The Plot of Bigamous Return

*It is painful to inquire where it is that all those stories of bigamy and seduction, those soi disant revelations of things that lie below the surface of life, come from.*

—Margaret Oliphant, “Novels” (1867)

Stories of bigamy flooded the British publishing market in the 1860s. Victorian reviewers insisted that bigamy, “like Pallas, . . . sprang into being full-grown” in 1861, when Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* began serialization. Bigamy was identified as the most shocking plot of a genre that was notoriously linked to its shocking plots. “A sensation novel, as a matter of course, abounds in incident,” wrote H. L. Mansel; “Indeed, as a general rule, it consists of nothing else.” “Incidents”—events, episodes, plot points—tended to define the genre. Alfred Austin provided a mocking summary of these plots in his review, “Our Novels: The Sensational School” (1870):

If, after all this, the reader is not prepared to be poisoned, stabbed, blown into the air; to find a skeleton in every cupboard, and a lost will in every drawer; to meet with an inconvenient number of husbands, and a most perplexing superfluity of wives; and to get rid of them by arson, strangulation, or a deep well, he must be very insensible to the influence and charm of situation.

The inconvenience of these extraneous spouses operates as a narrative engine in Austin’s account, generating further plot. For Mansel, as for Austin, of all the incidents most likely to seem sensational, “undoubtedly the first place must be given to Bigamy.” An article in the *Westminster Review* in 1866 exemplifies the tendency to distill the new genre of sensation fiction down to this prominent plot:

The Sensational Mania in Literature burst[s] out only in times of mental poverty, and afflict[s] only the most poverty-stricken minds. From an epidemic, however, it has lately changed into an endemic. Its virus is spreading in all directions, from the penny journal to the shilling magazine, and from the shilling magazine to the thirty

**Abstract** This article traces a single plot—the plot of bigamous return—through a range of genres and texts, including Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) and Alfred Tennyson’s “Enoch Arden” (1864), concentrating on Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Sylvia’s Lovers* (1863). Arguing that plot is a more productive heuristic than genre, this article investigates the intersection of literary currents in one historical moment with the long durée of a recurring story, powerfully present in nautical ballads and melodrama.

shillings volume. Bigamy is just now its typical form. Miss Braddon first brought the type into fashion. No novel can now possibly succeed without it. In real life money is sometimes obtained by marriage, but in literature, only by bigamy.5

This reviewer swiftly moves from the larger category of the “Sensational” to the story of bigamy, here typically identified as Braddon’s invention. In this account, the literary history of bigamy, from the penny journal to the thirty-shilling volume, is as brief as the half-life of a virus. Reviewers struggled to explain the contagion of bigamy. Mansel astutely set the stage for historicist analyses by suggesting that sensation fiction was the product of “periodicals, circulating libraries, and railway bookstalls,” and predicting that a generation accustomed to divorce would discard the plot as “obsolete.”6

The idea that sensation fiction burst forth upon an unsuspecting public in a sudden generic efflorescence largely persists today: “The new genre had no perceptible infancy,” Winifred Hughes writes; “its greatest triumph, as well as its masterpieces, coincided with its initial appearance. It sprang full-blown, nearly simultaneously, from the minds of Wilkie Collins, Mrs. Henry Wood, and M. E. Braddon.”7 Other critics argue that it is this very suddenness that renders the genre suspect: “The ‘sensation novel,’” Ronald Thomas writes, “was a genre invented in the 1860s by the same outraged literary critics who condemned it.”8 Jonathan Loesberg identifies the ideological motivations of those reviewers, tying the genre to the class conflict leading up to the Second Reform Act of 1867 and arguing that “Victorian reviewers produced the genre and thus also the structure of the critical discussion.”9 Historicist critics, including Barbara Leckie, Karen Chase, and Michael Levenson, follow Mansel’s lead, showing how sensation fiction was culturally bound to the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, the Yelverton bigamy trials of 1861–64, and the appearance of the penny press.10 While there is no doubt that sensation fiction was historically conditioned by these factors, such arguments still leave us accounting for a sudden, mysterious literary development.

I propose that we turn from the questionably constructed genre of sensation fiction to the plot of bigamy, shifting our attention away from a genre with no apparent infancy to a long-known plot. The particular variation on the plot of bigamy that I call the plot of bigamous return unfolds over an extended historical arc, encompassing the literary gestation period of the dozens of bigamy novels, poems, and plays that appeared “full-grown” in the 1860s, but also moving past this seemingly monstrous birth.11

Renderings

The plot of bigamous return begins with a marriage between a maiden and a sailor. This marriage might take place in a church, or it might
be a folk vow—a broom jumped, a handkerchief torn in half. While the wife waits at home, the sailor nearly dies at sea. She is finally convinced—sometimes by his rival, sometimes by her own intuition—that he is dead, and she agrees to remarry. In the story’s dramatic twist, the sailor returns to discover that his wife has married another. This, then, is not simply a story of courtship and a wedding, but of bigamy and the disruption of a marriage.

Of course, dangerous absence at sea and painful waiting at home are elements at least as ancient as *The Odyssey*, and seafaring communities tell many versions of this plot. The story in this particular form can be dated to one of the earliest prose fictions, Chariton’s Greek romance *Chaereas and Callirhoe* (c. 100 AD), in which star-crossed lovers are buffeted about the Mediterranean. Callirhoe and Chaereas are forced by separation and slavery into a painfully complex bigamy, with no easy solutions: Callirhoe “loved Chaereas; she respected Dionysus.” Callirhoe’s lament is typical: “Truly I am lost to you, Chaereas, separated from you by so vast an ocean!” The long absences and uncertain fate of seagoing people necessitate a more flexible conception of marriage, which must be quickly transacted and may be as quickly annulled, and of death, which must be considered always possible, but remains unknown and unconfirmable.

This is an old story, and yet Braddon’s insistently up-to-date *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1861–62) follows this same plot pattern. As the novel’s amateur detective eventually discovers, the woman now known as Lady Audley began life as Helen Maldon, who married a dashing soldier in a port town. When the soldier set sail for Australia, abandoning his young wife and son, Helen chose to consider him dead and established a new identity for herself as a single governess. By the time her husband returned from his years-long absence, she had bigamously remarried the wealthy baronet Michael Audley. *Lady Audley’s Secret* was by no means the only such plot to appear in the early 1860s; the novel’s phenomenal popularity inspired dozens of imitators. These years also saw versions of the plot of bigamous return that were held to be quite distinct from Braddon’s novel, including Elizabeth Gaskell’s historical novel *Sylvia’s Lovers* (1863) and Alfred Tennyson’s narrative poem “Enoch Arden” (1864). As its title suggests, *Sylvia’s Lovers* also hinges on a love triangle: Sylvia is betrothed to a dashing sailor, a promise solemnized by splitting a sixpence, but her devoted cousin deceives her into believing that the sailor is dead. When she finally marries her cousin, the sailor reappears, sparking the novel’s furiously active final volume, full of improbable coincidences and deathbed reunions. While Gaskell’s modern critics tend to consider the novel’s ending ungainly, her first readers and reviewers praised the conclusion as “very finely worked up, and... as true as it is powerful,” and sighed that “the end of the book is like the burden of some true-hearted old ballad tale.”
A glowing review of *Sylvia’s Lovers* that appeared in the *Reader* explicitly connected Gaskell’s novel and Tennyson’s poem: “Rumour has assigned a very similar plot as a subject for the labours of the laureate. We can hardly expect, even from him, a more pathetic rendering of it.” Like *Sylvia’s Lovers*, “Enoch Arden” is set in a northern English fishing port, in a past close enough for memory but distant enough for legend. The reviewer Walter Bagehot cursorily summarized Tennyson’s poem as a “simple . . . story,” although it in fact recounts multiple events in a succession that is now more likely to seem baroque: Enoch and his friend Philip vie for the love of young Annie Lee; Enoch marries her, working as a fisherman to support their growing family; he breaks his leg and loses this source of income, but joins a merchant vessel en route to China; he is shipwrecked and remains away ten years; meanwhile Philip finally succeeds in marrying Annie; Enoch returns, but conceals his identity until he is on his deathbed. This elaborate plot appeared “simple” to Bagehot because, as the reviewer for the *Reader* recognized, both “Enoch Arden” and *Sylvia’s Lovers* were “renderings,” explicit retellings of the well-understood story of bigamous return. This article explores the effects of understanding individual literary works as *renderings*, that is, as shorn of their singularity and imbricated in a range of overlapping formal categories and canons.

