

Review: Kevin A. Morrison, *The Provincial Fiction of Mitford, Gaskell and Eliot* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2023) 308pp. ISBN 978-1-3995-1608-2, £90.

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KEVIN MORRISON'S NEW monograph, *The Provincial Fiction of Mitford, Gaskell and Eliot*, delivers an entertaining and thought-provoking examination of the interrelated careers of these three renowned women writers. Morrison traces the works of Mary Russell Mitford through to Elizabeth Gaskell and then George Eliot, arguing that they challenged the traditional constraints of women's writing and publication to champion what is – and has been – the historically undervalued genre of provincial fiction. Morrison's central argument is that, for all three writers, a sense of place drives cultural, social, and political thought. By reconsidering the provincial genre as one in which modernity is explored in a familiar environment, Morrison argues that Mitford, Gaskell and Eliot challenge preconceptions of rural and provincial areas as inherently conservative.

Morrison's study is the first of its kind to link these three writers together in what he terms a 'chain of influence', with Mitford's literary career beginning in the late 1810s, Gaskell's in the 1830s, and Eliot's in the 1850s. Morrison traces the evolution of their writing and demonstrates the intertextuality between the three authors. For instance, he notes that although Eliot was a toddler when Mitford first came into the public eye, Gaskell was ten years older. His question is then, 'not, therefore, 'Did Elizabeth Gaskell read *Our Village* [by Mitford]' but 'When did she first encounter it?'.¹ Additionally, he argues that, in turn, Eliot draws on thematic and formal techniques used by Mitford and Gaskell, as well as gaining an 'essential insight' from her reading of Gaskell that 'one

¹ Kevin A. Morrison, *The Provincial Fiction of Mitford, Gaskell and Eliot* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), p. 122.

could both long for rural community and be aware of that longing', which allowed space for critical reflection.² Morrison deftly explores a wide range of subjects throughout this monograph: sketch writing, intertextuality, print cultures, liberalism, national identity and the emotional attachment to land are all treated with a nuanced approach and operate in dynamic interplay to form a complete and strong contextual background to his argument. He also uses a comprehensive and interdisciplinary selection of critics as support: Franco Moretti and John Plotz's works on the geographies of the provincial novel, McDonagh's essays on the modernity of provincialism and Karen Chase's work on ageing studies are amongst those featured.³ Perhaps the most important theoretical framing to Morrison's central argument is the work of cultural theorist Svetlana Boym, whose concepts of restorative and reflective nostalgia (as set out in her 2001 work, *The Future of Nostalgia*) Morrison routinely returns to as he builds his case on Mitford, Gaskell, and Eliot.⁴ Proponents of restorative nostalgia desire to reconstruct the past, and, as Morrison explains, they 'recognise in their longing an outcome to be realised: the eradication of the pain that comes with change and loss'.⁵ Those who engage in reflective nostalgia use this wistfulness to think critically about constructive change for the future. Principally, Morrison argues that, contrary to established belief, Mitford, Gaskell and Eliot's works have 'always resisted the impulse to deny change or to reconstruct lost worlds.'⁶ His aim is to pull discourses of regionalism away from a traditional reading of conservatism and into a contemporary understanding of the economic, social and political challenges faced by these writers. By tracing the 'chain of influence' between the three, Morrison identifies how liberal thought evolved throughout the nineteenth century, which in turn allows him to trace Eliot's own liberalism as an emotional response to landscape. It is surprising then that, despite such a varied bibliography, Morrison does not draw on the work of

² Morrison, p. 15.

³ Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2007); John Plotz, *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Josephine McDonagh, 'Place, Region, and Migration', in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel, 1820-1880*, ed. by J. Kucich and J.B. Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 361-76; Karen Chase, *The Victorians and Old Age* (New York: OUP, 2009).

⁴ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

⁵ Morrison, p. 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Dominic Head, in particular his monograph *Modernity and the English Rural Novel* (2017), for cultural context. Head's examination of the modern nature of rurality is pertinent to Morrison's own argument about the progressive possibilities of rurality and provincialism, and would have helped reinforce his case for the long-lasting influences of Mitford, Gaskell, and Eliot's work through to the twentieth century.

