that overvaluing the Victorian old lady is a useful way of understanding capitalism, that the old lady provides a crucial vector or perspective from which to view its effects (and in a society in which currently the average income for women over 65 living alone is \$8,000 a year, I would suggest that old women are still a useful vector for talking about capitalism's effects). On the other hand, the Victorian old gentlewoman who turns up in the discourses of cultural criticism and popular feminism returns as a fetish when these discourses repress certain things that they know--that "culture" is gendered in its very definitions, for example. Feminism, for one, may not be able to get rid of the Victorian old lady until it comes to terms with the way

in which much of its terms are intertwined with nineteenth-century ways of thinking.³⁵

I would like to end this discussion by mentioning briefly one final Victorian old lady. Or is she a sheep? Or a shawl? I am referring to the lady shopkeeper in the form of a sheep that Lewis Carroll's Alice encounters in Through the Looking Glass (1871). Sitting behind her counter, wearing a "white starched affair" on her head, spectacles at the end of her nose (see Tenniel's illustration) and knitting, this sheep, I would contend, is a demonic version of Cranford's Matty Jenkyns, who also knits behind the counter of her tea shop. Carroll's sheep knits furiously with fourteen knitting needles--she is a veritable multiplying porcupine of knitting needles--as if she were doing the knitting of all the knitting Victorian old ladies rolled into one. This sheep, moreover, owes her appearance in the narrative itself to a process of transformation and condensation: she is a product of the previous scene in the story, in which the hapless White Queen becomes completely muffled up in her wayward white wool shawl--which seems to have a life of its own and travels around her body: "the Queen . . . seemed to have suddenly wrapped herself up in wool."³⁶ This sheep is thus the natural source of the commodity, the commodity itself, the producer (she knits), the female consumer, the shopkeeper, all bundled together, an embodiment of the whole cycle of the object. It makes sense that the circulation of commodities in her shop is giddily accelerated: the objects for sale will not rest, but maddeningly travel around the room. "'Things flow about so here!'", complains Alice; and indeed they do (154). In this speeded up tiny shop, the only thing one can possibly grasp is the figure of the Victorian old lady.

Notes

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1. E.P.Thompson, "The Long Revolution," New Left Review 9 (1961), 24-25.
2. Laurie Langbauer, "Cultural Studies and the Politics of the Everyday," diacritics 22 (Spring 1992), 54.
3. See Joan Scott's discussion of the gendering of class consciousness in Thompson's work; "Women in The Making of the English Working Class," Gender and the Politics of History (New York: Columbia UP, 1988) 68-90.
4. Miss Helen Slingsby was my maiden aunt,
And lived in a small house near a fashionable square
Cared for by servants to the number of four.
Now when she died there was a silence in heaven
And silence at her end of the street.
The shutters were drawn and the undertaker wiped his feet--
He was aware this sort of thing had occurred before.
The dogs were handsomely provided for,
But shortly afterwards the parrot died too.
The Dresden clock continued ticking on the mantelpiece,
And the footman sat upon the dining-table
Holding the second housemaid on his knees--
Who had always been so careful while her mistress lived.

(T.S.Eliot, "Aunt Helen," from Prufrock and Other Observations [1917],
Collected Poems 1909-1935 [London: Faber and Faber].)

5. Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 25, 80.
6. I would speculate, however, that Thompson's indeed Victorian association of femininity with a culture that seems "disembodied"--in some way autonomous from economics and politics--can be heard echoing faintly through more recent and more positive assessments of the relationships between gender and culture. Both commentators who speak from within feminist studies and those who don't tend to affirm the importance of connecting feminist studies with cultural studies on the grounds that women's lives have had a special connection with the realm of culture--that feminism can truly keep the "culture" in cultural studies. This assumption is articulated, for example, in Richard Johnson's

account of the relationship between feminism and cultural studies in his essay "What is Cultural Studies Anyway?" (Social Text 6 (1987): "feminism [and anti-racism] have kept the left new," rescuing it from focusing too exclusively on economics and politics (40); feminism has contributed by bringing "'aesthetic' concerns to bear on social issues" (40). Feminist accounts of cultural studies often yield similar positions. See for example "Feminism and Cultural Studies: Pasts, Presents, Futures" by Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury and Jackie Stacy, Media, Culture and Society 13 (1991) 171-92; Cora Kaplan, "Introduction," Sea Changes: Culture and Feminism (London: Verso 1986).