Any identification of the genre of sensation fiction with “bigamy . . . [as] its typical form” requires denying the presence of the plot in other genres. In spite of the close proximity of Braddon’s, Gaskell’s, and Tennyson’s plots in literary-historical chronology and in narrative structure, reviews of *Sylvia’s Lovers* and “Enoch Arden” seldom identified Braddon’s fabulously popular novel as an influence or intertext. Nor did reviewers describe Braddon’s novel as a “rendering” of a classic story; they instead grouped *Lady Audley’s Secret* with Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1860) and Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* (1860) as part of the disturbing avant-garde of what they defined as a new genre: the sensation novel. The reviewers excluded Braddon’s novel from the multigeneric literary heritage ascribed to Gaskell’s novel and Tennyson’s poem, a heritage spanning George Crabbe’s poetry and tales, nautical melodrama, and ballads, among other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources. They drew a stark line dividing Braddon’s novels from other contemporary fiction. This was sometimes an actual line, like the one that separates sensation fiction from two Anthony Trollope novels reviewed in Margaret Oliphant’s joint review, in order “to make as distinct a separation as the printer’s skill can indicate between the lower and the higher ground in fiction.” This is the enigma posed by the plot of bigamous return: the same story was encountered by the same reviewers in multiple texts published within a few years of one another, but, while some versions were identified as renderings of a comfortably
familiar traditional story, others were held up as harbingers of a dangerous new genre.

A review of *Sylvia’s Lovers* in the *Examiner* underscored the lengths to which reviewers went in order to specify the difference between a novel by Gaskell and one by Braddon:

In its whole texture *Sylvia’s Lovers* is as lawn to sackcloth compared with the coarse “sensation” tales of late forced into fashion.... In story as in style, the contrast is complete.... There is no bigamist, no murderer, no villain at all. There are the shortcomings of human weakness common to us all, the lesser conflicts of character wherein no small part of human life consists.  

The *Examiner’s* assertion that *Sylvia’s Lovers* has “no bigamist” is literally true, but the novel’s dramatic logic depends on the difficulty of defining marriage in a world of unofficial, yet still binding, oaths. Gaskell’s novel’s canny hybridity tests the *Examiner’s* insistence that it contrasts “in story as in style” with “such books as ‘Lady Audley’s Secret.’”  

*Sylvia’s Lovers*’ historical setting may lend it a classically serious style that differs from Braddon’s popular fiction, but its “story” clearly resembles that of Braddon’s pattern-setting hit.

The *Examiner*’s alignment of “story” and “style” encodes an important way of thinking about genre. While plot has always seemed the simplest of literary heuristics, genre has been understood as inherently dual. Genre is defined by Claudio Guillén, for instance, as “the association of matter with form,” while René Wellek and Austin Warren insist that genre must be located at the intersection of “both outer form (specific metre or structure) and also... inner form (attitude, tone, purpose—more crudely, subject and audience).” The habitual linkage of the binaries of “story” and “style,” “matter” and “form,” and “inner” and “outer” in the constitution of genre is useful for establishing productive categories, but in the process it creates surprisingly durable barriers between related texts.

Rather than tying matter to form, I propose that we revel in the one-sidedness of plot. Taking plot rather than genre as our term of analysis suggests how “matter” might operate irrespective of definitions of “form” that would distinguish a narrative poem from a three-volume novel, and, on a different generic scale, a “serious” novel from a “sensation” novel. Genre is often a misleading category, while plot—the story that is rendered—allows for a more nuanced account of form. Like other more common heuristics, however, plot can be a slippery category: though it may seem stable and prior to analysis, it is just as problematically the result of certain historically conditioned modes of reading and archiving. My understanding of plot is fundamentally historical; in this, it differs from some common formal accounts of this essential narrative building block.
For Aristotle, it was evident that plot (*mythos*) was the most central element of drama. His sense of plot as “the mimesis of the action” and “the organization of the incidents” set the terms of discussion about plot well into the twentieth century. In different ways, the Russian formalists and French structuralists built upon Aristotle’s sense of plot as an *organization*. Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*, for instance, identifies thirty-one distinct functions occurring in folktales in what he determined was an absolutely fixed order. Propp thus transforms a temporal sequence into a spatial arrangement of events. More recently, Peter Brooks and Paul Ricoeur have helpfully described plot as “an activity, a structuring operation” (Brooks) rather than a structure; plot in this account becomes “a configurational act . . . a ‘grasping together’ . . . eliciting a pattern from a succession” (Ricoeur). Although tracing the renderings of the plot of bigamous return has something in common with Propp’s creation of a “morphology” (“i.e., a description of the tale according to its component parts and the relationship of these components to each other and to the whole”), I emphasize Brooks’s and Ricoeur’s sense of plot as actively constructed. However, conceiving of plot as a process rather than a structure requires recognizing that certain plots are tied to their historical moments and may be more or less visible to individual readers situated at different points in history.

The idea that while one mode of reading might place a story on a historical continuum, seeing it as a rendering, and another mode might find the same story surprisingly anomalous has consequences for both the critical fortunes of a work and the experience of reading itself. Ricoeur suggests that familiar stories alter the expected shape of what he calls “narrative time”: “As soon as a story is well known . . . to follow the story is not so much to enclose its surprises or discoveries within our recognition of the meaning attached to the story, as to apprehend the episodes which are themselves well known as leading to this end.” Considering a story as a network of familiar “episodes” offers a useful way of thinking about plot without emphasizing the drive to resolution that Peter Brooks influentially characterized as “reading for the plot.” The reader’s project of “follow[ing] the story” is thus radically altered when encountering a retelling. While the experience of reading a new plot is dominated by suspense (what will happen next?), a familiar plot produces a more metaliterary response (how will they approach this scene?). The result is a shift from a line—plot over chronological time—to a pattern—plot as shape, or better, as cycle. Paradoxically, by focusing on plot in this way, “plot” in its most common sense of successive narrative events disappears; the plot of a rendering enables instead a kind of reading that must be attentive to a text’s modulations and variations along its formal axes.
This experiment produces a new sense of plot. Instead of considering plot as preformal matter (as genre theory might suggest) or as a static shape (as structuralism would have it), conceiving of plot as a mode of reading revises the literary historical categories that were shaped by early reviewers and that remain powerful, even when we fight them. Precisely because neither plot nor genre is immanent in a work of literature, a shift in heuristic approach usefully cuts across these carefully policed boundaries. Defining a plot (as opposed, in this case, to the genre of sensation fiction) can allow us to perform two interpretive acts at once: first, to reanimate the categories of the literary field in one historical moment (1861–64), exposing new patterns, and, second, to pivot from the historical facts and ideological pressures of that moment to the literary historical depth of a single plot that can be traced through time.

In the sections that follow, I test this procedure on the plot of bigamous return. I first disentangle the plot from the genre of sensation fiction by comparing the generically unlike pair Lady Audley’s Secret and “Enoch Arden.” I then uncover the plot’s rich tradition as a series of renderings through ballads of bigamous return, before turning, in the essay’s final section, to Gaskell’s Sylvia’s Lovers, a novel that itself muses on the literary legacy of oral and musical culture while shrewdly capitalizing on the popularity of sensational bigamy. It is through this reading of Sylvia’s Lovers that the power of plot to upend genre becomes most evident. Plot becomes the scene for repeatedly working through questions of mode and form, broadly defined.

Although many plots could be traced across genres and centuries, the plot of bigamous return itself thematizes the passage of time and accretion of narrative. Each moment of return within the plot is also a moment in the plot’s return. The reconceptualization of plot as a pattern rather than a line is particularly resonant for this plot, which deliberately thwart the telos of the Victorian novel’s dominant narrative structure, courtship leading to marriage. Neither marriage nor death is final in the versions of this story. The result is a case study for an approach to literary history that, by taking plot rather than genre as constitutive, reveals a newly porous sense of the Victorian novel.

Is Bigamy Sensational?

