

“SPEAKING OF ROMANCE . . .”: THE POWER OF THE FEMALE VOICE IN HARRIET MARTINEAU’S *DEERBROOK*

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It was all forest hereabouts, except a clear space round the tower. . . . It is meadow now, but then the deer used to come down through the wood to drink at the brook there. That is how the village got its name. (498)

Thus Deerbrook’s oldest living inhabitant weaves a romantic tale of the village’s humble beginnings. Unfortunately, not all the of the novel’s dialogue is delivered as a harmless yarn spun by a hundred-year-old storyteller. Opposing voices strike discord in the harmonious setting of Harriet Martineau’s 1839 novel, published just months before her five-year illness renowned for its controversial “mesmerism” cure. Charlotte Brontë, under her masculine pseudonym Currer Bell, expressed a “new and keen pleasure” in reading *Deerbrook*, remarking in November 1849 that it ranked “with the writings that have really done him good, added to his stock of ideas, and rectified his views of life” (qtd Yates 189). However, by peering closer to observe the eccentricities of its residents, it is possible to perceive the malicious underside of Deerbrook’s charming exterior, “hidden,” as it were, “by a nice management of the garden walls, and training of the shrubbery” (1). For the population (that is, at least, the female side) of this innocuous-looking township are revealed as incorrigible gossips. Much as their tendency to pry into one another’s activities is dismissed as typical of close-knit societies, the rapidity with which news travels within Deerbrook is remarkable to even the most well-initiated individual. Nowhere is the back-biting and manipulation underscoring the superficial civilities more perceptible than when the subject of romantic love becomes the focus for gossip. Through the almost exclusively female propensity to keep the rumour-mill churning, romantic illusions surrounding the Victorian archetype of the angel in the house and the idyllic realm of the pastoral are eroded by a nearly audible stream of subversive female conversation.

When Margaret and Hester Ibbotson land in Deerbrook, the chatter reaches fever pitch. The arrival of outsiders to any self-absorbed circle is bound to create speculation and since the newcomers are attractive young ladies of marriageable age, the inevitable question is raised as to possible romantic connections with the eligible local bachelors:

It is a fact which few but the despisers of their race like to acknowledge . . . that when young people first meet, the possibility of their falling in love should occur to all minds present. . . . We have no doubt that the minds in Mr Grey’s drawing room underwent the common succession of ideas—slight and transient imaginations, which pass into nothingness when unexpressed. . . . But Mrs Grey was the only one who fixed the idea in her own mind and another by speaking of it. (11)

Here is the crux of the discord **determining** the delicate infrastructure of Deerbrook society; the friction between what is spoken and what is left unsaid. The husbands of the two most prominent families keep aloof from gossip to retain a silent authority, whereas their wives employ the power of the word to exert their influence. Margaret and Hester Ibbotson find themselves caught in the middle of this power struggle for vocal supremacy between the Grey and Rowland women, shattering their resolve to remain neutral. Mrs Grey is as determined to secure a match for Hester with the darling of their social set, Mr Hope the medical man, as Mrs Rowland is to prevent a similar attachment forming between her brother Phillip and Margaret. Despite mutual promises to the contrary, the sisters are soon subjected to the devastating effects wrought by the collective voice of Deerbrook.

There is a preview of the harsh initiation they are about to receive with the vociferous introduction of the village scold. Mrs Plumstead has a voice capable of instilling dread into the most fearless hearts of those within earshot of her corrosive heckles. Her "paroxysms of rage" resembling "somebody killing a pig" disrupt the cowslip tea party given in honour of the Ibbotsons, as the panic-stricken household crowds together for protection: "Mr Grey proposed to put up the shutters of the windows nearest to the scene of action; but it was thought that this might draw on an attack from the virago; she was hunting a poor terrified countrywoman, who, between fright and running, looked ready to sink" (89). Analysing the role of women's speech in defining the moral dynamics of a community, Patricia Meyer Spacks observes: "Women like to talk. Their volubility demands control. What they might say, lacking external discipline, threatens the order of things" (150). Mrs Plumstead's outburst exemplifies this irrepressible feminine force, as both Grey's and Rowland's attempts to silence the abuse are in vain. It is only the calm appearance of the apothecary who exacts a "conquest of the otherwise unconquerable scold" (89), drawing murmurs of admiration from the grateful onlookers, with Margaret pronouncing the feat to be an act of magic.

