A Tale of Two Authors: The Shorter Fiction of Gaskell and Collins

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In the issue for February 1857 of the New York Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, there appeared a short, dramatic narrative of a young woman’s bravery, entitled “The Siege of the Black Cottage”. The story was published unsigned, and it has subsequently been claimed for both Elizabeth Gaskell and Wilkie Collins. My objectives here are first to confirm the bibliographical status of this tale, and then to suggest what can be learned from the confusion over authorship concerning the interaction of the publishing format and literary form of shorter fiction around the middle of the nineteenth century.

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Founded in 1817, well before there was any American law to protect the copyright of aliens, the New York literary house of Harper had long specialized in reprinting fiction originally published in Britain, with or without authorization. In the early 1840s, at the time of Charles Dickens’s first visit to the United States, Harper & Brothers were still known as “the redoubtable champions of literary piracy” (Barnes, p. 80), though not long afterwards they acquired a London agent, Sampson Low, and began to offer payment to English authors whenever there was an economic incentive to do so. In June 1850, only a couple of months after the appearance in London of the first issue of Household Words, the New York house had started its own literary miscellany, Harper’s New Monthly Magazine. With each issue containing nearly 150 double-column pages, including a generous supply of quality illustrations, and selling at only a quarter, this represented even better value than Dickens’s twopenny plain weekly paper. A major reason was doubtless the magazine’s policy of “transfer[ing] to its pages as rapidly as they may be issued all the continuous tales of Dickens, Bulwer, Croly, Lever, Warren, and other distinguished contributors to British Periodicals”. Indeed, two of the

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2 This article is based upon a guest lecture under the title “Other Tales”, given at the Annual Conference of the Japan Gaskell Society, held at Waseda University, Tokyo, on 2 October 2005. I am grateful to the other participants for their helpful and encouraging comments.

lengthier items in the opening issue were the first serial installment of Maurice Tiernay and the complete narrative of “Lizzie Leigh,” lifted from the April issue of the Dublin University Magazine, and the first three numbers of Household Words, respectively. Both on the paper cover of the June issue and in the index to the bound volume containing the first six, Maurice Tiernay was correctly assigned to Charles Lever, while “Lizzie Leigh” was ascribed mistakenly to Dickens rather than to Elizabeth Gaskell. It is now difficult to ascertain whether or not the mistake was intentional.4

Though it appeared along with a number of unsigned sketches of local original, like the satirical “Pursuit of a Wife” (p. 346-56) set in New York, “The Siege of the Black Cottage” itself was clearly from the pen of a British author. The heroine Bessie, a stone-mason’s daughter without “a farthing of money of her own”, acts as the narrator of her own story which is set “in the midst of a moor in the West of England”. The main events take place when the eighteen-year-old Bessie is left alone at night in an isolated cottage, and acts with unexpected courage and ingenuity to protect the money left in her care by a wealthy neighbour from a violent gang of ruffians. This narrative opens:

To begin at the beginning, I must take you back to the time after my mother’s death, when my only brother had gone to sea, when my sister was out at service, and when I lived alone with my father . . .

But there is also a frame narrative, beginning:

Young Lady, — As you were leaving my house, I accidentally heard you ask your sister if it was true that I had begun life as the daughter of a poor working stone-mason of the lowest degree . . .

In this the adult Bessie, now “wife of one of the largest and richest gentlemen-farmers” in the area, explains to a young visitor, curious about her humble origins, how her social advancement came as an indirect reward for her heroic performance during the siege. The tale’s underlying theme is indeed a questioning, at once restrained and persistent, of the conventionally assigned class and gender roles of the mid-Victorian period. Although there is apparently no reference to the story among the author’s private papers, it is not difficult to find parallels, whether of setting, characterization, plot or subject, elsewhere among the shorter works of fiction by Gaskell. On the basis of the textual evidence, then, claiming the story for her does not seem unreasonable.

