

Wives and Daughters on Television

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'Was it faithful to the book?' This is the most frequent question heard and debated when a much-loved 'classic' novel is transposed to film or television. Such discussions, however, quickly reveal widely different concepts of what 'faithfulness' entails. Some viewers are outraged at the detection of door-knobs of a style not invented at the date of setting, while others are only concerned that the reproduction conform to their notion of the 'spirit' of the original. Even on material ground, however, our responses are clearly subjective. A setting which appears 'accurate' to one viewer will seem 'chocolate-boxy' to another, while readers build up notoriously different mental images of the characters described in novels, so that any specific actor is likely to offend *someone's* preconceptions.

To be pedantic, of course, it is not possible to reproduce a novel - a lengthy linear narrative constructed wholly in words - in a different medium. The material must to begin with be condensed, as well as being 'translated' into a mixed medium which is most noticeably visual but also includes the audible delivery of dialogue. Where the adaptation is of a nineteenth-century 'classic' realist novel like *Wives and Daughters*, however, and the production context is the BBC, with its known responsibility to the national literary heritage, adaptors tend to take few obvious 'liberties' with their originating text, and one of the reasons why discussions about the 'faithfulness' of

transposition get heated is that viewers assume a greater degree of correspondence between the two forms than is in fact possible. In such a case as *Wives and Daughters*, moreover, the novel has the dignity of age and classic status, against which the television version can only appear a late-come impostor. Comments on televised versions of classic novels are almost always, therefore, focussed on the shortcomings of the new, usurping version, in which the notion of 'fidelity' serves to obscure the fact that changes may not only be necessary, but creative.

Nevertheless, Andrew Davies's adaptation of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* for BBC1 television, which was produced by Sue Birtwhistle, directed by Nick Renton and broadcast in four parts in December, 1999,¹ was on the whole perceived as an accurate and sensitive rendering of Gaskell's original. The favourable reception is, however, still dependent on a notion of 'faithfulness' which is largely unexamined, and I have tried to give my own comments on the serialisation some extra clarity by adopting some key terms from Brian McFarlane's book, *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*.² Although McFarlane explicitly excludes television adaptations from his consideration, which is based on feature film versions of classic novels (p. vii), I have nevertheless found his introductory material useful in organising my thoughts about the televising of *Wives and Daughters*. In the summary which follows, however, it should be noted that I have introduced the word 'television' where McFarlane speaks only of film.

The most useful distinction McFarlane makes is between those elements of a novel which can be 'transferred' to television, and those which depend on a different system of signification (verbal as opposed to visual) and can therefore *only* be 'adapted'. In his terminology, therefore, the word 'adaptation' refers *only* to elements of the original novel which *have* to be changed in some way (for instance, a verbal description of a room becomes a picture of a room). Other elements, notably the sequence of events, can be 'transferred' - that is, transposed from one medium to the other with no significant change. Because he wants to use the word 'adaptation' in this limited way, McFarlane speaks of the whole process of shifting the novel to television not as 'adaptation' but as 'transposition', and I shall also adopt this convention. 'Transposition', then, has to deal with two different sets of features: those which can be 'transferred' and those which must be 'adapted'.

Classic realist novels and television serials are both essentially narrative forms which

depend on a sequence of events. The narrative structure, therefore, is the most easily 'transferable' feature of a novel, and the first and essential feature of a 'faithful' screenplay for television must be a narrative sequence which seeks to match that of the novel. Brian McFarlane, in discussing this aspect of transposition, adopts the terminology of Roland Barthes, who stresses the importance of what he calls the 'cardinal functions' of narrative:

Cardinal functions are the 'hinge-points' of narrative: that is, the actions they refer to open up alternatives of consequence to the development of the story; they create 'risky' moments in the narrative and it is crucial to narrativity ('the process through which the reader... constructs the meaning of the text'³) that the reader recognizes the possibility of such alternative consequences. The linking together of cardinal functions provides the irreducible bare bones of the narrative, and this linking, this 'tie between two cardinal functions, is invested with a double functionality, at once chronological and logical'.⁴

McFarlane's point is that

These cardinal functions... are... transferable: when a major cardinal function is deleted or altered in the film version of a novel (e.g. to provide a happy rather than a sombre ending), this is apt to occasion critical outrage and popular disaffection. The film-maker bent on 'faithful' adaptation must, as a basis for such an enterprise, seek to preserve the major cardinal functions. (pp. 13-14)

