

Elizabeth Gaskell

WIVES AND DAUGHTERS

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# WIVES AND DAUGHTERS

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell was born in London in 1810, but spent her formative years in Cheshire, Stratford-upon-Avon and the north of England. In 1832 she married the Reverend William Gaskell, who was to become the famous minister of the Unitarian Chapel in Manchester's Cross Street. For sixteen years she bore children, worked among the poor, travelled and, latterly, dabbled in writing. In 1848, however, *Mary Barton* made her instantly a celebrity. In 1850 Dickens secured her for *Household Words*, to which she contributed fiction for the next thirteen years, notably the companion novel to *Mary Barton*, *North and South* (1855). In 1850 too she met Charlotte Brontë, which was the beginning of a vital friendship culminating in 1857 in the fine *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. Her position as William Gaskell's wife and as a successful writer gave her a wide circle of friends both from the professional world of Manchester and from the larger literary world. There is nothing of the amateur about Mrs Gaskell. Her life-story can make her seem a wife and mother who came to writing late, almost for something to do, but this is far from the truth. Her output was substantial and wholly professional. As Dickens discovered when he tried to impose his views on her as editor of *Household Words*, she knew what she was hoping to achieve and would not be bullied even by the greater genius. Her later works, *Sylvia's Lovers*, (1863), *Cousin Phyllis* (1864) and *Wives and Daughters* (1866), suggest in their greater confidence and inventiveness of style and form that Mrs Gaskell was reaching a new level of creation when she suddenly died in November 1865.

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## Introduction

### I

THE great woman novelists all have two names: Jane Austen, Emily Brontë (or 'Ellis Bell'), George Eliot, Virginia Woolf. The names may be false, or masculine, but at least they look like names. Behind them, dimly thronging the pages of the histories of literature, come the modestly feminine writers who shelter behind their marriage lines: Mrs Radcliffe, Mrs Humphrey Ward, Mrs Oliphant, Mrs Gaskell. Elizabeth Gaskell was a modest woman, and would not have been surprised to find herself among the minor and even the unread. Those who have read only one of her books – it is invariably *Cranford* – may feel that she belongs there, assuming that her other novels are even more feminine, more limited, and perhaps not quite so charming. This book will give them the pleasure of discovering their mistake.

Elizabeth Gaskell's books include several that are quite as good as *Cranford* and very different from it – and from one another. And above all they include *Wives and Daughters*, which is surely the most neglected novel of its century – the one where the gap is biggest between its intrinsic excellence and the neglect it has fallen into, little known and out of print. *Jane Eyre*, or *Barchester Towers*, or *Pendennis*, are flabby in comparison to its wit, its pathos, its intelligence. It raises Elizabeth Gaskell to the level when we can compare her with Jane Austen or George Eliot.

And the comparison is worth making, for the novel recalls them both. It looks back to Jane Austen, the great writer of serious comedy, and forward to George Eliot, the great writer of witty tragedy, and seems to bridge the gap between them.

While Cynthia ate her lunch, Mrs Gibson went on questioning. 'And your aunt, how is her cold? And Helen, quite strong again? Margaretta as pretty as ever? The boys are at Harrow, I suppose? And my old favourite, Mr Henderson?' She could not manage to slip in this last inquiry naturally; in spite of herself, there was a change of tone, an accent of eagerness. Cynthia did not reply on the instant; she poured herself out some water with great deliberation, and then said –



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'My aunt is quite well; Helen is as strong as she ever is, and Margaretta very pretty. The boys are at Harrow, and I conclude that Mr Henderson is enjoying his usual health, for he was to dine at my uncle's today.'

'Take care, Cynthia. Look how you are cutting that gooseberry tart,' said Mrs Gibson, with sharp annoyance; not provoked by Cynthia's present action, although it gave excuse for a little vent of temper. 'I can't think how you could come off in this sudden kind of way; I am sure it must have annoyed your uncle and aunt. I daresay they'll never ask you again.'

'On the contrary, I am to go back there as soon as ever I can be easy to leave Molly.'

'"Easy to leave Molly." Now that really is nonsense, and rather uncomplimentary to me, I must say: nursing her as I have been, daily, and almost nightly; for I have been wakened, times out of number, by Mr Gibson getting up, and going to see if she had had her medicine properly.'

