

## Taking bearings: Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* televised

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When *North and South* appeared in two volumes in 1855, its title page carried no author's name. The novel was described as being 'By the author of "Mary Barton," "Ruth," "Cranford," &c.', much as it had been on its first appearance as a serial in Dickens's weekly *Household Words* between 2 September 1854 and 27 January 1855. Yet Elizabeth Gaskell's authorship was no secret: while some, like the anonymous *Athenaeum* reviewer, continued to refer to 'the Author', most used her name, the *Leader* reviewer for instance scrupulously identifying her as 'Mrs. Gaskell, if not a Manchester lady, a settler therein'.<sup>1</sup> The designation 'Mrs Gaskell' has been damning. This form of address, emphasising her (willingly embraced) roles as wife and mother, was reinforced over time as literary historians based her reputation on the 'charming' *Cranford*, allowing her ability in delineating the restricted sphere of domesticity, but denying her range. Lord David Cecil is exemplary: in his judgement, she is a domestic novelist with real facility in presenting feeling, while 'As for the industrial novels, it "would have been impossible for her if she tried, to have found a subject less suited to her talents"'.<sup>2</sup> It would be anachronistic now to embark on a defence of Gaskell against Cecil. Jenny Uglow's description of her as 'an original, passionate and sometimes rather strange writer'<sup>3</sup> states an agreed late-twentieth century position consequent on Gaskell's instatement as an industrial novelist and 'social explorer'<sup>4</sup> by Raymond Williams, John Lucas, and others from the late 1950s.<sup>5</sup> It is the transgressive and confronting Gaskell that viewers encounter in Sandy Welch's script and Brian Percival's direction of the 2004 BBC-TV version of *North and South*, her fourth novel. This production was hugely successful, topping the BBC's poll of viewers to determine 'Best Drama' of the year with a decisive 49.43% of the vote.<sup>6</sup> Some reactions to the adaptation were extreme: it is true that despite her residence in Manchester, Elizabeth Gaskell was well-connected in literary circles both in London and Paris, but not that 'she ended her days living in Rome with a

younger lover',<sup>7</sup> as was claimed in one piece about the series.

None the less, it should be recognized that Gaskell was transgressive in particular ways from the beginning of her career. In *North and South*, Gaskell returned to the industrial world of Manchester that she knew first-hand, having lived there since her marriage in 1832 to the Unitarian minister William Gaskell. It was a bold stroke to set her first novel, *Mary Barton*, in the northern industrial city, especially since she declared in the Preface her intention of giving voice to the inarticulate working class.<sup>8</sup> In this mission she was well placed to show the human cost of a capitalist industrialized society, memorably described by Thomas Carlyle in *Past and Present* (1843) as the 'Condition of England'. She was similarly bold in *Ruth* (1853), a distinctive presence among the nineteenth-century novels working variations along different class lines on the theme of 'seduced and abandoned', from Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818) to George Moore's *Esther Waters* (1894). *Cranford*, a more episodic fiction traditionally regarded as Gaskell's signature work, was serialized in *Household Words* at irregular intervals between December 1851 and May 1853 (with book publication in June 1853). While its original popularity derived from the provincial village setting and 'quaint' characters, it is now read as a plangent address to dominant mid-nineteenth century concerns like urbanization and industrialization, as well as to the taboo topic of the spinster. In *North and South*, Gaskell's return to full-on engagement with Condition of England issues is effected through the sexualized discourse of a romance plot. Her later work continued her experiments in genre. In the decade between *North and South* and her death, this versatile writer published a notable biography, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857); two more novels, *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), set in Whitby in the late eighteenth century, and *Wives and Daughters* (1866), her most ambitious venture in the domestic novel; and much short fiction.

In its original appearance, *North and South* occasioned grief both to Gaskell and to her editor. Gaskell's difficulty in meeting the requirements of weekly serial publication has been discussed often.<sup>9</sup> Dickens's exasperation with her found its most vehement expression when she next published in *Household Words* (a story, 'Half a Lifetime Ago'): the same problems of space overrun and continual emendations came up, causing Dickens to write

to his deputy editor W. H. Wills 'Mrs Gaskell — fearful — fearful! If I were Mr G. O Heaven how I would beat her!'<sup>10</sup>

Gaskell bemoaned the effect on her work of the pressure of writing for weekly serial publication. She felt the novel to be 'unnatural, & deformed': the phrase is from a letter written as she was finalizing the serial version of *North and South*, in which she declared 'my poor story is like a pantomime figure, with a great large head, and very small trunk.'<sup>11</sup> Her modifications for book publication can be seen to adjust the proportions somewhat.<sup>12</sup> A century and a half later, a television adaptation in four hour-long episodes might appear even more of a grotesque. The notion of deformation, used by Gaskell to refer to the discrepancy between her mental conception of her novel and what appeared in the pages of *Household Words*, is analogous to ideas that adaptations are of their nature deformations of the source work. Such a view is advanced in order to be countered by Sarah Cardwell in *Adaptation Revisited: Television and the Classic Novel*, who argues strenuously for treating television adaptations as *sui generis*.<sup>13</sup> In this essay, I am unrepentantly offering an account of the TV adaptation in relation to its source text, *pace* Cardwell's remonstrations: David Kelly in 'A View of North & South'<sup>14</sup> comes from a different position, discussing the mini-series with due attention to the claims of the medium, and according to its own generic conventions.