Unfortunately, no such recourse to supernatural intervention is at Mr Hope's disposal when it comes to directing his own fate. Mrs Grey's conviction that Hope and Hester should be united in marital bliss extends to a few heavily weighted words in drawing-room conversation, throwing the genial practitioner into a state of mental and moral turmoil. Mrs Grey having intimated Hester's availability on the marriage market, Hope feels obliged to provide the much-anticipated proposal. The task would be undertaken without hesitation in a conventional pairing of the hero and heroine, but the narrator seems anxious to point out that real life differs from the ideals of romantic fiction. In a twist to the happily-ever-after scenario, Hope is not romantically inclined toward the accomplished Hester as much as to the philosophical Margaret. In true Victorian form, the intellectual man of letters is fascinated by moral courage and animated discussion rather than mere superficial beauty. The deceptive duality existing between appearances and the true state of affairs emphasises the social significance of the female voice. Prior to the sisters' arrival it was believed that Hope was engaged to the illiterate daughter of the town boatman—a rumour that lost none of its desired impact for being totally prefabricated by the local gossips.

Guilty misapprehension notwithstanding, Hope resolves to honour the attachment he has fostered and upholds his moral duty to marry Hester. Having prematurely confided his preference for Margaret in a letter to his brother in India, Hope must await the reply with trepidation now he has betrayed his heart in a romantic compromise. Should Hester

happen to learn the contents of the return correspondence she will be made aware of Hope's more than fraternal affection for her sister. The situation is complicated by Margaret living with the newly-weds, as she in turn is disappointed in the cold reserve of her new brother-in-law. Here it is the *refusal* to speak one's mind that is the source of intrigue and resentment. Hope's disdain for perpetrating gossip is justified—merely allowing idle conjecture to seep into his private correspondence has incurred harmful repercussions. As Spacks has observed, letters can be seen as an illustration of the tension between “self” and “world,” and explains their function as “calling attention to discrepancies between personal impulse and social restriction. Society has always allowed in personal letters at least some of the verbal latitude it deplors in gossip” (164). Mr Hope, by entertaining a space for verbal latitude in his personal dealings, has left himself open for public conjecture. The fatal flaw of the hero is the disclosure of romantic yearning, thus threatening his romanticised position as diplomatic country doctor.

Having long side-stepped quarrels despite his constant involvement in the domestic and therefore private concerns of his patients, it is ironically an act of public indiscretion which causes Hope's fall from favour. Openly admitting a voting preference in opposition to the local nobility, Hope is accused of jumping on the bandwagon when his candidate is elected. Despite Mr Grey's warning to refrain from political posturing, Hope exercises his political influence and thus incurs the wrath of the Deerbrook gossips, whose access to parliamentary policy is frustratingly limited by nature of their sex. Perhaps the decision to abandon his normally inoffensive neutrality is a result of having relinquished control of his personal life. Asserting his authority where his voice is instrumental in determining the outcome of events is a means of compensating for the need to remain silent in the domestic sphere. Barred by nature of their sex from exerting any influence outside the domestic sphere, the women of Deerbrook nonetheless register their political activism by boycotting Hope and his family. Spacks asserts: “Fiction reveals more clearly what didactic texts only hint: that gossip, ‘female talk,’ provides a mode of power, of undermining public rigidities and asserting private integrity, of discovering means of agency for women, those private citizens deprived of public function” (170). The realism of the novel has created a rift in the fabric of romantic fiction as the idyllic realm of rural escapism is brought into contrast with the harsh reality of urban politics.

Just as Mrs Plumstead disrupts the peace of the countryside with her irascible voice, so the power of gossip manages to disrupt Hope's personal calm and thus encourages discord among those associated with him. The dissolution of the cowslip tea-party after its noisy interruption precursors the degeneration of Hope's own romantic ideal of a retreat from worldly cares: “‘So this is home!’ thought he, as he surveyed the room, filled as it was with tokens of occupation and appliances of domestic life. ‘It is home to be more lonely than ever before—and yet never to be alone with my secret! At my own table, by my own hearth, I cannot look up into the faces around me, nor say what I am thinking’” (211-12). Ironically, Hope experiences the kind of despair felt by women confined to the mundanity of the domestic sphere. The sense of being lonely while never being alone expresses the isolation creating the propensity for gossip, a means of breaching the gap between inside and outside matters through the connection of speech. Social sciences researcher Melanie Tebbutt describes the dilemma of communication in societies where the cloistered female is idealised: “Women's words spoken in communal, public locales became immodest and worthless, while diffidence and reserve was expected of their private speech” (23). To counteract the innate female propensity to talk, Victorian

standards of behaviour enforced trivial feminine pursuits such as embroidery and reading aloud to curb conversation and prevent women from voicing common opinions. However *Deerbrook* illustrates that even this romantic ideal of feminine reserve was not beyond the subversive tendencies of the spoken word.