After a series of case-studies, McFarlane concludes that in general film-makers who transpose novels to the screen adhere closely 'to the original text at a level of major cardinal functions... The incidence of actual distortion at this level is much rarer than the general dissatisfaction expressed with adaptations would lead one to expect' (p. 196). Andrew Davies's screenplay for *Wives and Daughters* certainly adheres to most of the 'major cardinal functions' of Elizabeth Gaskell's plot. Molly's youthful encounter with 'Clare'; Mr Coxe's infatuation and Molly's consequent visit to the Hamleys; Mr Gibson's marriage; the arrival of Cynthia - these and almost all subsequent 'hinge-points' of the plot are faithfully transferred to the television version, preserving both the 'chronology' and the 'logic' of the original. Since it is clearly possible to transfer *all* such functions, however, the instances where the television version does not do so invite comment. In McFarlane's terms, 'when the film-maker chooses radically to alter such key plot

elements,.. the effects are apt to be striking and interesting in so far as they reflect on the way the film-maker is *using* his source material. (p. 196)

There are three examples of Davies's radical departure from Gaskell's cardinal functions, all of which relate to the winding-up of the story. The least obtrusive change is the entire omission of Molly's illness, brought on by sustained effort in nursing Aimee and keeping things going at Hamley Hall after the death of Osborne. In Gaskell's hands this episode is far more than an excuse for the decorative languor which made Victorian heroines 'pale and interesting'; it is part of Gaskell's demonstration that the 'caring' qualities associated with women are not just a matter of sentiment. Molly collapses from physical exhaustion brought on by hard work and a relentless assumption of responsibility. In plot terms, however, its omission is hardly noticeable. Although it represents a 'risky moment' in that Molly might not have survived, or might have become a permanent invalid, it is perhaps not a 'hinge-point' in the plot in the way that her dealings with Mr Preston or Cynthia's visits to London are.

The omission is, however, linked to a change of emphasis in the television serial away from Molly's passive endurance and towards her active pursuit of goals. This seems to me entirely in keeping with Gaskell's own priorities. Sarah Ellis may have announced to *The Daughters of England* (1845) that 'a woman's highest duty is so often to suffer and be still',⁵ but Molly Gibson thinks that her life would scarcely be worth living 'when I shall have killed myself, as it were, and live only in trying to do, and to be, as other people like'.⁶ The physical reality of 'care' and the lingering effects of illness are, however, themes more vivid for the Victorian reader than for the more emancipated viewers of today. I know from talking to undergraduates that present-day readers are impatient with the 'endurance' of Victorian heroines such as Lucy Snowe and wish that they had taken their lives in their own hands. The historical constraints preventing this no longer operate on television viewers, so that the 'lesson' of endurance is no longer an appropriate one. Davies is, therefore, in my opinion right to build on Molly's self-reliance in two real innovations to the plot.

After Roger's vigil in the rain, and the doubtful exchange of handkerchief-waving, Gaskell's text tells us, 'And then, he was gone! and Molly returned to her worsted-work, happy, glowing, sad, content, and thinking to herself how sweet is - friendship!' (*WD*, p. 680). In the screen version, Molly's 'contentment' lasts all of two minutes before she is overcome by the irresistible need to run after Roger, just as he finds his manly resolution

inadequate to leaving without an exchange of pledges. The resulting scene in the rain leads to a predictable wedding at Hamley Hall, but nothing prepares us for the most striking invention of Davies's screenplay: the final scene where Molly is shown with Roger walking an escarpment of a magnificent desert landscape.

This final scene seems to me a stroke of genius, bringing together all of Gaskell's interest in the advancement of science, her restless 'gypsy-bachelor' side which leads her to long for 'wings like a dove to fly away',⁷ and the tough independence of her heroine, Molly Gibson. The fact that Gaskell's novel is unfinished gives more sanction than normally possible for a radical invention of this kind, but it is also sanctioned by history, since the Victorian age in which Gaskell was writing was not only that of Darwin but of numerous 'lady travellers' who put on breeches and escaped the constraints of femininity.⁸ Although the novel is dated in the late 1820s, when such travellers were rare, Gaskell also, as it were, predates Darwin by basing Roger's voyage of exploration on Darwin's voyage in the 'Beagle', which did not take place for another ten years. The inspired final scene is more importantly sanctioned by the tenor of the novel itself, in which Molly is shown happy eating bread and cheese in her father's 'bachelor' household, happy in her garden covered in mud, or in the lanes gathering blackberries, curious about Roger's specimens, and above all, self-reliant, able to keep secrets and take action on her own responsibility.

After narrative sequence, a novel's dialogue is its most easily transferable element, and Gaskell's dialogue in particular is a gift to television. Andrew Davies has triumphantly managed to construct almost all the television dialogue from Gaskell's own words, so that one can in many cases 'read off' the televised scenes from the novel. This is especially true of the scenes involving Squire Hamley, most movingly played by Michael Gambon. Davies comments that 'Gaskell lets the characters speak for themselves. It's like living with these people for a while, getting the wrong idea about them, then getting surprises and shocks'.⁸ Davies reproduces these effects, so that it is amusing to find *Observer* reviewer Kathryn Flett assuming that some of the surprises are Davies's inventions:

Molly Gibson, feisty heroine of Mrs Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*... has been given a very Nineties spin in BBC1's lush adaptation by Andrew Davies. Justine Waddell, as Molly, even got away with the sort of insolence that, as recently as the 1980s, would have had her confined to her room with bread and water and forced into marriage with the youngest son of a blacksmith.⁹

The scene in question is presumably that where Molly responds to news of her father's engagement by saying 'So that's why I was sent away - so that all this could be quietly arranged in my absence!' Gaskell's original reads: 'So I was sent out of the house that all this might be quietly arranged in my absence?' (*WD*, p. 115). Oh, what a Nineties spin is here!

