

“Nothing more” and “Nothing definite”:  
First Wives in Elizabeth Gaskell’s  
*Wives and Daughters* (1866)

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Early in *Wives and Daughters*, Hamley, the aging country squire, makes a private assessment of Molly Gibson, the novel’s heroine:

‘That’s a nice girl of Gibson’s,’ quoth [Squire Hamley] to himself. ‘But what a tight hold the wench got of the notion of his marrying again! . . . To think of her never having thought of the chance of a step-mother. To be sure; a step-mother to a girl is a different thing to a second wife to a man! (Gaskell 74)<sup>1</sup>

The Squire’s statement anticipates the novel’s critical heritage: in its “tight hold” on certain subjects, like mothers and step-mothers, the scholarship has neglected a stringent examination of the key role Gaskell pays to first wives in *Wives and Daughters*.<sup>2</sup> Certainly the book explores the ironies concealed in the Squire’s remark—Molly Gibson will struggle with the inadequate attentions of a superficial stepmother; her father’s remarriage will prove less than satisfactory to both husband and wife; and Squire Hamley himself will lose his beloved spouse. Implicit in the Squire’s comment is the first wife’s primacy, the place she holds in Hamley’s understanding of familial security and, more particularly, male need. As a per-

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*JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory* 34.1 (Winter 2004): 1–26. Copyright © 2004 by *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory*.

sonal reflection, the Squire's remark acknowledges that his own sense of self depends on the first wife's presence. A second wife would be a "different thing" to and for a man. Indeed, as this essay will discuss, when Mrs. Hamley dies, the novel shows that the Squire's carefully constructed world of a patriarchal and landed regimen must allow for a different one to begin.

Hamley's comparison also alludes to the paradox the first wife becomes in *Wives and Daughters*. As a criterion, the ideal the first wife represents exists only as an absented form; in the epigraph's example she "is" because the Squire omits her from his actual statement. However, linguistic exclusion does not disempower the first wife. Rather, her absence often affords her a place of remarkable centrality—in the characters' imaginations, in plot development, and in narrative structure. *Wives and Daughters* is not the first time Gaskell works with replacements for a dead wife. *Mary Barton* (1848), for instance, immediately readies the young heroine to step into the domestic role her mother, the elder Mary Barton vacates when she dies in Chapter Three. In *North and South* (1854–1855) Margaret Hale, an efficient manager of household affairs, moral support to her father's trials, nursemaid to her invalid mother's sensitivities, plays the role of "wife" before the real Mrs. Hale dies, and eventually becomes a "second" Margaret Thornton when she marries at the end. With these two novels, daughters replace dead wives; however, in *Wives and Daughters* Gaskell takes another approach to the problem of the dead wife, reaching for something different in her own fictional families as well as in the novel's focus itself. Gaskell assigns the first wife in *Wives and Daughters* an unusual authority. She may be already dead (as with Mary Pearson Gibson), or she may be ill, dying, and ultimately dead (as with Mrs. Hamley), but she is always present. Her constancy often signals, sometimes even creates, a confused clash of perspectives. At times the first wife frustrates the novel's progress since the text itself seems undecided about whether to keep her or not, whether to let her rest peacefully or to resurrect her.

This resulting ambivalence endows the first wife with the unexpected power to unsettle and disrupt the chronological unfolding of the novel's story of remarriage and its theme of an evolutionary growth within the family unit. In concentrating my energies on Gaskell's first wives I myself add a "different thing" to the existing scholarship's focus on the domestic, on female subjectivity, and on the woman author. Despite the narrator's

and the characters' needs to memorialize the middle-class Victorian angel in the house, Gaskell does not give them a peaceful time with the image. First wives in *Wives and Daughters* create a variety of disturbances that only begin to be stabilized toward the novel's conclusion when the author introduces a new and foreign model, "French, Catholic, servant" (495). In forcibly writing her way into the story as she does, Aimee, Osborne Hamley's wife, makes a two-fold impact that trumps the power of those wives before her. Aimee suggests an edgier and confident authorial energy that seeks a departure from the nineteenth-century novel's focus on a familial harmony dependent on the construct of the middle-class domestic angel. Aimee first effectively lays to rest the wandering spirits of first wives in *Wives and Daughters* and thus resolves the formal and narrative troubles they posed with their restless interferences with the text. Second, in turning the genre away from an illusory central stability the Victorian novel sought to preserve, the "second" Mrs. Hamley lays the ground for the powerfully fractured irresolution in stories about marriage later novelists would explore.

### **"Nothing more": The First Mrs. Gibson**

In Chapter Three, Gaskell introduces, describes, and then eliminates Mr. Gibson's first wife in a paragraph depiction that predates the action of the novel. Despite its brevity, the character sketch efficiently establishes the first Mrs. Gibson as a specific class and gender type intrinsic to the culture's domestic ideology. This first wife was the "orphan grand-niece" of the town's aging physician and

the woman-contemning old bachelor, became thankful for the cheerful presence of the pretty, bonny Mary Preston, who was good and sensible and nothing more. She formed a close friendship with the daughters of the vicar, Mr. Browning, and Mr. Gibson found time to be intimate with all three. Hollingford speculated much on which young lady would become Mrs. Gibson, and was rather sorry when the talk about possibilities, and the gossip about probabilities with regard to the handsome young surgeon's marriage, ended in the most natural manner in the world, by his marrying his predecessor's niece. (31)

Of “nothing more” I will say much later, but here I want to highlight the novel’s practicality in constructing the first wife’s image, an effect especially noticeable in the limited and plain physical description the text provides. She was a “cheerful presence” for those to whom she ministers; she was “pretty and bonny.” In this narrative postmortem, Gaskell sets up what will become one comparison between the former and the latter Mrs. Gibsons: Mary Preston, “good and sensible” and the languid Hyacinth, vain, manipulative, and extravagant. Establishing Mary Preston as part of the history of the Gibson household, and of the Hollingsford village community, anchors the novel via a character who, despite her modest first appearance, functions as a constant reminder of a past which many seem loath to leave.

