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Adapting *Wives and Daughters* for Television: Reimagining Women, Travel, Natural Science, and Race

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Abstract This essay examines the depiction of women, travel, natural science, and race in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (1864–66) and Andrew Davies's BBC adaptation of the novel (1999). It argues that the adaptation offers a recognizable transposition of Gaskell's text, but makes some significant adjustments that reveal its contemporary reimagining of the novel's gender and racial politics. In particular, Davies transforms Gaskell's unexceptional female protagonist Molly Gibson into a proto-feminist naturalist adventurer, and revisions the casual racism the novel expresses towards black people in line with late-twentieth-century sensibilities. Each text, novel and film, reveals the period-specific ideological forces that shape its portrayal of Englishwomen and African people.

Keywords *Gaskell,* Wives and Daughters, *Davies, adaptation, women, race.*

Set in a pre-Reform Bill provincial town, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* is a richly drawn psychological study of the central character Molly Gibson's personal development. The novel was left tantalizingly incomplete on Gaskell's untimely death in November 1865, an unfinished masterpiece that contributed to her legacy of fiction covering a variety of genres. Gaskell's work ranges from social protest fiction (*Ruth*, *Mary Barton*, *North and South*) to historical novels (*Sylvia's Lovers*) and domestic fiction (*Cranford*, *Cousin Phillis*); *Wives and Daughters* straddles the latter two categories. Despite the richness and breadth of Gaskell's oeuvre, her novels did not receive much attention from screenwriters in the United Kingdom in the late twentieth century, even though the 1990s was, as Imelda Whelehan notes, a remarkable decade for adaptations of nineteenth-century novels (Cartmell and Whelehan 249). To rectify this omission, Joan Leach from the Gaskell Society contacted Andrew Davies after he had adapted *Middlemarch* (a novel that *Wives and Daughters* influenced) and *Pride and Prejudice*, his first two serial adaptations of nineteenth-century novels, and asked him if he would consider writing a television screenplay for Gaskell's novel. As Sarah Cardwell notes, by this point 'Davies's name' was 'synonymous with "good quality," classic-novel adaptations' (*Andrew Davies* 6). Davies read *Wives and Daughters* and immediately 'fell in love with Molly' (Davies 2); at the same time, BBC executives were becoming interested in the novel, and the producer Sue Birtwistle contacted Davies about the possibility of

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adapting it. *Wives and Daughters* was duly commissioned as a BBC and WGBH Boston Co-Production and aired on BBC1 in four seventy-five minute parts on Sundays between 28 November and 19 December 1999.[1] Nicholas Renton directed the miniseries; Birtwistle produced it; and Gaskell biographer Jenny Uglow was the literary and historical advisor.

At over six hundred pages, *Wives and Daughters* is a substantial Victorian novel; it was, like many others during the period, published in parts before being issued in volume form. As Cardwell confirms, 'television's serial form' makes it an ideal place for 'adapting expansive classic novels' ("Literature" 182); lengthy adaptations enable a more detailed and developed reimagining of fiction of this kind, and to some degree replicate the experience of the original readers: viewers watch adaptations in parts, just as Victorian readers consumed the latest novels in instalments, and discussed them as they read. Davies makes deft work of converting the lengthy narrative into a workable screenplay,[2] and *Wives and Daughters* was a commercial and critical success: it was nominated for, and won, awards from BAFTA, the Broadcasting Press Guild, and the Royal Television Society, United Kingdom.[3] These, and other, plaudits confirmed Davies's reputation as adaptation screenwriter par excellence; Cardwell affirms that he has made the classic-novel adaptation 'genre his specialism, and is the closest it has to an auteur' ("Literature" 193). The adaptation was one of several that aired during the Christmas period of 1999 on the BBC and ITV, and it competed with the latter's *Oliver Twist*, written by Alan Bleasdale; both the public service broadcaster and commercial channel relied on classic-novel adaptations for substantial viewing figures over the festive break.[4] Of the Christmas adaptations, *Wives and Daughters*, in particular, fulfils the expectations of viewers demanded by its genre, namely: 'high production values; "authentic," detailed costumes and sets; "great British actors"; light classical music; slow pace; steady, often symmetrical framing; an interest in landscapes, buildings and interiors as well as characters; strong, gradually developed protagonists accompanied by entertaining cameo roles; and intelligent, "faithful" dialogue' (Cardwell, "Literature" 189). As well as these aspects, *Wives and Daughters* features generic classic-novel adaptation scenes including horse and carriage riding, ballroom dancing, and 'conversations over afternoon tea' (Cardwell, *Adaptation* 121). Such scenes would have appealed to fans of Davies's phenomenally successful *Pride and Prejudice*; other synergies include casting: Barbara Leigh-Hunt, who played Lady Catherine de Bourgh in the Austen serial, starred as Lady Cumnor in *Wives and Daughters*, and lent a decidedly Lady Catherine-esque tone to her performance.