Flett, after paying lip-service to Davies as 'a peerless adaptor of classic fiction', finds that

there were still moments when I blanched at the modern dialogue. 'It doesn't do any good to pre-judge people', Molly was told, while her step-mother was sagely advised 'I think you'll have your work cut out there!'

Gaskell's text for these passages reads: 'it is best not to prejudge people on the bad side' (*WD*, p. 121) and 'Why, Clare, you've got your work before you!' (*WD*, p. 135). In each case, the television dialogue follows the novel with only the minimal changes needed to make oral speech flow or to use a now more familiar version of the idiom. If Kathryn Flett 'blanched' at Lady Cumnor's harmless metaphor from dressmaking, one wonders that she didn't pounce on her later reference to Molly as Cynthia's 'cat's-paw', a phrase which is also there in Gaskell's text (*WD*, p. 567), although according to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, it was newly in use in the 1820s. The fault in this case is neither with Gaskell nor with Davies but with Flett, who goes on to betray an entirely inadequate concept of the vivacity and variety of nineteenth-century novels:

These were jarring moments at odds with the fact that sweet young Victorian heroines must still fall in love with the blindingly obviously bad sort before they see sense and settle for the nice ones.

This description fits neither Cynthia (who settles for the off-stage Mr Henderson rather than 'nice' Roger) nor Molly, who plumps for Roger after the briefest of interest in Osborne, who is, in any case, not 'blindingly obviously bad'.

It is frustrating that Gaskell cannot be given credit for her own dialogue, especially because Davies has so smoothly managed the process of transposition. According to McFarlane, although dialogue can technically be 'transferred' from novel to screen, the process is not without risk because 'the element of *transfer* is powerfully overlaid with those elements more properly designated *adaptation*' (p. 149). In speaking of the

processes of adaptation, Brian McFarlane again adopts the terminology of Roland Barthes - this time Barthes' distinction between what, in a narrative, is said or *enunciated*, and the manner of its *enunciation*. The processes of adaptation proper, in McFarlane's terms, are a question of enunciation 'because their effects are closely tied to the semiotic system in which they are manifested' (p. 20). Thus the 'enunciation' of a novel would include one or more narrators, possibly omniscient, with the verbal resources of sentence structure, vocabulary choice, metaphor, irony, allusion, the use of past, future and conditional tenses and so on. A television serial, on the other hand, relies primarily on camera angles and devices such as zooming, panning and cutting - not only between scenes but between speakers in a conversation, for instance.

Unlike verbal narrative, however, the camera and the processes of editing have no content themselves; for this they rely on the setting and the actors, including costumes, gestures and voice tones. We only have to think of Merle Oberon and Laurence Olivier as Catherine and Heathcliff, for instance, to see the effect of received pronunciation on a regional text. The televised version of *Wives and Daughters*, however, shows a scrupulous orchestration of class accents, from the courtly Cumnors through Molly's mild Cheshire accent to Squire Hamley's stronger and Williams' the gardener's quite pronounced versions. Gaskell represents these variations as well as she can in written form, but here an aural enunciation enhances the written text. What viewers like Flett fail to realize, however, is that Gaskell was just as subtle in discriminating between class usages in questions of metaphor and idiom. Lady Cumnor feels free to use the latest racy language because there is no one who would dare find fault with her. Lady Harriet also uses 'familiar colloquialisms' in contrast to her maid, 'who piqued herself on the correctness of her language' (*WD*, p. 647). Just so, it is the socially-insecure Mrs Gibson who castigates Molly for speaking of 'the apple of his eye' (*WD*, p. 673) and Cynthia for saying 'one man may steal a horse, but another must not look over the hedge' (*WD*, p. 333). 'Proverbs and idioms are never used by people of education..!' remarks the unobservant Mrs Gibson, who prides herself on her intimacy with 'the Cumnors'. Like Kathryn Flett, she is 'really shocked' (*WD*, p. 673) by the 'jarring' discrepancy between what she hears and her own unexamined stereotype of what she ought to be hearing.