This is pure Jane Austen. Cynthia has come back from staying with her uncle in London, where her mother hopes she has managed to extract a proposal from the eligible Mr Henderson (he proposed once before, but Cynthia was unfortunately engaged to someone else then). Cynthia is distressed to find that while she has been enjoying herself her stepsister Molly, of whom she is really very fond, has been very ill – suffering from one of those low-spirited declines into which Victorian heroines drop at low moments of the plot. That is the situation, and out of it Elizabeth Gaskell's clear eye and sharp ear have made a splendid piece of social comedy. The eye has given us one visual detail, beautifully used: Cynthia sees through her mother completely, and her infuriating gesture as she pours the water reveals her contempt, her patience, and a touch of malicious amusement. The ear has given us Cynthia's measured, factual reply, conveying her delight in misunderstanding, her calm ability to goad her mother, but gently, so that the mother's rebuke can only be an indirect one. No reader can love Cynthia at this point, yet all readers must identify with her, for she is doing the same as her author – seeing through Mrs Gibson, and then not quite saying so. Mrs Gibson's final sentence could have been by Cynthia or Jane Austen, though in fact it is by Elizabeth Gaskell.

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Blind herself as she would, she could not help perceiving that her father was not satisfied with the wife he had chosen. . . . He had become nervously sensitive to his wife's failings, and his whole manner had grown dry and sarcastic, not merely to her, but sometimes to Cynthia – and even, but this very rarely, to Molly herself. He was not a man to go into passions, or ebullitions of feeling; they would have relieved him, even while degrading him in his own eyes; but he became hard and occasionally bitter in his speeches and ways. Molly now learnt to long after the vanished blindness in which her father had passed the first year of his marriage; yet there were no outrageous infractions of domestic peace. Some people might say that Mr Gibson 'accepted the inevitable'; he told himself in more homely phrase 'that it was no use crying over spilt milk'; and he, from principle, avoided all actual dissensions with his wife, preferring to cut short a discussion by a sarcasm, or by leaving the room. Moreover, Mrs Gibson had a very tolerable temper of her own, and her cat-like nature purred and delighted in smooth ways and pleasant quietness. She had no great facility for understanding sarcasm; it is true it disturbed her; but, as she was not quick at deciphering any depth of meaning, and felt it unpleasant to think about it, she forgot it as soon as possible. Yet she saw she was often in some kind of disfavour with her husband, and it made her uneasy. She resembled Cynthia in this: she liked to be liked; and she wanted to regain the esteem which she did not perceive she had lost for ever. Molly sometimes took her stepmother's part in secret; she felt as if she herself could never have borne her father's hard speeches so patiently; they would have cut her to the heart, and she must either have demanded an explanation, and probed the sore to the bottom, or sat down despairing and miserable. Instead of which, Mrs Gibson, after her husband had left the room, on these occasions would say in a manner more bewildered than hurt –

'I think dear papa seems a little put out today; we must see that he has a dinner that he likes when he comes home. I have often perceived that everything depends on making a man comfortable in his own house.'

It was a passage of dialogue that recalled Jane Austen; and, appropriately enough, a lengthy paragraph of analysis recalls George Eliot. Once again it is about Mrs Gibson, but the tone is quite different. Not calm amusement at her incongruities and her shallowness, but grief at the disappointment she must cause. The grief

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is seen at one remove – it is Mr Gibson who is disappointed, his daughter who is sad; and the passage moves with some subtlety between Molly's direct jealousy, her sympathy for her father, and – a last and shrewd irony – the intensity of her love for him that leads her to understand so well the pain of not being liked by him that she 'took her stepmother's part in secret'. Molly (like Cynthia in the last extract) has become assimilated to the author at this point, for like the author she feels on Mrs Gibson's behalf the pain that, in that insensitive nature, appeared simply as uneasiness. And at that point, with the touch of a true ironist, Elizabeth Gaskell moves into direct speech – a groping speech by Mrs Gibson that illustrates all we have been told about her, shows how incapable she is of understanding her husband, how incapable she would be of understanding this passage.