The to-ing and fro-ing between Gaskell and Dickens over the print serialization included discussion of the title. The author initially thought of the book as 'Margaret' or 'Margaret Hale' (imaginative titles were not her strong suit): the shift to *North and South* was possibly at the suggestion of Dickens. The first documented reference to the final title is ambiguous, and may refer to a change initiated by Gaskell herself: Dickens commented that 'North and South appears to me a better name than Margaret Hale. It implies more, and is expressive of the opposite people brought face to face by the story.'<sup>15</sup> The counterpointing of ideologies and cultures represented by 'North' and 'South' is explicitly articulated through the text of the novel. *Cranford* after all had been named for its locale, though its successor deals in a more abstract and complex way with cultural geography. As the serialization was nearing its end, Gaskell had sardonic third thoughts, that 'a better

title than N. & S. would have been “Death & Variations”. There are 5 deaths, each beautifully suited to the character of the individual.’<sup>16</sup>

How, then, is *North and South* to be read in the twenty-first century? And in particular, what kind of a reading of *North and South* is this BBC adaptation? I see it as definitely ‘North and South’, rather than ‘Margaret Hale’, for all the excellence of Daniela Denby-Ashe’s performance.<sup>17</sup> In saying this, I endorse Terence Wright’s observation that the title is ‘North and South, not North or South.’<sup>18</sup> *North and South*, whether on the screen or between covers, is driven by the dialogue of two cultures and two ways of life. Certainly reviewers of the series were very ready to comment on the relevance still of the north/south divide in England. Hywel Williams’s reflections in the *Guardian* took an informed perspective:

The idea that England consists of two nations with each knowing little of the other’s way of life is a Victorian invention. Disraeli’s One Nation response offered a consolidation of the classes under the umbrella of crown, empire and enlightened Toryism. But another novelist is responsible for something much more significant: a geographical and cultural version of the two-nation theory.

Elizabeth Gaskell ... popularized an idea whose consequences have been with us ever since. The professional classes of the softer south are hypocritical but sophisticated while the mercantile-industrial north, though rapacious, conceals hearts of gold beneath rough and ready ways.

... The north now exists as an aspect of the southern English mind: cute but beyond our ken.<sup>19</sup>

Issue might be taken with some of Williams’s formulation, but it is more nuanced than Fiona Sturges’s comments on ‘the enduring divide between north and south’, or the assertion by Joan Leach, Honorary Secretary of the Gaskell Society, that ‘the problems and ethics of strikes and worker/management relationships are still relevant today.’<sup>20</sup>

Having read and taught *North and South* many times over the years, I awaited the mini-series with some apprehension, fearful that it would be at

odds with my way of seeing the novel, on a scale ranging from gratingly to infuriatingly. Almost immediately, this *North and South* not only reassured but won me. The moment came early in the first episode when Margaret opens the door onto the factory floor, to reveal the vista of machines clattering away and scraps of cotton whirling like snowflakes. We see her wondering expression first, and then what she is seeing, a tactic frequently used to good effect through the series. It is also a tactic that transposes such narrative strategies as free indirect speech to the visual medium, giving a scene in terms of a particular character’s perception of it. In a letter to her cousin at the end of the episode, Margaret is to comment ‘I believe I have seen hell—it’s white. It’s snow white’ (my transcription). The onscreen transition to the factory floor occasions the same gasp from the audience as when *The Wizard of Oz* goes into colour, and both character and viewer are transported into another world. Here that other world is the awesome aspect of industry, a phenomenon whose manifestations were new to the Victorians, the novelty and impact of which now need to be demonstrated to viewers. The description of Coketown early in Dickens’s *Hard Times*, a companion piece to *North and South* (it preceded *North and South* in *Household Words*, running April to August 1854) dwells on the mechanical monotony of the industrial town, ‘a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage ... where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness.’<sup>21</sup> In chapter 10, ‘Wrought Iron and Gold’, Gaskell explicitly makes John Thornton the advocate of a different interpretation of the industrial scene. Margaret listens to him

explaining to Mr. Hale the magnificent power, yet delicate adjustment of the might of the steam-hammer, which was recalling to Mr. Hale some of the wonderful stories of subservient genii in the Arabian Nights — one moment stretching from earth to sky and filling all the width of the horizon, at the next obediently compressed into a vase small enough to be borne in the hand of a child. (pp. 80-1)

