

‘No-nonsense-two-up-two-down-by-gum-you-daft-ha’poth-Northernness’: Jane Horrocks, Gracie Fields and performing generic Northernness

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Abstract

When Jane Horrocks starred as Gracie Fields in the BBC Four single drama *Gracie!* (2009), most reviewers agreed that this casting was almost too perfect. They were thinking of the geographical connection between the two women – Horrocks grew up in Rawtenstall, Lancashire, only a few miles from Fields’s famed home town of Rochdale. Like Gracie, Horrocks’s star image has been built around the ambivalent performance and exploitation of a Lancashire identity. From Bubble in *Absolutely Fabulous* (1992–2012), to a middle-class mother turned political candidate in *The Amazing Mrs Pritchard* (2006) or deputy supermarket manager in *Trollied* (2011–) Horrocks’ strong regional accent has rendered her a recognizable presence on British television for two decades. Her persona is of down-to-earth, no-nonsense, seemingly authentic Northernness. This article analyses Horrocks’ performance of Gracie in relation to the rest of her career. It compares common themes of Lancashire identity associated with these stars of different eras, with particular attention to the changing sociocultural milieu in which working-class Northern characters are found in their work – the mill/factory in the 1930s and the supermarket in the twenty-first century. It also considers the critical reception of *Gracie!* and the critical tendency to conflate actor with character. It explores how the embodied performance of known biographical personalities works in tension with the performance of generic ‘Northernness’.

Keywords

British television

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Jane Horrocks

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class representation

In his assessment of *Gracie!* (2009), a dramatization of the life of the singer and film star, David Stephenson wrote: ‘Jane Horrocks strikes you as perfect casting in the role of Gracie Fields’ (2009: 66). This opinion was shared by most of the TV critics who reviewed the programme, to the extent that some believed it ‘unthinkable’ that anyone else could have performed the role (Simon and McIver 2009). Though many were perhaps recalling Horrocks’s brief but effective impersonation in *Little Voice* (Herman, 1998), the connection between the two women was also one of geography: Horrocks grew up in Rawtenstall, just a few miles from Fields’s home town of Rochdale, Lancashire in the North of England. Both routinely described as quintessential ‘Lancashire lasses’ (Macnab 2000; Richards 1989; Kelly 1994; Anon. 1998), this association with the county looms large in the career histories of these women.

Horrocks’s star image has been built around the performance of a Northern identity, though, as this article will explore, a complex and ambivalent one. From her break-out TV role as Bubble in *Absolutely Fabulous* (1992–2012), to her

performances as a middle-class working mother turned prime minister in *The Amazing Mrs Pritchard* (2006), a supermarket manager in *Trollied* (2011–), and even lending her voice to children’s characters in *Fifi and the Flowertots* (2005–2009) and *Little Princess* (2006–2011), Horrocks has been a recognizable presence on British television for two decades. Her persona, supported and subverted by a well-known turn alongside Prunella Scales in a long-running advertisement for the supermarket chain Tesco (1995–2004), is of wacky but down-to-earth Northernness, despite the fact that she has lived most of her life in London, and many of her characters are not, in fact, Northern.

Horrocks’s version of Gracie Fields replays a number of tropes of Northern English (female) identity: brashness, common sense, pride and humour in the face of adversity. These are traits that Fields embodied, if we are to accept J. B. Priestley’s description of her:

Listen to her for a quarter of an hour and you will learn more about Lancashire women and Lancashire than you would from a dozen books on these subjects. All the qualities are there, shrewdness, homely simplicity, irony, fierce independence, and impish delight in mocking whatever is thought to be affected or pretentious.

(in Macnab 2000: 90)

Though some reviewers critiqued the film’s reliance on stereotype, much of the reception of *Gracie!* saw Horrocks’s performance praised as one that was at once accurate as an impersonation and authentic. A common assumption of Northern characters is that they are, by nature, somehow more ‘real’ than others. This draws

upon long-standing traditions of distinction between north and south as observed by George Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier*:

There exists in England a curious cult of Northernness, sort of Northern snobbishness. A Yorkshireman in the South will always take care to let you know that he regards you as an inferior. If you ask him why, he will explain that it is only in the North that life is 'real' life, that the industrial work done in the North is the only 'real' work, that the North is inhabited by 'real' people, the South merely by rentiers and their parasites. ([1937] 1986: 101)

When Jane Horrocks plays Gracie Fields, then, a series of cultural associations between Northernness and 'realness' are combined with a performance of a real person with whom the actor is assumed to share a common identity. Here, ideas of accuracy and authenticity intermingle, and a performance that depends upon a series of generic markers of identity can be confused for a close approximation.