7. For an interesting account of the emergence of cultural feminism, see Alice Echols, Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975 (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989). Proponents of a women's culture in the 1970's truly focused on culture--on cultural production: in an interview published in 1975, Robin Morgan spoke of women's culture--women's poetry and art--as an "absolute necessity . . . It is not cultural nationalism, it is not self-indulgence. . . Culture is breath, it is oxygen to us as an oppressed people who have never spoken in our own voice" ("Adrienne Rich and Robin Morgan Talk About Poetry and Women's Culture," The New Woman's Survival Sourcebook [New York: Knopf, 1975], 106.) See also "The Fourth World Manifesto" by Barbara Burris et al, especially the section "Female and Male Culture": "A FEMALE CULTURE EXISTS. IT IS A CULTURE THAT IS SUBORDINATED AND UNDER MALE CULTURE'S COLONIAL, IMPERIALIST RULE ALL OVER THE WORLD. UNDERNEATH THE SURFACE OF EVERY NATIONAL, ETHNIC, OR RACIAL CULTURE IS THE SPLIT BETWEEN THE TWO PRIMARY CULTURES OF THE WORLD--THE FEMALE AND THE MALE CULTURE" (341). For a discussion of how the principles of cultural feminism became enshrined in feminist theory, see Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism Versus Poststructuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," Signs 13 (1988): 405-36.

8. Katha Pollitt, "Are Women Morally Superior to Men?" The Nation December 28, 1992, 804; Susan Faludi, Backlash: The Undeclared War on American Women (NY: Crown, 1991), 327; Katie Rophie, "Date Rape Hysteria," New York Times November 20, 1991.

9. Elizabeth Gaskell, Cranford (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 39. Subsequent references to this text will be in parentheses.

10. Nina Auerbach, Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1978), 98. Subsequent references to this text will be in parentheses.

11. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987).

12. John Kucich, "Transgression and Sexual Difference in Elizabeth Gaskell's Novels," Texas Studies in Language and Literature 32 (1990): 204.

13. On fashions in umbrellas, see Alison Adburgham, Shops and Shopping: 1800-1914 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964).

14. "Railway Waifs and Strays," by Charles Dickens, Household Words 20 December 1850; "Valentine's Day at the Post Office," by Charles Dickens and W.H.Wills, Household Words 30 March 1850, 6-12; see also "Old Clothes!" by George Sala, 17 April 1852, 93-98; "My Uncle" by W.H Wills and Charles Dickens, 6 December 1851, 241-46. Dickens' "Railway Waifs and Strays" suggests, like Cranford, that this new world of things has effects on the construction of persons. "Our old friend, Mrs. Gamp, was as plainly visible on one of the shelves as if she stood before us. She was personified by a cotton umbrella with a tremendous horn-head, and a pair of pattens as tall and as clumsy as Dutch horse-shoes." Mrs. Gamp is in fact a Dickens character. From the perspective of the world of goods, people may behave more like literary characters, than literary characters behave like real people.

15. On the Great Exhibition, see Christopher Hobhouse, 1851 and the Crystal Palace (London: John Murray 1951). C.H. Gibbs Smith, The Great Exhibition of 1851 (London: Victoria and Albert, 1964). For an account of the effects of the Exhibition on Victorian anthropological thinking about culture, see George Stocking, Victorian Anthropology (NY: The Free Press, 1987). Thomas Richards' The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle 1851-1914 (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990) sees as the fundamental problem of Victorian culture the question of how to go about representing the commodity. For Richards, the dominant mode of the commodity from the mid nineteenth century on was the semiotics of spectacle. See his interesting discussion of the cultural effects of the Great Exhibition of 1851, "The Great Exhibition of Things," pp 17-72.

16. This line of reasoning has become a familiar old Victorian story: see Gayatri Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," Critical Inquiry 12:1 (1985): 243-261.

17. In the first chapter of Gaskell's North and South (1855), for example, the heroine stands as a mannequin so that the India shawls of her wealthy cousin's trousseau may be displayed before envious eyes. See Alison Adburgham, Shops and Shopping: 1800-1914, 98-100.

18. Norman Bryson, Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Paintings (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990), 144.

19. I follow Norman Bryson's use of the term "rhopography"; see Looking at the Overlooked, 60-95, esp. chapter 2 fn.2, 182-83.

20. This is not the only place in Cranford where material objects are paired with a consciousness of unseemly narrative excursion. This happens as well in the passage where Mary Smith tells of the ladies' brooches before she tells of the ladies (120). There is also Mrs. Forrester's epic history of the lace collar that gets eaten and regurgitated by a cat (125-26), recounted by the narrator as an instance of socially inappropriate narrative.