Thornton is able to conjure in his listener a set of reactions as fantastic as but less threatening than those articulated by Dickens. Incidentally, the reader registers Mr Hale’s imaginative sensibility, as he interprets the might

of the engine as magic. In this first set-piece exposition of the qualities of the North as against the South, Thornton shows the alien majesty of the factory and manufacturing processes. Margaret, 'roused by the aspersion on her beloved South' (p. 81), offers observations which stimulate him into an account of the opportunities for making a fortune provided by manufacturing and the current tensions between capital and labour, masters and men. In this drawing of battle-lines, opinions are enunciated which are modified in the course of the novel.

The sequence is one of many where Sandy Welch's script works very close to the text of the novel, transposing a good deal of it as dialogue. Brian Percival's *mise en scène* responds to the challenge of counterpointing explicit topics of conversation with the emotional undertow experienced by each character. Gaskell characteristically is sparing of extended passages of narrative reflection, unlike George Eliot. Barbara Hardy alerts us: 'You will notice the way Mrs. Gaskell always shows or tells—usually both—what the characters are feeling, and how she pushes on the emotional development and change variously and continuously.'<sup>22</sup> Chapter 10 is a striking example of the extent to which she works through characters' reactions and reflections, as in Margaret's comparison of 'the difference of outward appearance between her father and Mr. Thornton, as betokening such distinctly opposite natures' (p. 80). This passage is preceded by Thornton's observation of the graceful comfort of the Hales' dining room, and of Margaret pouring the tea. The camera emulates Gaskell's account of his fascinated watching of Margaret's bracelet slipping down her arm, though the novel's byplay with Mr Hale's use of his daughter's hand as sugar-tongs is omitted. (Jenny Uglow observes of this gesture that 'Margaret's "hand" is still the possession of her father' (p. 374).) The sequence plays out the irresistible physical attraction Thornton feels for Margaret, and to a lesser extent the interest she feels in him, alongside their explicit differences of opinion on issues of social organisation, articulated in dialogue appropriately condensed for the screen. That Thornton, though serious and committed, is not deadly earnest is nicely registered by his wry turning aside of Mr Hale's excessive insistence on the classics as providing a model of 'heroic simplicity' (p. 85) by which to live. Margaret's ideas are independent, formed by her experience of the circumstances in which she finds herself, and progressively modified by closer contact.

Welch has Mr Hale reprimand Margaret for not shaking hands with Thornton, saying that she has given offence: a good instance of the adaptation's needing to spell out a point differently from the interiorized reaction provided in the closing paragraphs of the chapter (pp. 85-6). Again, when Margaret does shake hands, at the Thorntons' dinner, she comments as she offers her hand 'See how I'm learning Milton ways', where the novel has Thornton think 'He knew it was the first time their hands had met, though she was perfectly unconscious of the fact' (p. 161). Thornton is not the only character aware of Margaret's hand and her handshake: as Jenny Uglow reminds us, at their first meeting Dr Donaldson comments on the firmness of Margaret's handshake (p. 127; Uglow, p. 374).

Welch's script displays consistent responsiveness to and respect for Gaskell's text in these small and effective modifications. Indeed, there is a kind of empathy evident throughout, though she does not always work so closely to her 'source'. As I have indicated, most interpretations of *North and South* depend on their account of the central relationship of Margaret Hale and John Thornton, and the mini-series convincingly follows suit. The adaptation dramatizes compellingly both the tensions of North and South, and the tensions within the North.<sup>23</sup> The central means, as in the novel, is Margaret's learning to understand the North, and to love Thornton as in many respects its embodiment; and Thornton's parallel wrestling with his attraction to her. Complexity and subtlety in the dynamic is ensured by two fine performances.