In Jean-Louis Comolli's well-known 1978 essay on performance in the historical film, he argues that the genre suffers from the problem of a 'body too much': as well as accepting that the body of the actor is a representative of a character, or a particular form of humanity, the viewer has to reconcile the performance and representation with what is known of the real historical figure. This results in the awkward conflation of actor and subject in the mind of the spectator, which can be identified in the common reception of Horrocks as the 'ideal' person to portray Gracie. In this case, the 'body too much' is also a voice, an attitude, an identity 'too much'. This article will analyse Horrocks's performance of Gracie in relation to her own

career, the star image of her subject, and the overarching sense of ‘Northern’ identity that underpinned both.

‘Ee-by-gum’: Fields, Horrocks and the ‘Lancashire Lass’

The story of Gracie Fields’s rise from humble origins (born Grace Stansfield above a chip shop in Rochdale) to popular superstardom fits the rags-to-riches narrative identified by Richard Dyer in his celebrated study of film stars (1998: 44–46). Where his discussion of the myth of ‘success’ takes the American context as its starting point, with myths of meritocracy at its heart, Gracie’s stardom is a peculiarly British one, and, more specifically, a Northern one. Fields only briefly worked in the mills with which her star image is associated, but this aspect of her biography – alongside the fact that she lived for much of her life on Capri – is often ignored in favour of the more romantic idea of the mill-town girl who through hard work, talent and determination became a star:

Fields’s screen image as disseminated through publicity is tied closely to biographical elements that involve an accent on her working-class origins, struggles to succeed, rise to fame and fortune, and the obstacles that inhere in her remaining at the ‘top’. (Landy 2001: 57)

Fields exemplifies one of the major contradictions Dyer identifies in the discourse of star-making, the tension between ordinariness and specialness. Indeed, as Paul Morley argues, her ordinariness *was* her unique selling point: ‘Fields used an idea of northernness to achieve a perverse form of glamour, shrewdly exploiting her underclass roots in order to convey alluring novelty’ (2013: 120).

Evaluating the impact of Gracie Fields on popular cinema, Jeffrey Richards suggests that ‘Gracie Fields was more than just a film star. She was a phenomenon. She was a music hall star who by being herself, the indomitable, eternal “Lancashire Lass” became a national symbol’ (1989: 169). Here is an internal contradiction: the ability for Gracie to become a ‘national symbol’ is predicated on ‘being herself’, and yet being herself involved embodying the typed figure of the ‘Lancashire Lass’. Dyer argues that ‘types’ provide a ‘shared, recognisable, easily grasped image of how people are in society’, and that ‘the star both fulfils/incarnates the type and, by virtue of his/her idiosyncracies, individuates it’ (1998: 47). Gracie seems to demonstrate this process in relation to the type of the working-class Northern woman. As Dave Russell has noted, images of Northern women have associated them with ‘homeliness’, a ‘phlegmatic quality’ and a lack of ‘fuss’, arguing that ‘The North has certainly been the key site for England’s “strong” women, both real and fictional’ (2004: 39). Elsewhere, he even goes as far as to claim that Fields’s star image, alongside other famous personalities, helped popularize ideas about the ‘key characteristics’ of ‘northernness’: ‘notably stoicism, toughness, a rude vitality, independence and cheerfulness’ (2000: 36). A central part of Gracie’s appeal appears to have been her ability to remind audiences of the positive qualities associated with a particular kind of Northern identity (see Russell 2004: 37). Her sarcastic but ultimately positive personality rendered her a working-class hero in a period where class mobility was fairly limited.