Because, on the whole, however, the adaptation of dialogue from written to aural expression seems unproblematic, it is tempting to look for further systematic equivalences between the two systems of enunciation. For instance, McFarlane suggests that

where a novel has an omniscient narrator, the camera has to 'become' the narrator by focusing on... the way actors look... or... are positioned in a scene...: in these ways the camera may catch a 'truth' which comments on and qualifies what the characters have to say. (p. 17)

Thus a facial expression can provide the equivalent of an adverbial phrase in the novel. When Gaskell writes that Molly hears 'with eager interest' that Osborne Hamley is a poet, for instance (*WD*, p. 64), Justine Waddell, who plays the part on television, can take the phrase as a stage instruction. Much narrative comment, however, goes well beyond 'instructions', and here much can be rendered by expressive acting. When Mr Gibson visits the Miss Brownings to tell them of his impending marriage, Gaskell gives us a passage of narrative comment on Miss Phoebe's reaction:

A little hope darted up in Miss Phoebe's breast. She had often said to her sister, in the confidence of curling time (ladies wore curls in those days), 'that the only man who could ever bring her to think of matrimony was Mr Gibson; but that if he ever proposed, she should feel bound to accept him, for poor dear Mary's sake'; never explaining what exact style of satisfaction she imagined she should give to her dead friend by marrying her late husband. Phoebe played nervously with the strings of her black silk apron. Like the Caliph in the Eastern story, a whole lifetime of possibilities passed through her mind in an instant, of which possibilities the question of questions was, Could she leave her sister? Attend, Phoebe, to the present moment, and listen to what is being said before you distress yourself with a perplexity which will never arise. (*WD*, p. 148)

In the television version, Deborah Findlay as Miss Phoebe sits down, exchanges tiny looks with her sister, allows the very beginnings of a smile to reach the corners of her mouth, closes her eyes, draws a sigh... A perceptive viewer can guess so much from these signs that it was hardly necessary for Andrew Davies to transpose some of this narrative into dialogue, so that after Mr Gibson has left, Miss Browning can berate her sister for 'ever hav[ing] got the notion that Mr Gibson would think of you!' The subtlety of performance here, and in the later scene where Barbara Flynn as Miss Browning has to tell Mr Gibson about the scandal concerning Molly, is such as to make it quite painful to see them described as 'great comic turns'.¹⁰

There are many elements of narrative commentary, however, which cannot be rendered either by expressive performance or by transposition into dialogue. Visual enunciation is notoriously unable to deal with the tenses of verbal narrative except through relatively clumsy devices such as flash-back or voice-over. In the passage quoted above, there is a modulation of tenses from 'a little hope darted up in Miss Phoebe's breast' (a simple past tense which could be rendered by a facial expression) through 'she had often said to her sister' (a pluperfect which has to be adapted into dialogue) to complex conditionals ('if he ever proposed, she should feel bound to accept') and negative participles ('never explaining...') which the adaptors wisely refrained from attempting. Jonathan Miller, in his book, *Subsequent Performances*, discusses this kind of difficulty with examples from *Madame Bovary*, and another of his examples concerns the novelist's use of simile.¹¹ When, in *Madame Bovary*, a figure of the Virgin is described as 'having a rich crimson on her cheeks, like an idol from the Sandwich Islands', he comments that 'although we know very little about its looks, we are told something that no picture could convey about what it looks like'. By comparing it to an idol from the Sandwich Islands, we cannot avoid drawing conclusions about the religious simplicity of the absent worshippers' (p. 231). Similarly, in the passage about Miss Phoebe, it would be impossible to give a visual enunciation of the phrase, 'like the Caliph in the Eastern story' and yet its inclusion in the novel suggests the child-like, fairy-tale context of Miss Phoebe's expectations.

In the adaptation of this scene, nevertheless, perhaps nothing crucial is lost. A more significant example is the presentation of Mrs Kirkpatrick's mental processes immediately before Mr Gibson's proposal. Viewers who have not read the novel respond to Mrs Kirkpatrick (later Mrs Gibson) in widely different ways, some seeing her as heartless and calculating, others as merely silly and vacant. This variation indicates, I think, some failure of the adaptation to present the complexity of Mrs Kirkpatrick's 'calculations' - a failure which has nothing to do with Francesca Annis's wonderful performance or with the dialogue written for her, but is a question of transposing material from one semiotic system to another. In Chapter 10 of the novel, where the proposal happens, there are sentences such as 'how pleasant it would be to have husband once more; - someone who would work while she sate at her elegant ease' (*WD*, p. 107), or, after the proposal, 'it was such a wonderful relief to feel that she need not struggle any more for a livelihood!' (*WD*, p. 109). These comments, which strongly imply a shallow and selfish personality, refer back, however, to a longer passage in the previous chapter, in which the word 'calculating' acquires a social context. Sitting in her pretty room at the Towers, 'Clare' reflects on the contrast between her own life and that of the Cumnors:

'One would think it was an easy enough thing to deck a looking-glass like that with muslin and pink ribbons; and yet how hard it is to keep it up! People don't know how hard it is till they've tried as I have. I made my own glass just as pretty when I first went to Ashcombe; but the muslin got dirty, and the pink ribbons faded, and it is so difficult to earn money to renew them; and when one has got the money one hasn't the heart to spend it all at once. One thinks and one thinks how one can get the most good out of it; and a new gown, or a day's pleasure, or some hot-house fruit, or some piece of elegance that can be seen and noticed in one's drawing-room, carries the day, and good-bye to prettily decked looking-glasses. Now, here, money is like the air they breathe. No one ever asks or knows how much the washing costs, or what pink ribbon is a yard. Ah! it would be different if they had to earn every penny as I have! They would have to calculate, like me, how to get the most pleasure out of it. I wonder if I am to go on all my life toiling and moiling for money? It's not natural. Marriage is the natural thing; then the husband has all that kind of dirty work to do, and his wife sits in the drawing-room like a lady.'

(*WD*, pp. 99-100)

The passage is typical of Gaskell in its combination of precise physical details (the muslin that gets dirty) and what is taken to be human nature (she is 'calculating' because she has to be). Like George Eliot after her, she manages to explain and even sympathise with Mrs Kirkpatrick's faults without condoning them (there is sharp irony in the fact that her competing priorities all concern different kinds of pleasure, and that she sees nothing wrong in *husbands* 'toiling and moiling'). Something of the balance and complexity provided by this passage has been lost in the television version, perhaps allowing an opening for Kathryn Flett's careless assumption that 'Francesca Annis's wicked stepmother' failed to compete with Lindsay Duncan's 'performance of pure Gothic campery as Oliver [Twist]'s father's evil estranged wife' in what she calls 'the battle of the corseted bitches'.¹² The explanatory pre-history of Mrs Kirkpatrick's 'calculating' nature could only, however, have been rendered in flash-back. This technique was adopted for Cynthia's story of her 'engagement' to Mr Preston, where visual enunciation had some advantages in being able to focus on the pathetic bonnet and ribbons, for instance, which figure so largely in the written account. The same technique was adopted to show us, at an earlier point than in the novel, the content of Osborne Hamley's thoughts of his absent wife. It may be that a similar flashback could have clarified Mrs Kirkpatrick's motives.

Much depends, however, on the discrimination of the viewer. Nancy Banks-Smith is quite able to assert that Mrs Gibson 'is not, you understand, a stereotypical cruel stepmother. It is just that she sees things from the standpoint of the sun'.¹³ On the other hand, the *Radio Times* describes Cynthia, stereotypically, as 'Mrs Gibson's spoilt, beautiful daughter' (p. 23) in spite of the fact that Keeley Hawes' nervy, intriguing performance is backed up by a passage of flash-back explanation about her neglected youth. After seeing this sequence, we should have been able to judge that Cynthia is the opposite of 'spoilt': she suffers not from over-indulgence but from having been left too early to rely on her own judgment, without parental care and unfortified by sound principle. It is Lady Cumnor's mistake to call her 'spoilt' (*WD*, p. 567) - Lady Cumnor, who, as 'Clare' bitterly reflects, is too cushioned by comfort even to imagine the kinds of 'calculation' which might lead a mother to leave her young daughter to her own devices.

Because television is virtually a universal medium, it is easy to assume that no skills are required to interpret its easy flow of pictures. The interpretation of visual detail, however, requires a different kind of alertness from that required to decode narrative sequence and dialogue. One difference between a verbal description and a visual scene is that the written text needs only to provide that information which is relevant to its purpose. A visual representation of a scene inevitably provides redundant information, and this is where skill is needed to guide the attention of the viewer. The very first scene of the television version of *Wives and Daughters* shows Molly in the conservatory at the Towers, about to be overcome by the heat. The passage in the novel has almost no detail beyond 'the long glittering range of greenhouses and hothouses'. We hear that 'Lady Agnes... expatiated on the rarity of this, and the mode of cultivation required by that plant' (*WD*, p. 11), but as readers we are free to paint the hot-house white or green and imagine orchids or bromeliads as the subject of the lecture. The visual adaptor, on the other hand, cannot evade specificity; he or she must make choices, and it is at this level of enunciation that objections usually arise.

