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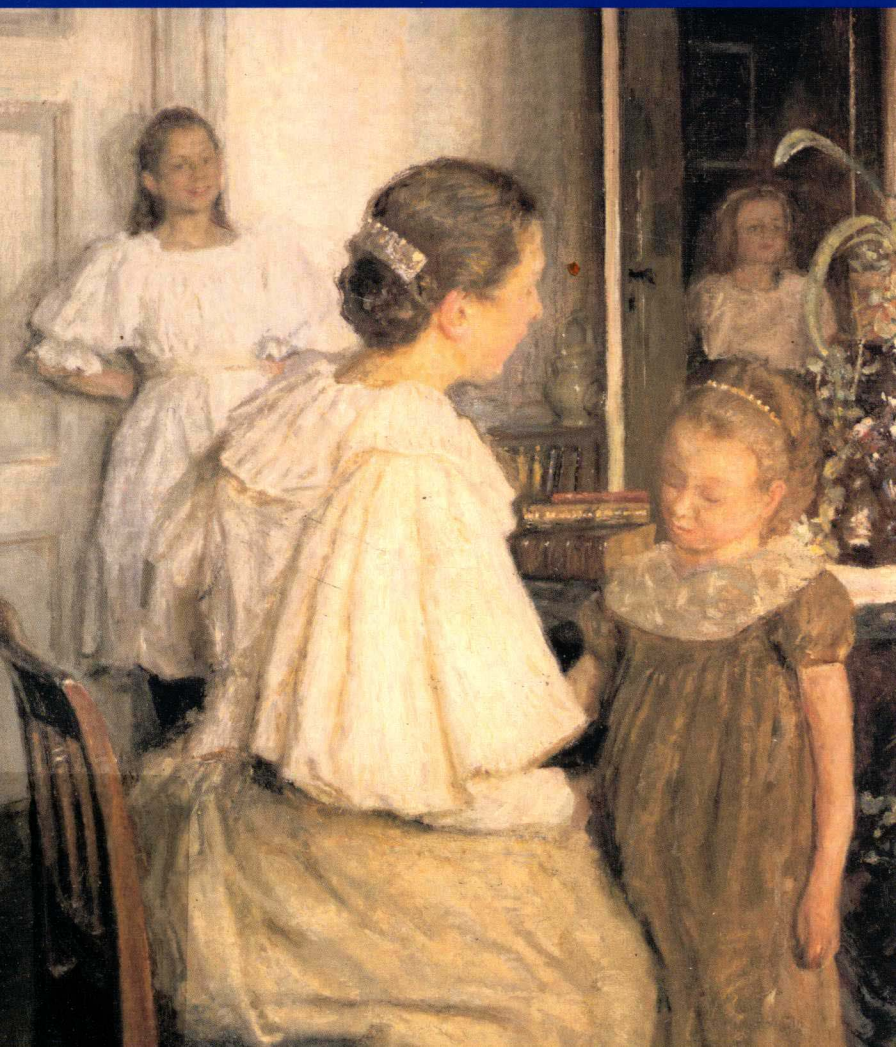
Wives and Daughters

ELIZABETH GASKELL



WIVES AND DAUGHTERS

An Everyday Story

Elizabeth Gaskell

With Introduction and Notes by

DINNY THORLEY

University of Westminster

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide-ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

General Adviser
KEITH CARABINE
Rutherford College
University of Kent at Canterbury

INTRODUCTION

In May 1864 Elizabeth Gaskell, writing to her publisher George Smith, announced that she'd thrown overboard a projected story he didn't seem to like 'and I have made up a story in my mind, – of country-town life forty years ago, – a widowed doctor has one daughter Molly, – when she is about sixteen he marries again – a widow with one girl Cynthia, – and these girls – contrasted characters, – not sisters but living as sisters in the same house are unconscious rivals for the love of a young man Roger . . . the second son of a neighbouring squire . . . '.[1] She continues with an outline of the plot including a comparison of Roger, who becomes a scientist, with her cousin Charles Darwin.

1 J. A. V. Chapple & Arthur Pollard (eds) *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, Mandolin, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1997, p. 731. All works cited in the footnotes will also be listed in the Bibliography.