If Gracie is a dependable figurehead of the early twentieth-century working-class, Jane Horrocks is much more characteristic of the social mobility promised to British citizens under successive governments in the 1980s and 1990s. Where Fields learned her craft on the stage, Horrocks trained professionally at the prestigious Royal

Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA). Horrocks has spoken often in interviews of her experiences as a Northerner at RADA, noting that she was treated as an exotic ‘other’, overburdened with expectations drawn from assumptions about her background, which, though perhaps less privileged than her peers, could hardly be described as humble.¹ Horrocks made a virtue of her difference; for example, rather than a piece of classical prose, she impersonated Gracie Fields singing ‘Fred Fanakapan’ as part of a producers’ showcase during her final year in training.² She emerged from RADA a classically trained actress with the ‘authentic’ credentials of a Northern identity, a set of influences that can be traced throughout her subsequent career. However, where Gracie Fields’s stardom was built upon the clever exploitation of Northern tropes in her repertoire, Horrocks has largely avoided being typecast, and has played a wide range of roles in theatre, film and television.

Though she had worked consistently through the later part of the 1980s and the early 1990s, in particular making a name for herself as belligerent, bulimic feminist Nicola in *Life is Sweet* (Leigh, 1991), Horrocks’s breakthrough stage role was LV in the National Theatre production of *The Rise and Fall of Little Voice* (Cartwright 1992). Jim Cartwright created the part especially for Horrocks after she had worked with him on *Road* for the Royal Court in 1986. He discovered her talent for impersonation, and drew on both this skill and aspects of Horrocks’s own personality to construct the character. LV is a shy dreamer, who escapes her repressive surroundings through singing in character as tragic, glamorous movie stars. She is the binary opposite of her coarse, world-weathered mother Mari, who represents a more pessimistic version of Northern female identity than the Gracie ‘type’. Reprising the role in Mark Herman’s 1998 film version marked the moment when Horrocks’s fame peaked, with Golden Globe and BAFTA nominations for her

performance. Though the location of the film was moved from Lancashire to Scarborough, the characterizations were changed very little. The play presents markers of, and appeals to a sense of a generic ‘North’; the script indicates simply that the events take place in ‘A northern town in England’ (Cartwright 1992). In both play and film, Horrocks’s performance is set in deliberate contrast to the unsympathetic version of Northern femininity represented by Mari, but it is telling that when LV finally finds her ‘voice’ in the final act, she bellows in an outburst of repressed rage at her mother, whom she now more closely resembles. She has finally inhabited the role of ‘real’ Northern woman rather than a Hollywood fantasy.

As is usual for actors, Horrocks’s star image has been supplemented over time by magazine and newspaper interviews, gossip stories and profiles. In these pieces, it is rare for a journalist to resist the temptation to mention Horrocks’s Northern heritage. Many rely on metonymic images of Lancashire for their character profiles, making allusions to Hovis bread (Smith 1995), hotpot (Ross 2000), mills (Honan 1992) and even Gracie Fields (Butler 1992). Interviewers often note their surprise at hearing the loudness and broadness of Horrocks’s accent coming from someone of her slight frame and appearance of metropolitan sophistication (Billen 1994; Kelly 1994; Eggar 1996; Brown 2007). This indicates both the association of the Northern, working-class identity with a different body type to Horrocks’s (a little stouter, more robust, more like Gracie, perhaps), but also the apparent conflict between a Northern background and the life of the London elite with which Horrocks was increasingly associated throughout her career.

Horrocks has shown ambivalence about this trajectory, at once drawing upon and separating herself from her Northern heritage. In 1994, for example, she was quoted as saying ‘my roots will always be up there, I’m not deserting, but I’m not a

professional Northerner. I don't want to be part of the London Luvvy scene, but yes, I am a member of Groucho's' (Kelly 1994: 8). Horrocks's desire to distance herself from the 'Luvvy' scene indicates a typical construction of Northern identity in opposition to 'images of the Southern "other": as being "soft", "aloof", "reserved" and "affluent", indeed, "pampered"' (Kirk 2000: xii). Horrocks has also used her heritage as a means of explaining aspects of her personality. In her appearance on the long-running BBC family history programme *Who Do You Think You Are* (2004–), an establishing sequence just after the titles shows Horrocks 'pegging out' her washing, which she describes to camera as a 'Northern' tradition, handed down the generations of her family. This chore is done in the spacious garden of her smart, North London home, a signifier of middle-class privilege that distinguishes her present self from her origins. Following a *WDYTUA* convention, this distance is dramatized through the metaphoric device of the train journey that takes Horrocks from her current location to her family home in Rawtenstall. Performing herself on this programme, Horrocks displays a deep, nostalgic connection to Lancashire, one that draws on and augments her ambivalently Northern star image. Here, as elsewhere, she presents herself as strong, wilful and level-headed, and explicitly links these attributes to a sense of Northern family heritage.