This openness of choice, however, can be an opportunity as well as a problem. Where the written text offers no specific clue, adaptors can organize detail according to some logic deriving from their larger reading of the novel. This is what happens with Andrew Davies's screenplay and Nick Renton's direction. The sequence opens with a very precise, though invented, detail: Molly looks intently at a caterpillar on a leaf. Because every scene in the serial will inevitably contain material unspecified in the novel, there is

huge scope for such invented detail which appears only in the visual enunciation and does not involve alteration either of the cardinal functions or of the dialogue. When Mr Gibson takes Molly for a ride in the dog-cart, for instance, all Gaskell tells us is, 'One day Mr Gibson came in, bright and swift' (*WD*, p. 481). We do not know which room he comes into, or what Molly is doing when he interrupts her. It becomes an opportunity, therefore, to develop the leitmotif of Molly's interest in small creatures. She is shown, not in the drawing-room with her embroidery but in Mr Gibson's consulting-room using what is presumably his microscope to make drawings, presumably prompted by books lent by Roger. Similarly, slight hints in the novel are developed to show Molly following Roger's expedition with minute attention, so that in an invented scene towards the end of the last episode, her informed curiosity about Roger's specimens militates against Molly's conventional reluctance to push herself forward as partner to a 'rising man'. The exploitation of detail is even used to comment on Mrs Gibson, who during her visit to Hamley Hall is merely annoyed by a buzzing insect, and on Osborne Hamley, who is shown in death lying among greenery with a beetle crawling across his face. The beetle is shocking because it treats the man as part of inanimate nature; but then Osborne, despite his 'poetical' temperament, never engaged with the detail of the natural world. In the novel, he has to confess that he doesn't 'exactly know when dog-roses are in flower', and to concede that where Roger 'is practical in his love of flowers, I am only theoretical' (*WD*, p. 323). If this is true for flowers, how much more so for beetles!

Costume is a major aspect of visual enunciation which offers imaginative freedom to the television adaptor. Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* itself is unusual in focussing on the question of dress in such a way as to make a critical comment on what was, in the early nineteenth century, regarded as 'normal' femininity. There are frequent references to the time and ingenuity spent by Cynthia and her mother on millinery, and Cynthia's lack of clothes is the source of her entanglement with Mr Preston. On the other hand, Molly is careless of dress, appearing 'more like a delving Adam than a spinning Eve' (*WD*, p. 345), and in the scene where Molly learns of Cynthia's engagement to Roger there is a formal comparison between them:

[Molly] caught reflection of the two faces in the glass; her own, red-eyed, pale, with lips dyed with blackberry juice, her curls tangled, her bonnet pulled awry, her gown torn - and contrasted it with Cynthia's brightness and bloom, and the trim elegance of her dress. (*WD*, p. 395)

The television serial builds on such information as this in an unobtrusive way. When Molly goes to the Towers to meet Mrs Kirkpatrick as her future stepmother, for instance, she appears before Lady Cumnor in a neat white dress which is, nevertheless, noticeably too short for her and only sketchily redeemed by a couple of inches of white underskirt. This is explained as Molly being too young to take full charge of her own expenses, but even after her father's wedding, she takes a great deal of care with the 'tea-dinner' table on her father's return from honeymoon, but greets him and her stepmother in a green check pinafore over a brown check dress, both of which she keeps on for the rest of the evening, oddly augmented as the night grows chilly by the handsome green stole which was new for her father's wedding. The green stole reappears as a night-time wrap while she is nursing Mrs Hamley and, later, talking to Cynthia in bed - yet there it is again, now somewhat frayed, as part of her day-time dress after Aim F's arrival. All this indicates not slovenliness but a functional rather than decorative attitude to dress. The television choice of colours may have been prompted by Cynthia's exasperated comment in the novel that when Molly comes to visit her after her marriage, 'if you wear brown ribbons to a green gown, I'll turn you out of the house!' (*WD*, p. 645).

In cases such as this, much depends on the viewer's ability to interpret the visual enunciation, which in turn depends partly on social codes of normality which may no longer be current. In the nineteenth century, for instance, it would not have been respectable for a young lady to appear out of doors without a bonnet: in the novel's 'hot-house' scene, for instance, despite her distress, young Molly still keeps on 'such a heavy straw bonnet' (*WD*, p. 13), and in the passage quoted above, she still wears her bonnet although the blackberrying has pulled it 'awry'. In the television serial, on the other hand, Molly is shown pulling off her bonnet in the first scene in the conservatory, and later this becomes another leitmotif, so that the blackberrying scene and her meeting with Mr Preston in the Towers park show her bare-headed. There may be a practical reason for this, in that facial expressions are obscured by close bonnets, but it also serves to reinforce the idea of Molly's impatience with merely formal items of dress. Few viewers will now register Molly's bonnet-less state as impropriety; instead it suggests freedom and independence.

A more striking example of the effect of merely visual enunciation is Lady Harriet's appearance at the Towers house-party with cropped hair. The historical precedent for this is no more dubious than the predating of Darwin's voyage, since the 'Titus cut',

which originated in revolutionary France, did persist into the 1820s among such radical figures as Lady Caroline Lamb.¹⁴ Its main justification is, however, thematic. In the context of the elaborate coiffures of most of the other women, Lady Harriet's hair defines her as a 'strong-minded' woman and reminds us that despite the date of the novel's setting, it was written amidst the debate on the 'woman question' culminating in John Stuart Mill's 1867 Women's Suffrage Amendment.