The source of the ascription to Gaskell appears to be the Harpers

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4 Typically for that period, neither Maurice Tiernay nor “Lizzie Leigh” was signed in its original British periodical appearance; the first signed British volume editions appeared only in 1852 and 1855, respectively. Household Words carried the legend “Conducted by Charles Dickens” prominently on its masthead, and, either for that reason or because his name would sell more copies, unauthorized American reprints of material from that journal by other authors often identified Dickens as author. For example, Wilkie Collins’s tale “Sister Rose”, appearing in Household Words from 7-28 April 1855, was reprinted in the same year as a slim volume by Peterson of Philadelphia under Dickens’s name. Indeed, in May 1850 Lizzie Leigh had appeared in a similar volume carrying Dickens’s name, from Dewitt and Davenport in New York; according to Smith (pp. 27-34), the story “continued to appear under Dickens’s name in America as late as the 1870s”.

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themselves. Though there was no indication of provenance on the February 1857 magazine cover, or in the index to the bound volume appearing in the May, in mid-1870 the New York house issued a cumulative index where “The Siege of the Black Cottage” and the name of “Mrs E.C. Gaskell” were linked together in the alphabetical lists of both authors and works (Index to Harper’s Monthly, pp. 191 & 371). This attribution still has a certain currency today. The rapid growth of academic interest during recent decades in both Victorian women’s writing and Victorian periodicals has inevitably encouraged a search for lost work. Most notable for our purposes is the 1981 article by Unsworth and Morton, which attributes eight new items to Gaskell, based mainly on stylometric analysis. It is then perhaps unsurprising that many modern Gaskell scholars have been keen to add “The Siege of the Black Cottage” to the total. Mitsuharu Matsuoka includes the tale in his listing of shorter works of fiction by the author, though he notes that this is an “uncertain attribution”; Linda Hughes and Michael Lund (p. 118), on the other hand, discuss the story confidently as a product of Gaskell’s pen.

Yet there is incontrovertible evidence that the story was written by Wilkie Collins. It was reprinted under the author’s name as “Brother Owen’s Story of the Black Cottage,” the first tale in The Queen of Hearts (1859), a collection of ten set within a frame narrative, which was published in October 1859 in three volumes from Hurst & Blackett. There, it is true, the original frame of Bessie’s address to the young visitor is stripped away. Instead we find the Sheherazade-like conceit of an elderly lawyer and his two brothers spinning stories to detain his beautiful young ward, so that his absent son will have time to return from the Crimean War to claim her heart. This opens:

5 The author entry for Gaskell again overlooked “Lizzie Leigh” which remained assigned to Dickens, but correctly identified three other works – “A Love Affair at Cranford,” March 1852, “The Doom of the Griffiths”, January 1858, and “An Incident at Niagara Falls,” June 1858. The Cranford episode, originally appearing unsigned in Household Words on 3 January 1852, was reprinted under Gaskell’s name as chs. 3-4 in the 1853 single-volume edition from Chapman & Hall. The two 1858 items had both appeared in Harper’s Monthly signed “Mrs Gaskell”: “The Doom of the Griffiths” had been purchased through Sampson Low, while “An Incident at Niagara Falls” seems to have been “transferred” from Gaskell’s edition of Maria S. Cummins’s Mabel Vaughan, which had appeared as a single volume from Routledge in 1857.


7 The fact that the attribution to Gaskell was spurious and the true author was Collins is indeed noted in the Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature, 3rd ed., IV pp. 1299-1300, though there Easson traces the origin of the mistake only back to the 1885 edition of the cumulative index to Harper’s Monthly.
WE were three quiet, lonely old men, and SHE was a lively, handsome young woman, and we were at our wits’ end what to do with her . . . .