Jane Austen had been dead for over thirty years when Elizabeth Gaskell began to write. We can presume she had read and admired her, but there is no reference to Jane Austen in her letters; and there is no way of knowing how far the resemblances we see are due to influence. With George Eliot the relationship is more complicated, since they were almost contemporaries. Elizabeth Gaskell was born in 1810, Marian Evans in 1819; both started writing fiction late in life – both, as it happens, at the age of 37. *Wives and Daughters* was Elizabeth Gaskell's last novel, and George Eliot was already famous when it was written. If there was influence it may well have been mutual, and we know a little about what they thought of each other.

They never met, though they corresponded briefly. Elizabeth Gaskell wrote a delightful letter to 'Mr Gilbert Elliot' in 1859, saying how pleased she was that someone had suspected her of writing *Adam Bede*; and then when she knew who the author was she wrote again to say how 'earnestly, fully and humbly' she admired both *Adam Bede* and *the Scenes of Clerical Life*, and George Eliot replied, with the offensive pleasure of someone who desperately needed praise, that the letter 'had brought me the only sort of help I care to have – an assurance of fellow-feeling, of thorough truthful recognition from one of the minds which are capable of judging as well as of being moved.'

If they had met, it might not have been quite comfortable.

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Marian Evans lived openly with G. H. Lewes as his wife, though they were not married and never could be, since Lewes could not divorce his wife, whose adultery he had at first condoned. Elizabeth Gaskell, wife of a provincial clergyman, found this deeply distressing. Even in her letter of praise she added, 'I should not be quite true in my ending, if I did not say before I concluded that I wish you were Mrs Lewes', and we can find from other letters that she was greatly upset to learn of the authorship:

It is a noble grand book, whoever wrote it, – but Miss Evans' life taken at the best construction, does so jar against the beautiful book that one cannot help hoping against hope.

But we need not speculate about a meeting that never happened: it is the interaction between two writers that concerns us, not between two women. We know that they admired each other. George Eliot read *Cranford* aloud to her husband, and praised both *Mary Barton* and *Sylvia's Lovers*. Her greatest enthusiasm was for the *Life of Charlotte Brontë*: 'we thought it admirable – cried over it – and felt the better for it.' About Ruth she was more hesitant: 'Mrs Gaskell seems to me to be constantly misled by a love of sharp contrasts – of "dramatic" effects. She is not contented with the subdued colouring – the half tints of real life.' The comment, from the great realist, is revealing, and *Wives and Daughters*, where even the finest scenes are in subdued tints, might have been written in obedience to it. But *Wives and Daughters*, alas, is never mentioned by George Eliot.

## II

Jane Austen and George Eliot make good starting points from which to converge on the fiction of Elizabeth Gaskell, but we must now look at her direct. Who was she, and what did she write?

She was the wife of the Rev. William Gaskell, minister of the Unitarian chapel of Cross Street, Manchester; and the mother of four daughters – a busy, happy woman, who wrote her novels in the interstices of family life. 'Now in this hour since breakfast', she writes to Charles Eliot Norton,

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I have had to decide on the following variety of important questions. Boiled beef – how long to boil? What perennials will do in Manchester smoke, and what colours our garden wants? Length of skirt for a gown? Salary of a nursery governess, and stipulations for a certain quantity of time to be left to herself. – Read letters on the state of Indian army – lent me by a very agreeable neighbour and return, with a proper note, and as many wise remarks as would come in a hurry :... – See a lady about an MS of hers, and give her disheartening but very good advice. Arrange about selling two poor cows for one good one ... – and it's not half past ten yet!

Here is a good deal of Elizabeth Gaskell: slightly self-mocking, yet really believing in all she does. Her duties were domestic, charitable and by no means unintellectual. Through her husband's work and her own lively awareness, she was thoroughly integrated into the life of Manchester – so thoroughly as to write very shrewdly about the character of that money-making town in which 'when you or I want a little good hearty personal individual exertion from any one they are apt to say in deeds if not in words "Spare my time, but take my money"'. Though Elizabeth Gaskell travelled a good deal and met many of the leading figures of the time, she was always a provincial at heart. She was pleased when her husband refused the offer of a church in London ('he has made his place here, and there must be some much stronger reason than a mere increase of income before it can be right to pull up the roots of a man of his age'). When she penetrated the literary or social centre of England, it was with a naïve vitality, laughing at her own enjoyment, aware of her own good sense:

Only think how grand we are! Meta and I declined joining the Prince of Wales incognito party to the Trosachs ... It sounds grand – as I try to comfort Meta, who won't be comforted – to have declined.