Many references to Mary Preston expose the novel’s reluctance, even inability, to dismiss the image of the angel of the house. She seems a permanent fixture, secure in the Hollingsford social world before and after her marriage, elevated to iconic status after her death. Gaskell retains that female presence in curious ways that, as I will show, affect the novel’s development. Mary Preston’s memory haunts Hollingsford residents, in particular, the Browning sisters, as many moments demonstrate. Miss Phoebe justifies her thrilling (albeit mistaken) hope that Gibson will propose to her with the thought that “she would feel bound to accept him, for poor dear Mary’s sake” (144). Her sister later confides her fears about Molly’s future to Gibson and claims that “you ought to know; for though you’re married again, I can’t forget you were dear Mary’s husband once upon a time; and Molly’s her child” (513). When gossip about Molly and Mr. Preston, Cynthia’s suitor, reaches them, the sisters’ concern is that “it would be a bad match for Mary Preston’s daughter” (444), as marriage to the land agent would be a crass gesture toward a middle-class respectability. In the most triumphant display of loyalty for the departed wife Phoebe Browning compliments Gibson, saying

‘All men are not—like you, Mr. Gibson—faithful to the memory of their first love.’ Mr. Gibson winced. Jeannie was his first love; but her name had never been breathed in Hollingsford. His wife—good, sensible, and beloved as she had been—was not his second; no, nor his third love. (143)

For the two spinsters, Mary Preston carries hagiographic appeal and they assume others to be as devoted in their nostalgia for the dead woman. Thus, although Gaskell's gentle humor with Phoebe Browning turns on how the first wife's image easily conceals misinterpretations of a character's intentions—her own, Gibson's—the author, at the same time, presents the first wife as a standard for fidelity, an ideal that often links daughter, husband, and female friends in a tight bond.

This narrative allegiance to the first wife's primacy shapes an underlying thematic force, so that, despite her brief appearance in *Wives and Daughters*, Mary Preston lives in the text. Invoked again and again, the first wife illustrates the pattern for a desirable feminine mode that Gaskell locates in women's emotions, like the Brownings' sentimental chastisements. As added emphasis, Gaskell allows this first wife's influence a mildly inherent and instinctual quality. Stoneman has argued that, like Wollstonecraft, Gaskell believes that the role of a "good" mother is not a role a woman came by naturally (199), and many have noted that Gaskell's title excludes "mothers" from its categories of female socialization. In debating a woman's natural maternal tendencies *Wives and Daughters* uses Mary Preston for a gentle argument against it even while behavior associated with the first wife's "good" nature lives on through her daughter. The first wife's image represents mother love; she symbolizes a tactile female sympathy domestic ideology framed as an essential and biologically driven way of being as we see when Molly comforts her step-sister Cynthia by stroking the girl's hand, "a mode of caressing that had come down to her from her mother." However, the narrator's vested conviction in this physical inheritance slides into an analytic uncertainty when she admits another's view: "whether as an hereditary instinct, or as a lingering remembrance of the tender way of the dead woman, Mr. Gibson often wondered within himself when he observed it" (328). The novel needs to idealize the first wife and the place she occupies as a reminder of a more desirable past located in an evocative symbol of femininity. Mary Preston's ghost inspires an unspoken female bond, here handed down through gestures of selfless comfort. Although Gibson's observation raises the question of woman's natural versus socialized behavior, he remains outside this particular and female realm; he is "within himself" and not part of a gendered central place carefully enshrined within the text.

And yet, while *Wives and Daughters* establishes Mary Preston as an

ideal and thus seems to affirm the domestic angel's vitality, the novel also wrestles to move on from a history and attitudes about class, about gender and about genre the first wife represents. For all the times when Gaskell uses Mary Preston as the wifely ideal, she also, often simultaneously, counters that notion with an alternate view. For instance, in the scene when he is asked to recall his own youthful ardors, Gibson thinks not of his first wife but of another woman completely outside the story in *Wives and Daughters*: "poor Jeannie was not so old, and how I did love her!" (Mrs. Gibson's name was Mary, so he must have been referring to someone else.)" (49). The narrator's own observation comically underscores how negligible the first wife actually may be for some. Rather than living in sainthood as she does for those like the Browning sisters, Mary Preston moves farther and farther down Gibson's hierarchy of romantic importance. She is not only not his first, but also not the second nor even the third. In this narratorial indiscretion Gaskell suggests the differences in audience interpretations of the marriage plot. Gaskell casts a cool eye on the rationale for Gibson's second marriage: he wants a mother for Molly. Rather than stressing spousal fidelity, the first wife's death reinforces Gibson as a man of reason, distanced from the world of feeling, and Hollingford gossips about the degree of his sorrow, measuring it by the "narrowness of his crape hat-band" (32). The spinster sisters want the romance of a love story (and an old story at that) rather than the realities of a marriage between a widowed governess and a country doctor. Gibson may harbor thoughts of old loves but in deciding to remarry, he chooses a woman from a social class less secure than that of his first wife and opts for the contractual arrangement that could make his home a site for constructive familial energy.

Furthermore, while the novel situates a particularly female manner in the idealized first wife, the novel often suggests its own hesitancy regarding an inherent connection that would link all women. When the narrator and Gibson wonder about Molly's physical tenderness toward her stepsister, Gaskell compares these affectionate moments of women's physical touch with several when Hyacinth holds Molly's hand. Earlier the girl sits in silent rebellion when Hyacinth, recently betrothed to Mr. Gibson, "fondled her hand" as Lady Cumnor questions Molly about her education and background, a line of interrogation that irritates and frustrates Molly.<sup>3</sup> The more the girl chafes under the investigation, the more Hyacinth fondles,

holding "her hand more perseveringly than ever, hoping thus to express a sufficient amount of sympathy to prevent her from saying anything so injudicious" (132). Hyacinth's caress is not a gesture of selfless comfort; it silences Molly and "[irritates] her nerves" and she eventually breaks the touch.

