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Performative Acts in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*

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Judith Butler argues that gender is not derived from an innate set of predetermined characteristics but is a social construction. She says:

Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time ó an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*;¹ a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief (519-20).

Therefore, one is always in the process of becoming a gender rather than actually being a gender. Reading Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*, we see that Butler's notion of gender as *õa stylized repetition of acts* or performative acts operate in the life of the Cranford ladies. The Cranford ladies dissociate what they do from reality. The performative acts in *Cranford* institute not only their gender but also their class identity as the upper-middle-class women.

The Cranford ladies primarily consist of the Jenkyns sisters: Miss (Deborah) Jenkyns and Miss Matty, Miss Pole, Mrs. Jamieson, Mrs. Fitz-Adam, Mrs. Forrester, Miss Jessie Brown, and Marry Smith. All of them are either spinsters or widows. Later on Miss Jessie Brown is married to Major Gordon. These ladies belong to the gentry or upper-middle-class families, and they try their best to sustain their status as the genteel by maintaining certain habits, rules, and regulation. For example, these ladies have strict rules for time and social visit. Calling hours are between twelve and three PM. After being called, a person has to return the call in three days at the latest. Each visit, either paid or received, should be done in no more than fifteen minutes. The narrator (Marry Smith) was amazed when she was being explained such rules by one of the ladies (Miss Jenkyns):



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"But am I to look at my watch? How am I to find out when a quarter of an hour has passed?"

"You must keep thinking about the time, my dear, and not allow yourself to forget it in conversation" (6).

Everyone is informed of the rule and practice repeatedly so that everybody has come to internalize them. With the rule in mind, they will only involve themselves in small talk and always keep the time. They practice the rules over and over as those are parts of their idea of class division or their idea of themselves. Such rules are stylized repetitions that define their identity.

As the genteel, these ladies are not the aristocrats, but they also distinct themselves from the middle-class. In fact, as the upper-middle-class they are right on the dividing line between the middle-class and the upper-class. They model their attitude after the upper-class, the aristocrats. The Cranford ladies uphold their aristocratic values as if they were the real members of the upper-class. One of the markers of the upper-class is wealth. Therefore, the ladies act as if they were wealthy although their real condition might suggest the opposite. The following passages show how they deal with the issue of poverty: "Death was as true and as common as poverty; yet people never spoke about that, loud out in the streets. It was a word not to be mentioned to ears polite" (8). One of the best ways to deny a fact is by not talking about it, and that is what the Cranford ladies do. If they do not talk about the thing, this very thing does not exist. They do not talk about poverty. Since poverty always has its ways to show itself, the ladies find their ways to ignore the signs of it:

We had tacitly agreed to ignore that any with whom we associated on terms of visiting equality could ever be prevented by poverty from doing anything that they wished. If we walked to or from a party, it was because the night was *so*

fine, or the air *so* refreshing, not because sedan-chairs were expensive. If we wore prints, instead of summer silks, it was because we preferred a washing material; and so on, till we blinded ourselves to the vulgar fact that we were, all of us, people of very moderate means (8).

The passage above suggests the stylized repetition of acts by the Cranford ladies. They fashion their identity as the aristocratic women despite the fact that they are moderate upper-middle-class women who have to practice "elegant economy" (8). Everybody plays their part in acting out their assumed aristocratic position. It is a stylized repetition of act that nobody ever talks about poverty and ignores the sign of poverty seen on others or themselves. They know that they practice elegant economy out of necessity, but they act as if they did it because they chose to do it. Everybody knows that they are acting, but at the same time they also come to believe that what they are acting on represents the truth.

The acts are repeated over time that they perform in the mode of belief that they are indeed members of the upper-class. The following incident proves it:

"Don't you find it very unpleasant walking?" asked Mrs Jamieson, as our respective servants were announced. It was a pretty regular question from Mrs Jamieson, who had her own carriage in the coach-house, and always went out in a sedan-chair to the very shortest distances. The answers were nearly as much a matter of course.

"Oh dear, no! it is so pleasant and still at night!" "Such a refreshment after the excitement of a party!" "The stars are so beautiful!" This last was from Miss Matty (96).