Eighteen months later Gaskell died, suddenly, in mid-sentence, surrounded by her daughters, in the house in Hampshire she'd recently bought with the proceeds from her writing, intended for her husband's retirement (but kept from him as a surprise) and for her unmarried daughters. Her letters chronicle her struggle to keep up with the writing while battling with intermittent ill-health ('such bad headaches . . . Oh *how* dead I feel'), dealing with house negotiations and coping with all the activities of a Unitarian minister's wife and a busy mother of four who was also engaged in voluntary social work in Manchester.[2] She had written all but the very end of *Wives and Daughters* (serialised in the *Cornhill Magazine* with illustrations by du Maurier, August 1864 to January 1866, and published in book form later in 1866), and Frederick Greenwood, the *Cornhill* editor, wrote the short conclusion, using information Gaskell had given her family.

Gaskell, writing in the decade in which sensation fiction peaked in popularity (she was highly indignant at the £5000 the *Cornhill* were paying Wilkie Collins for *Armadale*, as against her £2000 for the copyright of *Wives and Daughters*),[3] gave her novel a deliberately anti-sensation fiction subtitle, 'An Everyday Story'; and the basic ingredients, as her outline to Smith suggests, are those of very many nineteenth-century realist novels. What makes *Wives and Daughters* an outstanding achievement is the depth and solidity of Gaskell's imaginative representation of this world, and the humane and progressive vision that informs it. Family relationships are central, with considerable focus on fathers and sons as well as wives and daughters, but Gaskell also vividly presents a whole society, with the interactions, social, professional and personal, of a wide range of characters from many classes, and the novel is permeated by a sense of her deep love for the setting, a small provincial town, 'Hollingford', and its rural surroundings in the northwest of England. It is set in the 1820s and recalls the way of life of her girlhood, familiar down to the smallest detail. Like *Cranford*, Hollingford is another incarnation of Knutsford in Cheshire, then a town of three to four thousand, Gaskell's home until in 1832, at the age of twenty-one, she married and moved to Manchester. There is acute and compassionate psychological analysis, especially of Hamley, the local squire, and of the stepsister, Cynthia Kirkpatrick, far from the moralistic tendency of some Victorian fiction to divide characters into sheep and goats, and

2 ibid., pp. 776 and 773

3 Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, Faber & Faber, London 1993, p. 572

there are ingenious variations on a theme in the portrayal of the stepmother Clare. Within an overall comic realist mode, she successfully blends various genres, including comedy of manners, *Bildungsroman*, some sensation elements, *pace* the subtitle (the secret marriage, for example), and fairytale motifs such as Molly and the 'ogre' at The Towers, as Lord Cumnor appears to the twelve-year-old child. Finally, there is Gaskell's consistently critical slant. She portrays this world with great affection but, though there is some idealisation of Roger and especially of Molly, she does not view it with uncritical nostalgia.

Gaskell's work used to be seen as dividing broadly into two types: industrial social-problem novels, such as *Mary Barton* (1848), highly critical of factory owners, and *Ruth* (1853), the compassionate story of an unmarried mother, praised by Marx among others (and banned and even burnt, in the case of *Ruth*, by some of her husband's outraged parishioners), and comedies of manners, subtle and delicate, such as *Cranford* (1851). Today it is recognised that the same concerns are evident in all her writing. Gaskell's work invariably shows authority structures, whether in the form of a mill-owner, the legal establishment or the father of a family, to be highly fallible. In this novel, there is sharp critical analysis of most members of the Cumnor family, overlords of Hollingford. Class relationships are precisely defined; for example, the Cumnors must court the people of Hollingford with a county election looming: their presence – the 'aristocratic ozone' (p. 256) – and the ostentation they're expected to display at the Easter ball, 'We're a show and a spectacle' (p. 264–5), are all part of the bargain to secure votes, as the youngest Cumnor daughter, Lady Harriet, shrewdly comments.

Though the novel opens in 1821, when her heroine Molly Gibson is a child of twelve, Gaskell skips briefly over the next five years and then covers the period June 1827 to the autumn of 1830. *Wives and Daughters* is therefore set shortly before the first Reform Bill of 1832, and written in the run-up to the second, of 1867. Gaskell does not touch directly on the issue of constitutional reform, but change, especially social change, is a theme in almost every area explored. Lord Cumnor and Squire Hamley are representatives of a dying feudal age, though the Cumnors are clearly an adaptable species, shown for example by their courting of rising young scientist Roger Hamley near the end of the novel.