Hyacinth's grasp of Molly's hand cannot replace or imitate the first wife's maternal affection; however, rather than trying to be the mother she is not, Hyacinth roots her intentions in the practical approach this middle-aged bride-to-be takes in her life. Holding Molly's hand makes a pretty display of a love Hyacinth does not ultimately feel. As a woman who has been dependent on the kindness of her social betters, Hyacinth knows the importance in adapting to Lady Cumnor's manner. She understands she must often play a part not natural to her own inclinations. Hyacinth's gesture—not quite parody but still emptied of maternal emotive force—conceals her clear sense of the value in Lady Cumnor's good will and how to curry that kind of favor. Her knowledge is a wisdom gleaned from the vicissitudes associated with her unstable class status, a wisdom that Molly, tied to the middle-class ideal the first wife represents, rejects. Hyacinth's play-acting reveals an arbitrariness and adaptability to roles deemed natural to a particular type of female gender. By showing how the pretty image cloaks economic motivations crucial to individual well-being, even survival, Gaskell includes her readers in the actual mechanics that form and sustain that gendered image.

Nancy Armstrong has argued that the discursive construction of an ideal middle-class female stressed a self-command that would, in turn, foster a well-regulated domestic sphere with a woman at its center (80–86; 95). As a novel of domestic life, *Wives and Daughters* does not refute Armstrong's assessment of the domestic angel's place in the nineteenth-century novel, but Gaskell's text steadily questions whether the image deserves such a long-lived centrality. After Hyacinth and Gibson marry, Gaskell explores with even greater relish Hyacinth's energetic command, developing it into a battle waged on the domestic front. When Hyacinth announces her plans to redecorate Molly's bedroom, to make it "look quite a different place" (182), Molly protests since it was her "own mamma's before she was married" (183). Hyacinth's will for the newfangled overrides Molly's wish to dwell in a room at one time occupied by the girl who would become the first Mrs. Gibson. Granted, we may sympathize with

Molly but Hyacinth's words rightly challenge the dead first wife's power and authorize Hyacinth's intrusion into this home. It is the home Hyacinth now controls, not one in which she merely works as she had in the past as either a governess or as a house guest invited to distract and entertain her hosts.

Redecoration symbolizes not solely the rights of a new wife—why shouldn't this second Mrs. Gibson redo her home?—but also the healthy, even evolutionary soundness in change. Hyacinth is, as Elizabeth Langland has claimed, “socially productive rather than destructive.”<sup>4</sup> She expresses her right to redecorate in a direct and confident tone. As she says to Molly: “‘It’s very much to your credit that you should have such feelings, I’m sure. But don’t you think sentiment may be carried too far? Why we should have no new furniture at all, and should have to put up with worm-eaten horrors” (183). The Brownings’ idolatry steadily resurrects “Mary Preston,” but perhaps that “sentiment may be carried too far.” Is Mary Preston,” after all, “nothing more” than an empty form, a phrase for a gender type and a social and literary past the novel questions? Gaskell regularly reintroduces the idealized image in her story so that the narrator’s complacent use of “nothing more” seems somewhat counterfeit, its finality as a pronouncement not quite conclusive since the “nothing more” that is Mary Preston seems to signal a perverse longevity in the first wife’s utility. The first Mrs. Gibson may remain “bonny . . . good and sensible” in memory, but because she disturbs the action, she pulls the characters back into the past to stagnate there. And while perhaps not exactly like the “worm-eaten horrors” of Gothic convention, this power nevertheless undermines the novel’s focus on the present and the future. As Armstrong notes, the ideal domestic woman reflects a “peculiar combination of invisibility and vigilance”; she is capable of “disappearing into the woodwork to watch over the household” (80). Gaskell, however, critiques the ideal and its function in the nineteenth-century novel: Mary Preston’s vigilant efforts to control what had been her home and her story produce visible discord.

*Wives and Daughters* regularly undermines the symbolic legitimacy in the self-sacrificing first wife and seeks, instead, a more earthly and reasonable substitute. As appealing an image or a memory as she can be, she is one that offers ambivalent securities. For an audience like the Brownings, this loyalty must be strictly maintained; however, for those like Hy-

acanth and Gibson, intent on progress, the insistent connection to a cultural ideal is an irritant, an anxiety, a platitude that can leave one wincing with embarrassment and even impatience. Gaskell loosens the ties her characters and her audience may have to a singular female perfection by developing other types driven by other, and viable, ways of being. Hyacinth longs for an escape from the drudgery of teaching and the dangers of an insecure financial future. Marrying Gibson saves her from slipping further down the class scale, brings her into the novel's domestic focus, and, as a result, revises the role of class for the narrative. Hyacinth challenges the legitimacy of that old story of middle-class marital stability and domestic closure. Inured to earning her own living, Hyacinth approaches marriage and motherhood like the jobs they are, and she performs them with an eye for future opportunities. She is a new force in the Gibson home and in the story, "sensible" in a way the ghostly Mary Preston could not be.

As a result, the novel regularly unsettles the characters' and the culture's need to sentimentalize the first wife. Mary Preston's thumbnail biography and the abbreviated statement of her death relegate the first wife to the realm of the matter-of-fact to articulate the paradoxical role the first wife plays in the novel. As noted above, the narrator's observation that she was "good and sensible, and nothing more" seems to assign the first wife a limited space in the text. Her death—"poor Mrs. Gibson it was that died of consumption, four or five years after her marriage"—reinforces that the trope may be easily discarded, carried out of the story by the convenience of another nineteenth-century literary convention.<sup>5</sup> Gaskell shows authorial ease with the cultural and aesthetic materials of her time: she can simultaneously invoke and eliminate the angel of the house. The characters in *Wives and Daughters* try to anchor themselves with a ready-made figure from their own history only to have the text resist the image as a concrete truth.