Although *Wives and Daughters* was another success for Davies, it, like many other adaptations for television, has received scant critical attention: Cardwell confirms that '[a]daptation theorists frequently overlook television altogether, and focus only on literature/film adaptations' ("Literature" 190). Patsy Stoneman published '*Wives and Daughters* on Television' in *The Gaskell Society Journal* in 2000, and Katherine Byrne's essay, 'Anxious Journeys and Open Endings: Sexuality and the Family in the BBC's *Wives and Daughters* (1999)', featured in a book on adaptations of Gaskell's fiction published by Cambridge Scholars in 2013. Stoneman adopts a comparative approach, using Brian McFarlane's terminology in *Novel to Film* to examine the process of transposition by considering what can be transferred to the small screen (namely, narrative

sequence and dialogue) and what has to be adapted (specifically, visual enunciation dramatizes the novel's key themes). In contrast, Byrne offers a pluralist reading that judges the adaptation in ideological terms, arguing that it reconfigures Molly to make her more appealing to a modern viewership (85).[5]

This essay develops Byrne's critical trajectory significantly, offering a more detailed examination of the novel's and adaptation's depiction of Molly's agency in the context of women's roles in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Gaskell's Molly remains confined within the domestic sphere for much of the novel, reflecting restrictions faced by many middle-class women in the nineteenth century; the adaptation draws out Molly's latent potential, so the representation of her as an engaged natural scientist throughout the miniseries and a co-traveller with her naturalist husband at the end of it appeals to late-twentieth-century feminist sensibilities. The issue of agency in the adaptation is also significant when it comes to a hitherto neglected aspect of the adaptation that revisions the source material: the portrayal of African people. The novel perpetuates the racist discourses of its day; the adaptation excises these, reflecting more enlightened contemporary attitudes, and gives some representation to African men and women. So, in the adaptation, the central female character and African 'other' are accorded greater agency and a degree of parity with the white Englishman. What follows focuses on how the novel is adapted to suit late-twentieth-century attitudes to gender and race: it explores how each text, novel and film, reveals the period-specific ideological forces that shape its depiction of Englishwomen and African people. As I have noted in an essay on Jane Austen and adaptation, other critics who argue that an adaptation reflects its 'historical moment' in line with my own perspective include Chris Louttit (35) and Ellen Belton (175). Louttit in particular suggests that '[c]ritics of classic novel adaptations on television have not thus far considered them in relation to wider political, social and cultural forces' (35), even though works of 'adaptation and appropriation … are frequently, if not inevitably, political acts', as Julie Sanders notes (123); this essay attempts to redress this deficit apropos the Gaskell television adaptation.[6] Making adaptations of literary texts culturally relevant to their audiences is clearly fundamental to Davies's work: when interviewed in 2004 he stated: 'obviously what interests me will also have a lot to do with "the way we live now"—and what kind of relevance different parts of the book have, or don't have, because some bits will seem really interesting and vital and some bits, won't' (Cartmell and Whelehan 245). Davies's exploration of Molly's potential is unsurprising, given that his 'discernible authorial signature' includes a 'preoccupation with strong female protagonists' (Cardwell, *Andrew Davies* 1, 115).[7] However, Davies's revision of the African material in the novel is, perhaps, at odds with his other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel adaptations that 'expose the iniquities and double standards of their respective periods' (Cardwell, *Andrew Davies* 189); the likely reasons for this rewriting will be explored in due course.

WOMEN, TRAVEL, AND NATURAL SCIENCE

In recent years, several critics have suggested that Gaskell's portrayal of Molly Gibson, a middle-class doctor's daughter, and Roger Hamley, a naturalist loosely modelled on Charles Darwin (Gaskell's distant cousin), collapses male/female, scientific/domestic, and public/private divisions.[8] Claire Pettitt argues that the novel's ascription

of supposedly '"feminine" characteristics', such as 'attention to detail, sympathy and patience', to male scientists proves how important these traits are (330). Susan E. Colón contends that Molly's feminine qualities can be linked to professional male ones, so 'the feminine ideal and the professional ideal' go hand in hand (18). The novel implicitly challenges gender essentialism, however, it is still committed to depicting the reality of most women's lives at the period the novel is set, namely the late 1820s to early 1830s.[9] Patsy Stoneman recognizes this when she affirms that Molly simply cannot 'share [Roger's] route through life' as a typical nineteenth-century woman, even though she was one of the first critics to acknowledge that 'there is no essential difference between the "attention" required for scientific knowledge and that which creates the "intuitive" knowledge of most women's daily life' in the novel ("*Wives and Daughters* (1865)" 179, 183) along lines developed by the likes of Pettitt and Colón. Roger takes the opportunity to travel around Africa collecting specimens for a new museum and sharing reports of his findings with the Royal Geographical Society, whereas Molly remains at home, desperate for news of him from his fiancée Cynthia, her step-sister.

The final chapter of the published text highlights Molly's domestic confinement. Although Gaskell died before completing *Wives and Daughters*, it had nearly finished its serial run in the *Cornhill Magazine*. The last chapter includes Roger revealing his feelings for Molly to her father, and watching Molly in her home from outside, then waving goodbye to her—Gibson has forbidden him to see her because Roger has been in proximity to his nephew who has had scarlet fever—since he is to return to Africa to complete his specimen gathering. Gaskell had given her editor Frederick Greenwood an indication of how the novel would end; Greenwood provided a sketch of her plans in 'A Note by the *Cornhill* Editor', published at the end of the novel. Roger was to finish his African work, then return, and propose to Molly. They were to marry, and he was to become 'professor at some great scientific institution'; the couple were to live in London (649). The adaptation radically reworks Molly's agency in the final chapter and the planned ending. In the novel, Molly sees Roger from a window (645); this is one of multiple references to her looking out of windows at home.[10] Together, they suggest a nineteenth-century woman's domestic imprisonment, and the adaptation replicates some of them, which is unsurprising given that Davies uses the 'window motif' in non-adapted work and classic-novel adaptations to indicate how 'characters are trapped within the frame' (*Andrew Davies* 55).[11] Yet at this point in the adaptation, Justine Waddell's Molly is not content to remain safely screened at home: after seeing Anthony Howell's Roger through several windows in the house, she leaves unchaperoned, running out hatless and coatless into the rain to meet him. Whereas Davies's Molly escapes her domestic space to claim the man she desires, Gaskell's heroine would not exhibit such agency on her own behalf and break nineteenth-century gender-based codes of propriety after her experience with Preston. Earlier in the novel, motivated by her love and loyalty towards her step-sister, Molly places herself in a potentially questionable position as an unmarried woman alone with another man. Molly has two exchanges with Preston on behalf of Cynthia; as a result of being seen with him in apparently compromising intimacy, she is subject to malicious gossip and her father's violent accusations of impropriety. After such exposure, Molly would no doubt baulk at another tête-à-tête with a man in public. The adaptation replicates the Preston scenes