“Strange to say,” wrote Tennyson’s reviewer in the Athenaeum, “the least sensational of poets has made the passion of ‘Enoch Arden’ (the chief work as regards art and length in this new volume) turn on the incident of bigamy.”29 Is bigamy, then, sensational? What literature qualified as sensational was the subject of dispute from the moment the term crystallized
into a generic descriptor. Plot—“the incident of bigamy”—was not a sufficient criterion, in spite of critical insistence that it was central to the genre. Wellek and Warren’s strangely capacious definition of “inner form,” “attitude, tone, purpose—more crudely, subject and audience,” approaches the range of criteria required to address the genre of the sensational. For although Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* and Tennyson’s “Enoch Arden” contrast in nearly every respect in terms of “outer form” and “attitude, tone, purpose” (the former, a three-volume novel still bearing the marks of a relatively lowbrow serialization record, published by a self-described writer of “penny dreadfuls,” who was living in sin with her married publisher; the latter, a stately narrative poem of more than nine hundred lines, published as the lead poem in a volume by the current poet laureate), both novel and poem caused a sensation by confounding readers’ class expectations. Wellek and Warren’s phrase “subject and audience” will help parse how class intersects with genre and plot.

Even in the process of magisterially defining “The Sensational School” in 1870, Alfred Austin complained of the slipperiness of the genre’s readers in terms that foreground how the comparative class of the audience ought to constitute genre: “We remember once to have seen a sensational novel described as ‘kitchen literature.’ We thought the epithet appropriate. Unhappily, the sensational novel is that one touch of anything but nature that makes the kitchen and the drawing room kin.” Austin clarifies the class anxiety involved in Margaret Oliphant’s supposedly aesthetic desire to divide “the lower and the higher ground in fiction.” Servants and masters were increasingly consuming the same reading material, a worry a *Punch* cartoon of 1868 transforms into nervous laughter (fig. 1). A maid has borrowed a gentleman’s novel without authorization and is desperate to discover “if as how the ‘Markis’ found out as she’d pisoned ’er two fust ’usbands.” Their shared reading reflects poorly on both the underhanded, overeducated maid and her dissolute master. Although the hero of the borrowed novel is an English marquess (or possibly a French marquis), the cartoon reveals that the plot of excessively multiplied and violently terminated marriages titillates both lower and middle-class readers.

While the most popular novelistic bigamy plots described middle- or upper-class bigamists, like the landed Mr. Rochester and the baronet’s wife Lady Audley, actual bigamy was largely a lower-class phenomenon. The historian Lawrence Stone observes that the poor needed to create substitutes for insurmountably expensive official divorces, and contrived their own quasi-legal or illegal means of self-divorce—such as desertion, elopement, private separation, or the occasional wife-sale. So long as both parties were satisfied, the illegality of the procedure was irrelevant, and any subsequent act of bigamy carried few serious risks of discovery or of serious punishment if exposed.
And quite late in the century, the crusading author of *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883) observed of London’s poor,

Ask if the men and women living together in these rookeries are married, and your simplicity will cause a smile. Nobody knows. Nobody cares. Nobody expects that they are. . . . Those who appear to be married are often separated by a mere quarrel, and they do not hesitate to form similar companionships immediately.  

In fact, a reviewer in 1868 considered bigamy an uninteresting subject for a novel, primarily because “bigamy is an offence . . . that prevails chiefly among the uneducated poor of agricultural districts.”  

Novels like Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* transformed the bigamy plot by shifting its setting from rookeries and cottages to a baronet’s estate. Braddon’s description of the meteoric rise of a drunken sea captain’s daughter who successfully infiltrates the British nobility was therefore partly shocking because it transcribed a lower-class story into an upper-class situation, and into a commodity—the three-volume novel of domestic life—marketed to a middle-class audience. This audience, like Lady Audley herself, was drawn in part by the depiction of a lifestyle to which they might aspire.
Tennyson’s “Enoch Arden” also alters the class of the plot of bigamous return, but in a different manner: the poem, with its financially precarious fishermen, is a demographically probable version of the plot, but it was written for an audience quite unlike its subjects. Tennyson’s class transposition of bigamy’s readers forms the basis of a negative review by Walter Bagehot that set the tone for the critical response to what is often termed the poem’s “vulgarity.”

For Bagehot, to return to the generic terms proffered by the Examiner, the “story” of “Enoch Arden” is out of alignment with the poem’s “style,” both of which are distasteful in different ways. The poem’s story features unappealingly lower-class characters, while its style is unpleasantly “ornate”:

Everyone knows that in himself Enoch could not have been charming. People who sell fish about the country (and this is what he did, though Mr. Tennyson won’t speak out, and wraps it up) never are beautiful. As Enoch was and must be coarse, in itself the poem must depend for its charm on a ‘gay confusion’—on a splendid accumulation of impossible accessories.

In his frustration, Bagehot coins a word: “Picturesque means fit to be put into a picture; we want a word literatesque, ‘fit to be put into a book,’” “that perfect combination in the subject-matter of literature, which suits the art of literature.” The disconnect between subject matter and art that Bagehot tracks here is of course a part of the literary critical tradition of defining genres. This is a formal problem, but Bagehot himself drives home its ideological aspect: “The sudden millionaires of the present day hope to disguise their social defects by buying old places, and hiding among aristocratic furniture; just so, a great artist who has to deal with characters artistically imperfect, will use an ornate style, will fit them into a scene where there is much else to look at.”

The literary sumptuary laws that Bagehot proposes would confine ornament to its proper class and restrict the migration of the bigamy plot.

This is one genealogy of the plot of bigamous return, the story that the reviewers accusingly told of a middle-class public learning to like the sensational reading of their inferiors, at the same moment as those inferiors learned to read along with their betters. The following section traces a quite different genealogy for the plot, one for which class status is no less central, but which does not require literacy. Juxtaposing two traditions in which any given version of bigamous return might be positioned emphasizes the activity involved in reading a plot as a rendering.

The Ballads of Bigamy

When Margaret Oliphant wondered “where it is that all those stories of bigamy and seduction, those soi disant revelations of things that lie...
below the surface of life, come from,” like other perplexed Victorian reviewers, she suggested that it was *Lady Audley’s Secret* that “brought in the reign of bigamy as an interesting and fashionable crime.”42 Earlier in the same piece, however, Oliphant had imagined a different literary history for the emergent genre of sensation fiction: “The change perhaps began at the time when Jane Eyre made what advanced critics call her ‘protest’ against the conventionalities in which the world clothes itself.”43 Oliphant’s competing origin stories distinguish Braddon’s plot from Brontë’s protest, but of course, *Jane Eyre* (1847) itself turns on the threat of bigamy. And in an early review of *Jane Eyre*, G. H. Lewes could already identify the familiarity of Brontë’s plot as an important reservation in his praise: “There is indeed, too much melodrama and improbability, which smack of the circulating-library,—we allude particularly to the mad wife and all that relates to her.”44

The oral tradition of the plot of bigamous return is a primary source of its “melodrama and improbability,” operating as both historical background and contemporary competitor to the “circulating-library” popularizations of bigamy that I have already outlined. Although possible genealogies for the plot could be found in many places, including the penny press and melodrama, the ballad’s formal patternings, supernatural stories, and paths of transmission mark it out as an important source of renderings. While ballads have become central to the study of romantic poetry in the early nineteenth century, they have largely been ignored in relation to the Victorian novel. This, indeed, is another result of the kind of myopia genre differences can create, and which emphasis on plot might repair.45 The account of plot as a rendering is of course absolutely fundamental to the oral tradition, but it resonates with the novel as well. In what follows, I identify the crucial plot points of the balladic history of bigamy. As the same series of episodes continues to recur, I hope to duplicate the effect of a familiar retelling of a story across genres, so that this seemingly idiosyncratic plot begins to read as a rendering.

The nineteenth-century American ballad scholar Francis Child categorized the most prominent ballad of the plot of bigamous return under the title “James Harris (The Daemon Lover).”46 In this ballad, a young woman makes “a solemn vow” (in some variants, this is an official marriage) to the sailor James Harris, who is then pressed to sea in the navy. After years of faithfulness, the woman hears that Harris is dead, whereupon she marries a local carpenter. Harris’s spirit returns a significant seven years after he had disappeared and convinces the woman to sail away from her new family with him in a ship with silken sails and a golden mast. The ballad’s variants involve a range of endings, from the realistic (the wife’s regret, the carpenter’s suicide) to the supernatural (Harris’s revelation as the Devil himself, taunting his bride with the hills of heaven and steering her toward the
mountain of hell). “James Harris,” like all iterations of the plot of bigamous return, stages infidelity as an opposition between spouses across time, rather than against one spouse in the present. Harris’s wife attempts a sequential life, but his return disrupts that linearity with an irreconcilable simultaneity.