Gaskell contrasts Tory Squire Hamley, whose family have lived in the village of Hamley from time immemorial and whose estate is now small, with the Whig Cumnors, originally tobacco sellers and only in

the county for a century, as Lady Harriet reminds her mother Lady Cumnor, a snobbish despot (p. 544). The Cumnors have large estates in two counties and own most of the town of Hollingford. Squire Hamley's estate, on the other hand, is encumbered with debt, partly a government loan for land drainage (Gaskell is slightly anachronistic here, these loans being brought in by Peel in the 1840s), he cannot sell any part of his estate due to entails, and Gaskell shows the vulnerability of this situation. As Lansbury in her study of Gaskell comments: 'Lord Cumnor could well afford to maintain his estates, but a man like Squire Hamley was becoming anomalous in English agricultural life . . . By the 1870s, about 24% of the agricultural land of England was owned by men who held properties of more than 10,000 acres. Just as industry was developing larger units, small farms were being absorbed by the great estates, and a man like Hamley lived in dread of a neighbour like Cumnor'.[4] If not swallowed up by a large landowner, his estate might well be bought by a new industrialist. Neither landowner is well educated and both are highly conscious of their rival Tory and Whig alignments. The positive pattern of change is shown, however, in the second generation, where the respective sons, Roger Hamley and Lord Hollingford, are collaborators in their scientific pursuits and are not much interested in party politics. When Lady Harriet tries to stir her brother up about the forthcoming election, he replies 'I really would as soon be out of the House as in it' (p. 265). Gaskell portrays him as shy and intelligent, part of a European community of scientists and well abreast of developments.

To most of Gaskell's first generation of readers in the mid-1860s, the changes that had occurred in those past forty years, 'the days before railroads were' (p. 252), would have made the late 1820s – when the Napoleonic Wars were a vivid memory, anti-Catholic prejudice a widespread phenomenon and the class hierarchy firmly fixed – a remote world. Hollingford is a feudal town, and the sentiments and convictions of a character such as the positively depicted Trade Unionist Nicholas Higgins in Gaskell's second industrial novel *North and South* (1855), written a decade earlier but set in 1850s' urban Manchester, would be inconceivable in this deeply conservative rural world of some twenty-five years earlier. Significantly, in Gaskell's plans for the ending, Roger Hamley and his wife-to-be Molly, open and progressive in outlook, are to leave

4 Coral Lansbury, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis*, Paul Elek, London 1975, pp. 184-5

Hollingford for London, reminiscent of the similar move of Dorothea and Ladislaw, pro-reform journalist and later MP, at the end of Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871).

Another target in all Gaskell's work is injustice, closely linked to the exposure of authority structures. A powerful example here, a case in which injustice arises from issues of class and sexual politics, is the intended treatment of Aimée, the young French Catholic nursery-maid, an orphan, the secret wife of Squire Hamley's older son Osborne. After Osborne's death the squire intends to pay Aimée off, ignoring her rights to her child, seeing her merely as the means by which he's been provided with a grandson, a male heir. Aimée's name is a perfect shorthand for her character and role and, unlike the pattern in some Victorian novels (Disraeli's *Sybil*, for example), she does not – indeed could not, in Gaskell's writing – turn out to be an aristocrat in disguise. The Aimée plot unobtrusively illustrates historical change in displaying Squire Hamley's rabid anti-French ('Johnny *crapaud*') and anti-Catholic sentiments. It also shows Gaskell's wholesale challenge to the patriarchal dominance shown by the squire to his older son Osborne, concerning his (as the squire thinks) future marriage, as well as indicating a move towards a more egalitarian future, with some crossing of class boundaries. When Squire Hamley bemoans Osborne's choice of 'this French girl, of no family at all', his son Roger, ally and supporter of his sister-in-law from the start, dwells on Aimée's loving qualities and urges merit over rank: 'Never mind what she was; look at what she is!' (p. 565).