Judith Butler's influential contributions to 1990's post-structuralist thought on writing and historical veracity note the emptiness, the "nothing more" that lies beneath ideologically determined types like an essential female nature.<sup>6</sup> Her point that feminism's error is in believing there to be "some existing identity understood through the category of women" (3) glosses Gaskell's ironized investment in the first wife. The novel is, after all, entitled *Wives and Daughters*, and yet the narrative's presentation of several different wives and daughters rests on its yearning for one specific

kind. Gaskell's novel raises the question that there may not be an essential female self that "[awaits] representation in or by the law" and that language fashions a "nonhistorical" identity, since representation itself continues the illusions of a fixed female nature (Butler 5) outside social and cultural markers. To emphasize what could be regarded as an optimistic belief in an ideal first wife who lives outside the narrative's chronological plotting, the novel clings to that figure so that while Gaskell may question the limits in categories like "wives," the critique she offers in her novel is an often unwilling or indecisive one, as she herself begins to explore new authorial ground.

In *Wives and Daughters*, the "nothing more" of the first wife paradoxically signifies "something" as she, to draw on Butler's terminology, troubles the text. Despite her position as dead wife, Mary Preston exercises a subtle ability to stall the narrative's progress forward. Characters' references to her throw the story back to a time before, an historical past existing prior to the actual events in *Wives and Daughters*. In her rare linguistic appearances, the first Mrs. Gibson stays always "Mary Preston" and the label names the discursive identity and connotes the secure class position she held before becoming Gibson's first wife. Gaskell argues for a female self that cannot stand outside the socialized identities culture and language bestow upon her, a case particularly evident in her depiction of Hyacinth whose surname suffers an unrelenting mobility.<sup>7</sup> She is first the widow Fitzpatrick, next the second Mrs. Gibson, but always, for Lady Cumnor, the governess Clare, a titular fate that causes her embarrassment as that last name repeatedly equates her with a socioeconomic status and a female employment nineteenth-century novels and social discourse explored with such anxious frequency.<sup>8</sup> Mary Preston's constant reminder lives outside the narrative's parameters and suggests the feminist failings Butler, and Gaskell, in her scrutiny of domestic ideology, notes. While she may seem an essential female type, the first wife is also the nothing beneath representational practices. By destabilizing the narrative as she does, Mary Preston undermines the nurturing attributes associated with her "good and sensible" self, the Victorian angel of the house. She reveals a textual struggle with accepted cultural clichés that form part of the novel's generic formula and that also, for Gaskell, expose the genre's own need to enliven its internal energies. This textual ambivalence—should the novel keep her or not?—and its argument about a gendered literary trope the first

wife represents find a special embodiment in the other first wife in *Wives and Daughters*, Mrs. Hamley.

### **"Nothing definite": The Ghost of Hamley Hall**

Mrs. Hamley's fragile, poetic femininity develops the domestic angel icon Gaskell outlines with Mary Preston's sensible immortality. Whereas the latter's spectral presence turns on the contradictory "nothing more" she is in the narrative, Mrs. Hamley's influence—pervasive, alternately soothing and unsettling—finds its root in "nothing definite" (43). Indeed, ambiguity and vagueness characterize most everything about Mrs. Hamley, and the text, from the start, locates the origins of this first wife's power in the inexplicable.

The narrator associates desirable feminine traits—"gentle and sentimental; tender and good" (43) with Mrs. Hamley in keeping with the idealized domesticating influence men like Squire Hamley—rough and ill-educated, but naturally good—require. However, despite the amicability of this partnership, the Hamley union itself is "one of those perplexing marriages of which one cannot understand the reasons" (42). Mrs. Hamley was a "delicate fine London lady" (42) and, unlike her husband, "had considerable literary taste" (43); the narrator claims "yet they were very happy, though possibly Mrs. Hamley would not have sunk into the condition of a chronic invalid, if her husband had cared a little more for her various tastes or allowed her the companionship of those who did" (43). The narrator cannot really say what makes the Hamley marriage and the Hamleys "happy," cannot describe what determines a companionate union. The Hamley marriage eludes full articulation, evinced by the narrator's rather contradictory syntax: "yet" and "though" quickly revise any clear position each conjunction could record about the Hamley marriage. The novel's ambivalent description of the marriage highlights the first wife's role in the novel—she is there and also not there; she represents a key cultural icon but also an unhealthy continuation of the image. "[Squire Hamley]" we learn, "loved his wife all the more dearly for her sacrifices for him; but, deprived of all her strong interests, she sank into ill-health; nothing definite; only she never was well" (43). Self-sacrifice characterizes this type beloved by Victorian culture (and adored by many in *Wives and Daughters*)—Mary Preston is consumed by disease in the very paragraph

that applauds her perfection; Mrs. Hamley falls into a chronic invalidism. However, just as Mary Preston's "nothing more" does not limit her power in the story, Mrs. Hamley's soft vagueness does not "invalidate" her own narrative control. Rather, "nothing definite" allows this first wife an often vivid and pronounced weight in the text's design.

Mrs. Hamley's languid figure is the "ruling spirit" (246) of Hamley Hall and her rooms enclose her in the heart of this domestic and ancestral world. Miriam Bailin has argued for the primacy of the sickroom in the Victorian literary imagination, and Mrs. Hamley's chambers anchor the movements of the characters, providing a place to which they come and go and that provides a fixed and secure location. Mrs. Hamley may be a chronic invalid, but her housekeeping talents show a superlative efficiency as she issues her "directions to the servants, down to the most minute particulars . . . from her sitting-room, or from the sofa on which she lay." Like Mary Preston, she portrays the gender type central to domestic ideology and central to the genre itself; however, unlike the novel's other first wife, Mrs. Hamley is a far more visible figure, a more assertive creator and manager of the domestic terrain. Her "pleasant influence" teaches servants and sons, and in an image and language that Woolf, in 1927, surely takes up in her depiction of the Ramsay marriage, [her husband] "became at peace with himself when in her presence, just as a child is at ease when with some one who is both firm and gentle" (247).<sup>9</sup>

But while her "darkened room" often seems a place of quiet retreat, entering it removes characters from the world of animated daily life and naturally progressive time, particularly for Molly often called to Hamley Hall to be Mrs. Hamley's companion and nurse and who finds there a soothing escape from her own troubling new home. Temporally and spatially separate from the vitality of Hollingford society, the first wife dwells in a shadowy world, decorated with crayon portraits of her younger self and her sons, and filled with the poetry and sentimental literature she loves. Mrs. Hamley dies over an extended period of narrative time, but Gaskell pushes her actual death to the perimeter of narrative description. "At length," the narrator notes, ". . . the end came." Mrs. Hamley leaves "her place in this world" and "her place knew her no more" (219).<sup>10</sup> However, just as her quarantine in her rooms at Hamley Hall gave her a base for domestic and narrative control, once deceased she continues to regularly direct the characters' thoughts and actions. Like the first Mrs. Gibson, Mrs.