and the damage they do to her reputation before Lady Harriet restores it, but then goes further by having the emboldened Molly literally chase after the man she really loves. The adaptation gives Molly the agency to confirm her choice of partner: her latent love for Roger in the novel is rendered strikingly explicit.

In the next, invented scene in the adaptation, there is a garden party at Hamley Hall, and Molly and Roger preside as master and mistress. Roger is to return Africa shortly; there is no mention of Molly, the implication being she will stay at home as mistress of the Hall. At the end of the scene, Rosamund Pike's Lady Harriet says to her brother Shaughan Seymour's Lord Hollingford, 'You men concern yourselves with the eternal verities; we women are content to ponder the petty things in life', suggesting that male/female divisions remain firmly in place. However, the next and final scene features Molly in Africa with Roger, revealing that she has finally escaped domesticity and is living a full, adventurous life, the life of the co-naturalist, fit and strong enough to withstand the African climate and terrain.[12] As the couple continue their walk, Molly leads the way. This scene adds dramatic irony to Lady Harriet's comments at the end of the penultimate one.[13]

This new ending to the novel synchronized with the predominantly accepting, and in many cases admiring, view of adventurous women in late-twentieth-century popular culture, rather than offering a representative reflection of a typical middle-class married woman's life in the nineteenth century; as Shirley Foster notes, 'Gaskell would probably not have gone as far as the BBC in envisaging Molly in breeches striding across the desert with her husband' (171).[14] During the screening of the adaptation, BBC2 aired a series entitled *Wild Climbs* about intrepid men and women on Friday nights at 8 p.m.; on 26th November, two days before the first episode of *Wives and Daughters*, one of the episodes featured two female glacier ski mountaineers, Sarah Ferguson and Vaila Macdonald, women 'so tough and feisty they make Thelma and Louise look like wimps', according to television reviewer Jacqui MacDermott for *The Observer*. And a few weeks after the finale of the adaptation, Jan Morris reported for the *Daily Mail* on 'four intrepid women adventurers' achieving 'remarkable feats'. This led her to reflect upon the scale of women's achievements in a few generations: '[w]omen running marathons, women jumping unimaginable heights, women boxing, women playing soccer, women walking across the Antarctic or jumping into the Grand Canyon – all these physical accomplishments would have been inconceivable a couple of generations ago' (Morris). Since Davies's Molly gets the opportunity to 'share [Roger's] route through life' and become a female explorer akin to female adventurers of the late twentieth century, it is worth considering precisely how anachronistic this presentation of a nineteenth-century woman is.

In Gaskell's text, Molly is emotionally attached to Hollingford, and never expresses an explicit desire to travel too far from home: after Osborne's death she declares 'I think I never wish to go out of sight of [Hollingford church spire] again' (561), reflecting how attachment to home was inculcated normatively in nineteenth-century middle-class women. So, Gaskell gives no indication that Molly might want to break out of the domestic confinement typical of women of her class. Also, Molly is not physically strong: at one point, she becomes very ill, and her father 'fear[s] that she might become a permanent invalid' (583). As Byrne notes, 'the "cult of invalidism" … gendered

illness as female throughout the nineteenth-century [*sic*]' and the novel reflects this (86). Roger, in contrast, has, as Gibson states, 'a thoroughly good constitution' (367), which fits him for travel. Gaskell's Molly would never have been robust enough to partner her husband in his adventures, even if she had desired to: Byrne acknowledges that Molly's illness 'is written out of the script' so she is able to 'accompan[y] [Roger] on his travels to Africa' (86).

In the early- to mid-nineteenth century, married women of means in good health could visit other countries as tourists: Gaskell was a frequent visitor to Europe with her daughters and friends (unusually, her husband William did not often accompany them); she even wrote part of *Wives and Daughters* when staying with her friends the Mohls in Paris.[15] However, women travellers who wrote about their experiences abroad tended to be stereotyped in one of two ways, as Janice Schroeder explains: the 'Spinster Abroad' or 'the Memsahib' (118). 'Memsahib' was the term used by non-Europeans to denote married, middle- and upper-class European women, especially in colonial India; Schroeder notes its Hindi etymology (122). The 'Spinster Abroad' is perceived to be 'eccentric, improper, … and mildly embarrassing', whereas 'the Memsahib … is a married and therefore "natural" woman whose mission is to accompany her husband' (Schroeder 122).