The scene in the mill is one of Sandy Welch's additions to Gaskell's text. Margaret has come to the Marlborough Mills in quest of the proprietor, John Thornton, a connection of her godfather Daniel Bell, who is assisting the Hales to settle into Milton. She is to encounter Thornton on his own ground, the factory floor, where she sees him thrash a workman. The scene is shocking to watch: the master unleashes a physical reaction at odds with his well-dressed, decorous appearance, and he doesn't just hit the workman, he keeps on with his blows, adding kicks for good measure. It would be easy to say, as some did, that the addition is gratuitous and needlessly violent. I took it that Welch was wanting to show that Thornton is not to be taken at buttoned-up face value, that passion lurks beneath his well-controlled

demeanour. It's important to note, too, that the man's offence is that he has been caught smoking near the dangerously flammable factory floor, and that Thornton's reaction is provoked by concern for the safety of the other hands, and (of course) for his business. (In the course of composition, Gaskell wrote 'What do you think of a fire burning down Mr Thornton's mills *and house* as a *help* to failure? Then Margaret would rebuild them larger & better & need not go & live there when she's married' (quoted in Uglow, p. 369).) Thornton's restraint and discipline are hard won, and this early scene helps explain the tensions brought about by his attraction to Margaret Hale. It is not a vulgarizing addition, though it is certainly discomfiting, demonstrating a significant aspect of the character that is intimately connected with his being a businessman and of the North.

A colleague, responding to Richard Armitage's brooding stance, commented that he plays Thornton as Heathcliff. Though Thornton is of course distinctly more couth than Heathcliff, and less obsessed, it is unquestionably the case that there is something Brontë-esque in Armitage's brooding expressions and projection of barely controlled violence. One of Gaskell's contemporaries, Margaret Oliphant, herself a novelist and woman of letters (published anonymously at this early stage of her long career), saw the influence of Charlotte Brontë rather than Emily at work in *North and South*. Oliphant credits *Jane Eyre* with changing the way women write novels, observing that even 'the *indirect* influence of this new light in literature [is] remarkable.'<sup>24</sup> She finds such indirect influence at work in *North and South*. Describing the author, 'Mrs Gaskell', as 'a sensible and conscientious woman, and herself ranking high in her sphere' she goes on:

*North and South* is extremely clever, as a story ... perhaps better and livelier than any of Mrs Gaskell's previous works; yet here are still the wide circles in the water, showing that not far off is the identical spot where *Jane Eyre* and *Lucy Snowe* [in *Villette*], in their wild sport, have been casting stones; here is again the desperate, bitter quarrel out of which love is to come; here is love itself, always in a fury, often looking exceedingly like hatred, and by no means distinguished for its good manners, or its graces of speech. (p. 559)

This brilliant insight into the dynamic of passion in *North and South* is followed by Oliphant's observations on the resemblance of *North and South* to *Hard Times*: 'We are prepared in both for the discussion of an important social question; and in both, the story gradually slides off the public topic to pursue a course of its own' (p. 560). Gaskell's whole point of course is to restate the 'important social question' in terms of individuals and their personal relationships (Margaret and Thornton, each of them with Higgins and his daughters, and so on).

I have quoted Oliphant at length partly to provide Sandy Welch with a perhaps unexpected ally. I'm not implying that Welch sets out to make *North and South* Brontë-esque, though she has described Thornton in the mill as 'Very Mr Rochester' (Shannon, p. 14), and its subject matter has some affinity with *Jane Eyre*'s successor, *Shirley* (1849), which Gaskell read.<sup>25</sup> My point is rather that her script homes in on the passion which is so integral a part of the energy of the north. The scene in which various passions are really let loose is the riot of the workers in chapter 22 (episode 2).<sup>26</sup> The riot scene is a case in point of the ways in which the series has to deal with the challenge of personifying North and South in John Thornton and Margaret Hale without making either into a mouthpiece abstraction. He is concerned to keep the business going, she to assert values of honour and compassion. The quality of intellectual and emotional engagement in each is apparent from the outset, and convincingly individualizes them. Neither is imprisoned by the social conventions within which they must operate (though Margaret must learn the different codes about visiting, as well as about shaking hands, that operate in Milton). The dramatization of the riot highlights the interweaving of plot strands, and the texture of comparison and contrast on which the narrative depends. Again, Welch was able to draw quite directly on Gaskell's text as Margaret first taunts Thornton into leaving his house to face the mob, and then rushes to his defence. Margaret's integrity and her emotional intelligence are seen to advantage in comparison both with Mrs Thornton's toughness and the vapidity of her daughter Fanny, and with Thornton's resolution and his honorableness. The men's hunger and frustration are clearly enough sketched in the series but more fully articulated in the novel. Viewers are aware both of the menace of the rioters *en masse*, and of individuals in the mob, some of them known to us. In general, the working class characters, even the doomed

Bessy Higgins, seem better nourished and clad than their historical counterparts (and of course their teeth are good). Brendan Coyle as Nicholas Higgins gives a manful portrayal of the bristly union leader; William Houston as Boucher makes a good fist of a difficult role, and his drowned body, stained with the dyes that are manufacturing by-products, is a dreadful sight. Welch and Percival improve on their source by writing one of Boucher's sons into the narrative as Higgins nurtures him and teaches him to read.