Gaskell shows how the convention of 'separate spheres', the age-old division – men, rationality and the public sphere; women, emotion and the domestic – may make it damagingly difficult for men to communicate, and to analyse and handle emotion. Her fiction also shows men greatly enriched by bridging this opposition. John Thornton, the factory-owner in *North and South*, for example, is shown in the early part of the novel as split between an intuitive 'feeling' side, seen in his care and thoughtfulness in providing practical means to alleviate the suffering of the sick Mrs. Hale, and on the other hand as a tough, 'rational', *laissez-faire* master, who sees no need to communicate with his factory 'hands'. In the course of the novel he changes, and the intuitive nurturing side is integrated into his role as master – the joint factory-canteen venture is symbolic of this. As he puts it to an MP concerned about the industrial situation, near the end of the novel, communication and joint planning on the part of masters and men are essential for successful industrial relations . . . '[A]ctual personal contact . . . is the very breath of life . . . I

would take an idea, the working out of which would necessitate personal intercourse; it might not go well at first, but at every hitch interest would be felt by an increasing number of men, and at last its success in working come to be desired by all, as all had borne a part in the formation of the plan . . . '[5] And in her first novel *Mary Barton*, Gaskell lays positive emphasis on the working men's close involvement in family life, such as the Chartist Barton's and Wilson's care for the starving wife and children of a fellow-worker sick with fever, 'rough, tender nurses as they were';[6] and in Chapter 9 she describes in touching and comic detail the long journey home from London of another worker, Job Legh, with his recently orphaned baby granddaughter, whom he subsequently brings up.

In *Wives and Daughters*, male emotional repression is shown especially in the case of Gibson, the widowed local doctor, a Scot, generally a man of few words, and father of the heroine Molly. Gibson's second marriage, the mainspring of the plot, occurs partly because propriety, so destructive in its prescriptions for women, urges the need of a stepmother for Molly aged sixteen. Widowed father and daughter are idyllically happy, but he is concerned when his young medical apprentice Coxe falls for Molly, and feels she needs a chaperone-figure who will supervise these and household matters. He also seems to feel that the presence of a wife-chaperone will release him from having to deal with the emotions conjured up by his daughter's approaching adulthood, something he would dearly like to delay. Gibson's repression is highlighted time and time again, especially in the run-up to the rushed and disastrous marriage, treated comically but also seen as tragic in its repercussions, especially in the first half of the novel. Gibson believes that his reason is 'lord of all' (p. 28), he has 'rather a contempt for demonstrative people' (p. 28), and he is resolutely against self-analysis. Some of Gibson's tactics are dismissal of his feelings by joking; diversion by concentrating on his work or on the practical – 'don't let us have any sentiment. Have you got your keys? that's more to the purpose' (p. 54); or brusque behaviour, as when, very upset by Molly's imminent departure to stay with the Hamleys, he sees her in Hollingford during the day but 'only gave her a look or a nod, and went on his way, scolding himself for his weakness in feeling so much pain at the thought of her absence for a fortnight or so' (p. 53). After

5 Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, Wordsworth, Ware 1994, p. 399
6 Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1970, p. 99

a very brief acquaintance he proposes to Clare Kirkpatrick, a pretty and shallow widow, ex-governess to the Cumnors, but 'was aware that the question as to its wisdom came into his mind the instant that the words were said past recall' (p. 95). A few minutes later he realises he has been semi-manipulated both by Clare, and by the Cumnors, trying their hand at match-making by way of diversion, but 'Mr Gibson tried not to think about it, for he was aware that if he dwelt upon it, he might get to fancy all sorts of things, as to the conversation which had ended in his offer' (p. 96). Before the marriage Gibson suffers from depression; later he determines he will 'not allow himself to repine over the step he had taken' (p. 288), concentrating instead on the practical benefits of his marriage, such as Clare's role as chaperone and manager of his house. Despite this supposedly rational attitude, 'sudden tears came into Mr Gibson's eyes as he remembered how quiet and undemonstrative his little Molly had become in her general behaviour to him' (p. 288–9). (Ironically, his apprentice Coxe is summoned to live with a rich uncle and become his heir, removing the immediate need of a chaperone.) Gibson associates women with emotion and makes frequent (often clichéd) misogynistic statements, on for example women's folly and irrationality. He is against education for girls, and gets exasperated when appealed to concerning domestic upsets in his household. It's significant that it is the two 'rational' men of science, Dr Gibson and Roger Hamley, initially with Cynthia, who choose wrongly, again reminiscent of *Middlemarch* and the marriage of the pioneering Dr Lydgate to Rosamund Vincy.