Another instance of the ambivalent position Horrocks occupies in relation to her movement between north and south, and between class locations, has been her embroilment in two public arguments concerning snobbery. In April 2000 she supported Michael Caine, who was criticized for suggesting he had suffered discrimination in the film industry as a result of his working-class roots. She was quoted:

If you have made it to the top table, then you've made it, fine, but it happens a lot that the middle and upper classes in the profession get hailed when those from the lower classes don't. (Jagasia 2000)

These comments speak to two key problems that limit the careers of working-class actors: a lack of good quality working-class parts on the one hand, and on the other the tendency for the industry to cast actors to 'type'. The second incident revolved around accusations that *she* had become a reactionary elitist. While promoting *Trolled*, in 2011, Horrocks, with her typical forthrightness, told the *Radio Times* that she no longer shopped at Tesco, as it is 'full of chavs'. Journalists were quick to point out the hypocrisy in this statement, given that she had also publicly stated that starring in adverts for the supermarket for a number of years had paid for her house, which she mockingly nicknamed 'Tesco Towers', and had allowed her to take lower-paying roles to avoid 'crap' scripts. Barbara Ellen perceived this as a form of self-hating working-class snobbery:

It was as if Horrocks had been given myriad blessings (talent, intelligence, quirky beauty, that engaging Lancashire accent), and instead chose to turn her back on her own working-class background, and become a dreary snob. Talk about going over to the luvvie dark side. On a wider level, how depressing that this is what 'doing well' means to some people – the opportunity not to look back in anger, so much as to look around and sneer. (2011: 15)

It is interesting to compare this idea of Horrocks as a class traitor with enduring perceptions of Gracie as firmly embedded within her origins, no matter how far this was from reality. It is no accident that this incident revolved around a discussion of supermarkets, a milieu with which Horrocks became associated as her career progressed. Could the supermarket space represent a contemporary updating of the working-class workplaces associated with Fields?

‘No-nonsense’: Finding consensus in the factory and the supermarket

The association between Gracie Fields and the mill or factory is drawn upon in a number of her films, though she is also represented in other traditional working-class jobs such as domestic service (*Molly and Me* [Seiler, 1945], *Paris Underground* [Ratoff, 1945]) or publican (*Love, Life and Laughter* [Elvey, 1934], *Shipyard Sally* [Banks, 1939]). Regardless of the actual occupation of her characters, though, her roles share a complex relationship with the other members of the working class. She is figured simultaneously as ‘one of us’ and at the same time as a leader. In an early scene in *Sing as We Go* (Dean, 1934) it falls to Gracie to deliver the news from the mill’s owner to her colleagues that they will be made redundant, which she does with a cheerful stoicism, leading them in song as they leave. Lawrence Napper has noted that Gracie is figured thus as a ‘symbol of her community and its welfare’ (2012: 49). At the end of the film, Gracie returns to the reopened mill as the welfare officer, a role she has achieved through her easy relationship with both management and staff. Napper notes that in a number of scholarly readings of the film, this fact is used to support an idea of Fields as a figure of ‘consensus’, between working and middle class. Workplaces in Gracie’s films are spaces of class integration, but where rigid

divisions are maintained, and collective dissent is contained by the interventions of a nimble mediator in the figure of Gracie.