Some aspects of the visual enunciation of 'classic' novels present intractable problems. *Wives and Daughters* is sub-titled *An Every-Day Story*, and many of those involved in the television adaptation commented on the 'ordinariness' of the novel's world. The village of Marshfield in Gloucestershire, which was 'adapted' to be Gaskell's Hollingford, was chosen because of its predominance of houses from the right historical period but, as the production designer Gerry Scott writes, 'this is a story of real life, not fantasy, so we didn't want anything too pretty. It's important that it has the feel of a solid, homely, working town'.¹⁵ The process of removing signs of modern life, however - tarmac roads, telegraph poles, cars, advertisements - has the effect of making the town anything but 'ordinary' for the modern viewer. Such towns no longer exist except in the glamorous and marketable context of theme parks or living museums. This perhaps explains the paradox that the setting which was painstakingly prepared to represent 'ordinariness' has the impact of the exotic for many viewers. Reviewers speak casually of 'BBC1's lush adaptation',¹⁶ which is 'even richer and more beautiful than its predecessors'.¹⁷

Despite my own comments on Molly's dress, many viewers and reviewers make similar judgements about the costumes. 'Elizabeth Gaskell's last novel is a party pack of treats for costume-drama fans: great dresses, lovely houses, nice park land and top-notch actors'. So Alison Graham introduces *Wives and Daughters* as 'Programme of the week'. The implication, here as elsewhere, is that 'costume-drama' is a homogeneous form characterised by its distance from the modern world. 'Have a bath, pour yourself a glass of wine, maybe even open a packet of crisps, and wallow in a bit of 19th-century social history'.¹⁸ 'Costume drama' is thus self-indulgence, escapism. Once upon a time this might have been fair enough. One thinks of William Wyler who blatantly declared that he dressed his characters for *Wuthering Heights* (1939) in costumes of the 1840s rather than the 1780s because he thought them prettier. Turning from one 'costume drama' of this period to another - from *Gone With the Wind* (1936) to *Jane Eyre* (1944), for instance - we can see that the costumes were almost interchangeable, as if

their function was only to register a vague otherness. This is no longer true, especially in BBC adaptations. According to Sue Birtwistle, the producer of the BBC1 serial, 'nothing is there just for effect: every frock, every hairdo, every scrap of wallpaper has something to say about the social standing of the characters. That's how Gaskell writes, and we've tried to translate that into visual terms'.¹⁹ Unfortunately communication involves a viewer as well as a producer, and the evidence is that many modern viewers are unfamiliar with the social codes which would enable them to distinguish between, for instance, Cynthia's dressmaking ingenuity and the genuine sumptuousness of Lady Harriet's clothes. Or perhaps they simply can't be bothered to pay that degree of attention. Kathryn Flett, commenting on Lady Harriet's startling hairstyle and Molly Gibson's final breeches, merely remarks, 'costume drama nostalgia ain't what it used to be'.²⁰

In the novel, of course, we have the benefit of the narrative voice directing our attention. Attention to detail is, indeed, presented as a very positive quality in *Wives and Daughters*, as, for instance, we are told that 'Molly knew her father's looks as well as she knew her alphabet; his wife did not' (*WD*, p. 185). Roger is also a great observer of human nature as well as of flora and fauna, and when he comes upon Molly in the wood he understands a great deal of her state of mind from noticing details of her behaviour (*WD*, p. 121). This combination of objectivity and sympathy is not, however, common, and Mr Gibson, for instance, 'surgeon though he was, had never learnt to anatomize a woman's heart' (*WD*, p. 416). It is in response to this pervasive theme of the novel that the television adaptation has Lady Harriet articulate this shortcoming, characteristic of many 'men of science', in the scene where she and her brother discuss the growing closeness between Roger and Molly. 'You men', she says, 'concern yourselves with the eternal verities: we women are content to ponder the petty things in life'. There is multiple irony in this speech since, as we have seen, the gender-division is by no means constant (compare Roger with Mrs Gibson, for instance). More importantly, the issues which the men concern themselves with *are* 'petty' in one sense, since they relate to minute distinctions between classifications of beetles and amoeba. In another sense, of course, they are not petty at all, since from such minute observations important theories grew.