Convention and propriety, as expressed in countless conduct-books for women, have formed the character and dictate the behaviour of Clare, Gibson's second wife. Stoneman quotes from a typical conduct book of 1824 as an epigraph to her chapter on *Wives and Daughters*. 'It is by the arts of *pleasing* only that WOMEN can attain to any degree of consequence or of power.' (*The New Female Instructor: or Young Woman's Guide to Domestic Happiness* . . . [Thomas Kelly, London 1824]). Clare is virtually a textbook illustration of the behaviour recommended in this book, the first six chapters of which deal with 'Dress and Fashion', 'Behaviour and Manners', 'Company', 'Conversation', 'Visiting and Amusements' and 'Employment of Time'. Cunning is also a desired attribute; 'as Patmore approvingly puts it, "To the sweet folly of the dove,/She joins the cunning of the snake" (*The Angel in the House*, VII, Prelude I [1862])' [7] The most

7 Patsy Stoneman, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, Harvester, Brighton 1987, pp. 170 and 174

shocking example of Clare's cunning is her eavesdropping on the medical consultation in order to discover whether Osborne's poor health makes him an uncertain choice as prospective husband for Cynthia, in which case she should concentrate her match-making energies on younger son Roger (Chapter 29). Clare is one of many fictional illustrations of manipulative 'weak' women (Eliot's Rosamond Vincy being, perhaps, the outstanding example), a type often discussed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writings on 'The Woman Question'. One of the main purposes of Mary Wollstonecraft's classic *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) was to show the pernicious effects of this ideology of femininity, and to urge that women, as rational creatures, should receive a sound education, enabling them to become good mothers, workers and citizens. (One of the contrasts that is stressed by Gaskell between the two stepsisters is Molly's omnivorous reading and later, through Roger, her keen interest in scientific material.) In addition, Wollstonecraft, speaking of the need of education for women, is persuaded that 'the heart, as well as the understanding, is opened by cultivation'.[8] Wollstonecraft's work is a manifesto; there is no shred of polemic in Gaskell's inventive, entertaining and fully dramatised creation, but their point is the same: women such as Clare, with her undernourished heart, affectation and scheming, are the products of a culturally powerful ideology, and change is needed at the root.

Clare exercises power with 'silken' determination, seems unaware of her lack of moral scruple and is also an inveterate liar who can improvise whenever the need arises. Calculation and manipulation, of the kind required for success in the marriage market and for social advancement generally, have become second nature to her. Years of practice enable her speedily to weigh up the various factors in order to decide on any action. Near the end of the novel she wonders whether to agree to a visit by the convalescent Molly to the Cumnors while Cynthia's marriage takes place in London. 'Meanwhile Mrs Gibson was rapidly balancing advantages and disadvantages. Amongst the latter, jealousy came in predominant. Amongst the former – it would sound well; Maria could then accompany Cynthia and herself as "their maid"; Mr Gibson would stay longer with her, and it was always desirable to have a man at her beck and call in such a place as London; besides that, this identical man was gentlemanly and good-looking, and a favourite with her prosperous brother-in-

8 Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1982, p. 158

law; the "ayes" had it. "What a charming plan . . . " ' (pp. 546).

If Clare is a *tour de force*, Gaskell's presentation of Clare's daughter Cynthia is a more unusual and complex psychological triumph. Cynthia is an instinctive though 'passive coquette' (title of Chapter 31), who cannot help 'tickling the vanity of men' (p. 360). Clare, feeling her daughter an encumbrance, has kept her out of the way at school in Boulogne. Cynthia in turn feels contempt and enjoys exposing her mother's manoeuvres. Gaskell suggests that Cynthia, suffering from a lack of love and feelings of rejection, has no solid core of selfhood and therefore constantly adapts. On one of the occasions when she's oppressed by her entanglement with Preston, her sparkling though restless mood in company is compared by Gaskell (in one of her rare images) to 'the glitter of the pieces of a broken mirror' (p. 309). Cynthia is aware of her own moral failings and inability to feel deeply (' . . . too much love is rather oppressive to me . . . I like a great deal, widely spread about; not all confined to one individual lover', p. 505), probably through having been 'tossed about so' in childhood (p. 294). Gaskell's vivid and sympathetic picture of this girl stresses the contrast between the mother's lack of moral awareness and the daughter's clear-sightedness about her own flawed psychological make-up and its causes. In some ways Cynthia seems more like an alienated modern young woman.