Hamley becomes a touchstone for many—the butler, for instance, complains about how “things is a deal changed since poor miss went” (256); Osborne and his father quarrel about the depths of “loyalty to her memory” (253) in their daily routines. Her passing also marks the plot’s chronology as, for instance, we discover that an argument between Osborne and his father takes place “on an evening in the March succeeding Mrs. Hamley’s death” (251); Molly will explain she learned of Osborne’s secret marriage in a conversation she overheard “at the time of Mrs. Hamley’s last illness” (558).

Mrs. Hamley’s death coincides with many of the estate’s sudden and potential economic insecurities, and her dominance, so integral to sustaining a certain way of life associated with rank and privilege, from beyond the grave also affects the authority of her husband’s family. Mrs. Hamley remains a symbol of moral decency for her grief-stricken husband, a powerful “nothing definite” for the Squire, but she also retains her image as the real manager of the estate’s many affairs. Unlike the Squire, who fumbles for words when trying to say what “she” would have done or thought in situations that leave him in such a quandary that he cannot even work on the jumbled mathematics of the estate’s accounts (256–257),<sup>11</sup> Mrs. Hamley, “quiet and passive as [she] had always been in appearance” (246), had commanded the Hamley business affairs. She upheld the patriarchal control of the ancestral Hall; she protected her husband’s family name, underscoring the social heft wielded by old blood and old money. The Squire’s stiff-necked pride conceals his sense of his own failings—he is “deficient in manners, and in education” (251), and, consequently, timid in society. The first wife had softened his rough qualities and had encouraged his involvement with work subsidized by Government loans that would improve the estate grounds. After her death, the Squire

grew indifferent to it himself, and cared no more to go out on his stout roan cob, and sit square on his seat, watching the labourers on the marshy land all overgrown with rushes; speaking to them from time to time in their own strong nervous country dialect . (248)

Poetic yet also practical, docile yet also determined Mrs. Hamley’s keen ability to maintain and improve the Hamley family home included her

knack at bolstering the Squire's male authority. Without her his sense of ancestral duty, his fluency in his workers' peculiar language, his physical prestige, his "squareness," if you will, diminishes. Mrs. Hamley's absence provokes a subtle erasure of male identity, an emasculation that affects even the Estate's animals. One of the horses, as the carriage is "no longer needed after madam's death," is also, now, too old for more taxing work. Like the Squire who drifts without the central force of his wife, the horse, suitably named "Conqueror," has been "turned out to grass" (250).

Gaskell shows that the ideal female image mourned by so many conceals a strength and will that haunts and disables the characters and the plot as she seeks to pull them all back to her earlier command. Whether dying or dead, the Victorian domestic angel, an ailing figure in *Wives and Daughters*, poses a rigorous counter energy to much in the story. Rather than nurturing an orderly flow to the narrative, Mrs. Hamley's "ghost" confuses and stalls the novel. She creates what seems a willed and willful interference with the text. Her illness breaks into the story of Mr. Gibson's new marriage and new domesticity, underscoring the class implications in the union. When the new Mrs. Gibson takes up her role as wife and stepmother, Mrs. Hamley indirectly challenges this authority. Squire Hamley's call on "The Bride at Home" is solely to take Molly back to his sick wife. As selfish as the narrator may ask us to understand Hyacinth's plans are for her stepdaughter and that prevent Molly from going to Hamley Hall, her insistence that Molly "visit people" (186) that night creates a symbolic conflict between the world of a weakened past and that of a rigorous present. The novel's ambivalence about the first wife—her utility, suitability, force—surrenders to the necessity in the "new" that Gaskell locates here in Gibson's second wife. Hyacinth's victory over Mrs. Hamley's request keeps Molly in the world of lively social engagement and away from a fading world of privilege. Molly may dislike the vanities in this life around her, but the narrative infuses the superficialities of a newly feminine everyday that now controls what had been Mary Preston's territory with vivid liveliness so that the quotidian compete with the dying and historical past represented by the first wife:

Day after day the course of these small frivolities was broken in upon by the news Mr. Gibson brought of Mrs. Hamley's nearer approach to death. Molly—very often sitting

by Cynthia and surrounded by ribbon, and wire, and net,—  
heard the bulletins like the toll of a funeral bell at a marriage feast. (218)

As evocative an image the first wife may be, Gaskell writes a strong critique of the feminine ideal and its function in the period's fiction. Mary Preston and Mrs. Hamley adequately portray the role, affirming what the culture and Gaskell's audience would recognize about this female type. However, the novel's dead first wives enact a macabre abuse of the reincarnated image's authority, taking self-command beyond what any conduct book would advocate, refusing to give up the ghost completely or to melt into Armstrong's "woodwork" of the text. Mrs. Hamley, before and after her death, continually seeks to bring us all back to a scented and dim chamber Gibson had feared for his growing girl. In scenes like those discussed above, the first wife often succeeds in destabilizing the beginning of "new" stories, but, as the novel eventually demonstrates, her victory is a temporary one. Unable to venture beyond the estate's gardens and its world of entitlement, and unable to live through the entirety of *Wives and Daughters*, this first wife, reading and writing on her sofa, dressed in her soft gowns, suggests the hypnotic as well as eviscerated utility in literary motifs. The invalid first wife, ensconced in her sickroom, enshrined in characters' memories, enclosed by narrative form shows the self-contained, almost rarified quality of a literary convention that, in Gaskell's hands, must eventually clear a way for the new.