The multiple versions of “James Harris” immediately demonstrate that any “single” ballad is in fact richly multiple; hard facts are subsumed in general states, and a husband in one variant may be a sweetheart in another, with little real difference. This ambivalence is one of the generic traces the ballad leaves on the bigamy novel; its plot pattern remains constant in spite of the wide range of possible substitutions within its formal framework. The plot of bigamous return, across ballads and novels, may involve a male or female bigamist, and the bigamist may be the victim of a misunderstanding, or may deliberately commit the crime. The plot accommodates a sympathetic or critical view of all three bigamous subjects, as the titles of the common variants of “James Harris” suggest: they switch the ballad’s perspective from “Harris” himself to the wife (the ballad’s earliest known variant is called “A Warning for Married Women”) or to the second husband (in North America, the ballad is often known as “The House Carpenter”). The story can also be told in a variety of possible modes, from demonic terror to comic insouciance. The double title Francis Child assigned “James Harris (The Daemon Lover)” itself demonstrates how a ballad can navigate between two modes: in this case, the historical realism of full names and the supernaturalism of the plot’s most startling ending. In the ballad, the returning lover is at once a historical personage and a devilish revenant. The ghost of James Harris, though a spirit, “spake like a man,” convincing his former sweetheart of his wealth: “When he had told her these fair tales, to love him she began, / Because he was in humane shape much like unto a man.” A man and yet a devil, “James Harris” is the otherworldly expression of a painfully realistic situation.

In other ballads, slight narrative shifts can twist the same narrative structure from melodrama into comedy. “Hind Horn” (Child 17) may be the oldest of a family of ballads that offer a happier vision of the return of a sailor than “James Harris” does. Hind Horn and the king’s daughter exchange tokens of their love, often a ring that will indicate the princess’s loyalty to Horn while he is at sea. When the ring’s brightness fades, he returns to hear that she’ll soon be married. Disguised as a beggar, Horn shows her the ring, which she takes as awful proof that her love is dead. Reassured of her fidelity, he reveals himself, and they marry. Some of the many later variants date from a 1750 broadside, “The Sailor’s Return, or the Broken Token,” in which a maiden is approached by a man who suggests that her sailor sweetheart has been killed or is unfaithful. She scorns the newcomer’s advances, declaring she will remain loyal to her sailor. He then reveals his half of the token they
once divided—a coin, a handkerchief, or a ring that sealed their vow to marry; he is her faithful lover, disguised or altered by time. Broken Token ballads transform the stasis of waiting for an absent lover into a dramatic test, in which the complexity of fidelity can be resolved into a happy ending cemented by a simple proof. Does he still have her ring? Does she still have her half of their handkerchief?

“Jack Robinson,” which William Logan identifies in his Pedlar’s Pack of Ballads and Songs (1869) as an eighteenth-century ballad, exemplifies the flexibility of the plot outlined through these two groups of ballads. “Jack Robinson” includes many of the details characteristic of the tragic plot of bigamous return, transformed into a comic revision of a Broken Token ballad. Jack Robinson and his sweetheart Poll split a handkerchief in half to signify their engagement before he sets sail. When Jack returns after years of absence, however, he discovers that his former fiancée has married:

Says the landlady, says she, “I’ve changed my state,”
“Why you don’t mean,” says Jack, “as how you’ve got a mate;
You know you promis’d me.” Says she, “I couldn’t wait,
For no tidings could I gain of you, Jack Robinson.
When one day somebody comed to me and said,
That somebody else had somewheres read
In some newspaper as how that you was dead,”
“I han’t been dead at all,” says Jack Robinson. (Tol de rol, &c.)

Then he turn’d his quid and finish’d his glass,
Hitch’d up his trowsers, and said, “alas! alas!
That ever I should live to be made such an ass!
To be bilk’d by a woman!” says Jack Robinson.
“But to fret and stew about it now is all in vain,
I’ll get a ship and off I’ll go to Holland, France, and Spain,
No matter where: —to Portsmouth I’ll ne’er come back again,”
And he was off before they could say Jack Robinson. (Tol de rol, &c.) 49

The merry conclusion of “Jack Robinson” highlights the ontological ambiguity of the sailor’s life—thought dead, but not “dead at all,” Jack Robinson’s very name summons at once a presence and an absence. “Gone before you can say Jack Robinson” is the man who was (but was not) Poll’s husband. 50

Poll’s marriage represents a laughable infidelity in “Jack Robinson,” but the reasons for her mistake are precisely detailed: uncertain information comes to the illiterate sweetheart of the nonwriting sailor through a newspaper that has been translated into gossip. “Jack Robinson” demonstrates the dangers of both oral transmission and print communication in a form—the broadside ballad—that itself borders both. This kind of historical precision is intrinsic to the many variations on this plot, since the return of a sailor who had been pressed into naval service would in reality have seemed truly
miraculous. Harsh conditions on board ship, disease, and natural disaster were even more dangerous than the wars that the sailors had been pressed to wage. Given this context, the creakiest melodramatic devices of nautical ballads could be thought of as strictly historical. Ballads accommodate a worldview in which both life and death are equally unexpected. In such a view, survival and fidelity are actually as supernatural as ballads of demon lovers and magically retained tokens suggest.

Generic Residue

In addition to providing variations on the plot of bigamous return, and what I call the ballad’s generic residue (particularly its flexibility and modal variety), ballad scholarship suggests helpful methodologies for any historical approach to a plot. Two concepts are particularly productive for approaching plot cross-generically: the concept of incremental repetition and the concept of a wandering tune. Both have implications for any attempted taxonomy but are especially relevant to the plot of bigamous return, a plot that is itself structured around repetition with a difference.

The Victorian ballad scholar Francis Gummere named the ballad’s characteristic habit of near repetition “incremental repetition.” Gummere wrote that there is “nothing straightforward” about the narrative structure of a ballad; “The story, if that word may be used, keeps lingering, still lingering, and then leaps to a new part somewhat like those clocks whose hands point only to the five-minute intervals on the dial.” For Gummere, incremental repetition is “the lingering, of the succession of stanzas or of verses, mainly in triads, which are identical save for one or two pivotal words, delaying and almost pausing on the action, and marking a new phase in the grouping of persons and events.” The lingering, “almost pausing,” forward movement of incremental repetition suggests a way that repetition can be progressive; the story, though not straightforward, nonetheless moves on.

The jagged advancement of plot suggested by the clock’s leaping and lingering describes the narrative structure of ballads, and particularly the abrupt revelations of bigamy, but it also plays out beyond the borders of a single ballad, through the concept of a “wandering” tune. The historian Peter Burke proposes two paradoxes of the oral musical tradition: that “the same tune is different,” and that “different tunes are the same.” That is, improvisation and constant variation make the idea of a fixed text irrelevant, while “motifs may be said to ‘wander’ or ‘float’ from one tune to another.” Burke demonstrates this peripatetic quality through “the motif of the return of the hero,” an umbrella motif that includes the versions of bigamous return, observing that
we find that he may be in disguise and may not; that he may find his beloved waiting for him, or about to marry another, or married already, with several children (as in the French ballad *Pauvre soldat revient de guerre*), or gone, perhaps kidnapped by pirates. If we were listing examples of this motif among the British ballads, it would be odd to include Child 17, *Hind Horn*, where the hero turns up at his love’s wedding, and not Child 53, *Young Beichan*, which reverses the situation and makes the hero’s first love return as young Beichan is marrying someone else.56

This mode of criticism—the naming and grouping of related instances—is common to studies of ballads and folklore but remains unusual in novel criticism. The claim that individual novels would defy such categorization is often made in defense of formalism (“close” reading continues to battle “distant” reading, and so on), but the result is a prohibition on the analysis of an important formal element—plot.57