One of many perceptively analysed relationships is that between Cynthia and Gibson, a surrogate father figure who touches a deep chord in her and for whose approval she longs. While Cynthia cherishes loving memories of her own father, Kirkpatrick the curate, who died when she was very young, she is well aware that to her mother, until Clare's remarriage, she was considered and treated not just as an encumbrance but latterly also as a rival. Hence her radical comment to Molly that: 'I don't think love for one's mother quite comes by nature' (p. 196). The theme of parental rejection or loss is particularly powerful in Gaskell's work and undoubtedly stems from the loss of her own mother and her father's very infrequent contact with his daughter after his wife's death when Elizabeth was one year old and was taken to Knutsford to be brought up by maternal relations. [9] In Molly Gibson's case, Gaskell links the issue of loss to that of female self-abnegation and silencing. Gaskell gives Molly

9 This is discussed in all biographies of Gaskell and is explored in detail in F. Bonaparte's psychoanalytic study of Gaskell's work: *The Gypsy Bachelor in Manchester: The Life of Mrs Gaskell's Demon*, University Press of Virginia, Virginia 1992

perhaps the most strikingly strong and heartfelt language in the whole novel, and another of her rare images, when Molly is told by her father of his forthcoming remarriage and is shattered by the loss of their close and loving relationship that this implies. 'She was afraid of saying anything, lest the passion of anger, dislike, indignation – whatever it was that was boiling up in her breast – should find vent in cries and screams, or worse, in raging words that could never be forgotten. It was as if the piece of solid ground on which she stood had broken from the shore, and she was drifting out to the infinite sea alone' (p. 99). When Roger urges self-abnegation, telling Molly she'll be happier if she can think of others rather than herself, Molly's reply is again striking: '"No, I shan't," said Molly, shaking her head. "It will be very dull when I shall have killed myself, as it were, and live only in trying to do, and to be, as other people like .... I might as well never have lived" ' (p. 121). It might be argued that Gaskell intends Molly's view to sound exaggerated, yet the idea of self-abegnation as a kind of suicide seems literally borne out by the case of Mrs Hamley, who gives up most of her own interests after marriage, due to her husband's patronising attitude towards cultural pursuits and to his dislike of socialising. The squire 'loved his wife all the more dearly for her sacrifices for him; but, deprived of all her strong interests, she sank into ill-health' (p. 37), leading gradually to her death.

From the earliest reviews onwards, Squire Hamley has been recognised as perhaps the greatest achievement among the characters, proud, narrow-minded, deeply prejudiced and of 'morbid sensitiveness' (p. 224) due to his lack of education and the family's decline, but also loving and loveable. He is seen in many relationships. The powerful scene with Preston shows the rise of the Cumnors and the fall of smaller landowners like Hamley; the death-scene of his tenant Silas, which shows the strong bond between tenant and landlord, contrasts strongly with Lady Cumnor's class attitudes. Mention has already been made of his French daughter-in-law. Squire Hamley, Hamley Hall and estate seem to represent something quintessentially English, there since the Conquest – or the Heptarchy, as Hollingford's Miss Browning puts it. The fact that his grandson and heir is half French is a challenge to chauvinism on Gaskell's part. (It recalls the marriage of Frederick Hale, the heroine's brother in *North and South*, to a Catholic Spanish girl Dolores, and Gaskell's gentle satire of the Hale's family servant Dixon who fears that Catholicism might be contagious, a dangerous virus, if she were ever to visit them in Spain.)

The greatest focus is on the squire's family relationships. Here

again Gaskell shows the pain caused by inability to communicate deepest feelings and she analyses with compassion the barriers to Osborne's confiding in his father, in particular the squire's burning desire to 'hoist the old family up again' (p. 388). In keeping with the great nineteenth-century realist tradition, Gaskell has shown how broad historical circumstances and the particular family background have helped mould Squire Hamley; psychologically he is highly plausible. Many scenes centring on the squire are dramatised with particular vividness and with eloquent detail and gesture, for example the watch and pipe-smoking scenes (Chapters 22 and 23). The watch scene occurs on a bleak March evening not long after the death of the squire's beloved wife. The scene appeals to the senses: the neglected, sputtering, smoking fire, piled high with half-dried wood, the keen March wind cutting its way through the room, lit only by pale candlelight. Gaskell contrasts with this the figure of Osborne in full evening dress: 'black coat, drab trousers, checked cotton cravat, and splashed boots' (p. 225). The initial disagreement – the accuracy of their respective watches when Osborne arrives late for dinner in his finery – is trivial, but it stirs up deep-seated bitter feelings of hostility and resentment.

