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Breaking the Borders: Elizabeth Gaskell's Travel, 'French Life' and its Spatial Intertextuality

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Abstract

According to the nineteenth-century ideology of separate spheres, women were supposed to avoid the public sphere and to stay at home, as depicted in most artistic and literary representations. Even though much content in her travel writing represented by letters and the journal article 'French Life' is about daily living in ordinary foreign societies, I argue that Elizabeth Gaskell is treating some basic questions of human and social values such as class differences and gender distinctions. This paper emphasizes the significance of travel and travel-writing in Gaskell's personal and professional life, examining how her exposure to other cultures shapes her novels and positions her as a cross-cultural literary figure. Combining ESRI technology, I apply the old map (1864, Paris) to it and draw a GIS picture. The route is based on the journal article 'French Life' by Gaskell: by comparing it with the locations and landscapes mentioned in Charles Dickens's *The Tale of the Two Cities*, I find there is only one overlapping place: Faubourg Saint-Germain. However, the narratives of the two writers about this same place are so different. Multiple layers of mobility are uncovered in 'French Life': starting with Gaskell's physical mobility in Paris and the Mohls' residence, followed by an exploration of her social activities within the salon setting as a British writer, and culminating in an analysis of Gaskell's professional development exemplified through her creation during her time with the French families.

Keywords

Elizabeth Gaskell, Travel and Travel-writing, French Life, Domesticity, Spatial Intertextuality

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Introduction

Women's travel and their writing is not a strange area in recent nineteenth century studies. Puts forward female travellers' advantages in 'Travel Writing' as that they 'might place more value on personal observation of and contact with the daily lives of other peoples, especially women and children' partly 'because of their restricted access to scientific and political discourses'. (Lara, 2018) Then Ingrid Horrocks further points out the difference between the male wanderers who purely enjoyed pleasant rambles and the females like Mary Wollstonecraft and Fanny Burney: the latter in fiction were more 'marginal, indigent, vulnerable, and endangered', (Horrocks, 2017) which can be seen from various topics such as the picturesque, landscapes, wartime conditions and refugees. Such Romanic trope exists in Gaskell's travel writing as well: this paper on her treatment of foreign places reveals how the woman writer has translated an elsewhere for the sake of an audience back home, if using Carl Thompson's terms in defining travelogue (Thompson 2011, 62).

The first group of previous scholars who have explored elements of 'travel' in Gaskell is represented by Maureen T. Reddy: she read Gaskell's work as feminist palimpsests with a connection with the foreign contexts. Gaskell invokes 'a sense of universality and closeness', Reddy further indicates 'there is a sense that women's lives are the same the world over, with gender taking primacy over nationality'. (Reddy 1985, 186) While in 2002 Shu Chuan Yan points out the neglect of the relationships between women and geography. Through that Mary has once told Will Wilson the sailor that she wishes she were a boy and would go to sea with him, and how fascinating geography is to Sylvia as compared with the 'weary work' (Yan 2002, 81) of reading or writing, Yan raises the issue of gender division and spatial construction. Although both Reddy and Yan affirm the significance of foreign backgrounds in Gaskell's stories, their analysis excludes Gaskell's non-fiction such as letters and journal articles.

Other scholars who also admit the power of mobility in Gaskell's professional development include Kristine Swenson (1993) who appreciates Gaskell's creation of the character Margaret Legh because the successful singer needs to travel for performance. In 1998 Peter Stiles suggests Gaskell on trips did not quit reflecting on social problems back at home or totally escaped from the realities back at home, instead, she was just seeking alternative environments and past historical context to set the fiction. More recently, Julia McCord Chavez admires how 'Gaskell takes her readers out of the classic Gothic world of Catholic superstition', a world that 'could easily be dismissed by British readers as irrational and antiquated' by relocating and domesticating the settings of her tales (Chavez 2015, 65).

Different from the above studies, my research examines Gaskell's travel writing and mobility through the locus of domesticity. Based on their connections, I believe, Gaskell's perceptions of race, class and gender can be seen more clearly. The geographical mobility, or Gaskell's physical movement, provides her with the journey during which she perceived and wrote down her experiences in either a travelogue, letters or any form of preparation for longer fiction. In her travel writings such as 'French Life', Gaskell broadens her domestic vision by describing domestic life in a different cultural setting along with reflections of a group of authors or even a nation during that era. Other studies in the narrative of mobility also share my highlight of gender here as it has been agreed when travel is performed by a woman and extends beyond the boundary of her local community, it will become essentially transgressive (Mathieson, 2015).