If the mill and the factory are the places of work associated with the Northern English working classes in the early twentieth century, the closest analogue for such workplaces in the period of late capitalism may well be the supermarket. As a place where people from different classes are brought together, supermarkets provide a rich vein of comic and dramatic potential for television fiction, mined in various ways throughout Horrocks's career. For instance, the long-running advertising campaign for Tesco pits southern, middle-class reticence, in the figure of Horrocks's Kate, against Northern working-class assertiveness and economic good sense, emblemized by Prunella Scales's Dotty. Horrocks plays Kate with an exaggerated RP accent, perfectly straightened bob, and costumed in tasteful beige trousers, angora jumpers and a series of expensive scarfs. She is the perpetually embarrassed daughter of Scales's eccentric Yorkshirewoman, whose class location is similarly coded in costuming: tweed skirts, cardigans, horn-rimmed spectacles and a woolly hat. Horrocks overtly performs Kate's irritation at Dotty's bizarre demands (a refund for a sullen-looking trout, for example), rolling her eyes, twisting her face and groaning 'Mother!' through gritted teeth. The servile respect with which Dotty is treated by Tesco employees shows that Kate is wrong in her intuitions of 'correct' supermarket etiquette. Horrocks's 2011 comments on the behaviour of Tesco customers may indicate that she, in fact, shares some of Kate's frustrations.

Julie Cook, the supermarket deputy manager Horrocks plays in *Trollied* looks rather like Kate, with a similar bobbed haircut and neat dress sense, and shares some of her pretensions. This is the target of much of the series' comedy, a good example of which is her visible displeasure at the display of a new discount range called 'No

Nonsense’, which she feels cheapens the store (a running joke in series two). Julie is evidently part of the aspirational middle class, having risen up the ranks of Valco through her hard work ethic and devotion to the company. Horrocks conveys her brittleness through rigid posture, tight, false smile, and nervous, high-pitched laugh, all of which oppose the more lackadaisical attitude of her peers. Similarly, her ‘posh Liverpool’ accent separates her from the array of more pronounced Northern accents of her colleagues. She is alienated from them by both her desperation for authority and her absent sense of humour. For instance, in the first episode, Julie approaches in-store butcher Andy (Mark Addy) asking for the advice of a ‘*professional* butcher’, following this up with ‘Have you seen one?’ and giggling at her own joke. This failed attempt at humour irritates rather than amuses her co-worker, in one of many incidents that display a gulf of understanding and experience between middle-class and working-class colleagues.

Unlike Gracie in her film roles, then, Julie/Horrocks here is not a figure of consensus, but of a more divisive class system within a fragmented workplace. Workers at Valco are separated from each other by their specific roles in the supermarket, compounded by the narrative structure of the programme, which comprises a series of vignettes in the various departments: front desk, tills, deli counter and managerial offices. Rivalries between different departments within the supermarket provide comic material for the programme, often implying that there are minute hierarchical gradations between them that are encouraged by management. Julie suggests, for example, to student Katie (Chanel Cresswell) that being in charge of the cigarette counter is a ‘step up’ from working at the checkout (Season 2, Episode 3). Valco is spatially and narratively divided, suggesting that supermarkets

are workplaces where classes may be brought together under one roof but are kept apart through artificial sectional divisions and, at another level, through class.

Julie's failure to integrate with her working-class colleagues contrasts with Horrocks's earlier rendition of a supermarket manager in *The Amazing Mrs Pritchard*. Horrocks plays Ros as a woman at ease in her surroundings, relaxed but sturdy, as communicated in the series' opening scenes where she copes easily with the day-to-day task of managing her store, through her pleasant rapport with her workers. In echoes of Gracie's ability to mediate between manager and worker in the mill, her Northernness is drawn on here as shorthand for a comfortable negotiation between middle and working classes. Ros is solidly middle class, *and* solidly Northern. It is this combination of traits and her gender, the programme suggests, that make her both an excellent manager and an ideal candidate for political office. She is inspired to enter politics by encountering a fist fight between two politicians, both of whom are trying to occupy the same ground outside the supermarket, in a phony appeal to the 'ordinary' people to be found inside. Ros finds this preposterous and frustrating, realizing that she has more in common with the electorate than those who supposedly represent them (see Corner and Richardson 2008). The programme argues that a woman who can fit genuinely in the environment of a supermarket is the kind of consensual figure that a public can support and be led by. Ros demonstrates that same 'extraordinary ordinariness' that had previously made Gracie Fields a national star.