Implicit in Lady Harriet's speech is the demand that the 'petty' concerns of women - that is, human relations - be dignified with the same status as science. This motif in the novel prefigures its better-known appearance in *Middlemarch*, where Dr Lydgate is

described as 'bringing a much more testing vision of details and relations into this pathological study than he had ever thought it necessary to apply to the complexities of love and marriage'.²¹ It is appropriate, therefore, that Nick Renton, BBC's director for *Wives and Daughters*, writes that 'this book is given to training psychotherapists to help them understand family dynamics'.²² As Nancy Banks-Smith, writing in *The Guardian*, says of Gaskell, 'she is extremely good on *wives and daughters*. And brothers and sisters and fathers and upright, downright spinsters. And family spats and mortal illness. This woman has sat by a few deathbeds. She has acute domestic antennae'.²³

Television can register how these 'antennae' are set quivering by, for instance, bodily gestures. Several speakers in the 'Omnibus' programme commented on the implicitness of physical reactions in the novel. Jenny Uglow comments on how Gaskell 'uses the movement of the dance so that you absolutely know the movement of desire in Molly or Cynthia and the description of Preston moving closer and closer is very sexual in an alarming, sort of tigerish way'. As always, the transposition works creatively with Gaskell's text, whether it is the expressive word 'swaying' applied to Cynthia's 'figure' (*WD*, p. 223) or the description of Mr Preston as 'tigerish, with his beautiful striped skin and relentless heart' (*WD*, p. 497). The television series, moreover, goes beyond Gaskell's text in imaginative ways. When Molly first arrives at Hamley Hall, finding herself alone in the drawing-room, she does a little spontaneous hop, skip and jump of pure physical enjoyment - a tiny touch which does much to establish her youthful vitality as well as her childlike simplicity. And in the invented scene where Roger and Molly face one another in the pouring rain, their shining eyes and radiant smiles also suggest that their marriage will be one of passion as well as intellectual agreement.

Here, moreover, perhaps for the only time in the serial, Andrew Davies avails himself of a resource always there for the late-come adaptor. He might not easily be able to render the allusion to the Caliph in the Eastern story, but he can draw on allusions unavailable to Gaskell. As Molly replies yes to Roger's proposal, the scarlet fever, the pouring rain, the six feet of distance between the lovers act as metaphors for nineteenth-century decorum - but her series of shining Yeses invokes the ending of another novel, where another Molly replies to a proposal altogether more carnal with 'yes I said yes I will Yes'.²⁴

Andrew Davies's television version of *Wives and Daughters* is as intelligent, responsive, subtle and imaginative as any Gaskell enthusiast could wish. The Gaskell Society is to

be congratulated on having initiated such an undertaking, and the whole BBC1 team for their dedication and skill in bringing it alive. All that is to be wished for is, perhaps, a more educated audience. Mary Kulman's recent review of Gaskell scholarship revealed that very little work is being done specifically on *Wives and Daughters*,²⁵ and the eulogistic responses to the novel which featured in the pre-broadcast publicity and particularly in the BBC1 'Omnibus' programme had an air of surprise about them. Perhaps this splendid adaptation will have prompted both general discussion and scholarly reinvestigation. It will certainly have brought Elizabeth Gaskell to the attention of thousands who will see her name in a new light.

NOTES

1 *Wives and Daughters*, screenplay in four parts by Andrew Davies, prod. Sue Birtwistle, dir. Nick Renton, BBC1 television, December 1999.

2 Brian McFarlane, *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

3 McFarlane is quoting Christopher Orr, 'The Discourse of Adaptation', *Wide Angle* Vol. 6/2 (1984) p. 73.

4 McFarlane is quoting Roland Barthes, 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives', *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1966), p. 94.

5 Sarah Ellis, *The Daughters of England: Their Position in Society, Character and Responsibilities* (London & Paris: Fisher, Son & Co., 1845), p. 126.

6 *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), Letter 8.

7 Deirdre Clancy, Costume designer for the serial, assured me that Molly's appearance in breeches was based on an engraving of a lady traveller of the 1830s who accompanied her husband on explorations of North Africa. (Personal communication)

8 *Radio Times*, p. 20.

9 Kathryn Flett, 'Let's Twist Again..', p. 16.

10 *Radio Times*, p. 22.

11 Jonathan Miller, *Subsequent Performances* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), pp. 230-1.

12 Kathryn Flett, 'Let's Twist Again..', p. 16.

13 Nancy Banks-Smith, 'History: the director's cut'.

- 14 Lisa Westcott, Production team Hair and Make-up Design: personal communication.
- 15 *Radio Times* (27 November-3 December 1999), p. 22.
- 16 Kathryn Flett, 'Let's Twist Again..' *The Observer* (5 December 1999), p. 16.
- 17 *Radio Times*, p. 22.
- 18 *Radio Times*, p. 85.
- 19 *Radio Times*, p. 22.
- 20 *Observer* (26 December 1999).
- 21 George Eliot, *Middlemarch* [1870-1]. (Ed. David Carroll, *The World's Classics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 134-5.
- 22 BBC Pre-broadcast publicity pack, p. 5.
- 23 Nancy Banks-Smith, 'History: the director's cut', *The Guardian* (29 November 1999).
- 24 James Joyce, *Ulysses* [1922] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 933.
- 25 Mary Kulman, 'A survey of Gaskell scholarship, or: Things written recently about Gaskell', *Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol. 13 (1999), pp. 25-35.