Gaskell's Travel in France and Career Development

Gaskell embarked on her journey to France in 1853, recurring in 1854, 1855, 1857, 1858, 1862, 1863 and 1865, such frequency allows us to explore the woman writer's travel modes in more detail. Also owed to her engaging personality, while traveling Gaskell kept meeting stimulating and excellent people and introducing them to the family, which encourages creative writing based on the geographical reminder. It is travel that let Gaskell not have to write alone, those 'interesting, stimulating, and distinguished people' (Yarrow 1993, 20) that Gaskell met have incented her to produce. Mme Mohl is one example among many. Before the Gaskell couple meet the Mohls at the Schwabes in May 1853, Madame Mohl had thanked Gaskell for Cranford a week ago, for the book gave her great pleasure, and on the 17th, she greatly praised Gaskell's talent, common sense, and her modesty. Such a connection between these two continued since then. Apart from intercommunication by letters, friends were brought to travel with the Gaskells and introduced into her circle. For instance, in August 1857 Madame Mohl came to visit Gaskell when the Worcester Festival is over, staying from the 13th to the 23rd. In Letter 404 that was sent from Heidelberg to Marianne, besides lots of calculation of the expenses of the daughter's coming, there is an indication of expecting a Monsieur Mohl (brother of Madame Mohl's husband Julius).

On the one hand, Gaskell worked on the review of Madame Mohl's intimate friends (e.g., a Fauriel as told on 1854-February-25). On the other Mohl's letters were great comforts when Gaskell suffered from critics of her novels. When *The Life* first came out and Lady Scott was threatening libel action over it, Madame Mohl sent two letters on 1857-May-9 and June-16, insisting *The Life* is a 'masterpiece', condemning those who criticize Gaskell, and expressing her love of Gaskell's 'spirited anger' on behalf of Charlotte Brontë. (Handley 2005, 164) Likewise, in 1860 January after Madame Mohl first published her article on Madame Récamier's Souvenirs et Correspondence in the *National Review* and *Edinburgh Review*, on June-7 she consulted Gaskell about converting her work on Madame Récamier into a book. The book was expanded and completed in 1862-- *Madame Récamier: with a Sketch of the History of Society in France*, during this period from articles to a book, Madame Mohl had been writing to Gaskell saying how she was struggling with it.

As previous critics have observed, being very sensitive about the critical reception of her work, Gaskell sometimes planned her travel just to escape from home when she knew reviews were about to appear or controversy might be looming. At the beginning of 1855 Gaskell and Meta fled to Paris to avoid reviews of *North and South*. It was also during that journey Gaskell met Mrs. Scheffer and Hachette—important translators and publishers of her works. In February 1857 Gaskell went to see the Hachettes and again in late 1858, after warning them against the financial (mal)practices of some English publishers like Newby. And in 1865 she also came to stay with Madame Mohl and to make corrections for *Wives and Daughters*.

If we can see Gaskell's mobility as a kind of special capability by the above analysis of her travel, letters, and intellectual development, from here I mean to explore such capability in Gaskell's travel writing, a genre that has long been ignored in previous studies of the woman writer, through examination of a much-ignored journal article 'French Life'. The following case study illustrates how this article showcases the way in which the writer breaks down the nineteenth century gendered spheres through her travel writing. With the narrator's change of places, differences between spaces are shown to us, which makes the space and things 'talk' by telling readers the domestic details.

'French Life' and its Spatial Intertextuality

Begun in 1862, 'French Life' was composed by Gaskell as a part of an originally much larger project—descriptive memoirs of the life in Paris and the province of Madame de Sevigné, whose correspondence with her daughter during the period of Louis XIV charmed Gaskell. However, Gaskell's own project was never to be finished, and two years later, a fifty-page series of 'Notes of a Wanderer' was published under the title of 'French Life' in Fraser's Magazine in three instalments between April and June 1864. This hybrid text, which incorporates elements of autobiography, travelogue and fiction, is based on Gaskell's diary of two journeys in France mainly between 1862 and 1863 and details almost everything in French life from dress to customs to architecture, with some comparison to its English equivalent.

In this voyage en France Gaskell successfully integrates a housewife's domestic role and a writer's desire for mobility because her domestic sphere is greatly expanded during travel, which in turn, helps voice Gaskell's challenges to Victorian gender views and social structure. Gaskell's dear 'Clarkey' Madam Mohl and her house offered Gaskell much more than accommodation in Paris, but also rare opportunities for sociability at salons. As a bonus of that, Gaskell gained generous interpersonal and writing sources. By reading Gaskell's description of her visit to Sevigne's shrine in Brittany in a letter of July 1862, both Philip Yarrow (1993) and Alain Jumeau (1999) admire the natural affinity between these two women writers: they were 'well-read, wellbred, intelligent, and sensible women; both were sociable, sprightly, and interested in the world' and share 'a genuine concern for humble people' though the two writers 'belonged to two different periods, to two different countries, to two different cultural traditions'. (Jumeau 1999, 22) It was also in the same year 1862 when French publisher Louis Hachette began publishing the Grands Ecrivains de France edition of Mme de Sdvigne's letters (14 vols, 1862-1866).