Yet the text of the main narrative remains the same in all but the most minor details, and opens unmistakably, “To begin at the beginning, I must take you back to the time after my mother’s death . . .”. What remains uncertain is how the New York publishers obtained the story, since the pattern does not match that of any of the three other pieces by Collins carried by Harper’s Monthly during the 1850s. These were two anecdotes in April 1851, reprinted without authorization from the volume Rambles Beyond Railroads, and “A Marriage Tragedy” in February 1858, which the New York firm had clearly purchased from the author via Sampson Low. Like “The Black Cottage” itself, “A Marriage Tragedy” appeared first in Harper’s Monthly and was later incorporated into The Queen of Hearts, as “Brother Griffith’s Story of a Plot in Private Life”. When it was published in New York, though, “A Marriage Tragedy” was clearly signed and headed “Written Exclusively for Harper’s Magazine,” as indeed was Gaskell’s “Doom of the Griffiths” the previous month. It is difficult to explain both these variations and how the editors came eventually to attribute Collins’s tale to Gaskell. Amongst Collins’s surviving correspondence, there is only a single reference to the story, in a letter written to the editor of the Athenaeum objecting a review of The Queen of Hearts, on the grounds that it dismissed the book as merely “a reprint from Household Words”:

If the critic in question will be so obliging as to open the book, he may make acquaintance with three stories (“The Black Cottage,” “The Biter Bit,” [first published in the Boston Atlantic Monthly] and “A Plot in Private Life”) which he has not met with before in Household Words, or in any other English periodical whatever; and he will, moreover, find the whole collection of stories connected by an entirely new thread of interest which it has cost me some thought and trouble to weave for the occasion,

(26 October 1859, The Public Face of Wilkie Collins, I p. 181)

While this suggests that Collins had in fact authorized the publication of “The Black Cottage” in New York, it does not otherwise help to explain the confusion over authorship.

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I have described this affair in some detail not only to set the bibliographical record straight, but also because it can tell us a good deal about the earlier Victorian market for shorter fiction in general, and Dickens’s impact upon it in particular. In other words, the simple question, “Was ‘The Siege of the Black Cottage?’” written by Gaskell or Collins?”, leads to another and more complex one: “How is it possible for informed observers to confuse the work of writers as different as Gaskell and Collins?” For, while it is true that the two authors may coincide in their probing of the boundaries of social class, and in their depiction of strong female characters, in almost all other respects their positions seem strongly opposed. This remains true whether we focus on
the generation to which they belonged, their social background, gender identity, regional affiliation, religious beliefs, or literary style. Things becomes clearer if we consider whether it would have been possible to confuse the authorship of full-length novels by Gaskell and Collins, say *Wives and Daughters* and *Armadale*, whose initial serial runs in the *Cornhill Magazine* happened to overlap to a considerable extent. The answer must, of course, be a resounding negative. Here it is important to recognize a further commonality, the complex influence of Dickens as editor and publisher, at the same time empowering and overbearing, on the development of their early literary careers. Nevertheless, we must note that this influence was less crucial regarding novel serialization in the case of Gaskell at least, none of whose full-length narratives were to appear in either of Dickens’s weekly miscellanies after the problems in 1854 with *North and South*. These left the author convinced that the form of the work had been distorted, that “[e]very page was grudged” to her so that she was “compelled to desperate compression” (to Anna Jameson, [Jan 1855], *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, #225, pp. 328-9). In contrast, the form of Collins’s mature sensation novels was shaped to a considerable extent by the fact that four out of five of them, from *The Dead Secret* (1857) through to *The Moonstone* (1868), appeared initially in weekly installments in *Household Words* or *All the Year Round*; and here there was relatively little in the way of tension with the editor. In the space remaining, I thus wish to consider the impact of publishing format on literary form, in relation to the shorter fiction produced by Gaskell and Collins in the course of their literary careers.