By broadening the context of Burke’s concept of musical motifs that “‘wander’ or ‘float’ from one tune to another” to the interrelation of oral and literary forms, a new oral-literary history begins to emerge that is capable of enfolding the novel in a larger set of contexts. Critical thought about ballads offers a set of tools for theorizing this history. For most eighteenth-and nineteenth-century ballad collectors, the ballad was a survival from a personal or national infancy, persisting miraculously into modernity. The ballad was dated from these two parallel pasts, and it often continues to be “cast as the first poem of childhood, learned from nurse or mother, and/or as a relic of the national past,” as Steve Newman observes.58 Ballad collectors concentrated on preserving rural ballads that confirmed their sense of the ballad as an instantiation of Old England’s patrimony.59 Susan Stewart describes the collector’s investment in the ballad as “arrested history”:

The aristocracy of the ballad was envisioned as a pure and uncorrupted one—the ballad was to be steeped in history, yet locked within an impenetrable feudalism, hence an arrested history. Thus despite the ballad’s actual place in history—its absorption of the ongoingsness of temporality via details, innovations, borrowings, fragmentation, and changes in form—and despite the evident appearance of the ballad within contemporary traditional culture, the collectors and anthologists of the ballad continued to look for an uncorrupted and seemingly transcendent form.60

Stewart shows how the search for these resistant ur-ballads is belied by the vision of the precarious survival of the past that characterized the entire concept of the ballad “revival.” The revival, usually dated from the second half of the eighteenth century, posited an irretrievable past, even as it required an investigation of the ballad’s present. Maureen McLane notes that “What was theorized as archaic, ‘rude,’ and primitive was seen to persist into the modern, particularly in the Scottish cultural imaginary. By this cultural logic, milkmaids and their songs existed in 1771 but were not of 1771.”61 The
women singing ballads were out of time, with the political implication that they were therefore impotent.\textsuperscript{62}

Unlike these collectors, Elizabeth Gaskell, writing fiction in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, developed a radical approach to ballad history, one in which the ballad is both of the past and of the present. In her first novel, \textit{Mary Barton} (1848), ballads supply a lyrical touchstone for both visions of oral-literary history. Mary’s aged neighbor Alice Wilson uses a ballad to recall her rural childhood from the perspective of a grimy urban life:

You see there are hills there as seem to go up into th’ skies, not near may be, but that makes them all the bonnier. I used to think they were the golden hills of heaven, about which mother sang when I was a child:

\begin{quote}
“You are the golden hills o’ heaven, 
Where ye sall never win.”
\end{quote}

Something about a ship and a lover that should hae been na lover, the ballad was.\textsuperscript{63}

The ballad fragment that Alice remembers—significantly, the now familiar “James Harris (The Daemon Lover)” —operates on both of the ballad’s levels of past memory, personal and national. The people of England were not always factory workers, as Alice’s nostalgic glimmer reveals. But if Alice’s rural childhood is represented by hills, it is by the very abstract “golden hills o’ heaven”; the British past, in this account, is neither industrial nor exactly rural, but is instead balladic. This matrilineal instance of ballad transmission—from Alice’s mother to young Alice, old Alice to young Mary—echoes ballad collectors’ accounts of songs learned by their largely female sources in childhood. Alice’s song, like those the ballad collectors prized, foregrounds the difficulty of retrieving the past. Alice merely attempts to connect Mary to her literary past through these “old scraps of ballads.”\textsuperscript{64} Partially recalled and incompletely rendered, these scraps hint at the power of a shared literary heritage, but also suggest a failure in its transmission, and even the likelihood of the death of a tradition.\textsuperscript{65} This account of the disappearance of ballads parallels structuralist and poststructuralist descriptions of the decay of older genres, as in Claude Lévi-Strauss’s influential account of mythmaking as \textit{bricolage} from older materials and the way in which myth “finally exhausts itself,” and becomes open to fictionality, metaphor, and history, or in Frederic Jameson’s contention that “the older generic categories do not, for all that, die out, but persist in the half-life of the subliterary genres of mass culture … await[ing] the resurrection of their immemorial, archetypal resonance.”\textsuperscript{66}

But even within \textit{Mary Barton}, Gaskell posits a second model for thinking about the ballad’s relation to history—in this model, the ballad is of the present. While Mary herself sings a traditional British ballad, “Bonny Barbara Allen,” her friend Margaret performs a very different ballad, the
nineteenth-century urban broadside, “Th’ Owdham Weaver,” which Gaskell elaborately identifies and footnotes as a “complete Lancashire ditty.” The seventeenth-century “Barbara Allen” and recently composed “Owdham Weaver” are contemporaries in Gaskell’s novel, and both at once historical and present. In her inclusion of an urban ballad, Gaskell develops a sense of literary history that is neither Whiggishly progressive nor nostalgic for a rural past. Her frequent footnotes to Mary Barton, identifying the linguistic history of Manchester phrases that would be unfamiliar to London readers by drawing on quotations from Chaucer and Langland, further this sense of a synchronically layered history. England’s literary past and modern industrial slang are shown to be oddly coeval.

Raymond Williams distinguishes two categories of cultural forces from the past—the archaic, “that which is wholly recognized as an element of the past, to be observed, to be examined, or even on occasion to be consciously ‘revived’”—the past the ballad collectors enshrine—and the residual, forces “effectively formed in the past, but...still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present”—the more robust conception of the past that allows for the composition of new ballads. Gaskell depicts fictional worlds that allow both the archaic and the residual to coexist in the present. If Alice’s version of “James Harris” is archaic, arrested history, the same ballad represents a residual past in Gaskell’s later novel Sylvia’s Lovers, where it forms the bedrock of the plot of bigamous return.

Sylvia’s Lovers

Published at the height of the commercial success of the sensational bigamy plot, Sylvia’s Lovers manages to cash in on the contemporary appetite for bigamy while also exploring the fascinations and dangers of a story that, Gaskell is well aware, repeats through generations and genres. The novel’s plot shares key elements with much of the sensation fiction composed and published in the same years. As in Braddon’s Aurora Floyd (also 1862–63), which Gaskell borrowed from the library, the object of the heroine’s first passionate engagement is mistakenly thought dead; as in Wilkie Collins’s No Name (1862), an unofficial marriage is as legitimate as a legal ceremony; and as in Ellen Wood’s East Lynne (1860), a climactic deathbed scene reveals a disguised spouse. Gaskell’s self-aware novel perches between two literary-historical time frames: the longue durée of the plot of bigamous return and a brief literary moment, the genre of the sensational bigamy novel. Gaskell explicitly incorporates citations to the breadth of generic resources available to a novelist in the early 1860s, demonstrating that each of these
popular literary devices has a deep history extending beyond its contemporary publishing trend. Gaskell identifies the ballad as one of the novel’s unrecognized ancestors and a source for many of the sudden reversals characteristic of sensation fiction. By expanding the novel’s generic boundaries to include the oral and experiential influence of the ballad, Gaskell traces an alternative literary history, one more responsive to the melodramatic but compelling story of bigamy. The novel as Gaskell imagines it must be open to generic residue from surprising sources and unafraid of its own status as one rendering among many.

Sylvia’s Lovers is, significantly, a historical novel, set during the Napoleonic Wars in “Monkshaven,” a North Yorkshire port that Gaskell modeled on Whitby. Monkshaven abounds in a rich oral tradition of nautical ballads, folk ceremonies, and superstitions, but the town’s residents are increasingly literate and middle class. They speak a local dialect, which Gaskell revised carefully, changing her drafted Lancashire language to closely observed Yorkshire speech on every page (“ne’er” to “niver,” “father” to “feyther”), but they also encounter the civilizing and violent forces of Britishness: novels from London and the state’s violent press-gangs abducting seamen into the navy. In writing Sylvia’s Lovers, Gaskell worked as a ballad collector and historian as much as a novelist. Fresh from producing a biography, The Life of Charlotte Bronte (1857), Gaskell began work on her new novel with a research trip, obscure reading in local and private libraries, and interviews with Whitby residents about the town’s 1793 riot against the press-gangs.

One result of her emphatic historicism is the novel’s musical texture: Napoleonic sea shanties and press-gang ballads are woven throughout. Gaskell’s plot itself reflects the generic depth that I have traced: it draws elements from supernatural ballads—the magical broken token and the demon lover—but it is also invested in a realistic world of causes and consequences shaped by historical forces. These two strands are of course entwined: nautical ballads about interrupted weddings and pressed sailors unsurprisingly date to British naval engagements. Antpressing ballads suggest that every lover’s lament is also a political statement (in “The Sailor Laddie,” for instance, the waiting sweetheart pointedly observes, “If the wars they were all over, / And all our sailors were come home, / Then every lass would get her laddie, / And every mother get her son”). Gaskell shows how various pasts—literary, political, and musical—not only shape but also constitute the present.