As Lady Elizabeth Rigby Eastlake makes unequivocally clear in her review of the work of lady travellers for the influential Tory publication the *Quarterly Review* in 1845, the best kinds of female travel accounts are those by married ladies accompanying their husbands and retaining their 'domestic virtues' in the process; the ideal lady traveller creates 'a little fertile patch of household comfort' wherever she is (Eastlake).[16] The model English lady is 'the finest production of the finest country on earth – man's best companion, whether in the travels over this world or the voyage through this life' (Eastlake). So, according to Eastlake, the ideal English female traveller is man's helpmate, not a traveller in her own right. Yet such married women travellers could be naturalists of a kind: one of the works Eastlake chooses to review is Mrs Meredith's *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales*, 1844. After her marriage, Louisa Meredith lived in Tasmania with her politician husband William and 'composed and illustrated a number of beautiful books on Tasmanian flora and fauna … for a British readership' (Gates 104). Eastlake extols this botanist for extending her interest as a married woman 'to many other departments of natural phenomena'. Notably, Eastlake praises Meredith for using her keen powers of observation: '[n]ot a microscope nor a herbarium is seen; but keen eyes and taper fingers', since such scientific apparatus would, presumably, be unladylike; the value of her account lies in the fact that it is very different from a male 'expert' one.

In the adaptation, Molly *broadly* fits the Memsahib category, the more socially acceptable kind of female traveller, since she accompanies her husband, however, it suggests that she is more than Roger's 'best companion': her travelling outfit of shirt, breeches, and sturdy boots indicate that she is a naturalist, like her husband. In the 1850s, Florence Nightingale, Gaskell's friend and a woman the novelist admired intensely, lamented the fact that married women could not become experts in their chosen fields because they would ruin their husbands' domestic comforts, so '[t]he true marriage – that noble union, by which a man and woman come together the one perfect being – probably

does not exist at present upon earth' (Nightingale 1737). In the adaptation, Davies offers a vision of the kind of 'noble union' Nightingale laments as an impossibility in the closing scene: Roger's and Molly's intellectual pursuits are one, and together they are blissfully happy.

Although there were English lady travellers who wrote about their experiences during the nineteenth century, Africa was not visited by many of them.[17] Anna Maria Falconbridge was an exception: she wrote a travel book about Africa called *Narrative of Two Voyages to the River Sierra Leone* in 1802; as Mary Louise Pratt notes, hers 'is one of the very few European travel books about Africa written by a woman before 1850, and one of the most unusual in any period' (100). As the nineteenth century progressed, female explorers with more scientific interests began to make their subjects popular with the public through publications and lectures on their African travels: in the 1890s, the ichthyologist Mary Kingsley went out to West Africa; unlike Davies's Molly, she had no husband companion. This shows how tirelessly independent women were working to penetrate male, public domains abroad. Gaskell's Molly has little in common with intrepid real-life women such as Falconbridge, and she does not anticipate travellers like Kingsley; Davies's Molly bears affinities with these most unusual nineteenth-century female adventurers.

The adaptation prepares subtly for the transition of Molly from angel in the house to fit, roving naturalist from its inception. Her fascination with natural history predates her friendship with Roger: in the opening scene, Anna Maguire's child Molly intently scrutinizes a caterpillar. Adult Molly is a keen scientist: in every one of the episodes, she looks through a microscope or magnifying glass, often independently of Roger. In the novel, a microscope is only mentioned once: Roger encourages Molly to look at the 'treasures' he has gathered through it (120); the adaptation replicates this scene, and adds several more throughout the miniseries. Furthermore, the adaptation depicts Roger and Molly engaging in scientific dialogue when he is in Africa. In episode 4, Cynthia gives Molly a package with a beetle in it which Roger has sent from Africa for her; later, Molly collects a book about 'scarabs' she has ordered. In the novel, the relationship between Molly and Roger is one of teacher and pupil, or 'Mentor' and 'Telemachus' (137): he is her 'Pope', 'a highly educated young man of no common intelligence', whereas she is simply 'an ignorant girl of seventeen' (147). In the adaptation, this 'ignorant girl' is transformed into a scientist in the making, a fit companion intellectually for Roger.

This is not to suggest that Gaskell's Molly is uninterested in the scientific books Roger gives her to read: after dancing with her at the ball, Lord Hollingford remarks to Mr Gibson, 'What a charming little lady that daughter of yours is! Most girls of her age are so difficult to talk to; but she is intelligent and full of interest in all sorts of sensible things; well read, too – she was up in *Le Règne Animal* – and very pretty!' (297). The adaptation reproduces this conversation. However, in the novel, Molly confesses to Mrs Gibson and Cynthia the next morning that she has not read the comparative anatomist George Cuvier's work; Roger had read parts of it to her and given her a synopsis of it (298), so she was, in effect, simply paraphrasing his summary. The adaptation does not include this scene, and emphasizes Molly's scholarly nature by repeatedly surrounding her with books.

Whilst Gaskell's Molly may not be portrayed as the learned naturalist she is in the adaptation, the narrator states that she enjoys 'her garden' (70) and horticultural work at the Hall for Mrs Hamley (76). But the novel does not go as far as the adaptation in presenting Molly as a travelling naturalist; her gardening is merely in line with the genteel pursuits of a woman of her class. Lady Agnes and Lady Cuxhaven are the serious female horticulturalists in *Wives and Daughters*.[18] The adaptation does not include the educated, scientific sisters whose backgrounds are so different from Molly's own for reason of economy; Lady Harriet is the only daughter who features. Davies makes the most of her character, and her radical tendencies are visually accentuated through her new, daringly short haircut at the end of the adaptation.[19] Lady Harriet may be a feminist rule-breaker in the adaptation, but she is no natural scientist in either the miniseries or the novel. By omitting the intellectual, horticultural sisters from the adaptation, Davies makes Molly the sole representative of the female naturalist, a woman who leaves the domestic sphere and embarks upon fieldwork in Africa with her husband. Roger's interaction with the African landscape begins much earlier in the miniseries: from episode 3 onwards, his experiences abroad become an important part of the adaptation and require sustained attention.