So far I have consciously avoided using the term “short story”. This is because, in Britain at least, the phrase did not come into common use until late in the nineteenth century, when it was associated with the aesthetics of early modernism with its preference for realism, irony and compression. Around this time, there appeared a number of articles claiming that the form had originated in America, where short narratives of local colour had long been popular. Yet there was clearly no shortage of British shorter fiction earlier in the Victorian period, especially in periodicals. There the term “tale” was still preferred for narratives that tended either to function as fillers between the runs of full-length installment novels, or to be associated with the Christmas season, which thus imparted a distinctly gothic flavour. (A similar argument can be made concerning the terms “novella” and “novelette”; until the *fin de siècle* the
latter is far more commonly found.) This is only one among a number of dissatisfactions with Harold Orel’s monograph *The Victorian Short Story* (1986), which remains the most detailed historical treatment of the subject. Another is that, while Orel recognizes the importance to the changing aesthetics of shorter fiction of “the development of mass-circulation periodicals” (p. 184), his book is extremely short on detailed knowledge of publishing history. In the twenty years since Orel’s work appeared, of course, the study of what is now often called “print culture” has become a burgeoning academic enterprise. Here I can mention briefly only three among many relevant projects: first, Simon Eliot’s bibliometric work on nineteenth-century publishing trends, which shows how the Christmas season gradually emerged as the climax of the publishing year (Eliot, esp. pp. 26-42); next, my own work on popular fiction serialization from the mid-century, which shows the growing importance of both the weekly installment and the newspaper as a venue for it (Law, esp. pp. 3-38); and last, John Plunkett’s works on the reign of Victoria as the first “Media Monarchy”, which shows how important the illustrated press then was in melding the concepts of bourgeois family and nation state (Plunkett, esp. pp. 1-12). In their different ways, all three help us to understand that Dickens’s impact on the growth of mass-circulation journals was determined not just by his massive talent and personality, but also by the fact that his editorial projects captured the spirit of the age.

By any calculation, even excluding “novelettes” like Gaskell’s *The Moorland Cottage* and Collins’s *Mr Wray’s Cash-Box*, both writers produced well over fifty works of shorter fiction, of which a large proportion made their first appearance in either *Household Words* or *All the Year Round*. In fact their careers as writers of tales run in parallel fashion to a remarkable extent. Both made their early appearances in monthly journals edited by others (Gaskell in *Howitt’s Journal* and Collins in *Bentley’s Miscellany*, most notably), and defected late in their careers to George Smith’s *Cornhill*, a rather more prestigious and remunerative venue, but in between they remained very faithful to Dickens’s cheap weekly miscellanies. In Gaskell’s case this phase spanned from “Lizzie Leigh” (*HW*, 30 March 1850, the first number) to “Crowley Castle” (*AYR*, Christmas 1863); in Collins’s from “A Terribly Strange Bed” (*HW*, 24 April 1852) to a share in *No Thoroughfare* (*AYR*, Christmas 1867). Within these periods, among the most telling tales were those appearing in the Extra Christmas Numbers. Altogether there were sixteen such numbers, published continuously from 1852 to 1867, to which either Gaskell and/or Collins contributed to twelve, the four omitted all being found in the mid-1860s. Gaskell appeared in a total of five, but in the first two cases, *A Round of Stories by the Christmas Fire* (*HW*, 1852) and *Another Round of Stories by the