The background of 'French Life' indicates the positive influence of overseas travel upon Gaskell's professional career, and interestingly such advantage turned out to be in mutual ways, which occupied a large portion in the letters between Gaskell and her French connections like the Mohls. In particular, Gaskell gives a fascinating account of her life with the Mohls in a letter to Emily Shaen, dated 27 March, after paying her last visit to Mme Mohl in 1865 (Letter 563). It is so easy to find the resemblances between the details in 'French Life' and that letter describing life on the 4th and 5th storeys of a large hotel: no clocks in the house; books crammed all over the place; routine and ritual –breakfast and then second breakfast (a kind of lunch) till eleven– a walk by self in the afternoon-often out to dinner often at 6 – then the Mohls go to sleep – as does Gaskell occasionally; visits to other houses and always accounts of special meals and food. According to Yarrow, just about the same time Mme Mohl told Mrs. Simpson that Gaskell wrote the greater part of her last and most French novel *Wives and Daughters* in the larger salon, 'standing up before the mantelpiece, which she used as a desk, while her hostess went on with her reading and drawing in the adjoining room' (Yarrow 1993, 26).

I believe such comparative reading of 'French Life', either with other nonfiction or fiction by Gaskell, is vital for us to understand her position as a woman writer of domestic mobility. For a sensitive woman writer like Gaskell, the salon gave her a chance to carefully observe the two

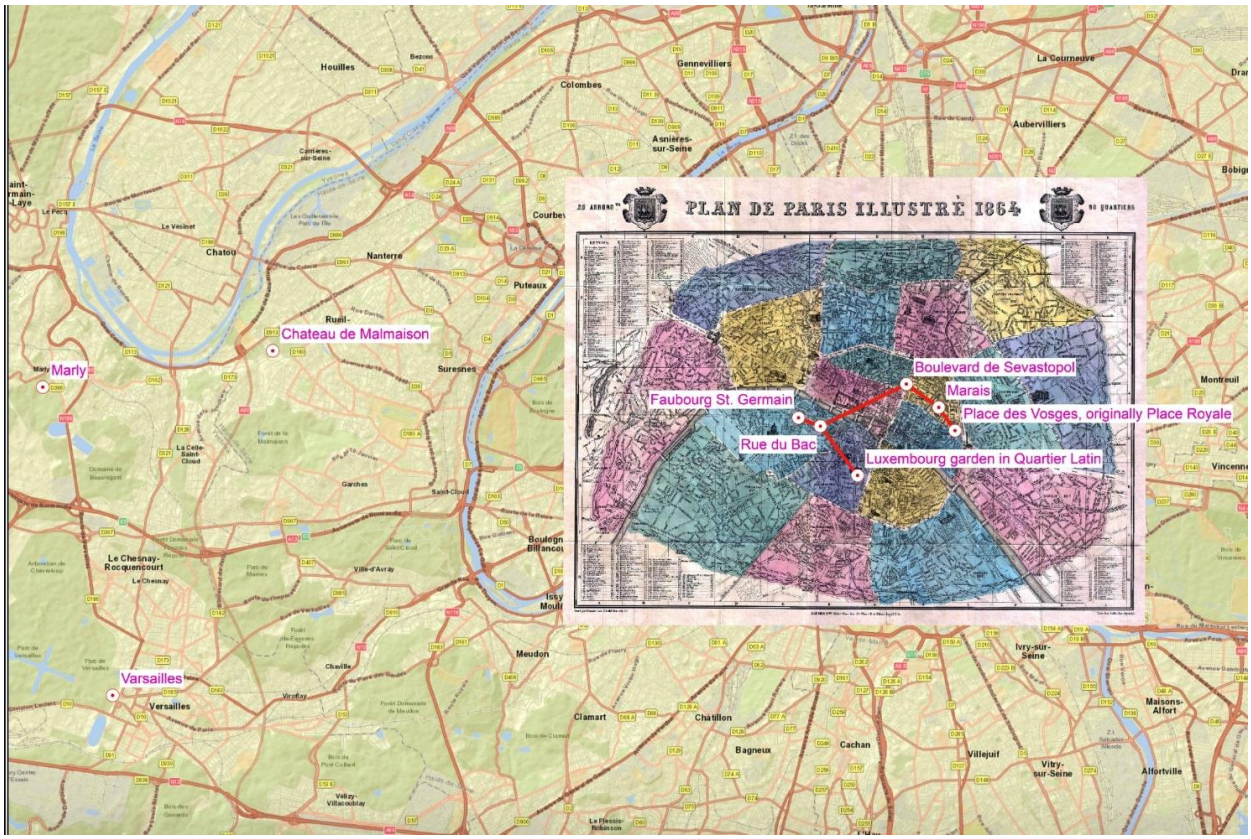
different cultures. What is even harder to measure, is the knowledge and encouragement the woman writer has received from the acquaintances. For instance, Hachette gave Gaskell the incentive as having become 'the journalist you have employed to keep you au courant in English literature'. (Jay 2016, 139) Or despite her endeavors in genres of journal articles like 'French Life', 'Company Manners' and 'A Column of Gossip from Paris', the experiences in salons have influenced her creation of characters too, as traced in the scientific figure of Roger from Wives and Daughters: though Darwin himself being a distant relative of Gaskell, the savants that she met at the Mohls' may also contribute to this characterization.