AFRICA AND AFRICAN PEOPLE

In the novel, Roger is selected to go out to Africa on 'a scientific voyage' to collect wildlife specimens for a new museum, the Crichton, because of his expertise in natural history (360). Roger's sojourn in Africa reflects developing interest in the continent in the early nineteenth century. The Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa, or African Association, was formed in 1788; it foregrounded knowledge of the continent, 'not colonization or settlement, and above all not the slave trade' (Pratt 68); William Wilberforce was one of its members (Pratt 69). In the 1790s, the African Association employed the Scotsman Mungo Park to explore the Niger Basin; his narratives of his travels were, as Pratt notes, 'anti-conquest' (78). The African Association 'was absorbed into the Royal Geographical Society in 1831' (Pratt 83). In the novel, Lord Hollingford reads a letter Roger has sent him from Arracuoba, a fictional name for a place in Africa, to the 'annual gathering of the Geographical Society' (449); the adaptation includes a report of this.

Roger first gains the notice of Lord Hollingford, one of the trustees of the Crichton legacy, in an article he has written that champions the views of Geoffroy St Hilaire (301). Geoffroy visits the Towers and expresses an interest in meeting Roger, since the latter's paper has 'attracted the attention of the French comparative anatomists' (301). Geoffroy (1772–1844) was a French naturalist and comparative anatomist who influenced Darwin's views: as Leon Litvack notes, Geoffroy believed in the '"unity of composition" for all animals', adducing that 'all animal life … could be strung into a continuous, related series' (732).[20] Critics of the novel have noted that Darwin mentions Geoffroy in his preface to *On the Origin of Species*,[21] as well as suggesting that Roger's kinship with Geoffroy cements his position as a proto-Darwinian evolutionist, a man of the future.[22] The adaptation conveys this idea more explicitly as Roger articulates Darwinian ideas of descent. In the novel, Mr Gibson discusses a paper written by a foreign author on 'comparative osteology' with Roger during the dinner party Mrs Gibson

holds for the Hamley men (266); this scene is replicated in episode 2 of the adaptation and the paper is alluded to. However, in the adaptation, Roger is the author of the paper, and he defines comparative osteology to the ladies as 'the study of the bone structure of the various species', which 'shows that we're more nearly related to the great apes than some of us might care to think'. Roger's view on this subject suggests that he collapses distinctions between humans and apes, let alone races.[23]

In contrast, Gaskell's Roger distances himself from his cultural 'others'. When writing to Cynthia, he describes Africa as a 'savage land' that possesses 'no society, no gaiety, no new books to write about, no gossip' (413); the series of negations suggests it is an uncivilized, uncultured world that has nothing in common with English society. The adaptation includes Roger calling Africa a 'savage land' in one of his letters to Cynthia, but the whole episode it forms a part of—episode 3—places the statement in a very different context.[24] This episode contains several scenes of Roger in Africa; the novel offers no such equivalents. In the first scene, a fully clothed Roger is surrounded by semi-clad African male guides wearing white sarongs and turbans who carry his equipment; in a voiceover from a letter to Cynthia, Roger describes how he is 'learning the language, and more importantly how to survive in this wonderful land'. The second African scene features Roger tanned and topless, providing a visual analogy to the semi-clad African guides in the previous scene. An African woman and two female children watch him, the latter giggling and whispering. His partially clothed, perspiring state offers a marked contrast to the African woman's fully clothed, calm, and collected appearance. She maintains her gaze; he moves from his initial crouching position to a standing one, but still looks bashful, subject to her appraisal. British male explorers in Africa during the period Gaskell was writing her novel such as Richard Burton wrote texts about their travels that became exemplars of the 'monarch-of-all-I-survey genre', according to Pratt (197). In Burton's and others' accounts, '[e]xplorer man paints/possesses newly unveiled landscape-woman' (Pratt 209). The adaptation implicitly challenges this paradigm: the clothed black woman becomes the voyeur, possessing the semi-naked white man through her gaze. Momentarily, the female gaze becomes quite powerful, making this 'contact zone' moment rich in interpretive possibilities that question the traditional narrative of imperial power: although Roger is the white, moneyed, travelling man, he is symbolically lower, which is visually enacted by the spatial relations between the two, since initially he is crouching and being observed, whereas she is standing and surveying unflinchingly.[25]

Straight after this scene, the adaptation cuts to dusk at camp. The men, clothed in white, walk around outside Roger's tent singing and cooking; camels are resting. The scene is one of fraternal tranquillity. Then it cross-cuts to Roger writing, hot and perspiring, in his tent. The voiceover of Roger's letter to Cynthia reveals a close and playful friendship between the naturalist and his guides. Roger has clearly told them about his supposedly secret engagement to Cynthia, implying intimacy; their 'teasing' by pretending to sing songs about his woeful romantic situation suggests a very relaxed relationship between the Englishman and the African men, not one that demonstrates the 'radically asymmetrical relations of power' more typical of contact zone encounters (Pratt 8). So when Roger goes on to write '[t]he Abyssinian wilds would not suit you, dearest Cynthia, but your love sustains me in this savage land', the 'savage land'

comment must be interpreted in light of the whole scene. Roger is drawing a contrast between his experiences of a challenging environment and his fiancée's genteel domestic space; when he writes this, a giant moth plagues him. The scene and wider episode do not support the idea that Roger views his guides and the continent as a whole as brutal and 'other': he wants to assimilate by learning the language and appears keen to break down traditional power hierarchies. So, the adaptation gives viewers a sanitized view of the Englishman's relationship with Africa and African people in the nineteenth century to ensure that they can remain in sympathetic accord with Roger.