Of the deeper recesses of her feelings we know very little: her letters are usually gay and often frank, but there are areas they do not deal with. It is hard, for instance, to know how close she felt to her husband. There have been suggestions that the marriage was not really happy, that her eager vitality was bruised against his stolid reserve. There is no evidence for this, but it is true that some of her letters about his health, his habits and his feelings

show her to be anxious, affectionate, devoted, yet somehow ill at ease. She occasionally speculates on what he may be thinking, often on points where a wife who felt no barrier might simply have asked. It is tempting to pry, yet it is doubtful if the springs of Elizabeth Gaskell's creative power lay in any such hidden unhappiness. She had nothing of the alienated artist about her: she belonged to the bourgeoisie, and when she attacked them (as she did in *Mary Barton*) it is an attack from within. And we can be quite sure that she wouldn't want us to pry, for she hated publicity. Her stiff reply to an unknown inquirer is a joy to read now: days:

I disapprove so entirely of the plan of writing 'notices' or 'memoirs' of living people, that I must send you on the answer I have already sent to many others; namely an entire refusal to sanction what is to me so objectionable and indelicate a practice, by furnishing a single fact with regard to myself. I do not see why the public have any more to do with me than to buy or reject the wares I supply to them.

Out of this useful, balanced life came six novels, one biography, and a few dozen stories. Her first novel, *Mary Barton*, which appeared in 1848, was called 'A Tale of Manchester Life'. Though the plot comes largely from romantic conventions, the setting came direct from her own experience. She wrote it to take the side of the workers, and her hero is a Chartist. The *Edinburgh Review* rebuked her at great and solemn length for this, praising the power of the book but accusing it of 'creating and fostering bad feeling between classes'; yet it is not really a radical book, and the message on which it closes, that the interests of all are in harmony if only they would try to understand one another, is firmly anti-revolutionary. It is not the answer, nor the plot, that gives *Mary Barton* its touches of power, but the simple genuineness of its version of working-class life in Manchester. Its descriptions tell the same story as Engels' terrifying *Condition of the Working Class in England* in 1844, and sometimes tell it almost as bluntly.

Her next novel, *Ruth*, was a piece of moral propaganda. It is the story of a fallen woman who tries to redeem herself and almost succeeds. Ruth is a former dressmaker's apprentice, ill-treated, turned away, seduced, and then abandoned with her

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illegitimate son; she is taken into the house of Mr Benson, a kindly Congregationalist clergyman, who passes her off as a distant connexion and a widow, and gradually she becomes accepted into the local Dissenting and money-making community. Mr Benson has never dared tell the truth about her to any of his congregation, and this secret of course produces the plot-complications of the climax. The book is an urgent plea for charity, and we can see that it required some courage to write and publish it; illegitimacy was thought an unfit subject for fiction in 1853, and the author was furiously denounced. Two of her husband's congregation burnt it; one London library withdrew it from circulation as unfit for family reading; and Elizabeth Gaskell, deeply upset by the hostile reviews, compared herself to St Sebastian, tied to a tree to be shot at with arrows. 'I shrink with more pain than I can tell you from what people are saying, though I would do every jot of it over again tomorrow.'

Is it strange that the author of this attack on conventional morality should be the woman who hated the thought that Marian Evans had written a book she so admired ('Oh do say Miss Evans did not write it!'), and who wailed 'I wish - oh how I wish - Miss Evans had never seen Mr Lewes'? Perhaps it is not really strange, for Ruth, though it shows an earnest longing for charity, does not really attack the marriage laws, and reveals a rather conventional imagination. The novel stacks the cards very carefully in favour of Ruth: she was seduced by a cad, she repented, she would have liked nothing better than a life of respectability. Bourgeois morality could have forgiven Ruth with no danger to itself, and the book asks none of the dangerous questions we find in Dostoyevsky, or Zola, or even Hardy. Unfortunately, too, this limitation is artistic as well as moral, and for all the vividness of its picture of the world of Congregationalism, it has less imaginative freedom than any of her other novels.