While 17-year-old Meta enjoyed dancing at one of the salons, she was also daunted by the potential conversation on zoology coming afterward in a famous Lamarckian naturalist's house, indicating that science was another focus of the talks. Roger Hamley is depicted as a typical savant in the early nineteenth-century, and his research is inextricably linked with the variety of species. Unlike political interactions popular in press offices or at the Bourse, the savants increasingly congregated in académies, or learned societies. By the time of the Third Republic to say that something was of importance 'in the salons' was tantamount to declaring it of merely academic interest, therefore Meta's worries were factual. In Madame Mohl's circle of heterogeneous interests, the European savants' lectures were enthusiastically attended. Gaskell literally imported the name of the naturalist-- Geoffroi St. Hilaire into her book, as evidenced in the reason why Roger is invited by Lord Hollingford to dinner in the Towers, which is because of his advocating views on certain scientific subjects of M. Geoffroi St. H—who was expected to visit the Towers and wished to meet his English comparative anatomists, so Lord Hollingford wrote a note to Roger.

As part of Gaskell's own 'Grand Tour', she spent accumulatively fifteen to twenty days in France, dated as February, March and May in 1862, and the March in the next year of 1863. Her visits ranged from the old Paris city to the fashionable new Paris, then to the outskirts and suburbs such as Versailles and Marly, and via Brittany and Avignon the tour group entered Italy. In the city of Paris, Gaskell's sightseeing route in 'French Life' was as follows: her trip started with Madame A—' place near the newly-built Boulevard de Sévastopol and ended in M. E. —'s house on the very same street; between the two visits the writer looked over some houses, apartments and tourist attractions in places such as the Luxembourg garden in Quartier Latin, several narrow streets in old Paris, Place Royale, Malmaison, St Germain and Marly-le-Roi.

Concisely, in 'French Life' Gaskell presents domestic details from several families that she has visited in her travel to France and particularly in the city of Paris, to indicate their hostess' taste which further showcases their class identification, sexual politics and other social problems. While the writer and her companion paid visits to several middle- and upper-class family houses in the city, she barely had any chance to engage with working- class communities because the lower-class people could not afford housing in the city at that time. Or even if they could, they were relegated to the cold garret rooms in Haussmannien buildings. (Gaskell 2005, 389) The last house in Gaskell's visit is a royal place—Marly built by King Louis XIV. By introducing the place's rise and fall in history, combined with her travel experiences, the writer disclosed a relation between human and space: 'on one hand, a person's behaviour and thought shape his space; meanwhile, he is living in the bigger space of collective social influence that modes his behaviour and thought'. (Edward Soja 2011, 451) Gaskell states that she wanted to see Marly— 'a place once so famous and so populous gone to ruin' (Gaskell 2005, 377)— for its history, observe the ruins and give her condolences to the place. The ruins were evidence of Louis XIV's ambition to change from the perspective of domesticity, a project in which he was unsuccessful and dragged his next generations into the mire. Only grass and flowers stood on the remains, the growth of which was irreversible, just like the fate of the nation.