Despite Martineau's own declared fondness for sewing, there is evidence in *Deerbrook* that she is aware her enthusiasm for plying the needle was not shared by others of her sex. Viewed more as a chore than an idle pleasure, the equation of sewing with work is aligned with a further constriction of visible activity within the already suppressed atmosphere of home. Prior to being excused for an afternoon of wandering in the meadows, Miss Young's female charges approach the daily ritual of sewing with extreme reluctance. The narrator remarks upon their lack of application: "Little girls are not usually fond of sewing. Till they become clever enough to have devices of their own . . . sewing is a mere galling of the fingers and strain upon the patience" (31). There even remains uncertainty as to whether the female psyche can be reconciled to such a distraction, with the unconvincing conclusion that "there is a chance that the girl may become fond of sewing" (31). Certainly Maria Young and Margaret seem conditioned to take up their work whenever they are in each other's company, reflecting a behaviour that has been artificially cultivated rather than a response to natural impulse. Indeed, on one occasion when Margaret is agitated at having "not a stitch of work to do" (157) she resorts to mending holes in Maria's gloves so that unexpected intruders do not catch her unoccupied. With the confident assertion that "we can talk as well working as idle" (157) the romantic assumption of the chaste, silent and obedient woman bent serenely over her sewing is undermined. Further evidence of women's work being an inducement rather than an impediment to conversation is provided in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*, with such comments as "Miss Pole and Miss Jessie had set up a kind of intimacy, on the strength of the Shetland wool and the new knitting stitches" (11). Roszika Parker emphasises the traditional suspicion toward these female networks by observing that "opponents of women's education argued that it would endanger their chastity by making them talkative and thus less careful of honour which is best preserved in silence" (74).

Conversely, silence carries its own threat to the instrument of control, as then there is speculation as to whether the mind and heart of the obedient female figure is as innocent as her appearance. As Florence Nightingale, the sometime correspondent of Harriet Martineau, warns in *Cassandra*: "Mothers, who cradle yourselves in visions about the domestic hearth, how many of your sons and daughters are *there*, do you think, while sitting round under your complacent maternal eye? Were you there yourself during your own (now forgotten) girlhood?" (206). At least when engaged in polite conversation there is a degree of reassurance that the preoccupation is with trivialities and not deeper philosophical issues, as the Ibbotson sisters are wont to frequently confide. The most outwardly convincing scene of domestic harmony is exposed as a fabrication as Hester is "surprised to find how easy a process it is to read aloud passably without taking in a word of the sense":

The only words spoken during the lecture, therefore, were occasional remarks that the reader seemed hoarse . . . and whispered requests across the table for scissors, thread, or the adjustment of the light. Such being the method of literary exercise in the family, Hester and

Margaret were able to think of anything they pleased with impunity.
(127)

Similarly, the custom of circulating literature through the book society is a guise for the excuse of infiltrating the private sanctuaries of the Deerbrook residents. The choice of texts becomes a source of contention among rival families while providing the psychological comfort that at least for some of the time each knows what is being said and heard in the other's drawing room.

Exposing the banality of everyday existence has the effect of quashing romantic ideals in *Deerbrook*. Spacks makes the assertion that "trivial and malicious talk reflects impoverished minds as well as experience, male talk communicates more meaning and value than female talk about people." As a consequence, she believes "the male realm provides the standard by which females can judge themselves and know themselves wanting" (169). The sense of helplessness in the male realm motivates Mrs Rowland's determination to manipulate her brother Phillip's romantic entanglements. It is the one aspect of masculine discourse directly accessible to feminine intervention and she has the advantage of summoning the skills at her disposal to exert her will. The interview between brother and sister concerning Phillip's engagement becomes a verbal tug-of-war. The chapter aptly titled "Coming to an Understanding" has less to do with reconciliation than with Phillip coming to understand the destructive capability of his sister's tongue, as the following exchange illustrates:

"You will marry no-one but Mary Bruce at last, you will see, whatever you think now." "For Heaven's sake, Priscilla, if you have any of the regard you profess to have for Miss Bruce, treat her name with some respect—I am accepted by Margaret Ibbotson!"

"I am glad you have told so few people of your entanglement. It makes it an easier matter to help you. I shall deny the engagement everywhere." "That will hardly avail against my testimony." "It will, when you are gone. The Deerbrook people always attend to the last speaker." (89)¹

Spoken with such an air of conviction, Priscilla, queen of the drawing room, literally talks herself into her brother's romantic aspirations and is true to her word. In the process she is required to interfere not only in what is spoken but also what is written, intercepting a correspondence between the couple in order not to have her groundwork destroyed. Mrs Rowland's versatility in both facilitating and thwarting the flow of communication exploits the skill of her tongue in subverting ideas of romance.

Articately outmatched, the men caught in the centre of speculation resort to the written word for redress. However, it is this very act of recoiling from the frankness of speech which further complicates the task of explanation. The only means of banishing the counter-productive written confessions from the physical realm is through literal destruction of the evidence—hence the fondness of burning letters in *Deerbrook*. Mrs

¹ A similar example of the transient yet immediate effect of the spoken word, particularly in a small community, occurs in *Cranford* where Miss Matty's opinion is alternately swayed by the arguments of Mrs Forrester and Miss Jenkyns as she finds herself "always convinced by the last speaker" (Gaskell 84).