During Mrs Pritchard's first prime minister's questions, she berates the opposition for their lack of attention to the country outside of the capital, and calls for change shouting 'Some of us have had our lives dictated to us from London for *far too long!*' Pitting north directly against south here, the programme appeals to

unspoken assumptions that the enduring folk intelligence of people from the north equips them to cope with everyday problems better than the cognoscenti that currently occupies Westminster. The implication here is that those qualities associated with Northerners: practicality, staunchness, and most of all honesty, are missing from British politics. Horrocks is able to bring to the role of Ros these associations, drawn from her own star image. Though the events take place in the fictional town of Eatanswill, Yorkshire, Horrocks employs her natural Lancashire accent for the role, and has described the part as the closest she has played to herself:

I thought, 'If that's why they've cast me, they obviously want something of me in it'. She initially toyed with giving Mrs Pritchard a Yorkshire accent. 'Then I thought, people remember me because of my voice, and I might as well invest that in the character'. (Rees 2006: 17)

Drawing this compelling parallel between self and character, she reveals the process of typing that went into her casting: she brought with her a series of coded assumptions about common sense, through her association with a generic 'Northern' identity.

'You daft ha'poth': Northern voices

Horrocks's comments about her own and Mrs Pritchard's voice reveals much about the centrality of her strong accent to her star persona. Accent is clearly the most obvious identifier of local identity, and thus can be used as a cultural signifier, as Katie Wales observes: 'linguistic features, like cultural artefacts such as caps and braces, leeks and whippets, serve as metonyms or synecdoche, standing for the whole

image' (2006: 29). Horrocks has been able to draw upon the cultural associations of her accent, sometimes in politically dubious ways. In *Absolutely Fabulous*, for example, she plays Bubble, an incompetent PA, with a hyperbolic version of the Lancashire accent, much slower and higher pitched than her usual register. Horrocks has stated that series creator Jennifer Saunders asked her to play the character Northern, 'so I just... did the dizziest rendition of northern that I could' (*Mark Lawson Talks to Jane Horrocks*, 2009). Bubble's over-pronounced accent matches her cartoonish styling; she frequently wears neon colours, elaborate accessories, strange headpieces, or themed costumes, such as a pinafore dress with a large skirt emblazoned with images of the Teletubbies. Although the satirical target of the programme as a whole is the middle-class affectations of its protagonist, the association between a strong Lancashire accent and infantile stupidity in the supporting character is a troubling one, uncomfortably implying a relationship between Northernness and ignorance, lack of sophistication, even childishness.

This childlike quality – the high pitch and clarity – of Horrocks's voice has also been lent to her voice-over work for children's television. In *Fifi and the Flowertots*, Horrocks voices the protagonist, a leader to the smaller 'tots' who is able to use her common sense and friendliness to fix various problems. Fifi is also absent-minded, allowing for the catchphrase 'Fifi Forget-me-Not, forgot!' Horrocks's accent is used to convey both strength of character and foolishness. The accent is used as shorthand for assertiveness in *Little Princess*, in which Horrocks plays the title character, a demanding, curious toddler, with an exaggerated version of her natural voice. The animation is set in a fictional kingdom in which the entire 'royal family' speaks with a northern accent, subverting expectations about what 'royalty' should sound like. Horrocks's voice complements the programme's raucous tone, set by the

title music played boisterously on a kazoo, reflecting the raspy quality of the Princess's voice. Horrocks also plays a child, though with a much gruffer voice in *The Flint Street Nativity* (1999), a television film in which an ensemble cast of well-known television actors portray children performing a chaotic nativity play. Because there are a number of competing narratives in the play, each role is by necessity caricatured. Horrocks plays Zoe, a nativity 'shepherd' – what else, for a Lancashire lass? She is the daughter of farmers, who pragmatically reveals to the other children how babies are made: 'I saw one come on me dad's farm once. It comes out yer bum covered in yak'. Horrocks's child characters utilize and exaggerate cultural associations with the North of England: earthiness, practicality, staunchness and no-nonsense wisdom. Following Wales's formulation, the accent works as a cultural shorthand for these qualities.