21. On the history of rubber see Thomas Hancock's Personal Narrative of the Origin and Progress of the Caoutchouc or India Rubber Manufacture in England (London, 1857); Charles Goodyears, Gum-Elastic (1853); William Woodruff. The

Rise of the British Rubber Industry in the Nineteenth Century. The rubber band of the kind found in Cranford was patented in the 1840's. On rubber in the Great Exhibition of 1851 see Asa Briggs, Victorian Things (London: Batsford, 1988).

22. "India-rubber," by George Dodd, Household Words 12 March 1853, 32.

23. The possibilities of rubber for matters of character were fully exploited by Dickens. Pickwick Papers is apparently full of instances of the elasticity of mind and body: a Mr. Dowler, for example, "bounced off the bed as abruptly as an india-rubber ball." Mr. Carker in Dombey and Son has a smile like india-rubber. Thanks to Erin O'Connor for bringing these passages to my attention.

24. Thomas Hancock, Personal Narrative, 14.

25. For the use of the notion of the elasticity of supplies and demands in the work of David Ricardo and others, see William Grampp, The Manchester School of Economics (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1960), 20-21.

26. See Angus McLaren, A History of Contraception (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990); Marie Carmichael Stopes, Contraception: Its Theory, History and Practice (London, 1929).

27. William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," Res 9 (1985). On the fetish as something that is pocketed: in his complex genealogy of the concept, Pietz notes that a common thread of fetish discourse is the material fetish's relationship to the embodied individual. Medieval Portuguese, for example distinguished the feitico, a fabricated object worn about the body, from the idolo (10).

28. Footnote on Joint-Stock Banks. A joint-stock failure is later central to the events of Cranford, since it is the failure of such a bank that "ruins" Miss Matty Jenkyns, causing her to go into the tea business. Rumours of the failure of Matty's bank are accompanied by general rumblings about bad business in Drumble, effecting even the narrator's father. Cranford is as concerned with the economic volatility of industrial England as are her "Condition of England" novels.

29. For a discussion of the way the power of one extremely dominant Victorian old lady--Queen Victoria herself--was linked to the image of the queen as the archetypal female consumer (and to the use of her image in advertising), see Thomas Richards, "The Image of Victoria in the Year of the Jubilee," The Commodity Culture of Victorian England 73-118. On the history of the novel: Cranford gained its enormous popularity only after Gaskell herself had become a dead Victorian old lady in 1865, and it reached the height of its popularity in the period between 1899--1910, during which it was reprinted 75 times. On other words, Cranford was most popular around the time of Conrad and Eliot: its gender has always already been central in its obsolescence.

30. Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection (orig 1984; Durham: Duke UP, 1993), 164.

31. For a reading of Marx to which I am much indebted here, see Ann Cvetkovich, "Marx's Capital and the Mystery of the Commodity," Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Sensationalism (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1992), esp. 191-97.
32. A glimpse of a "real life" Cranford lady--with Cranford-like attachment to material goods--might be found in Davidoff and Hall's account of the will of Maria Cadbury (1800-1887), unmarried daughter of a Birmingham draper: "Her will provides a testimony of the social and emotional world of a single woman of modest independent means . . . Her favorite family memorabilia were left to her beloved sister Emma . . . and precious teaspoons, sauce ladles, and sugar tongs were left to her many neices and nephews," Family Fortunes, 58-59.
33. See Naomi Schor, "Female Fetishism: The Case of George Sand, " The Female Body in Western Culture ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986) 363-72, plus Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine (New York: Methuen, 1987); Emily Apter, Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn of the Century France (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991). Schor is particularly indebted to Sarah Kofman's valorization of fetishism in "Ca Cloche," Les Fins de l'homme: a partir du travail de Jacques Derrida ed Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy (Paris: Galilee, 1981) 89-132. Kofman asks "pourquoi c'est si mal d'etre fetichiste" (99). Fetish-discourses of various kinds have been revalorized from a number of different perspectives recently: it seems to address historical conjunctions between heterogenous social systems (western and non-western for example); it seems to embrace practices of signification that subvert enlightenment thinking. See, for example, in addition to Apter, Schor, and Pietz noted above, Fetishism as Cultural Discourse ed Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993); "Introduction" to The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986). On the significance of the outmoded, I am indebted to Michael Taussig's discussion of Benjamin's essay on the Surrealism ("Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia") in Mimesis and Alterity (New York: Routledge, 1993), 212-235.
34. Emily Apter, Feminizing the Fetish, 2; Schor, "Female Fetishism," 363..
35. On how feminism's terms have been shaped and limited by their persistent debts to nineteenth-century social theory, see Rosalind Coward's Patriarchal Precedents: Sexuality and Social Relations (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983).
36. Lewis Carroll, Alice In Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass (New York: WW Norton, 1971), 153.