Interestingly, the above textual analysis directs to the same outcome of the literary mapping of Gaskell's route in Paris. From the fashionable new Paris to the old Paris city, then from the city of Paris to its outskirts like Marly, her unique reflections on the Paris landscape (Haussmanians and Marly) differentiate Gaskell from peer writers. And combining with her domestic observations Gaskell's really expanding the space of women. King Louis XIV's domestic reform in Marly failed, while in the city center Gaskell witnessed female's advancement in gender position through *le luxe de la toilette*, letting alone the salonnière Madame Mohl successfully orchestrated the sophisticated and elegant conversations on Rue du Bac. So, French females are no longer confined in the traditional domestic spheres, and more importantly, they are free from being 'systematically degraded by receiving the trivial attentions which men think it manly to pay to their sex' (Mary Wollstonecraft 1992, 148). A Similar Paris route in Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* indicates the different writing styles of the male writers and the female writer, even readers just specifically examine the descriptions of one single location-Faubourg St. Germain. At the beginning of his Chapter II 'The Grindstone' in *Third Book—the Track of a Storm*, there is a large house in that area belonging to a great nobleman whose throat would be cut by his previous chocolate preparers. While in 'French Life' Gaskell first laments for the environment of 'entre cour et jardin' there, and later moves deep into how Dizaine (both women of very moderate incomes and the richest lady in the Faubourg St. Germain) meet at regular intervals to render personal service through small outlays of capital. Such contrast implies the other side of the domestic angel-radical yet practical.



By uncovering females' development in social and even political power, Gaskell challenges the nineteenth century domestic ideology that prescribes separate spheres for different genders. In addition, I show how males, like King Louis XIV could play roles in the domestic sphere, leaving room for future discussion on the greater topic of domestic realism. Gaskell is, even just through her detailed and complex domestic observation, encouraging British readers to look at their own surroundings and reflect on the silent narratives of gender and class they might

reveal. Furthermore, the letters among her literary correspondents provide readers with clues about how such a virtuous circle emerged during the trips and supported Gaskell to break out of her own domestic seclusion through an expanding career.

Last but not least, according to Elizabeth Jay, perhaps it was beyond the reach of the majority of British writers when they came to depict Parisian life, (276) even for Gaskell the excellent observer. Gaskell explained during her stay in the house of Madame Mohl that she was not 'prepared by any previous reading of French romances, or even by former visits to Paris'; and in other times she 'remained in a hotel frequented by English, and close to the street which seems to belong almost exclusively to them'. (Gaskell 2005, 392) As a result of that, despite the long journal article 'French Life' and few similar, Gaskell's fiction like most of her contemporary writers, remained relatively untouched by this direct experience of Parisian domestic and social life. Instead, in *Wives and Daughters* Gaskell brings the savants at the Parisian salons back to the Hollingford Tower and composes a group of leaders from the scientific world who are 'odd-looking, simple-hearted', only 'earnest' about particular subjects and appear clumsy in others, with whom the country surgeon Mr. Gibson has been refreshed pleasantly. (Gaskell 2006, 31) Lord Hollingford was raised and educated by a mother who loathes Byron the 'immoral poet' whose family has been well-known for rotten extravagance and prefers Pope, and the scientist discovered by him—Roger is a 'clumsy and heavily built' wrangler with a square face giving 'grave, and rather immobile' expressions, (Gaskell 2006, 34) just like the zoologist young Meta would be afraid of in Paris. And by creating such a literary figure in a 'calm and dignified manner' and returning from Africa with 'taller', broader, stronger—more muscular' looks 'as brown as a berry', (Gaskell 2006, 479) I argue that Gaskell was also breaking her own stereotype in making characters since after all, it was her only book that is not focusing on the working class.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper demonstrates how the triangle among Gaskell's letters, travel, and domesticity work together to foster her publication. Through examination of 'French Life', first, we can draw the distinct levels of mobility: it starts with Gaskell's geographical mobility in the city of Paris and then in the house of the Mohls; then by illustrating the specific social activity of the salon in the house I explore the interpersonal mobility of Gaskell as a typical British writer; at last, an analysis of Gaskell's mobility in professional practice is conducted by instances from her novel written in the Mohls—Wives and Daughters. From the woman writer's breakthrough of the genre as well as the stereotype in this novel, I further emphasize the significance of travel and travel writing in her domestic life and professional career. Now that Gaskell has experienced other cultures, we can see how other cultures work in her novels and read Gaskell as translated into another culture later, with domesticity as the central thread throughout.

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Biography of the authors

Lisu Wang studied English in China and American literature in the US, and further received doctoral training in nineteenth-century English literature in the UK. Broadly speaking, she is interested in discovering the 'otherness' in Victorian female authors' travel writings. So far much of the work has been performed on understanding the foreign materials as a function of narrative in Elizabeth Gaskell's works, which leads to building a map of her mental mobility.