The squire's turn of phrase is distinctive (as is that of most of the main characters). He is straightforward, and often bluff and colloquial, as when he explains to his sons, earlier on, why he is unwilling for them to invite their public-school friends to stay. He is convinced that with his poor education he will be looked down upon: ' "Ay, you may laugh, but it is so; and your friends will throw their eyes askance at me, and never think on my pedigree, which would beat theirs all to shivers, I'll be bound" ' (p. 224). After Osborne's death, overcome with guilt and sorrow, he is also astonished to hear of the secret marriage. He pours out his thoughts in an expressive inner monologue, composed of short phrases and ending with an appeal to his dead son. ' "It's all over now. All over. All past and gone. We'll not blame him – no; but I wish he'd ha' told me; he and I to live together with such a secret in one of us. It's no wonder to me now – nothing can be a wonder again, for one never can tell what's in a man's heart. Married so long! and we sitting together at meals – and living together. Why, I told him everything! Too much, maybe, for I showed him all my passions and ill-tempers! Married so long! Oh, Osborne, Osborne, you should have told me!" ' (pp. 500).As a contemporary critic Henry Chorley wrote in the *Athenaeum* in March 1866, praising the novel's realism: 'The grief and remorse of the homely old man on the death of his delicate eldest-born, betwixt

whom and himself there had been a coolness, is as touching in its reality as anything which could be cited.' [10]

It may not be fanciful to see echoes of King Lear in Squire Hamley. Hamley has little power or room for manoeuvre; his touchiness and irascibility turn into towering rage in the scene with Preston; and – a case of parental neglect, but not of rejection – he has favoured his older son Osborne over the younger and devoted Roger. The pipe-smoking scene occurs when Roger has just returned home from Cambridge. Communication between Osborne and his father is virtually non-existent and the widowed father is lonely and unhappy. Roger, sensing his father's isolation, smokes and talks with him in his study after dinner. Towards the end of the evening, having filled another pipe for his father, he stoops over and strokes his cheek (p. 237). Roger has listened to his father's reminiscences and present troubles and succeeds in diverting him with a humorous Cambridge anecdote. Finally, the squire tells Roger: ' "Well, we've had a pleasant evening – at least, I have. But perhaps you haven't; for I'm but poor company now, I know." "I don't know when I've passed a happier evening, father," said Roger. And he spoke truly, though he did not trouble himself to find out the cause of his happiness' (p. 237). As Lansbury comments, 'It is a scene handled with exquisite restraint, for it is at this moment that Roger no longer feels himself the second son, the clumsy shadow accentuating Osborne's grace and refinement. And with this awareness comes the knowledge that his father loves him.' [11]

Wives and Daughters, then, is a fully dramatised and multi-voiced novel told by an unobtrusive narrator, and Gaskell implicitly intervenes in key nineteenth-century debates. She shows historical and social evolution and challenges to traditional patriarchal power and authority in the family. The family was of course often seen as a microcosm of society and, by the marriage choices of both Squire Hamley's sons, Gaskell implies a more egalitarian model. This is also stressed within the scientific community, seen as a true meritocracy. As Dr Gibson tells the Miss Brownings, who are upset at the amount of time he spends with Lord Hollingford: ' "I seek Lord Hollingford as I should seek such a man, whatever his rank or position might be: usher to a school, carpenter, shoemaker, if it were possible for them to have had a similar character of mind developed by similar

10 Angus Easson (ed.), *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge, London 1991, p. 472

11 Lansbury, p. 205

advantages' (p. 130). As well as dwelling on Roger's deep interest in science and his analytical powers, Gaskell stresses his love and care for nature, a nurturing attitude. The novel takes a probing look at the socialisation processes by which daughters become wives and suggests, with the many surrogate mother figures who surround Molly, a community role in upbringing. Overall, in this novel written just five years after Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), an optimistic picture of social change and development is presented.

Given the circumstances of *Wives and Daughters*' creation, one might expect signs of rush and of strain, but this is not the case. Gaskell seems to have been able to continue writing wherever she found herself, even using the mantelpiece of her room in Paris as a desk or writing against the background of talk when staying with friends there in the spring of 1865. Keats wrote that 'if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all', and this novel, written in the last hectic eighteen months of Gaskell's life, seems almost miraculously to flow with the utmost ease and naturalness. Called 'the most underrated novel in English' by Lawrence Lerner in his Penguin introduction of thirty years ago, it has now achieved the fame it deserves and is generally considered to be Elizabeth Gaskell's masterpiece.

DINNY THOROLD
Senior Lecturer
University of Westminster

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