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10 The *OED*, for example, provides the first citation of “novelette” as early as 1814, while the first cited usage of the term “novella” is by the *doyen* of American Realism, W.D. Howells: “Few modern fictions of the novel’s dimensions . . . have the beauty of form many a novella embodies.” See W.D. Howells, “Some Anomalies of the Short Story, ”*Literature and Life* (New York: Harper, 1902), pp. 110-24; here p. 116.
Christmas Fire (HW, 1853), as the titles suggest, there was no frame narrative or unifying concept other than that of Yuletide itself. Collins appeared in a total of nine, all with strong conceptual frameworks, including eight continuously from 1854-61, and, as Lillian Nayder has emphasized (pp. 9-14), in two cases (The Perils of Certain English Prisoners, HW 1857, and No Thoroughfare) the work was co-authored by Dickens and Collins alone. But it could also be claimed that Gaskell and Collins were occasional literary collaborators, since both contributed to not only A House to Let (1858) but also The Haunted House (1859), respectively, the last Christmas number of Household Words and the first of All the Year Round. Moreover, during the 1850s at least, even those works of shorter fiction by Gaskell and Collins that were not subject to Dickens’s control as editor reveal his influence to a remarkable extent. Indeed, both The Moorland Cottage (Chapman & Hall, 1850) and Mr Wray’s Cash-Box (Bentley, 1852) are apprentice Christmas books following the format popularized by the master Boz, with A Christmas Carol (Chapman & Hall, 1843), and the rest. And in the later 1850s, when both authors begin to gather their shorter tales from the periodicals into collections for book publication, the model of the Household Words Christmas Numbers with their elaborate narrative framework is apparent. Having already alluded to Collins’s The Queen of Hearts in 1859, we need to mention here only Round the Sofa from the same year, where Gaskell employs the device of a weekly soirée at the residence of a doctor in Edinburgh’s Old Town to contextualize her tales.

However, these examples also serve to remind us that, when we look more closely at the parallel outputs of shorter fiction from the pens of Gaskell and Collins, there are significant differences of literary form alongside the similarities of publishing format. Above all, the disparities concern the degree of tension with the models laid down by Dickens, the general point being that Gaskell typically displays a good deal more resistance than Collins. Let me briefly offer some examples. Regarding the early Christmas Books, Collins’s Mr Wray’s Cash-Box, with oral narrative style, gothic cast of eccentrics, wry humour, and sentimental ending around the yuletide fire, clearly endeavours to “strike the chord of the season”. It is far more in keeping with the Dickensian Christmas spirit than Gaskell’s sombre The Moorland Cottage, where the dénouement, with its symbolic drowning and resurrection of the heroine, seems more in the Easter vein. In the case of the collections of tales, Gaskell’s narrative framework in Round the Sofa is far more perfunctory, accounting for only 3% of the total word count as opposed to 18% in the case of Collins’s The Queen of Hearts. And in contrast to his stout public defence of his method in

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11 The phrase is from Dickens’s letter to the Revd. James White of 22 November 1852 (Letters of Charles Dickens VI, p. 809), where he describes “the spirit of the Christmas number”; see the discussion in Thomas, p. 66ff.

12 This was in fact the only occasion on which Gaskell attempted to create a frame narrative. Her collections of tales published in Britain without such a device were: Lizzie Leigh; and Other Tales (Chapman & Hall, 1855); Right at Last, and Other Tales (Sampson Low, 1860); Cousin Phillis, and Other Tales (Smith, Elder, 1865); and The Grey Woman, and Other Tales (Smith, Elder, 1865). Collins, on the other hand, had already produced a “new thread
the letter to the *Athenaeum*, she dismisses her own construction in private correspondence with a friend:

You will be seeing a book of mine advertized; but don’t be diddled about it; it is only a REpublication of *H W Stories*; I have a rascally publisher this time (Sampson Low . . .) & he is trying to pass it off as new. I sold the right of republication to him in a hurry to get 100£ to take Meta [her daughter] abroad out of the clatter of tongues consequent on her breaking off her engagement . . .

(to Anne Robson, [February 1859], *Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, pp. 530-1)