Sylvia Robson’s two lovers—her steady, shopkeeping cousin Philip Hepburn and the dashing harpooner Charley Kinraid—echo the balladic opposition of the landlubbing House Carpenter and the dangerous sailor James Harris. Before Kinraid is about to depart for the season’s whaling in Greenland, he and Sylvia determine to marry, marking their betrothal with a broken
token, a sixpence they split in two. On his way to his boat, Kinraid is captured by a press-gang and violently thrust into service in the navy. Philip witnesses his rival’s struggle, and Kinraid begs him: “Tell her I’ll come back to her. Bid her not forget the great oath we took together this morning; she’s as much my wife as if we’d gone to church; —I’ll come back and marry her afore long.”

Philip, who comes from the modern world of laws and official marriage, convinces himself that these promises are meaningless and remains silent about Kinraid’s impressment, even when the harpooner is presumed drowned. After some years, Sylvia, beset by her father’s hanging for inciting a riot against the press-gang and by her mother’s encroaching senility, eventually marries Philip. When Kinraid returns to find her married, he insists on the greater power of their earlier informal vows:

Your marriage is no marriage. You were tricked into it. You are my wife, not his. I am your husband; we plighted each other our troth. See! Here is my half of the sixpence…. When they stripped me and searched me in th’ French prison, I managed to keep this. No lies can break the oath we swore to each other. I can get your pretense of a marriage set aside.

Kinraid’s belief that Sylvia is “as much my wife as if we’d gone to church” transforms into an uneasy state of affairs, which Sylvia articulates by weighing the two marital vows—balladic and bureaucratic—against each other: “I’m bound and tied, but I’ve sworn my oath to him as well as yo’.” She then takes “a mighty oath” against Philip, which to her mind is an effective divorce: “I’d niver hold Philip to be my lawful husband again.” At this point, the novel’s events pile up even more dramatically: Philip enlists as a marine and encounters Kinraid at the Siege of Acre, where he saves the sailor’s life, but is himself disfigured. Philip then returns home, unrecognized until he rescues his own daughter and is fatally injured; he and Sylvia reconcile just before he dies.

The developments that now strike us as alarmingly sudden were comfortably expected by Gaskell’s Victorian readers. As one reviewer approvingly noted, “We need scarcely say that Kinraid returns, and his meeting with Sylvia is the most powerful scene in the book.” This reader clearly relished the novel’s status as a rendering, taking pleasure in “apprehending the episodes which are themselves well known as leading to [a recognizable] end,” in Ricoeur’s formulation. It will be useful now to recall the terms of another reviewer’s praise for the novel’s ending: “The end of the book is like the burden of some true-hearted old ballad tale.” The “burden” of this plot, to adopt this telling word, is indeed recognizable from ballads sung across Britain. In the final third of Sylvia’s Lovers, as the novel’s reviewers recognized, Gaskell shifts generic logic from the particularities of the historical novel to the lyric magic of the Daemon Lover.
But it is just as possible to trace the novel’s dramatic plot twists to contemporary sensation fiction as to ballads. Its most “sensational” moment is the return of Kinraid, the “dead, yet not dead” spouse that Alfred Austin identified as one of the sensation novelists’ “favourite resources.” Philip is desperate during his courtship to convince his cousin (and himself) that Kinraid is “in all probability dead—killed by either the chances of war or tempestuous sea; that, even if not, he was as good as dead to her; so that the word ‘dead’ might be used in all honest certainty, as in one of its meanings Kinraid was dead for sure.” Monkshaven is a place where “dead” does have multiple meanings: Philip’s actuarial logic is necessary among whalers, insurers, and long Greenland tours. Sylvia both believes and does not believe that Kinraid is “dead to her,” periodically reminding herself, “He was dead; he must be dead; for was she not Philip’s wife?” When Philip learns that Kinraid is in fact alive, he turns this ruthless logic on himself: one, and only one, of them must be dead and one, and only one, married. Philip writes home with no address: “You must all look on me as one dead; as I am to you, and maybe shall soon be in reality.” Sylvia must tell herself, “He was dead,” because she is “Philip’s wife”; Kinraid’s reappearance disrupts her marriage as completely as the revelation of criminal bigamy could.

Parallel Borrowing

Gaskell’s historically apt musical references score some of the novel’s most dramatic coincidences, reminding the reader that improbable return is a maritime reality as well as a frequently rendered story. The song “Weel may the keel row” (1812), in particular, acts as Charley Kinraid’s personal refrain, emphasizing the precariousness of the sailor’s life. The song’s speaker begins by setting the scene in northern England, “As I cam thro’ Sandgate, I heard a lassie sing,” and then switches to the perspective of that forlorn lassie, who describes her absent sweetheart, praying, “Weel may the keel row, that my laddie’s in,” sending him swiftly home. It is a lyric that expands one moment in the story of the sailor’s return—the maiden’s waiting—into its own narrative. The song is first heard in the novel sung by quayside prostitutes waiting to greet Kinraid’s whaling vessel, and it is last heard near the novel’s end when he is encountered by Philip on the battlefield. In this way, Kinraid, like “Jack Robinson,” is associated from his first arrival with absence and faithlessness. The harpooner’s death-defying allure is repeatedly summoned through this musical signature.

The fateful day that sees Kinraid and Sylvia’s sacred vow, Kinraid’s impressment, and Philip’s deceit is particularly marked by references to popular songs and ballads. In describing the walk along the ocean in which
Philip encounters Kinraid, the narrator observes, “The waves came up from the German Ocean upon that English shore with a long steady roll that might have taken its first impetus far away, in the haunt of the sea-serpent on the coast of ‘Norroway over the foam.’” The line is taken from the ballad “Sir Patrick Spens” (Child 58), in which the King of Scotland sends Spens to retrieve his daughter from Norway, and Spens and his crew die in the attempt. This famous ballad, like “Weel may the keel row,” swerves from a masculine frame to the perspective of the women waiting at home:

O lang, lang may the maidens sit
With their gold combs in their hair,
All waiting for their own dear loves,
For them they’ll see nac mair.

And beneath this ancient song lurks an even older, Beowulfian idea about the sea’s danger in Gaskell’s description of the deep ocean as “the haunt of the sea-serpent.”

Whether the story of sailors dead in the German Ocean is meant to seep into Philip’s consciousness during his moral crisis or not, other songs more directly influence his suspicions about Kinraid’s likelihood to return. As he approaches Kinraid, Philip sees the press-gang lying in wait, but he doesn’t warn the harpooner precisely because “it steeled Philip’s heart to what was coming to hear his rival whistling, ‘Weel may the keel row,’ so soon after parting with Sylvia.” Pages later, the gang mocks Kinraid’s attempt to send a message to Sylvia by calling up another ballad, “Billy Taylor,” again a story of absence through faithlessness and death. Billy Taylor is taken by the press-gang, and his loving sweetheart comes after him disguised as a sailor, only to discover that he has been unfaithful. (She shoots him and is made first lieutenant by the captain for her spunk.) Philip makes no comment on the press-gang member’s sarcastic suggestion that Kinraid has “some message to his sweetheart, asking her to come for to serve on board ship along with he, like Billy Taylor’s young woman,” but the pattern of abandoned women and faithless sailors is clear.