In the novel, after Molly reads some of Roger's letter, her 'thoughts by day and her dreams by night [a]re haunted by the idea of Roger lying ill and untended in those savage lands' (413). Later, Molly's step-mother Mrs Gibson '"lie[s] awake at night"' thinking about the '"savage"' and '"in some parts … cannibal country"' she has read about '"in geography books"' (523). Mrs Gibson's views reflect many of Gaskell's readers' perceptions of Africa; these readers were influenced by contemporary writings about the continent. Morris notes one such account: "Equatorial Africa, and its Inhabitants" from the *Westminster Review* in 1861, a fifty-page review of Paul B. du Chaillu's *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa* and John Petherick's *Egypt, The Soudan, and Central Africa* (both 1861). The reviewer considers comparative anatomy—Roger's field of study in the novel before he embarks upon his travels—, as well as the writers' accounts of tribal cannibalism in equatorial Africa, specifically du Chaillu's depiction of the Fans and Petherick's description of the Neam Nams. The reviewer presents cannibalism as a self-proclaimed fact amongst the Fans (180). However, he notes that the Fans have progressed in some degree 'from barbarism to civilization' since they no longer eat their own dead relatives, exchanging them instead for neighbours' kin (181). The reviewer also discusses Petherick's account of his experiences of cannibals, specifically how he and his companions narrowly avoided being eaten by the Neam Nams. The Neam Nams eat fugitive slaves, enemies, and their own tribe members, according to this review (184); contemporary readers relished accounts such as these of African barbarism. The veracity of these claims is not interrogated: African savagery was a given for many Victorians, the reviewer included.

Patrick Brantlinger argues that reports of African cannibalism only became 'an important theme in British writing about Africa' from the mid-nineteenth century onwards ("Victorians" 203). This means that the novel's concerns about African cannibalism reflect the time it was written rather than set, a period that increasingly perceived Africa to be 'the Dark Continent' ("Victorians" 187). As the century progressed, '[t]he more that Europeans dominated Africans, the more "savage" Africans came to seem; cannibalism represented the nadir of savagery'; this perception of African 'savagery', of course, 'legitimize[d] imperialism' ("Victorians" 203). The adaptation raises the subject of cannibalism, but refashions its context and treatment. During a dinner party at the Towers, a female guest asks the by now celebrated explorer Roger if 'the natives … eat each other?' He says that they prefer eating European women, which prompts great laughter from all the guests. So, Roger good-naturedly satirizes the genteel white woman's racist assumptions about African people: even old Lord Cumnor is in on the joke.

Another significant revisioning of attitudes towards Africans in the adaptation occurs through the representation of Mr Gibson. Gaskell's Gibson is a loving father, a

published scientist, and an excellent doctor; however, he expresses many casually racist attitudes typical of the time. When Mr Hamley hopes that the 'black folk' Roger will live among might put some 'sense in him' and make him rethink marrying Cynthia, Mr Gibson replies: '[b]lack folk are not remarkable for their powers of reasoning, I believe, so that they have not much chance of altering his opinion by argument, even if they understood each other's language; and certainly if he shares my taste, their peculiarity of complexion will only make him appreciate white skins the more' (391). Here, Mr Gibson showcases his antipathy towards another people on the grounds of perceived intellectual *and* aesthetic inferiority. Upon Roger's return, Mr Gibson registers the explorer's change in appearance, saying that he is 'not changed; and yet not the same. He is as brown as a berry for one thing; caught a little of the negro tinge, and a beard as fine and sweeping as my bay-mare's tail' (589). The doctor finds Roger's physical changes disconcerting, his darker skin connecting him to African people and their 'peculiarity of complexion'.

The adaptation does not replicate Mr Gibson's casual racism. The worst thing that Bill Paterson's Gibson says about Africa is that Roger will need a strong constitution; Davies presents Gibson's best self, racism expunged. And in portraying Roger as an enlightened naturalist, engaging with, rather than dominating, those he encounters abroad, Davies created a character late-twentieth-century audiences could connect with, and one that most likely reflects his own, in Cardwell's words, 'liberal world view' (*Andrew Davies* 35). Whilst Cardwell argues that Davies has a 'commitment to the inclusion of dissenting and politically incorrect voices within his work; he is able to inhabit and enjoy points of view that contradict his own instinctive proclivities' (*Andrew Davies* 190), this is not the case in the adaptation of *Wives and Daughters*, excepting the portrayal of Squire Hamley's Francophobic views, which are necessary to the plot. Davies revisions negative references to African people in the source material, which is unsurprising given the highly charged atmosphere regarding racial relations during the period. One relevant context is the racially motivated murder of black eighteen-year-old Stephen Lawrence in 1993; its repercussions were felt throughout the decade. A few days after the adaptation had completed its serial run, the way the white Metropolitan police had dealt with the murder was reported on. In an article for *The Guardian* on 22 December, Paul Kelso described how Lawrence's parents were to sue the Metropolitan police for their botched enquiry into their son's murder 'under section 20 of the race relations act, which permits legal action against discrimination on the ground of colour'. At the time of the adaptation, 6% of the British population were black or Asian[26] according to Kirsty Walker in *The Express*; she reported that the International Millennium survey revealed that over 50% of the population were aware 'that discrimination against people based on their colour happens "frequently"'. In early December, Susan Macdonald—writing for *The Times*—and Jonathon Carr-Brown and Alkarim Jivani—for *The Independent*—reported on increased workplace racism. So, the period Davies was writing in was hardly some racism-free utopia and he may have felt that a more accurate portrayal of Gibson would not have been interpreted in a sufficiently nuanced way.