It is evident that Horrocks's strong accent has always been part of her unique star persona. On the suggestion from a RADA instructor that she take elocution lessons to soften it, she refused, later telling Mark Lawson: 'I'm really glad I didn't, because I would have lost a lot of my personality losing my accent' (2009). This echoes a comment made by Gracie Fields on her return from Hollywood in the 1930s – 'I still say by gum and gee whiz: I haven't gone all glamour!' (Morley 2013: 120). This was not strictly true – working in the United States had softened Fields's speaking voice to a soft mid-Atlantic drawl, for which Horrocks ironically required dialect training when she played her in *Gracie!*³ Like Horrocks, Gracie exaggerated her Lancashire accent for comic effect, especially for musical numbers, in which she sung in character as a put-upon workingwoman, differentiated from her more serious pieces by quickly donning a headscarf. This transition between different onstage characters is dramatized in *Gracie!* as Horrocks-as-Gracie sings 'Sally' in her sweet,

clear soprano voice, then performs ‘Walter, Walter, Take me to the Altar’, a swipe dissolve in the film eliding the awkward moment where Gracie puts on the headscarf. Filmed in a combination of high-angle long shots, and more intimate medium close-ups, this scene shows how Gracie/Horrocks constructs this persona through bodily gesture (hunched shoulders, hands clenched together in front of her), facial contortion (wide eyes, exaggerated frown) and voice, as she switches between the deadpan spoken verses of the song, ‘Walter and me have been courtin’ fer years, but ‘e’s never asked me to wed’, and the sung (almost shouted) chorus. Horrocks’s talent for impersonation is crucial to the credibility of this scene, as she draws on it to convey the aspects of Fields as a performer that rendered her popular with audiences. Somewhat paradoxically, as much as Horrocks is famed for her strong natural accent, she is also, thanks largely to *Little Voice*, known for accurately imitating the voices of others. This combination of factors led reviewers of *Gracie!* to comment on the suitability of Horrocks for the role. But, as the concluding part of the article explores, Horrocks’s performance in *Gracie!* draws more upon generic ideas about Northern femininity than on a specific impersonation of Fields herself.

Generic and authentic Northernness in *Gracie!*

Gracie! is not a straightforward cradle-to-grave biopic, but a portrayal of a specific part of Fields’s life, the World War II period. Her marriage to Italian Monty Banks (Tom Hollander) leaves her with a moral quandary: stay in Britain, where he would be arrested as an enemy alien, or leave for the safety of America. Her choice of the latter damaged her popularity in Britain, and the TV film is a straightforward attempt to salvage her reputation. It thus portrays her as an everyday saint, constantly putting duty before personal health or happiness. Playing Gracie, Horrocks draws upon both

her talent for mimicry and on her ability to conjure up a sense of Northern, no-nonsense identity that are already inherent to her star persona. *Gracie!* demonstrates, then, the problematic combination of an embodied portrayal of a real-life person and the presentation of a series of tropes of Northernness that actress, subject and character all share.

Jean-Louis Comolli argues that the response to the 'body-too-much' problem (of a real-life referent with which the viewer can compare the actor) for most historical films is to use costuming, make-up and *mise-en-scène* to:

[...] cobble together a resemblance [...] for the image of the historical body present in the spectator's memory to allow identification between the character and the actor's body (it really is him) and for that image having thus performed this service to be entirely consumed in the soldering of copy and model. (1978: 49)

It is reasonable to expect that in a biographical drama, extra attention would be paid to this process of making over the actor's body to make it more accurately fit the public image of a well-known star, as the connection between actor and subject is the dynamic upon which the credibility of the drama hangs. Sequences in which Horrocks performs *Gracie* playing 'Gracie Fields' onstage or on-screen exemplify this approach to the problem, where care has been taken to match the real-life, documented styling, gesture and voice of the performer. A particularly intriguing example is the recreation towards the end of the film of a British Pathé newsreel made by Fields in 1946.⁴ The *mise-en-scène*, camera angle and style of the original are copied fairly precisely, and Horrocks performs an accurate impression of Fields's performance of herself in this

film. Paradoxically, sequences like this seem both to authenticate Horrocks's performance, inasmuch as it can be tested against the 'original', and at the same time be considered superficial: a surface imitation rather than the inhabitation of a character.