Rowland destroys Margaret's note of reconciliation with Phillip by consigning it to the flames unread. Hope refuses to disclose to Hester any reference to his initial feelings for Margaret before relegating the his brother's written congratulations to the fire. In both instances it is silence which incites suspicion and misunderstanding. In *Romantic Correspondence* Mary Favret reviews the letter's particular function in Victorian fiction:

No longer could the letter inscribe the individual within a secure social order; no longer would it voice the heterogeneous will of the people; nor would it betoken the unregulated exchange of ideas and feelings. Nineteenth-century literature's fiction of the suspect letter thus depends upon a romantic illusion that a time existed when the letter was an open, innocent and decorous mode of expression—a virginal genre. (34)

Similarly, the image of the silent woman plying her needle depends on a romantic illusion that female behaviour could be controlled by masculine ideology.

When Margaret Ibbotson's recourse to her needle fails to alleviate the nervous tension provoked by her long-suffering romance, she seeks a stereotyped romantic end to her mortal affliction. Deliberately venturing onto the thin ice of a frozen river, she experiences "one thought of joy"—"it will soon be all over now," before a hasty rescue foils her plan of escape. As she is even denied the martyrdom of a lingering terminal illness, she is forced to abandon her dreams of a romantic death and proceed along a more practical course. The narrator concedes that "the unhappy must be employed, or they will go mad" (262)—yet no drawing-room occupation can speed Margaret's recovery. Rather than languishing indoors, she channels her nervous energy with a concentrated composure typical of Harriet Martineau herself.² Margaret's inclination toward physical exertion avoids the mental fatigue heightened by sedentary pursuits such as reading, writing and sewing, since:

Much oftener the attention is languid, the thoughts wander, and associations with the subject of grief are awakened. Women who find that reading will not do, will obtain no relief from sewing. Sewing is pleasant enough in moderation to those whose minds are at ease the while; but it is employment which is trying to the nerves when long continued, at the best; and nothing can be worse for the harassed, and for those who want to escape from themselves. (263)

It is nonetheless difficult for the people of Deerbrook to disassociate themselves from romantic intrigue. Unable to provide a rational explanation for Margaret's long rambles, they suspect domestic unrest as the cause. Hope is occasionally seen meeting her after completing his rounds and it is speculated that the two are guilty of a romantic rendezvous. This in turn leads to gossip of Hester's unhappiness, with her concern for her husband's failing business misinterpreted as a troubled marriage. Mrs Rowland grasps at

² Martineau remarks in a letter to her sister-in-law Helen dated 12 May 1825: "Feelings are given us to be directed and controuled [sic], not to be thought about: much less talked about" (Sanders, *Selected Letters*, 5).

these threads to weave a tale of Margaret's infidelity to Phillip. Hope raises his voice in protest, all to no avail since the charm which worked so magically with Mrs Plumstead is wasted on Phillip. Diplomatic speech is rendered powerless as assumed male authority is undercut by actual female dominance. The physician's detachment from the artifices of gossip in keeping his communications on a strictly professional level has left him helpless to defend himself against contrived allegations. Required to respond to Mrs Rowland's accusations, delivered via the intermediary of the equally inarticulate Phillip, Hope is at a loss for words. He can only protest his sister-in-law's innocence and bow to Mrs Rowland's superior vocal dexterity, admitting his own defeat in reporting to Margaret that Phillip's "persuasion is irremovable" (408).

It is not until Priscilla, Phillip and Hope are physically brought together due to the fatal illness of a young Rowland that the contentious issue is resolved and rumour put to an end. Symbolically, the death of Matilda Rowland, hitherto described as her mother's most promising barb-tongued protégée, foresees the termination of detracting gossip. As Margaret and Phillip stroll toward happy tomorrows, the countryside regains its sense of romance. However, the continuation of disturbing drawing-room speculation is expected with the prediction that until the young women are "a knot of grey-headed friends" (523), the irrepressible sound of the female voice will continue to be heard. With the art of a skilled gossip, the narrator herself has shuffled this implication beneath a flourish of distracting language, leaving the reader with an appreciation of female verbal dexterity as practiced by the women of *Deerbrook*. The contemporary observations of Robert Louis Stevenson serve as a testament to the resourcefulness of Victorian women who crafted conversation into an art form as detailed as their needlework:

The point of difference, the point of interest, is evaded by the brilliant women, under a shower of irrelevant conversational rockets; it is bridged by the discreet woman with a rustle of silk, as she passes smoothly forward to the nearest point of safety. And this sort of prestidigitation, juggling the dangerous topic out of sight until it can be reintroduced in an altered shape, is a piece of tactics among the true drawing room queens. (45)

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