Davies's depiction of Roger suggests an enlightened traveller, not an imperialist, as I have been suggesting. However, his decision to include the African scenes, where the black men serve the white Englishman, could be deemed a continuation of the

age-old stereotype on a par with other clichéd roles given to black, Asian, and minority ethnic actors during the period. As well as writing about workplace racism, Carr-Brown and Jivani reported that 'ethnic minorities' on television 'always seem to be shown in "problem" stories, in marginal jobs, running corner shops, or in comedy shows'.[27] Davies, like others writing for television at the time, created stereotypical black roles in his adaptation. However, things have been changing slowly in the twenty-first century as the BAME population has continued to grow, and Davies has been at the forefront of this gradual evolution within his particular field. His 2018 BBC serial adaptation of *Les Misérables* featured colour-blind casting: David Oyelowo played the role of Javert and Adeel Akhtar was Monsieur Thénardier. Oyelowo—who has stated publicly that he 'do[es]n't want to do anything derivative, clichéd or stereotypical because images are political' (Hogan)—has commented that he grew up watching 'period dramas' by Davies and others, but never thought he would gain the opportunity to be part of them, so to play Javert 'was a true indication that things are shifting within [his] own lifetime' (Mueller). Oyelowo—alongside Davies and others—was an executive producer on the miniseries, suggesting that there is beginning to be some racial diversity behind the camera too, although there is still a long way to go, as contemporary commentators note.[28] When *Wives and Daughters* was airing, Carr-Brown and Javani also reported on 'the failure of organisations such as the BBC and ITV to promote black and Asian producers to senior positions'. In 2019, Davies and his co-writers adapted Austen's unfinished novel *Sanditon* for ITV, giving the West Indian heiress Miss Lambe, a skeletal character in the novel fragment, a major role, played by Crystal Clarke. Most recently, the BBC has aired Davies's lavish massive-budget adaptation of Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, an epic novel set in 1951, post-partition India. This 2020 six-part series features an unprecedented all Indian, not British Indian, cast.[29] Although some—such as Tufayel Ahmed—have criticized the choice of a white Welshman to write the screenplay, Seth 'turned to Davies' after witnessing two failed attempts to adapt his novel: they had a four-hour lunch together which Davies described as 'a cross between a viva voce and a bacchanalian revel' (Tomlinson). As well as liaising with Seth, Davies worked closely with the Indian-American director Mira Nair: together they 'brought the politics of the novel forward in the screenplay' (Tomlinson). Even reviewers who have considered it 'old-school' such as Chitra Ramaswamy admit to its significance, stating that 'it would never have been made 20 years ago'. So, classic-novel adaptation has evolved considerably since the late twentieth century, when, according to Paul Kerr, '[t]the BBC's conception of literary classics [did] not differ remarkably from Leavis' Great Tradition, or the Penguin imprints, "Penguin Classics" and "Penguin English Library"' (9).

To conclude, Davies offers an adaptation of *Wives and Daughters* that Gaskell's readers can readily recognize and enjoy, whilst simultaneously reimagining representations of femininity and race in keeping with late-twentieth-century sensibilities. In portraying Molly Gibson's life, Gaskell was committed to showcasing the domestic confinements a *typical* young woman experienced during the early- to mid-nineteenth century; Davies adapts the heroine so she becomes closer to *exceptional* women from the mid- to late-nineteenth century such as Meredith and Kingsley. Davies's Molly pays homage to such women; he renders explicit all the latent potential of Gaskell's heroine. As a result, the adaptation appeals to contemporary viewers expecting more agency and intellect

from the female protagonist, without becoming entirely anachronistic. Therefore, the adaptation offers a progressive interpretation of the novel's gender politics by teasing out the latent feminist energies of the text. In contrast, Gaskell's allusions to Africa and African people reveal the extent to which she was a product of her time: the novel replicates mid-nineteenth-century racist attitudes, particularly in references to perceived racial inferiority and the practice of cannibalism; the adaptation purges or recasts them in order to offer unchallenging viewing for its late-twentieth-century Christmas audience. Also, Davies revisions the source material by writing in new scenes that present Roger as a sensitive naturalist who has an egalitarian relationship with his guides and others, so the contact zone encounters depicted do not suggest that the Englishman is an all-powerful imperialist, although this gives the black actors limited, stereotypical roles in the process. In the twenty-first century, Davies has answered the call for more racially diverse representation in the arts: most recently, his novel adaptations have created much more complex and varied roles for non-white actors.

NOTES

[1] As Cardwell notes, the BBC and WGBH Boston, both public service broadcasters, have a history of 'successful collaborations' ("Literature" 192).