To counterbalance a perception that this performance is an impersonation, promotional material for the film drew attention to the Northern heritage shared by Horrocks and Fields as a means of authenticating the performance. In television and newspaper interviews, she discussed her affection for Gracie (Stephenson 2009), the short geographical distance between their birthplaces (*The Paul O'Grady Show*, 2009), and common attributes, including forcefulness and the desire to control situations. A tie-in interview broadcast on BBC Four prior to the broadcast of the film made this connection explicit, as Horrocks told Mark Lawson (2009) that, though she had researched Gracie thoroughly before playing her, she felt she understood her 'essence as a person' by virtue of their both being Lancashire women. The careful connection between the women set-up paratextually is underlined in the opening scene of the film, which was also used prominently in its trailer. We meet Gracie reclining in her garden, interrupted by the appearance of Monty, to whom she gives short shrift. He says 'I'm looking for Gracie Fields', and she curtly replies 'Eh, Me – I'm Gracie Fields!' The combination of familiar, strong Lancashire accent and straightforward declaration of identity could be read as an attempt to tackle the 'body-too-much' problem from the start. By beginning with such a bold assertion (we know, of course, that Jane Horrocks is *not* Gracie Fields), the film authenticates the performer and character.

The Northern identity so carefully set up at the beginning, however, goes on to manifest in the film as a series of trite aphorisms. Gracie often uses Lancashire phrases like 'ees' and 'come on lads!', and at one point actually vocalizes what has

been the repeated motif of the film: when offered a coat in mid-winter, she tells Monty: ‘eh, y’ don’t need t’ worry about a hardy lass from the North’. Set just offstage and filmed in medium shot through the stage wings, this short sequence uses framing to imply authenticity. Gracie is no longer playing to a crowd, but displaying her genuine Northern identity in private, intimately, although with a little playfulness. Indeed, there is very little variation in personality between Horrocks’s Gracie-as-performer and Gracie-as-Gracie; she is remarkably consistent in her performance of ‘hardy Northernness’ in public and in private. The strong implication is that the public personality was the ‘real’ Gracie Fields. For example, when Basil Dean (Alastair Petrie) invites her to entertain the troops in the early days of World War II, he tells her ‘they think you’re one of them’, she interposes: ‘I *am* one of them’ – another overt assertion of her identity. For the film, Gracie’s Northernness authenticates her, renders her an appropriate figurehead for the working class that she serves. To achieve a pastiche of that same authenticity, Horrocks draws upon a series of typed attributes of Lancashire women that have been discussed in this article. The common association between Northernness and authenticity works in Horrocks’s favour in delivering a version of a character whose popularity depended upon her extraordinary ‘ordinariness’.

It could be argued that the physical differences between Horrocks and Fields serve to emphasize the ‘body-too-much’ problem, as there is rather a large distance between original and ‘copy’ in looks: Horrocks is slighter and more conventionally attractive (particularly by contemporary standards) than Fields. However, the extratextual connotations Horrocks brings with her, the association with the same cultural spaces as Gracie, enabled her to overcome this problem. *Gracie!* demonstrates how playing to type can be an effective way of building an outwardly

accurate performance in a biographical drama. In her performance as Gracie, the various contradictions and conflicts in the star persona of Jane Horrocks are put aside, and her most obvious asset – her Lancashire identity – is imbricated with the character in ways that are satisfying for the viewer on one level, even if troubling when subjected to the deeper scrutiny I have applied here. Horrocks’s ‘body-too-much’ is subsumed by the set of cultural connotations utilized by both women in the service of their Northern stardom.

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Notes

¹ Unlike Gracie, who genuinely grew up in poverty, Horrocks’s parents were members of the more comfortably off working class, her father an electrical goods salesman and her mother a hospital worker.

² Indeed, it was at RADA that Horrocks first became aware of Gracie, as a friend introduced her repertoire via an LP. The discovery of Fields at this stage was apparently formative for Horrocks, to the extent that she selected ‘Fred Fanakapan’ as one of her Desert Island Discs when she appeared on the Radio 4 programme in October 2006.

³ As she told host Fern Britton on *The Paul O’Grady Show* (2009).

⁴ Original archived at: <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/interview-with-gracie-fields/>.