The advantages of the filmic presentation of the environment are marked. It is possible economically to contrast middle class comfort—and in places, luxury (the Thorntons' house, Aunt Shaw's in London)—with the condition of the working class, whose dwellings lack not only decoration but much creature comfort. When Margaret walks the streets, she goes into sets where designers have been busy choreographing the bustle and the squalour, which at times becomes a picturesque grotesque.<sup>27</sup> The streetscapes tend to be in a sombre palette; the degree of illumination of an interior is often an authentic index of affluence. The novel is set mainly indoors, as is the series: the sun does not shine brightly in Milton, though it does at Helstone. One reviewer commented with approval that 'there is not a grand or historic house to be seen in the whole series.'<sup>28</sup> It is important to have access, repeatedly, to the factory, to underscore the permeation of manufacturing processes into every aspect of Milton life. We see not only adults but children at work amidst the fluff, and the employers' strict demands. A key instance is an addition to the novel at the beginning of episode 2, where the extent of Mrs Thornton's concern for a sick child is that she will permit the mother to get another child to take its place on the shopfloor as long as the swap can be done quickly.

The novel often debates central questions through set-pieces. Much of the substance of one of the most famous of these, chapter 15, 'Masters and Men', is incorporated into the Milton manufacturers' dinner in the first episode. This has no exact correlate in the novel, but serves at once to develop the obstinate and honorable aspects of Thornton's character, to establish the conflict of masters and men ('it's a war and we masters have to win it or go under'), and to bring home the contrast between the well-dressed masters, sitting down to a substantial repast, and the garb and

demeanour of the men. Thornton's dinner in chapter 20 is one of these set-pieces, well presented in episode 2, while the Great Exhibition scenes (episode 3) are an important addition. The development of understanding in Thornton and Margaret can be grasped—and graphed—in their interventions. She tends to verbalize her responses more than he does. Action is sometimes necessary for him to demonstrate his sensitivity and thoughtfulness, as in the wallpapering of the Hales' rented house, his gifts of fruit for Mrs Hale, or his sentimental visit to Helstone. Margaret, as a woman and a newcomer to Milton, is differently constrained, and is more readily able to indicate her current perceptions. Relatively late in the novel, she dissuades Higgins from thinking of heading south. She shows a surprising perception of the quality of the workers' lives, and her words are an almost exact quotation from the novel: 'You would not bear the dulness of the life; you don't know what it is; it would eat you away like rust' (p. 306).

The ways that Welch's script adapts Gaskell's text can be further exemplified in the sequence at the Crystal Palace Exhibition in the third episode. Aunt Shaw insists on Margaret's travelling from Milton to go to the Great Exhibition, 'with the bears and elephants and exotic people and inventions from all over the empire'. Similarly, William Gaskell insisted that the family should visit London for the Exhibition, and enthusiastically went many times. Elizabeth went on three occasions and found it crowded (Uglow, p. 271). For all her superficiality, Aunt Shaw understands the project, of which Albert, the Prince Consort, was a prime mover. The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations of 1851 was designed to assert British industrial supremacy and imperial dominion to the world. More than half the exhibition area was given over to exhibits from Britain and her colonies, whether raw materials, fine arts, manufactures, or machinery—and the machinery gallery was the most popular. The innovatory design of the vast building was itself a triumph of technology. Built in glass and cast iron, Joseph Paxton's structure came to be known as the Crystal Palace, this popular name capturing reactions akin to the fairytale wonder momentarily experienced by Mr Hale listening to Thornton's exposition in chapter 10.

It was an inspiration to add this sequence in the adaptation, invoking significant Victorian iconography. It provides an opportunity for the characters

from the South to experience manufactures at first hand—and to modify their perceptions in the light of what they see. Edith's husband Captain Lennox declares 'I never realized the power and the money to be made by cotton'; Edith earlier has said 'we'll always wear linen'. It also provides an opportunity for Thornton of the North to take his place in the society of the South, and to preach his gospel: 'technologically we're the envy of the world. If only we had a mechanism to live together'—a sentiment that echoes the Milton concern that masters and men should be able to communicate. It is notable that many contemporaries saw great social significance in the way the Exhibition brought the lower orders into contact with the upper and middle classes, all gazing in wonder at various exotica.

Another way in which the adaptation works with elements in the novel has to do with the railway system. There was no more potent force in the changing of both the literal and metaphorical landscapes in the Victorian period than the railways, and that force is nowhere better captured than in Dickens's great set-piece in *Dombey and Son*, chapter 6. In *North and South*, Gaskell naturally conveys her characters by rail in a text where mobility is a condition of the action. Place is important, and not only Milton and Helstone as the principal representatives of North and South are in play: think of the sequences in or references to London, Corfu, Oxford, and Cromer, to which the series adds South America, where Mr Bell is going to die.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Gaskell sets an important sequence at a railway station, Margaret's farewell to her brother Frederick, chapter 32, 'Mischances', which leads to complications and her lie to the police inspector.