Sylvia’s mother attempts to use Monkshaven’s oral and musical history to warn her daughter against becoming attached to a sailor. Bell Robson tells Sylvia the story of “crazy Nancy,” a forsaken sweetheart who pined away muttering repetitively, “He once was here.” Bell structures her tale like a ballad, recurring to the name “Nancy Hartley” at the end of her phrases. She works to harness the story by assigning it a moral, concluding, “It were a caution to me again thinking a man t’ mean what he says when he’s a-talking to a young woman. . . . It were a caution to me, as I said afore, to keep fro’ thinking on men as thought nought on me.” But Sylvia’s response to the story indicates the various interpretations that seem endemic to ballads.
and are part of their generic residue: “‘Poor crazy Nancy!’ sighed Sylvia. The mother wondered if she had taken the ‘caution’ to herself, or was only full of pity for the mad girl, dead long before.” 91 It turns out, however, that Bell was right to feel that the story of crazy Nancy was “a caution.” When Sylvia’s father is hanged, it is Bell who gradually loses her senses and subsides into balladic repetition: “‘When feyther comes home,’ seemed a sort of burden at the beginning or end of every sentence.” 92

George Sims’s later ballad “In the Harbour” (1883) echoes Bell’s story of crazy Nancy in its account of “Crazy Kate,” another repeating widow. Kate marries the handsome sailor Ned, whose ship is wrecked shortly after their wedding. A local fisherman laconically summarizes her brief marriage: “One week a bride, and the next one a sailor’s widow—and mad.” 93 For twenty years, Crazy Kate believes Ned will return. “‘He isn’t drowned,’ she would murmur; ‘he will come again some day’— / And her lips shaped the self-same story as the long years crept away.” 94 Day after day, Kate stares at the ocean, “Waitin’ for what can’t happen till the dead come out o’ their graves.” 95 During a storm, Crazy Kate rows out into the sea and returns with what seems to be the corpse of her husband, looking just as he had twenty years ago. She dies from the shock. The ballad’s conclusion reveals that the corpse was Ned’s son, the product of Ned’s miraculous escape to France and bigamous marriage to a French woman. In Sims’s ballad, the bigamous return skips forward a generation, while the waiting wife remains trapped in the past. “In the Harbour” uncannily distorts time in its rendering of the plot of bigamous return. The deep strangeness of this story underscores the both-ness of this plot: the sailor’s return is neither expected nor unexpected; it is both.

Sylvia, meanwhile, does absorb her mother’s story of crazy Nancy, but not as a “caution,” rather as a parallel case to her own. Like Nancy, and borrowing the poor girl’s own words, she would say softly to herself, “He once was here;” but all along she believed in her heart he would come back again to her, though it touched her strangely to imagine the agonies of forsaken love. 96

Sylvia moons about romantically reminding herself of crazy Nancy’s story, which she considers a mark of true love rather than a warning. She is even more responsive when she next sees Kinraid, precisely because “Charley Kinraid and the story of crazy Nancy had been the subjects of her dreams for many a day, and many a night.” 97 For Bell, crazy Nancy and Crazy Kate, repeating “He once was here” is a burden. Their craziness lies in their adherence to this refrain. But Gaskell’s attention to the workings of ballads ensures that narrative repetition is not always pathological; she emphasizes the complexity of the echoing structure of the burden or refrain, in which repetition may also create incremental differences. Sylvia’s repetition represents a kind
of enjoyment, a savoring of the phrase and the multiply rendered story that may be self-indulgent, but is not insane. It is repetition at a remove, borrowed at a “parallel.” Sylvia sees herself as part of a literary rather than a historical past, in which Nancy’s life is “the story of crazy Nancy.”

Indeed, Sylvia borrows not just the words of crazy Nancy (“He once was here”), but also her story; she is perfectly willing to become a rendering herself. This process is neither simplified nor inoculated against its potential threat. When stories are borrowed as parallels by Gaskell’s characters, the results are frequently disastrous. Philip in particular is dangerously quick to see the parallels to his own life’s conflict. Old Jeremiah Foster’s story of Alice Rose’s unhappy past helps Philip justify his silent deceit about Kinraid’s impressment. Alice was loved by Jeremiah’s brother, but instead married a wild sailor who was unfaithful and abusive. After hearing the story, Philip fell to thinking; a generation ago something of the same kind had been going on as that which he was now living through, quick with hopes and fears. A girl beloved by two—nay, those two so identical in occupation as he and Kinraid were—Rose identical even in character with what he knew of the specksonian; a girl choosing the wrong lover, and suffering and soured all her life in consequence of her youth’s mistake; was that to be Sylvia’s lot?—or, rather, was she not saved from it by the event of the impressment, and by the course of silence he himself had resolved upon? Then he went on to wonder if the lives of one generation were but a repetition of the lives of those who had gone before. . . . Would those very circumstances which made the interest of his life now, return, in due cycle, when he was dead and Sylvia was forgotten?

The experience of falling in love is oddly depersonalized in Philip’s account. Sylvia, usually presented by the narrator in historical specificity, becomes merely “a girl beloved by two”; he himself is also reduced to a type, the shopkeeper (like Foster before him), or, perhaps, the House Carpenter. We see Philip here engaged in an act of literary criticism, attempting to deduce the genre of the story he finds himself in: he would like to believe he is in a recognizable courtship novel, just as Sylvia finds comfort in the balladic repetition that reminds her that she is not the only girl who waits for a lover. Gaskell’s conception of the different possible vectors of borrowing (Sylvia’s parallel; Bell’s stuttering echo) models her nuanced sense of the interrelation of the literary forms across which the plot of bigamous return travels. Sylvia’s Lovers borrows “as a parallel” from the ballads and folk legends that the novel’s characters cite, as well as from the popular sensation fiction of her own day.

The generic residue of Sylvia’s Lovers allows Gaskell to work like a balladeer, between stories and modes. Her narration even accommodates balladic variants within its plot, producing its own competing renderings. In the novel, Kinraid both is improbably rescued on the battlefield at Acre by Philip, and is
not. His account is discredited by the surgeon who operates on him, who believes that “it was his imagination which had endued a stranger with the lineaments of some former friend.” The story is embraced, however, by a sailor, who irritates Kinraid by suggesting, “Maybe it was a spirit. It’s not th’ first time as I’v heared of a spirit coming upon earth to save a man’s life i’ time o’ need.” The sailor then tells a long tale of folk magic, a passage Gaskell revised especially carefully to indicate that he is from Devonshire rather than a northerner like the novel’s other characters.

The sailor’s story is off in one sense—within the world of the novel Philip and Kinraid did meet on the battlefield—but true in another way, as Gaskell’s meticulous dialectical attention suggests. Similarly, the narrator explains Sylvia’s father’s anger at the press-gang by novelistically describing his life experiences and historically charting the local allegiances with smugglers against the coast guard. But she also credits the townspeople’s description of him as possessed: “This may be a physiological explanation,” she admits of her own complex account, “of what afterwards was spoken of as a supernatural kind of possession, leading him to his doom.” The novel’s primary attention to oral history means that the supernatural is never discounted. Indeed, Gaskell insists that it is only through what “afterwards was spoken of” that the novel’s story endures. It is the Widow Dobson, a villager barely connected to the novel’s love triangle, whose version of events will persist at the novel’s conclusion. She witnesses the final reconciliation between Sylvia and Philip, and the novel presents only her superstitious perspective on this important event: “She saw Sylvia, spirit-like, steal in—white, noiseless, and upborne from earth.” The ghost of James Harris “spake like a man”; the physical body of Sylvia Robson steals “spirit-like.” Meaning, in Gaskell’s novel as in the ballad, does not lie within one of the two possibilities, but is suspended between them.

For Walter Benjamin, the novel, as opposed to the story, “neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it,” but Sylvia’s Lovers does both, tracing its floating plot from ballads to sensation novels to realist fiction and then back again to collective legend. In the novel’s concluding coda, which rockets forward sixty years to present-day Monkshaven, the narrator observes that since “the memory of man fades away,” only “a few old people can still tell you the tradition of the man who died in a cottage somewhere about this spot.” The narrator describes a “lady” asking one of these old folks about the very story the novel’s reader has just completed. The garbled version the lady receives at first seems a striking removal from the detailed verity of the preceding pages. It transforms Sylvia’s Lovers into what the narrator now calls “Philip Hepburn and the legend of his fate,” just as the broadside “A Warning for Married Women” later became “The House Carpenter.” (And Gaskell’s working title for her novel, The Specksioneer, completes the
bigamous trio, as “James Harris” does for Child 243.) The narrator’s observation that “this is the form into which popular feeling, and ignorance of the real facts, have moulded the story” brings the focus back to the novel’s oral-historical world of suppositions, tradition, and legend. Syria’s Lovers is preoccupied by the forms stories are molded and remolded into. By connecting a single plot across genres, Gaskell’s coda presents the novel not as a literary isolate, but as an interpretation, a rendering.