The ladies are about to leave from their visit to Mrs Jamieson. Mrs Jamieson, who is often referred to as the Honourable Mrs Jamieson, is sister-in-law to the late Earl of Glenmire. She is



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the most respectable and the richest among the ladies. Mrs. Jamieson knows that the ladies to whom she asks the question cannot afford a sedan-chair. She asks the question anyway as if they indeed had the choice of using a sedan-chair. If these ladies had the choice, of course they would not prefer walking to using a sedan-chair, just like Mrs Jamieson. But expressing the truth will mean betraying their mode of belief. Therefore, Mrs Matty, representing the other ladies, says that they prefer walking in such a beautiful night. Miss Matty, as well as the other ladies that she represents, knows that they are acting. Although Mrs Jamieson knows that they are acting, she makes herself believe that they are telling the truth. She is playing her part in the performative acts. The fact that Mrs. Jamieson's question is "a pretty regular question" strengthens the notion of stylized repetition. The question is always asked, and it is always answered in the same way with everybody perceiving the question and the answer as natural.

As Butler says, the constructed identity is accomplished because "the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (520). The following passages also best represent the ladies' constructed identity:

I imagine that a few of the gentlefolks of Cranford were poor, and had some difficulty in making both ends meet; but they were like the Spartans, and concealed their smart under a smiling face. We none of us spoke of money, because that subject savoured of commerce and trade, and though some might be poor, we were all aristocratic (7).

Money is associated with commerce and trade. Anybody who is involved in commerce and trade belongs to the middle-class. Therefore, to maintain their identity, the ladies will not talk about money just like they will not involve themselves in commerce and trade. The other reason is, of course, to avoid talking about the lack of money because it will challenge their supposedly wealthy condition. The ladies know that some of them are poor. Yet, they "were all aristocratic"



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despite the poverty. The notion of being aristocratic is what they are acting out in the following passage:

The Cranfordians had that kindly *esprit de corps* which made them overlook all deficiencies in success when some among them tried to conceal their poverty.

When Mrs Forrester, for instance, gave a party in her baby-house of a dwelling, and the little maiden disturbed the ladies on the sofa by a request that she might get the tea-tray out from underneath, everyone took this novel proceeding as the most natural thing in the world, and talked on about household forms and ceremonies as if we all believed that our hostess had a regular servants' hall, second table, with housekeeper and steward, instead of the one little charity-school maiden í ö (7).

Mrs. Forrester is acting her best to conceal her poverty, yet both her poverty and her acting are so obvious to disguise. The other ladies, as a matter of fact, succeed to ignore them. They join Mrs. Forester in her acting. If Mrs. Forester's house is big enough to have a regular servants' hall, second table, with housekeeper and steward, the little maiden will not ask the guests to move to get the tea tray out from under the couch. When she does so, it suggests the fact that the house is not big and does not have the servants' hall. The house of course does not have a second table, and it does not even have enough space that the tea tray is kept under the couch. Yet, the ladies act as if it is the most natural thing in the world, and they keep on talking about the household forms and ceremonies as if the hostess had everything that she lacked. Having a servant defines somebody as a part of the middle-class. It is crucial for Mrs. Forester to have a servant, and everybody knows that she is only capable of hiring a little charity-school maiden, the lowest-paid kind of servant. The ladies perform another act by looking at the girl as representing a number of



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servants who are supposed to be in the house of the upper-class family. The ladies perform their acts as the upper-class even though their actual economic position is much lower than that.

The Cranford ladies perform their stylized repetition of acts to maintain their gender and class identity. Another marker of the upper-class women is the necessity not to work. This is also acted out by the ladies:

í the one little charity-school maiden whose short ruddy arms could never have been strong enough to carry the tray upstairs, if she had not been assisted in private by her mistress, who now sat in state, pretending not to know what cakes were sent up, though she knew, and we knew, and she knew that we knew, and we knew that she knew that we knew, she had been busy all the morning making tea-bread and sponge-cakes (7).

When the house does not have the servantsøhall, the hostess will not have the housekeeper and steward available in the house. The charity-school girl that helps Mrs. Forester is so little that she needs her mistress to assist her in doing all housework that she does. However, the mistress of the house is pretending not to know what will be served. Everybody knows that the household forms and ceremonies that they are talking about are fiction, not real. They know that the mistress does the housework, which she is not supposed to do. Nevertheless, the little maiden and the ladies all work out together in acting out as if they were all true. The òthough she knew, and we knew, and she knew that we knew, and we knew that she knew that we knewö shows how they, as the actors, know that they are acting, and they succeed in coming to believe and performing in the mode of belief which overlooks all the real facts of their situation. They maintain their acts since it strengthens their belief that as long as they act like the upper-class ladies, they are the upper-class ladies.



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