### **Aimee: The "unspeakable" Mrs. Hamley**

Osborne Hamley's "mysterious wife" (233) is not quite a literal second Mrs. Hamley, as she does not wed the widower Squire but his son, Osborne. In highlighting the novel's efforts with the first wife trope, Aimee writes another tale that foregrounds Gaskell's creative energies to reach beyond many of her own representations of dead wives and wife substitutes. Like Hyacinth, Aimee has supported herself as a governess/nursemaid, and, like Hyacinth, she makes her way into a domestic setting that is, because of her social rank, technically not her legitimate territory. Aimee's trespass, like Hyacinth's, suggests something new about the role

class may play in the domestic narratives of the late nineteenth-century novel.

While the first Mrs. Hamley's frail and elegant corporeality exerts tremendous power in the text, Aimee's character lives, at first, entirely in the realm of writing. She is, almost always, a figure imagined and imaginary, and her own writerly efforts to make herself known, although proof to an independent and autonomous identity, at first only add to the characters' fanciful perceptions of her. Aimee makes her initial surprise appearance in a letter to Osborne. This textual intrusion, which occurs during the slow spelling of Mrs. Hamley's death, shows what will become the novel's struggles to accommodate both a first wife, whose refusal to leave the action destabilizes narrative movement, and a second, whose demands for invitation and acknowledgement inspire a counter energy. The discovery of Aimee in letter form intrigues Molly as she tries to envision "what unspeakable elegant beauty had [Osborne] chosen for his wife" (211). The written word, proof of a new Mrs. Hamley, also stimulates Molly to create an imaged ideal but one that only repeats the outline of Mrs. Hamley's "elegant" and well-bred figure. Similarly, Osborne's sonnet series, which he hopes could provide his secret wife with financial support, suspends Aimee in the sphere of the linguistic. These poems may chronicle "an autobiographical passage in his life" (259), but they also reflect how writing transforms a "real" woman into a cultural icon as the titles move from those like "To Aimee, Walking with a Little Child" (the first in the series) to "Aimee's Confession" or "Aimee's Despair." In choosing a poetic form borne from a man's love for an unattainable object of desire, Osborne shapes Aimee as a purely textual being; Aimee's gendered perfection exists only because poetry's discursive "regulated process of repetition" creates her (Butler 145). The final sonnet legitimizes Aimee as "the" wife and the course of the poetry reflects a desirable end stage in a girl's social maturity. To be a wife, and a particular type of wife, is of primary importance in Gaskell's novel. To be capable of writing in a new way about "The Wife" is even more significant. Through Osborne's feeble attempts at poetry Gaskell critiques the shoddy and sentimental commercial output that help circulate trite images through the cultural imagination and that successfully elide class and class struggle from the province of representation. However, Gaskell's talents as a commercial writer lie in her ability to write "outside" the very conventions she herself must use.<sup>12</sup> Osborne's last

poem, "The Wife," reflects domestic ideology's standards and norms; Gaskell's title for this fictitious sonnet foreshadows how her novel will cede the "first" Mrs. Hamley's centrality to a new literary construct whose vigor seems rooted in the class and national differences other characters find so disturbing or wish to ignore.

Like a series of genre paintings, Osborne's poetry keeps Aimee fixed in a clear pattern of female perfection—she is silent, passive, and distant. Aimee's own writing, her letters, however, resists such a portrayal and such a static role. Margaret Homans's scrutiny of women and language in *Wives and Daughters* examines the crucial part Gaskell assigns to Molly the "bearer" and interpreter of so many others' words, but my interests here lie with the autonomy the act of writing actually provides Aimee. Ultimately, letter-writing, more than letter-reading, in *Wives and Daughters* shape how the book itself, in burying first wives, turns toward newer, more novel ways of writing. If the first Mrs. Hamley still lives in the spectral core of the narrative action, that core cannot support the psychic and domestic structures it once defended. Her absence frustrates and weakens characters that feel powerless to act without her, unable themselves, as this essay's opening quotation has suggested, to move on. "No letter will reach her now" (265), the Squire thinks, just as Osborne's wish that his mother were alive to help with his marriage keeps the younger man locked in a similar condition of befuddled passivity. However, both the Squire's and Osborne's difficulty with change expose the text's irony: that the novel *will* move on, that *Wives and Daughters*, ultimately, cannot and will not keep both Mrs. Hamleys. Thus, although the silent and dead first wife weakens and confuses the desire for progress, when confronted by the second Mrs. Hamley, the first cannot continue her enthrallment of the text. Indeed, Gaskell's concentration on Aimee's writing gives the new wife and the novel the means to move safely away from the first wife's command. The letters Molly dutifully writes to Osborne's wife do not reach the young woman because Aimee, independent of any summons, has left her place on the story's perimeter, her unidentified "farmhouse lodgings" in Winchester (304), and begun her movement toward Hamley Hall.

With Aimee's letters Gaskell certainly suggests language's precious fragility and particularly the language any writer may use for the private and epistolary mode. There seems, at first, something so elusive about Aimee that her letters cannot "bear translating into English" (303) that we

wonder how this delicate textual phantom can compete with that of the first Mrs. Hamley. However, Aimee's letters point to far more complicated notions about reading and writing that underpin the novel's use of first wives. As Aimee moves from her marginal to a more primary place, the characters struggle with their symbolic idolatry of the first wife. The challenge in translating Aimee's letters points to something crucial that *Wives and Daughters* notes with the "new" model, the "new" story, the "new" wife that has yet to find a form for complete articulation. When Molly, for instance, tells the Squire all she knows of Aimee, her voice, at first, sounds "high and unnatural" (558). Gaskell shows the discomfort readers can experience with the "new" or the "novel" since literary form itself is vulnerable to alteration or foreign influence, but she herself is intrigued by the possibilities, possibilities she had toyed with in *North and South* with Dolores, Frederick Hale's Spanish wife. "It seems strange to think," Margaret Hale says in that novel, "that what gives us the most hope for the future should be called Dolores" (Chap. 10). A decade later, Gaskell works again on a future dependent on a continental outsider.