After Ruth came *Cranford*, which appeared as a series of sketches in Dickens' magazine *Household Words* before being collected as a book. Two years later came *North and South*, her second Manchester novel. Both these will be discussed in the next section.

In 1855 her friend Charlotte Brontë died. They had known each

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ther for five years, and had exchanged visits; when she heard the news from a friend of Charlotte's at Haworth, she wrote:

I cannot tell you how **VERY** sad your note has made me. My dear dear friend that I shall never see again on earth! I did not even know she was ill . . .

Obituary notices and articles soon began to be published, some gossipy, some even malicious; Elizabeth Gaskell had already decided to publish what she knew of Charlotte when she received an unexpected request from Mr Brontë père to write his daughter's life. She took the task seriously, sought out all extant letters, visited all surviving friends, and paid the price in heart-searching and disappointments that the conscientious biographer always pays. The book was published in 1857, and it soon caused trouble. She had attacked a woman with whom Branwell Brontë was said to have had an affair, anonymously but frenetically, and this brought the threat of a libel action; there was a bitter controversy with Carus Wilson, son of the founder of the school that Charlotte had attended, and had used as the original of Lowwood in *Jane Eyre*; and even Mr Brontë, though at first he was pleased with the book, began to get uneasy as he thought over what she had said about him. The result of all this was an expurgated edition a year or so later, of which one of Charlotte's friends wrote:

As for the mutilated edition that is to come, I am sorry for it. Libellous or not, the first edition was all true.

In our time (as one might expect) the best has been on the other foot: the book has been attacked not for outspokenness but for reticence. In particular, it suppressed all reference to Charlotte's love for M. Héger, her tutor in Brussels, and no doubt the original of M. Paul Emmanuel in *Villette*. Charlotte's letters to Mr Héger, written in French after her return to England, are deeply moving half-confessions, but even if Elizabeth Gaskell saw the complete texts of them (which most scholars think she did) it is inconceivable that, with Charlotte's sensitive widower still alive, she should have published them. A twentieth-century husband might be proud of the earlier infatuations of his famous wife, but not the Rev. Arthur Nichols.



The next novel was *Sylvia's Lovers*, set in a north-eastern seaport during the Napoleonic wars. Like *Mary Barton*, it tells a romantic story in a realistically drawn setting. The plot hinges on the work of the press-gang, who kidnap the hero, and whose unpopularity in a sturdy seafaring community is vividly shown. This novel reminds us more than ever of George Eliot, and there is even one moment – the declaration of love between Sylvia and Kinraid – that I am quite sure George Eliot copied for the declaration between Lydgate and Rosamond. More important than such curiosities, of course, is the resemblance in style and method. Sylvia's parents, Daniel and Bell Robson, have a touch of the Poysers in them; Alice Rose, the pious outspoken old widow, has the raciness of Lisbeth Bede. And there are touches of psychological insight (as when Sylvia's brooding, jealous, unfavoured lover Philip watches her ripening love for Kinraid 'greedily as if it gave him delight') which suggest a new, mature economy of writing.

That was the last novel Elizabeth Gaskell published. There were also several volumes of tales, which on the whole are less interesting, though a few are still worth reading – *My Lady Ludlow*, *Lois the Witch* (a haunting story about the Salem Witch Trials) and *Cousin Phillis*, an almost perfect story, of which more below. When she died, suddenly, in 1865, she was still busy on *Wives and Daughters*, but fortunately there was only one more chapter to write – the happy ending, which is of course the most predictable chapter of all, and which readers will have no difficulty in supplying for themselves.

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*North and South* is probably Elizabeth Gaskell's finest novel, after *Wives and Daughters*. They are the only two of her books whose titles announce a theme: and this fact may be a clue to their excellence. The plots of all her novels are rather conventional, and the thematic pattern, superimposed on this, yields a more complex and more interesting structure. In *North and South* the theme is more pronounced than in *Wives and Daughters*, and is treated with great intelligence and fairness. 'North' is of course