Turning away from genre toward plot has the surprising effect of reinforcing our sense of that slipriest and broadest of genres, the novel itself. Rather than standing distinct from the oral tradition, as Benjamin insists, the novel becomes as capable as the ballad of recognizing its own status as a rendering. When Philip leaves Sylvia, determined to stay out of her life, he changes his name, but the narrator observes, “With a new name, he began a new life. Alas! the old life lives for ever!” Like the ballad that tells of the past but may predict the future, personal and literary history is here cyclical. The plot of bigamous return offers one glimpse of a kind of literary history that is neither synchronic nor diachronic, but is instead lodged residually in time in two ways—as part of a newly marbled chronology of texts and as part of historically conditioned modes of reading. The explosion of bigamy plots in the early 1860s can thus be seen as merely a new episode in “the old life” rather than a newborn genre. The layered vision of literary history that results from this experiment articulates, as it happens, a central truth of the bigamy plot: the past is not erased; it accretes.

Notes

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11. As part of my larger project, *The Bigamy Plot: Sensation and Convention in the Victorian Novel*, I have compiled a list of more than 270 Victorian novels featuring a bigamy plot. Of this (still inevitably partial) list, only 15 bigamy novels date from the 1850s, while 74 were published in the 1860s.


14. Elizabeth Gaskell worked on *Sylvia’s Lovers* from late 1859 until it was published in three volumes by Smith, Elder & Co. in 1863; Alfred Tennyson wrote “Enoch Arden” from 1861 to 1862, and it was published as the title poem in *Enoch Arden, and Other Poems* in 1864. In spite of a family story that Tennyson wrote the poem in a fortnight, P. G. Scott argues that the composition “occupied him for most of three months, followed by a long period of revision,” from November 11, 1861, to March 9, 1862; *Tennyson’s Enoch Arden: A Victorian Best-Seller* (Lincoln, UK, 1970), 9–10.

15. Christine Krueger, for instance, considers the deathbed reconciliation “a particularly saccharine, contrived example” of the motif and bemoans “the melodramatic devices dragged into the final chapters”: “Speaking Like a Woman: How to Have the Last Word on *Sylvia’s Lovers*,” in *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure*, ed. Alison Booth (Charlottesville, VA, 1993), 147. Francesco Marroni defends the ending while acknowledging “Gaskell’s overworking of the pattern of coincidence”: “Elizabeth Gaskell’s Tragic Vision: Historical Time and Timelessness in *Sylvia’s Lovers*,” in *Elizabeth Gaskell: Victorian Culture, and the Art of Fiction*, Original Essays for the Bicentenary, ed. Sandro Jung (Gent, Belgium, 2010), 177; “Sylvia’s Lovers,” *Athenaeum* 1844 (1863): 291; “Sylvia’s Lovers,” *Examiner* 2880, April 11, 1863, 232.


18. George Crabbe’s “Ruth” and “The Parting Hour” both tell versions of the story. The plot was also a classic trope of nautical melodrama, including the popular *My Poll and My Partner Joe*, by John Thomas Haines, as Scott observes in *Tennyson’s Enoch Arden*, 5. The prevalent plot is also similar to a folk motif Viktor Shklovskii calls “A Husband at His Wife’s Wedding,” and which he finds in another nineteenth-century text, Guy de Maupassant’s short story, “The Return” (1884), in *Theory of Prose* (Elmwood Park, IL, 1990), 20.


21. Ibid.

(San Diego, 1956), 231. Hans Robert Jauss agrees that genres “cannot be decided according to one-sided or formal or thematic characteristics,” citing Shaftesbury as the originator of the idea that “an ‘inner form’ must correspond to the outer form”; Toward an Aesthetic of Reception (Minneapolis, 1982), 82.

23. Debates over genre linger in spite of a general agreement that “the modern theory of genres can proceed only descriptively, and not by definition”; Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, 95; and that disputing generic definitions “leads us to treat as ‘real’ a conflict that is itself invented”; Adena Rosmarin, The Power of Genre (Minneapolis, 1985), 49.


30. In Belgravia, the journal that Mary Elizabeth Braddon edited, George Augustus Sala railed against the term “sensational” as meaningless: “In the opinion of dolts and dullards and envious backbiters, everything is ‘sensational’ that is vivid, and nervous, and forcible, and graphic, and true”; “On the ‘Sensational’ in Literature and Art,” Belgravia: A London magazine 4 (February 1868): 457. This definitional question was also central to polemics about expanding critical attention to Victorian popular fiction in the 1980s. Patrick Brantlinger’s article “What Is ‘Sensational’ About the Victorian Sensation Novel?” (1982) took the question as foundational, while D. A. Miller’s objection to Brantlinger’s approach in “Cage Aux Folles: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins’s The Woman in White,” Representations 14 (Spring 1986): 107–36, nonetheless accepted the centrality of the project of definition.

31. Aristotle makes the comparative class relationship between subject and audience the constituent feature of his generic definitions in the Poetics: “Since mimetic artists portray people in action, and since these people must be either good or bad . . . they can portray people better than ourselves, worse than ourselves, or on the same level. . . . This very distinction also separates tragedy from comedy: the latter tends to represent men worse than present humanity, the former better” (32–33). Following the Poetics, Northrop Frye opens Anatomy of Criticism by producing his schema of the modes of fiction based on “the hero’s power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same,” yielding a hierarchy of myth, romance, the high mimetic mode of epic and tragedy, the low mimetic mode of comedy and realistic fiction, and the ironic mode; Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (New York, 1967), 33–34.


38. This telling word is often applied to the poem’s final lines: “So past the strong heroic soul away. / And when they buried him the little port / Had seldom seen a costlier funeral.” See Miriam Bailin, “Seeing Is Believing in Enoch Arden,” in *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*, ed. Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan (Berkeley, 1995), 317.
40. Ibid., 29, 31.
41. Ibid., 55, emphasis in original.
42. O'liphant, “Novels,” 258, 263.
43. Ibid., 258.
45. Ivan Kreilkamp’s *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (Cambridge, 2005), which argues that the novel developed in dialectical relationship with the oral, is an important exception to this quarantine.
50. The idiomatic phrase “gone before you can say Jack Robinson” may have originated in this ballad; Logan’s date for “Jack Robinson” predates any date in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for the phrase; s.v. “Jack,” n.1, 34,b. (Oxford, 2012).
53. Ibid., 91.
55. Ibid., 125.
56. Ibid., 129–30.
57. Franco Moretti first laid out the concept of “distant reading” in “Conjectures On World Literature,” in *New Left Review* 1 (January/February 2000): 54–68, where he emphasized that distance “is a condition of knowledge: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems” (57). Margaret Cohen has recently described the intersection between close and distant reading as “narratology in the archive”: “Narratology in the Archive,” *Representations* 108 (Fall 2009): 51–75.


62. Ann Rowland shows how a family of ballads featuring treacherous nurses killing children complicate this vision of simple, feminine, and childlike ballad transmission: 229.


64. Ibid., 268.

65. Ivan Kreilkamp suggests a way in which Gaskell’s account of this second kind of role for the ballad may also be feminist: “It should be noted, however, that female Victorian writers were not likely to be well served by the fantasy of language’s basis in oral performance. When language is thought to derive from the archaic speech of pre-modern mothers and governesses, modern women are likely to find themselves at once idealized and professionally disabled”; *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller*, 130.


70. Shirley Foster asserts that “Gaskell herself enjoyed some of the sensation fiction of the 1860s, such as Caroline Clive’s *Why Paul Ferroll Killed His Wife* (1860), Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Aurora Floyd* (1863), and novels by Mrs. Henry Wood,” although the source for this statement is borrowing records at the Manchester library, which were, by requirement, in William Gaskell’s name; “Gaskell’s Shorter Pieces,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. Jill L. Matus (Cambridge, 2007), 119.


75. Ibid., 382.

76. Ibid., 383.

77. Ibid., 411.


83. Ibid., 360.

84. Ibid., 405.
85. Ibid., 19; 427.
86. Ibid., 213.
87. Ibid., 215.
88. Ibid., 218.
89. Ibid., 187–88.
90. Ibid., 188.
91. Ibid.
92. Ibid., 311.
94. Ibid., 71.
95. Ibid., 69.
97. Ibid., 193.
98. Ibid., 240.
99. Ibid., 432.
100. Ibid., 433.
103. Ibid., 495.
106. Ibid.
107. Ibid., 392.