Aimee's metamorphosis from strictly textual representation (her letters, Osbourne's poetry) into a textuality intended to reproduce the real (Gaskell's character) exposes the struggles and vacillations an author may have with literary traditions. Aimee's forced entry into the story enlivens the text and wrests the narrative away from the first wife's control. Reading Aimee's letters aloud in the "darkened living room," Molly and the Squire are roused from their cloistered pursuits: "Suddenly through this quiet, there came a ring at the front-door bell that sounded, and went on sounding, through the house, pulled by an ignorant, vigorous hand" (572). Gaskell provides the first wife's replacement with a healthy will—she is "vigorous" and unstoppable and her determination to enter her predecessor's home keeps on "sounding." Aimee's entry challenges Mrs. Hamley's ordered world of class privilege. Her refusal to stop would seem a rebuke to those like the Cumnors who

expected to be submitted to, and obeyed; the simple worship of the townspeople was accepted by the earl and countess as a right; and they would have stood still in amazement, and with a horrid memory of the French sansculottes who were the bugbears of their youth, had any in-

habitant of Hollingford ventured to set his will or opinions  
in opposition to those of the earl. (7)

However, unlike the angry French female associated with political revolution, and characterized by Dickens's Madame Defarge in 1859, Gaskell's *citoyenne* who makes her way across the Channel and into the house of British history brings a gentle reform of domestic life. Like a more modestly garbed version of the allegorical figure in Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, painted in 1830, the historical time in which Gaskell locates her action, Aimee emancipates the Hamley household and the domestic narrative from what has become an unhealthy rule.<sup>13</sup>

With *Wives and Daughters* Gaskell shows the emptiness in the nineteenth-century novel's necessary convention of the domestic angel. The "great sad event" of Mrs. Hamley's death is there to "fill [the] mind" (319) so that as Aimee, the second and "vigorous" Mrs. Hamley steps into that vacated place, Gaskell revives one of the novel's central *tableaux* to underscore the first wife's diseased control and to question the healthiness of the trope this essay has argued about. When Aimee faints and falls ill, overwhelmed by the news of Osborne's death, Gaskell allows the dead first wife, that "fine London lady" (42), one more effort to retain her place as the necessary void at the text's center. Indeed, the effect entering the first wife's place has on Aimee assumes contagious proportions for even Molly, who resumes her role as nurse to this Mrs. Hamley, realizes that "she felt unaccountably weary; that her head ached heavily, and that she was aware of a sluggishness of thought which it required a painful effort to overcome" (580). Gibson's early fears that the "life in Mrs. Hamley's heated and scented room would not be good for the girl" (45) have proven true. Characters idolize Mary Preston and long for Mrs. Hamley but these wives, dead and dying, point to the disease in a narrative form that simultaneously tries in the "most natural manner in the world" (31) to evolve, to discover new strategies for survival.<sup>14</sup>

If the first wife, the Victorian angel in Gaskell's novel reveals pestilent energies at the heart of the form, what antidote does the writer prescribe? This essay has argued that Gaskell proposes a story that could differ from that promoted by the feminine ideal so dear to nineteenth-century domestic fiction and borne from notions about class and gender that very fiction continued to promote. In her discussion of *Wives and Daughters*, Coral

Lansbury has said that “class can only function when everyone knows his proper place” (*Gaskell* 42). Gaskell’s second wives refuse to stay in place, even ask us to question the propriety about that place since the novel demonstrates that the way outsider second wives maneuver class fluidity can produce an outcome that is healthy for all. Gaskell places the responsibility for this type of new story, for now, in her little foreign wife, a “genuine working woman with practical skills” (Stoneman 199). She is the peripheral heroine who rejects the Hamley tradition, the Hamley home, the Squire’s life to choose her own new one. In bringing the second Mrs. Hamley in from the margins, Gaskell confronts the tradition of the first wife. When she returns Aimee to a spot about “ten minutes’ walk from the Hall so that she and [and her son] may easily go backwards and forwards as often as they like” (641), Gaskell valorizes a new family structure and gives this new wife a complex mobility the first-wife trope could never beat. In this way, Gaskell’s second Mrs. Hamley sets her “will” and “opposition” to authority—social and narrative—even more than the second Mrs. Gibson had. By abandoning that central position within an outmoded domesticity, the morbid place at the heart of the text, Aimee paradoxically fills it up: the first Mrs. Hamley disappears and is heard from no more.

In 1931 Virginia Woolf would claim that “killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer” (238); only by quelling that Victorian feminine ideal could Woolf work as she wished. Nearly seventy years earlier Gaskell recognizes the powerful artillery in her own inkpot and begins the metaphoric attack on the novelistic image her future countrywoman would take up for her own survival. *Wives and Daughters*’ concentration on the angelic first wife’s centrality to novelistic design and stability questions the motif’s endurance and its power to maintain the form’s own domestic harmony. Turning from that ideal, Gaskell’s novel sets its sights elsewhere and looks away from the mid-century’s affectionate belief in historical permanence and predictable time and toward new modes as yet questioned and questionable, foreshadowed yet unknown, toward a novel, perhaps, in which the first wife is something more than an unattainable ideal or an outworn convenience.