Chapter One focuses on the economic and professional challenges that Mitford faced as a woman writer in the periodical culture of the 1820s to argue that voice, a combination of 'direct address, detailed commentary and exhaustive description', is an 'intrinsic element' of provincial fiction.⁷ Chapter Two moves to those of Mitford's sketches which are concerned with a wider rural setting. Through an examination that stretches from their original publishing context through to the later editions from the latter half of the nineteenth century, Morrison shows the importance of their connection to a specific place in time, arguing against critical works that read Mitford's work as a 'portrayal of a provincial village that exists outside of history.'⁸ The third chapter links all three writers' use of voice within their texts. It begins with Gaskell's engagement with Mitford, demonstrating the ways in which Mitford's use of voice directly influenced Gaskell's development of her own textual voice, and then proceeds to show how Eliot was influenced by the narrative discourse of *Cranford*. Morrison's fourth chapter engages with Eliot's liberalism, and sets out an argument on nationhood that ties the provincial village's community functionality with cultivating a sense of citizenship. Eliot's *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (1871-72) forms the basis of Morrison's final chapter. In this section, he argues that the novel is concerned with how a sense of self is cultivated through the relationship between citizenship and a movement towards representative government.

The clear strength of Morrison's monograph is his section on Mary Russell Mitford. He draws on the important context of the threat of poverty in her life due to her father's penchant for gambling. By reading Mitford in the context of the publishing environment of the time – initially a 'patronage' system which eventually gave way in the late eighteenth century to allow the fostering of relationships between authors, editors, and publishers, and which, for the first time, made the idea of being a literary celebrity possible – Morrison identifies the ways in which Mitford fashioned herself as

⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

⁸ Ibid., p. 26.

an author and assembled her following.⁹ Morrison writes that 'in the case of Mitford's periodical sketches, her contributions to the *Lady's Magazine* [...] were often melded into a house style', as editorial teams attempted to bind together a naturally fragmentary collection.¹⁰ Mitford, Morrison tells us, rebelled against this. With literary sketching 'seen as a particularly appropriate genre for women writers because it was considered a less ambitious literary form', she cultivated a 'distinctive rhetorical style' that utilised her fondness for letter writing. Morrison tracks her use of direct address within narrative through to Gaskell and Eliot and argues that these narrative devices allow the writers to acknowledge the rural in order to differentiate their work from it.¹¹

Another insightful chapter explores the commercial aspects of Mitford's fiction as she attempted to become a professional writer with, crucially, a steady stream of income. Morrison notes that Virginia Woolf had called Mitford a 'hack who, driven by the need for "money", "scarcely knew what tragedy to spin, what annual to edit"', and claimed that her work was of 'marginal literary value', yet Morrison's examination suggests a rather different characterisation.¹² As the only surviving child of the heiress Mary Russell and the financially reckless George Mitford, Mary was under an immense amount of strain to support her family, yet, as a woman, had limited options. This led Mitford to publish prolifically over her literary career and to 'work across genres to maximise financial gain', whilst also battling with editors to be paid what she felt she deserved.¹³ It would be easy, as Woolf did, to deem this a characteristic of a demanding personality, but Morrison treats it with an empathetic understanding of the writer's familial situation.

For Morrison, Mitford is evidently the binding force between the three writers. His connections between Gaskell and Eliot as a pair are convincing enough, but perhaps slightly less enthusiastic. Of the three, it is Gaskell who seems to figure the least in Morrison's argument. This is not through a lack of analytical strength, but rather that his interest in Mitford and Eliot is so apparent, that the Gaskell section is comparatively weaker. Morrison does identify similarities in narrative techniques between Gaskell, Eliot

⁹ Ibid., p. 68

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 52

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 52, 216.

¹² Virginia Woolf, *Flush: A Biography*, qtd. in Morrison, p. 274.

¹³ Morrison, p. 41.

and Mitford – ironic disjunction, direct address, and descriptive detail, for example – and reminds us that ‘the material aspects of publication and their modes of circulation engender different textual meanings [...] Thus, establishing which version or versions Gaskell read has significant implications for understanding how *Our Village* informs *Cranford*.¹⁴ This attentiveness towards the importance of para- and inter-textuality between the author and reader of serial publications further highlights the influential lineage originating with Mitford.

Overall, Morrison’s monograph is a pleasurable and thought-provoking read that successfully links Mary Russell Mitford, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot together for the first time in a chain of influence. Morrison tackles a varied and robust set of ideas and does so in a lively and readable manner. His application of Boym’s differentiation of restorative and reflective nostalgias allows him to reframe the provincial fiction of these three women writers in a way that reveals their progressive nature. It is a wholly refreshing take on Mitford, Gaskell, and Eliot, and stands as another superb addition to Kevin A. Morrison’s existing output.



BIOGRAPHY: Rebecca Shipp is a second-year doctoral researcher at the University of Lincoln, whose thesis focusses upon how the walking habits of rural communities and inhabitants are demonstrated throughout literature of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and questions what these representations can tell us about both the formation of personal identity and the inheritance of cultural heritage/memory. She is the editor of the Thomas Hardy Journal and the Thomas Hardy Society Journal, and is a board member for the Thomas Hardy Society and the University of Lincoln’s Nineteenth Century Research Group.

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¹⁴ Ibid., p. 127.