Welch is quite explicit about her intentions: 'I have Margaret travelling to the North by train to signal that this isn't a coach-and-horses drama or a piece about long dresses and dances. I'm hoping it will give a steam-driven momentum to the piece right from the start' (Shannon, pp. 14-5). Where the novel opens and closes in London, in Aunt Shaw's Harley Street house, the series opens and closes in steam trains heading to Milton. We see a train travelling through the countryside, then close in on Margaret's face reflected in the window (a visual trope to recur throughout) and flashback to Edith's wedding and a fantasy sequence at Helstone. This flashback references Mar-

garet's dream of Lennox after his unexpected proposal in chapter 5, p. 43. Indeed, the use of flashback throughout the series is notable. The provision of Frederick's history is a case in point. Having been away at Aunt Shaw's, Margaret is unaware of the detail of the mutiny and its consequences. In the novel, Margaret is rather creakily briefed by her mother in chapter 14. The visualization of this narration is economical, and stylistically suggests the romanticisation and slight blurring at the edges of all Helstone memories. Arrival at Milton is to a dark bustling scene, with a porter calling 'All change!': a fair substitution for one of Gaskell's *tours de force*, when in chapter 7 of the novel Margaret and her father approach Milton, and Margaret comes to read the scene before her, realizing that what she at first saw as 'a deep lead-coloured cloud' is smoke from the factories (p. 59).

The closing sequence is Welch's most radical and most disconcerting change. It makes sense in terms of the adaptation but violated my sense of Victorian propriety. (BBC viewers rated it their 'Favourite Moment' by a convincing margin—52.22% of votes where the second and fifth ranked, also from *North and South*, got only 5.76% and 3.48% respectively. The victory was not without objections from some: 'disaster struck!' cried Alison of Dorking; S. Hart of London thought 'The ending was perfect—for a soap opera'.) Rather than meeting by appointment in Aunt Shaw's back drawing room in Harley Street, Margaret Hale and John Thornton run into each other by chance at a sunlit railway station. Margaret, chaperoned by Henry Lennox (in his professional capacity, as legal adviser), is returning south from a visit to Milton during which she intended to put a business proposition to Thornton now that she is in possession of Mr Bell's fortune. Thornton is returning from a sentimental pilgrimage to Helstone parsonage and environs. There is something brilliantly Victorian about hero and heroine almost heading off in opposite directions, and a particular appropriateness that they should meet on what is in a sense neutral ground. But some suspension of disbelief is required. Pedantic though it is to say so, no gentleman would travel with his shirt open at the neck (any more than women would attend funerals, as happens in the series: see Hotz, p. 170). And as for so passionate an embrace in public ...



Viewers' Favourite Moment: Margaret and Thornton's romantic meeting at the train station.

Such pedantry is misplaced. Both Daniela Denby-Ashe and Richard Armitage deliver extraordinary performances, each character taken unawares by their chance encounter, each struggling to abandon the codes of self-control that constrain them—and happily yielding. The performances altogether showcase yet again the depth of English character acting.<sup>30</sup> Only one character is significantly—and disconcertingly—rewritten in the series, Margaret's godfather Daniel Bell. Gaskell's character is more an Oxonian *bon vivant* than Brian Protheroe portrays him as being. Here, Bell is a fine figure of a man, not a pudgy gout-afflicted don, though he is diagnosed as having a fatal and unspecified disease and heads to warmer climes to die. (In the novel, he is taken off by a sudden apopleptic fit.) The irony of his living off the proceeds of his industrial investments is underplayed; the plot device of the unexpected legacy still required. But for all its good manners his proposal to Margaret is disconcerting, at the very least, and I wonder whether this non-Gaskell twist carries an implication of something quasi-incestuous. Certainly it reinforces the sense throughout of Margaret's attractiveness to intelligent men of consequence, like Henry Lennox, and underscores her independence in recognizing John Thornton as her match.

Elizabeth Gaskell's stocks as a novelist have never been higher. In bringing *North and South* to the small screen, Brian Percival, Sandy Welch, the cast, and the production team certainly augment her critical standing: more to the point, this exceptional mini-series achieves resounding success in its own right.