Perhaps the most telling cases, though, are found in those Extra Christmas Numbers to which both Gaskell and Collins contributed. Here the varying levels of resistance are obviously related to the fact that, as a woman, Gaskell was excluded from any editorial role in Dickens’s journals, while from October 1856 until January 1862 Collins was a paid member of staff. In *A House to Let*, Collins’s “Trotter’s Report,” with its focus on the restoration of the lost boy, not only reinforces Dickens’s theme of the Christmas gift of the Christ child, but it is so committed to the narrative frame (constructed together by the two men) that it cannot stand independently as an short tale.¹³ In contrast, Gaskell’s contribution, “The Manchester Marriage,” now one of her most anthologized tales, works entirely independently of the frame, and again, with its dénouement in the sacrificial death of the first husband, Frank Wilson, and the consequent redemption of the second, the Manchester man Openshaw, more strongly evokes the spirit of Easter. Moreover, the sympathetic treatment of Openshaw can be interpreted as a challenge to Dickens’s attack on Manchester values in the person of Gradgrind in *Hard Times*. Since the serial run of *Hard Times* in *Household Words* had immediately preceded that of *North and South*, there might even be a sense in which Gaskell was getting her own back for the damage done to the form of that narrative. A similar argument could perhaps be made about “The Crooked Branch,” Gaskell’s contribution to *The Haunted House*, but here I will focus instead on the nature of the frame narrative itself, in this case constructed by Dickens alone. There, each of the fictional guests telling a story in the haunted house is given a persona that parodies the personality of the real contributing author, and thus reveals his or her identity to those in the know – with the marked exception of Gaskell herself. The Bohemian George Augustus Sala becomes “Alfred Starling, an uncommonly agreeable young fellow … who pretends to be ‘fast’ (another word for loose, as I understand the term)”. Feminist versifier Adelaide Anne Procter becomes “Belinda Bates, … [who] has a fine genius for poetry, combined with real

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¹³ It was thus excluded from *Wilkie Collins: The Complete Shorter Fiction*, where the editor, Julian Thompson, notes that “Trottle’s Report” belongs to a group of contributions to Christmas numbers that “do not seem to me to be sufficiently self-contained to merit reprinting here” (p. xiii).
business earnestness, and “goes in” for Woman’s mission . . .”. The sailing fanatic Wilkie Collins, already more than a little overweight, becomes “one ‘Nat Beaver’, . . . captain of a merchantman . . . with a thick-set wooden face and figure, and … a world of watery experience.” Gaskell, in contrast, is disguised as Dickens’s legal representative Frederick Ouvry: “Mr Undery, my friend and solicitor: who came down, in an amateur capacity, . . . and who plays whist better than the whole Law List . . .”. In thus symbolically excluding her from the group around the Christmas fire, Dickens seems to have been signalling his awareness of and annoyance at Gaskell’s persistent resistance to his narrative schemes. Indeed, she was not asked to contribute to the extra number for several years, and returned for one last contribution only in 1863, with “Crowley Castle” in Mrs Lirriper’s Lodgings. This, of course, was after Collins himself had jumped ship.

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Seen in the general context of Dickens’s impact on both the literary form and the publishing format of the mid-Victorian tale, the confusion concerning the authorship of “The Siege of the Black Cottage” becomes rather more comprehensible and enlightening. Perhaps I can conclude by differentiating my position from those of a couple of earlier commentators on the process of collaboration with Dickens. First, despite my admiration for its patient unravelling of the ideological tensions between Dickens and Collins in their co-authoring of the Christmas numbers, I think that Lillian Nayder’s Unequal Partners slightly overdoes their personal and political conflicts. Something in the way of a control experiment, more systematically comparing and contrasting Dickens’s acts of collaboration with women writers – and Gaskell is really the only viable candidate here – might have produced a more nuanced account. On the other hand, I am convinced that Harold Orel considerably underplays the importance of Dickens’s relations to his co-authors in “Charles Dickens: establishing rapport with the public,” the relevant chapter of The Victorian Short Story. There, for example, Orel is surely wrong to claim that, in the Christmas numbers they worked on together, “Collins was responsible primarily for sections of the framework used by Dickens rather than for the narratives themselves” (p. 63). More generally Orel seeks to stress the uniqueness of Dickens’s sense of fictional form: “A short story by Dickens may resemble short stories by his contemporaries much less strikingly than it does longer stories by himself. In this genre, as in so much else that he wrote, Dickens created his own universe.” (p. 78). I could not disagree more with this conclusion.
Works Cited

(Items in periodicals are identified fully in body of the text.)