[2] The four-part adaptation broadly covers the novel's plot as follows: episode 1: chapters 1–19 (approximately 33% of the novel); episode 2: chapters 19–34 (25%); episode 3: chapters 34–44 (17%); and episode 4: chapters 44–60 (25%).

[3] See IMDb listing.

[4] Cardwell lists the television adaptations screened over this period: '*Oliver Twist* (ITV) in December, and *David Copperfield* (BBC) on Christmas Day and Boxing Day; … also … an adaptation of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (ITV) and Mrs Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*' (*Adaptation* 81).

[5] See Cardwell for a brief history and critique of the pluralist approach in adaptation studies (*Adaptation* 69–73). She argues that the pluralist reading, developed from the 1990s onwards, 'recognises that an adaptation's relationship to, and equivalence with, its source novel is not necessarily more salient than its relation to other "resources" such as other adaptations, and film and television conventions; its institutional context as a marketed, audience-targeted, contemporary media text; and its particular historical, social and cultural context' (*Adaptation* 72). Byrne examines the adaptation's: relationship to heritage drama; presentation of Molly's relationship with her father; portrayal of sexuality; transformation of Molly into 'a modern heroine, strong and active' (86); and conservative portrayal of Cynthia.

[6] Cardwell has written a monograph on Davies, but she devotes less than half a page to *Wives and* Daughters, and she offers a largely medium-specific analysis of his output up to 2005, 'critiqu[ing] the programmes as individual artworks' (*Andrew Davies* 3).

[7] Other 'common elements' to Davies's adapted work are, Cardwell argues, 'a range of characters' and 'tone or attitude' whereby the work exhibits '*sympathetic irony*' towards the characters, so that the audience may be encouraged to be sympathetic, but also at a 'critical distance from them' (*Andrew Davies* 115).

[8] For a good summary of different interpretations of Molly, see Anne DeWitt, 62–63. Regarding the Darwin connection, in a letter to her publisher George Smith in May 1864 sketching out her plan for the novel, Gaskell states that her character Roger 'works out for himself a certain name in Natural Science' and is given 'a large offer to go round the world (like Charles Darwin) as naturalist' (*Letters* 732, letter 550). Gaskell mentions dining with Darwin in a letter with an unverified date; the editors give a likely one of 10 July 1851 (*Letters* 157, letter 99). Gaskell alludes to a planned visit from him in October 1856 in another letter (*Letters* 411, letter 308).

[9] At the beginning of the novel, the narrator alludes to Molly being around twelve forty-five years ago (6); as Pam Morris notes, '[t]his sets the main action of the story in the late 1820s through to the early 1830s' (653).

[10] For other examples of Molly looking out of windows, see pages 5–6, 215, 315, 375, 465, 592, and 599.

[11] Cardwell does not mention the deployment of this motif in *Wives and Daughters*.
[12] Byrne argues that the 'mountain is clearly symbolic of the familial, intellectual and emotional sufferings and challenges Molly has had to endure and overcome … freedom, travel, and gender equality are her reward' (92).
[13] Byrne notes the ironic nature of Lady Harriet's speech (90), but does not mention that the next scene works to emphasize it.
[14] Byrne quotes Foster's observation too (86).
[15] See Uglow (569).
[16] Schroeder considers this review and argues that Eastlake can be classified as a Memsahib (121).
[17] Eastlake mentions two of the lady travellers whose work she reviews getting as far as Africa with their husbands, but she does not suggest that they spent much time there.
[18] For a cultural history of female botanists from 1760 to 1860, see Ann B. Shteir.
[19] Stoneman argues that this visual enunciation of Lady Harriet's cropped hair works to remind readers that she is a strong woman ('*Wives and Daughters* on Television' 96–97); Byrne contends that 'a complete rejection of conventional femininity, and of romantic and marital preoccupations, appears to be suggested by her dramatic and unconventionally short haircut' (90).
[20] Gaskell visited Geoffroy's surviving family in France in 1855; in a joint letter with her daughter Meta, she anticipated having 'to talk zoologically – & be kissed' (*Letters* 332, letter 229).
[21] See Morris 665 and Litvack 733–34.
[22] Karen Boiko argues that the alignment of Roger with republican Geoffroy suggests that the novel advocates socially progressive views, whereas Litvack contends that men such as Geoffroy were participators in imperial projects, and Roger, like his real-life counterparts, follows this path, so the novel endorses imperialism.
[23] At the time Gaskell was writing the novel, Darwinians favoured monogenesis, the theory that humankind was 'a single species with a single evolutionary origin'; others promoted polygenesis, the idea that different races 'were distinct species with separate primeval origins' (Brantlinger, "Race" 150).
[24] Litvack gives cursory consideration to the adaptation's portrayal of Africa, suggesting that it perpetuates the novel's racist views (748); I offer a different reading.
[25] Pratt invents the term 'contact zone', 'the space of imperial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, racial inequality, and intractable conflict' (8).
[26] As of 2020, the percentage of black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) people in England and Wales had more than doubled to 14% of the population; see 'Population of England and Wales'.
[27] In commenting on television roles, Carr-Brown and Jivani were anticipating the findings of a forthcoming joint Broadcasting Standards Commission (BSC)/Independent Television Commission report; Janine Gibson considers the BSC's report.
[28] In 2020, David Olusoga stated that the British television industry remains unwilling 'to make space for [black people] behind the scenes' (Waterson).
[29] The lead actor, Tanya Maniktala, who played Lata Mehra, has stated that this was so important because 'many Indian actors grew up with family stories of the partition, making it part of their "identity"' (Carr).

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