#### NOTES

- 1 Angus Easson, ed., *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 333. The *Athenaeum* review, by Henry Fothergill Chorley, is on pp. 331-2.
- 2 Easson, *Critical Heritage*, p. 49, quoting Cecil's *Early Victorian Novelists* (1934).
- 3 *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (London: Faber, 1993), p. ix.
- 4 Easson, *Critical Heritage*, p. 48.
- 5 Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958); John Lucas, 'Mrs Gaskell and Brotherhood', in *Tradition and Tolerance in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, ed. David Howard, John Lucas, and John Goode (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966); and a considerable subsequent critical literature, of which Hilary Schor provides an excellent account down to 1990, in 'Elizabeth Gaskell: A Critical History and A Critical Revision', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 19 (1990), 345-69.
- 6 The series won six of the eight categories polled, missing out on 'Worst Drama' and 'Best Villain', but including (it seems appropriate to acknowledge) 'Best Drama Website': <http://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/bestof2004>, accessed 30 March 2006; and see also n. 17.
- 7 Sarah Shannon, 'Love in a cold climate', *Independent*, 10 November 2004, 14. This and other reviews of the series were accessed through Factiva, 30 November 2005. Gaskell in fact died suddenly on 12 November 1865 at The Lawn, Holybourne, Hampshire, a house she had bought and furnished but not occupied (all without her husband's knowledge): despite her appreciation of the North, Gaskell wanted to be able to live and work under her own roof in the South for part of the year. At the moment of her death she was talking about a possible visit to Rome where she had spent some happy

- weeks in 1857, meeting among others a thirty-year-old American, Charles Eliot Norton, later a Harvard professor. Gaskell's biographer Jenny Uglow comments 'He was part of her Italian romance' (p. 418): Uglow's account both of that 1857 visit (pp. 418-26), and of Gaskell's death (pp. 605-10), provides the factual basis for Shannon's fanciful notion of the 55-year-old novelist's foreign affair.
- 8 *Mary Barton* (1848; ed. Edgar Wright, World's Classics, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), pp. xxxv-xxxvi.
- 9 Dorothy Collin, 'The Composition of Mrs Gaskell's *North and South*', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 54:1 (1971), 67-98, gives a detailed account of the interaction of author and editor, with a glance at the changes Gaskell made to the serial version for volume publication. A more nuanced discussion is Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, 'Textual/Sexual Pleasure and Serial Publication: *North and South*', in their *Victorian Publishing and Mrs. Gaskell's Work* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1999), pp. 96-123.
- 10 Uglow, p. 395, quoting from A. B. Hopkins, *Elizabeth Gaskell: Her Life and Works* (1952).
- 11 Quoted in *North and South* (1855; ed. Alan Shelston, Norton Critical Edition, New York: Norton, 2005), p. 405.
- 12 Sally Shuttleworth, *North and South* (1855; World's Classics, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), p. xxxv, provides a succinct description of the major differences among the serial, the first edition (2 vols., 1855), and the second (revised and reset) edition (also 1855). Gaskell made her most substantial changes in revising the serial for the first book version. In the closing phases of the novel, some material was re-ordered and two new chapters added (volume 2, chapters 20 and 21), to redress the perceived proportions brought about by pressures of time and space. In particular, more detail is provided of Mr Bell's role in facilitating the ending.
- In this article, quotations from *North and South* are from Shuttleworth's Oxford World's Classics edition.
- 13 Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002, e.g. pp. 21-3, where she uses my essay 'Whose *Middlemarch*? The 1994 British Broadcasting Corporation's Television Production', *Sydney Studies in English*, 21 (1995), 95-102, as an exemplar of the traditional 'literal' model of discussing adaptation. I hasten to say that I consider *Adaptation Revisited* to be an important if laboured contribution to the critical literature on screen adaptation, particularly because of the focus on television and the classic novel spelled out in its subtitle, though I maintain that Cardwell's views and mine are closer than she chooses to acknowledge in making her argument.
- 14 *Sydney Studies in English*, 32 (2006), pp. 83-96.
- 15 Quoted in Norton Critical Edition, p. 411. Sally Shuttleworth pertinently comments that 'In many ways *North and South* is an unfortunate title, since it suggests a novel of stark polarities' (p. xi).
- 16 Quoted in Norton Critical Edition, p. 402. The deaths are those of Bessy Higgins, Mrs Hale, Boucher, Mr Hale, and Mr Bell—who though sentenced to death is spared in the mini-series. Leonards and Mrs Boucher might be added. See also Mary Elizabeth Holz, "'Taught by death what life should be": Elizabeth Gaskell's representation of death in *North and South*', *Studies in the Novel*, 32 (2000), 165-84.
- 17 For most viewers, it was John Thornton, played by Richard Armitage, who was the charismatic character. The BBC's *North and South* website posted a number of viewers' comments on Armitage's spunky heart-throb appeal, frequently benchmarking his performance against that of Colin Firth in the 1995 *Pride and Prejudice* (the title of Jane Austen's novel has relevance also to *North and South*, of course). In a canvass of viewers to establish the 'Best of 2004' in drama, Armitage overwhelmingly topped the poll for both 'Best Actor' (53% of the votes cast) and 'Most Desirable Star' (54.79%). Daniela Denby-Ashe was 'Best Actress' (scoring a decisive but relatively modest 33.36% of votes), with Sinéad Cusack (Mrs Thornton) in third position. Three of the top five 'Favourite Moments' were from the series. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/bestof2004>, accessed 30 March 2006.
- 18 *Elizabeth Gaskell, 'We are not angels': Realism, Gender, Values* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), p. 97.
- 19 'The north's gone south', *Guardian*, 26 November 2004, 28.
- 20 'Staying in: class and costumes collide', *Independent*, 13 November 2004, 47; 'Northern Exposure' [letter to the editor], *Daily Telegraph*, 18 November 2004, 29.
- 21 Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854; ed. Paul Schlicke, World's Classics, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989), p. 28.
- 22 'Mrs Gaskell and George Eliot', *The Victorians*, ed. Arthur Pollard (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1970), p. 178. Hardy goes on to point out that Gaskell's characters are distinguished by their 'reasonable passion ... a reasonable pride, a reasonable anger, a reasonable despair.'
- 23 Shuttleworth's introduction to her Oxford World's Classics edition gives an excellent brief account of such tensions, as well as of the novel's ques-

