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Repackaging Mary Russell Mitford: A Study of Influence

The Provincial Fiction of Mitford, Gaskell and Eliot. Kevin A. Morrison.
Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023. 308 pp.

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<1>Kevin Morrison has accomplished something rare and remarkable in his study of three women writers who shaped nineteenth-century provincial fiction. By front-loading the book with two chapters on Mary Russell Mitford, Morrison pushes back against a tendency in literary scholarship to allow the later nineteenth-century to seem more important, more developed and sophisticated than the earlier. This book is important to scholars of the long nineteenth-century (whether we start that era in the 1780s or end it in the 1910s) for exposing how the publishing industry of the later century severely truncated, simplified, and normalized women's writing from the early century to package them in shorter versions and market them for popular press tailored for children's consumption. Morrison's study of Mary Russell Mitford's *Our Village* (1824) shows how, over the course of the nineteenth century, publishers reduced and repackaged her complex literary sketches, utterly transforming their representation of English provincial villages. Yet Morrison also traces a surviving line of influence of Mitford's complex ideas into the writings of Gaskell, and thence (by way of Gaskell) into Eliot's fiction. This is a remarkable study of reception, influence, and the survival of ideas from an earlier moment, despite the damaging power of popular book markets.

<2>In his account of Mary Russell Mitford's sketches that would become *Our Village*, Morrison considers carefully the form they took in the pages of *The Lady's Magazine*, the scene of their initial publication. In the early chapters of this book, we gain access to a very different Mitford than the one most widely known to Victorianists in Anne Thackeray Ritchie's gorgeous yet vapid four-volume edition of *Our Village*, illustrated by Hugh Thomson to deliver for children and new readers a pleasant nostalgia about England's country past. We do learn, to be fair, that the publishing industry was not entirely responsible for this net reduction of Mitford's

writing and authorial persona. Mitford herself, even in adapting her work for book publication as an attempt to gain control of copyright and sales, began the reductive sugaring of her work for popular tastes, removing elements of bitter social critique from her sketches as she published them in book form. The severe reduction of fortune for her aging parents combined with the financial precarity of *The Lady's Magazine* and others, the abandonment of editors from remunerating authors, led Mitford to announce in a letter of 1824 to her friend Thomas Noon Talfourd (later the defender of Charles Dickens' copyright), "I am sick to death of the plagues of authorship—to be pestered by every body to write for them & then not be paid" (102). This Mitford is keenly aware of privation and poverty in the English countryside, and Morrison points out that the magazine versions of her sketches frequently make an ironic counterpoint to the other pieces published in *The Lady's Magazine*, which rarely described England's rural poor but far more usually catered to fashionable European travel and the rage for Italian tourist attractions in the 1820s. We learn, again from Morrison's investigation of Mitford's letters to Talfourd, that she understood a serious distinction in writing anonymously for magazines and in putting her name to her work in literary annuals and on a book. Morrison points out that the personal risk of being identified as the author led Mitford to temper some of the acerbic critique of their earliest versions in order to make her writing perfectly acceptable and to develop the cheerful authorial persona that Ruskin and Eliot came to know. *Our Village* came eventually to be seen as autobiographical and mainly a static happy memory of England's countryside. But it came that way gradually, over decades of repackaging, after the author produced the series, attained the success she sought, and sold her copyright to Whittaker—who began to refashion it to circulate a profitable idealized vision of English hearth and home.

<3>Morrison addresses the earliest version of Mitford's sketches at length, pointing out extensively how much was lost in the later popularized versions. New scholars of nineteenth-century literature and publishing should be assigned these first two chapters to learn something more complex than the theoretical "death of the author." The author perhaps participates in her own deconstruction while traces of her original critique and attention to social change may yet survive when read and comprehended by attentive readers like Elizabeth Gaskell. Morrison finds that Mitford's rendering of social change and economic hardship eventually lead through the mediation of Gaskell's fiction, especially *Cranford* (1853), to Eliot's emotional rendering of landscape and self in *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (1871)

<4>Turning to Elizabeth Gaskell, Morrison speculates whether she ever encountered *The Lady's Magazine* that first published Mitford's sketches. Reading *Cranford*, he finds its "patchwork quality" (151) reminiscent of the

periodicals popular in the 1820s, the absorbing reading culture of high-turbaned fashion associated with Miss Matty's youth. Morrison finds an even more compelling association of *Cranford's* Mary Smith with the narrator of *Our Village*, as both are undeveloped observers, mediators of the strangeness of small-village life to their presumably metropolitan audiences. The exotic consumer interests of *Cranford's* aging characters emphasize their participation in a rapidly changing global market economy as a function of their own amusingly eccentric individualism. Morrison associates Gaskell's humorous celebration of her characters' progressive independence as a sign of her liberalism, connected with her industrial fiction, and he sees *Cranford* as a significant precursor to the celebration of the individual in the writings of John Stuart Mill. To the extent that we find compelling parallels between *Our Village* and *Cranford*, they are more strongly associated with the stronger vein of irony in the earlier forms of Mitford's work.

<5>While Mary Ann Evans had very little to say of Mary Russell Mitford, Morrison finds a Mitfordian line of thinking in George Eliot's provincial characters, first in *Mill on the Floss* (1860), and then in *Middlemarch*. Indeed, through Morrison's study we recognize a remarkably striking parallel between Mitford and Eliot, such that their cultivation of the capitalist publishing market led both to idealize peaceful, socially harmonious life. Yet, that ideal vision of provincial community exists in striking tension with critiques of possessive, domineering ownership. A nationalized virtue of inclusiveness is amplified, Morrison finds, in *Middlemarch's* provincial landscapes, traversed by the mobile, "rootless and wandering" Dorothea and Will (269). Owning property is shown to be unnecessary for free and full civic participation in *Middlemarch*, where home can be wherever one finds oneself included in the fold of the nation. Ironically, the version of *Our Village* circulating by the time *Middlemarch* was published had nearly entirely removed the sights of poverty, yet Morrison demonstrates how Dorothea's commitment to cottage reform affiliates her with the original narrator of "Violeting," herself appalled at the poverty she confronts. Morrison calls attention to Will's pronounced advocacy of political reform and how he and Dorothea imagine the English countryside even while away from it, as a particularly expansive, inclusive vision of home that requires no fixed location.

<6>In Morrison's impressive study of Mitford, Gaskell, and Eliot, we learn to take the fictional rendering of provinces seriously as the basis for reflection on the possibilities of social connection and a basis for national reform. We also find all three writers drawing upon the ideas of natural philosophers like Gilbert White and Charles Darwin and engaging with theories of population and economy while each attempting to succeed in a capitalist commercial publishing industry. Morrison's

conclusion cautions us not to accept Virginia Woolf's pat dismissals of Gaskell and Mitford in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), nor her favor of Eliot as somehow "less feminine" than other writers. Woolf's judgment helped to canonize Eliot for twentieth-century readers but failed to recognize the line of influence from Mitford and her time. Morrison's compelling influence study anchors the renowned Eliot in a connected liberal tradition, elevates Gaskell's representation of a changing global economy in a small village, and brings forward Mitford from the shadows as a writer of provocative irony whose early writings exposed the disturbance of change in provincial experience.