Gaskell’s sudden death in November 1865 left *Wives and Daughters* a text always in progress. The *Cornhill* editor reassured readers that “we know that Roger Hamley will marry Molly, and that is what we are most concerned with” (648). But what remain the novel’s final pages leave us

with a very different image and one that Margaret Homans has criticized as the author's rejection of a female literary tradition and her capitulation to a patriarchal one (273–276). However, I think that Gaskell suggests quite "a different thing" (74). Molly and her stepmother look from the window as Roger Hamley rides away. Mrs. Gibson

Took out her watch and held it up, tapping it with her fore-finger, and occupying the very center of the window. Molly could only peep here and there, dodging now up, now down, now on this side, now on that, of the perpetually-moving arms . . . at length he went away, slowly, slowly, and often looking back, in spite of the tapped watch. Mrs. Gibson at last retreated, and Molly quietly moved into her place . . . (645)

Molly's animated movements, and the eager gaze she directs toward Roger's retreating figure, turn the novel away from the past and into a distant future. Not yet a wife, Molly peeps and dodges on the borders of that pivotal role and even when she "quietly" moves to the window's center, Gaskell refuses to grant that place its former legitimacy: "how sweet," Molly thinks, "is—friendship!" (645). In turning away from the center, in burying the first wives who had constructed and maintained that place, *Wives and Daughters* anticipates new narrative forms, and (perhaps) new first wives, whom the novel, in 1865, trusts will come in time.

## Notes

1. All quotations from *Wives and Daughters* will appear parenthetically in the text.
2. Coral Lansbury's and Elizabeth Langland's discussions on social class, historical change, and female autonomy in the domestic sphere have been particularly useful for my essay. In-text references to Lansbury will be abbreviated in the following manner: *Social Crisis* for *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis* and *Gaskell* for *Elizabeth Gaskell*.

Other contributions cover an impressive scope, ranging from female socialization and female subjectivity, to the conflicts between sentimental and scientific discourse, to Gaskell's own growth as a novelist. On the topic of women's education and social-

ization, Stoneman makes rich use of contemporary conduct books as well as Wollestonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, arguing that Gaskell shows that learning to be a good mother requires a certain amount of independent action and thought. Foster notes that while *Wives and Daughters* certainly questions marriage and women's subjectivity, the novel demonstrates greater acceptance of women's social roles, reflecting Gaskell's own marital happiness. d'Albortis explores Gaskell's concern with a Darwinian system of selection and classification that underpins the novel's social argument. Studies of Gaskell's growth as a writer include those by Homans, Bonaparte, Billington, and Ugelow's biography. Hughes and Lund discuss the influence serial publishing had on *Wives and Daughters* and Gaskell's assertion of a female authorial voice within the form.

3. Terence Wright has listed the many ways hand-holding in the novel show intimacy, domination, and independence.
4. In her compelling and detailed argument, Langland reads Hyacinth as the force that reshapes the foundering Gibson household into one that not only runs smoothly and efficiently, but that allows for social advancement and opportunity. It is Langland's contention, and one with which I agree, that the second Mrs. Gibson's energetic command of the household's domestic and social economies creates a progressive and healthy movement away from a stagnant past and into an active future. See 132–147. Felicia Bonaparte emphasizes the subtleties in Hyacinth's characterization. Like the other women in Gaskell's story, Hyacinth must conform to certain social rules and standards and is often injured by the very roles she must assume (65–66).
5. In her discussion of *Ruth*, Hilary Schor claims that Gaskell's decision to let her fallen and redeemed heroine die from typhus reflects the author's acquiescence to her readers' tastes (71–75). In her well-known 1852 letter to Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë bemoaned this turn to convention that forces the audience to "shut up the book weeping" (letter 570).
6. In a previous article, I have discussed Butler's "nothing" and female gender in George Moore's 1885 novel *A Mummer's Wife*.
7. In a cogent discussion, Homans has made a similar point, reinforcing Hyacinth as a "shifting signifier" in the text, able to elude, in particular, the role of "mother" (263–265).
8. The extensive attention to this topic is best represented in scholarship by Wanda Fraiken Neff, M. Jeanne Peterson, Nancy Armstrong, Mary Poovey, and Helena Michie.

9. Mrs. Ramsay’s unspoken love for her husband, her steady “strength flaring up,” relieves him in his crisis of self-doubt: “filled with her words, like a child who drops off satisfied, he said, at last, looking at her with humble gratitude, restored, renewed, that he would take a turn; he would watch the children playing cricket” (Woolf 38).
10. Critics have noted Gaskell’s reworking of her 1850 novella *The Moorland Cottage* as an influence on *Wives and Daughters* (Bonaparte 24, 72–74; Ugelow 255–256). The novella’s Mrs. Buxton, a delicate invalid who dresses in soft muslin gowns and robes, provides the heroine Maggie with a gently feminine maternal influence. In a way then, Mrs. Buxton is a “first-wife” for Mrs. Hamley even down to her own death that Gaskell portrays within the space of a one-sentence paragraph.
11. As if taking up the elliptical fate Gaskell awards the Victorian angel of the house, Virginia Woolf will push Mrs. Ramsay, the female center of *To the Lighthouse*, into a matter-of-fact bracketed note to her sudden death and her grieving husband’s groping confusion.
12. Stoneman has discussed how Osbourne’s debt to Wordsworth cannot, as much as he would like, make Aimee another “Lucy” (198–199). Hughes and Lund emphasize that point as well in their discussion of how Osbourne’s “Aimee” poems emphasize Gaskell’s understanding of herself as an author and the profession of writing (28). Homans makes a more extended analysis of Gaskell’s intertextual use of “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal” (260–262).
13. Delacroix’s painting experienced a highly unstable period of exhibition from its initial display in the 1831 Salon, to reinstatement at the Luxembourg in 1861, and then its installment at the Louvre in 1874. See Barthelemy 128–133. It is more than probable that Gaskell knew of Delacroix’s painting as she made frequent trips to France and actually composed much of *Wives and Daughters* during an extended stay in the country. As Ugelow notes, Gaskell adored France, its people and the culture, and her letters, as well as the series “French Life” she wrote for *Fraser’s* in 1864, testify to this enthusiasm.
14. Gaskell, who described Darwin as a cousin, had met the scientist in 1851 (Unsworth 47). See also Ugelow for these family connections and for the intense interest a book like *On the Origin of Species* provided Gaskell in the spring of 1860. Both Schor and d’Albertis discuss the novel’s Darwinian emphasis on kinship, heredity, and knowledge in the context of authorship and gender. For other scholarly works on Darwin’s influence on the Victorian novel see Beer and Levine.

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