- tioning of many kinds of authority—religious, social, legal, familial.
- 24 'Modern Novelists—Great and Small', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 77 (May 1855), 559. Easson prints excerpts, *Critical Heritage*, pp. 344-7.
- 25 Into the bargain, Welch moved on to a television series of *Jane Eyre*, in production in 2006. For 'North and South ... in serious struggle with Shirley', see Rosemarie Bodenheimer's discussion in *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1988), pp. 53-68, *passim*. Note that one of the heroines of *Shirley* is Caroline Helstone, a name that perhaps lingered in Gaskell's mind when she chose to call the Hampshire village so dear to Margaret Hale 'Helstone'.
- 26 A particularly influential discussion of this scene is Barbara Leah Harman's 'In Promiscuous Company: Female Public Appearance in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*', *Victorian Studies* 31 (1988), 351-74, and also her *The Feminine Political Novel in Victorian England* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1998), chapter 2, 'Women's Work in *North and South*'.
- 27 Some recent discussion has dwelt on the significance of Margaret's freedom on the streets of Milton: e.g. Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995), esp. chapter 5, 'Elbowed in the Streets: Exposure and Authority in Elizabeth Gaskell's Urban Fiction'. Uglow's emphasis on physicality in the novel is also relevant.
- 28 Sophie Cunningham, 'To the defence of Gaskell', *The Age*, 14 May 2005, 18.
- 29 For a comprehensive discussion of place in the novel, see W. A. Craik, *Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel* (London: Methuen, 1975), chapter 3, 'North and South'.
- 30 Various possible reflections here include the nice touch that Tim Pigott-Smith, Mr Hale in this production, played Hale's son Frederick, Margaret's brother, in a 1975 BBC television version—in which, incidentally, *Star Trek's* Patrick Stewart played John Thornton.

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## A View of *North & South*

DAVID KELLY

Has the mini-series become the novel of today? The home entertainment revolution has had a profound effect not only on our viewing but, perhaps surprisingly, on our reading habits. Indeed, I know people who curl up with a good mini-series in a way they once would have done with a good book, and the reason is the same: because, now, they can.

There is more to it than that, of course, and no doubt part of the attraction of the mini-series for readers is that it has certain affinities with the novel—especially the classic realist novel—which give it a number of advantages over the feature film when it comes to the adaptation of literary classics. Unlike watching a film, which might occupy about the same time as a long story or a shortish novella, viewing a mini-series might take about the same time as reading a decent sized novel. One lives with the story, so to speak, re-visiting it, experiencing its world, its style, its themes, to an extent unimaginable in conventional cinema, often over a period of weeks. The story is spun out in episodic units, a structural principle similar to that which presided over the production of the serialized novels of the past, which likewise appeared first in episodes and later in their entirety. In this it has a particular advantage over the feature film, for the mini-series has the length and the leisure to explore its fictive world with something akin to the depth of interest of the novelist. It has always been one of the major complaints about film adaptations of classic novels that the complexity, intricacy, and thematic expanse of the literary text are inevitably reduced and simplified by the time constraints, to say nothing of the commercial pressures, of the feature film. These are much less important factors in the mini-series and indeed their effect may even be reversed. With the sets and costumes made, the locations visited, the crew in place, it might make more financial sense to spin out an extra episode than to reduce the overall time of the show, thus encouraging the filmmakers to make greater use of novelistic devices such as minor characters, local colour, sub-plots, and the like. For the viewer,