

**“Far Away in Mysterious Darkness of Distance”:  
Science, Travel, and Elizabeth Gaskell’s  
*Wives and Daughters: An Every-Day Story***

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**Abstract**

This paper seeks to examine how Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) extends her vision abroad and looks upon the geographical location of Africa as an ideological landscape that contributes to the physical dimension of empire in *Wives and Daughters: An Every-Day Story* (1864-66). Through scientific and imperial discourse, the paper first investigates the impact of evolutionary science on the imperial nation at home. It then goes on to explore how the pursuit of science is intimately related to Britain’s imperial activity and development overseas, focusing specifically on the African tour of Roger Hamley, a scientific traveler in the novel. It undertakes to address the intriguing issue of scientific imperialism and its practice in Africa, arguing that British imperialism is located in a specific colonial setting and merges with natural science through the culture of exploration. Gaskell’s casual references to osteology and the Royal Geographical Society are exemplary in this respect. The questions of blackness, language, and racial identity are also considered in a discussion of how Africa and the imperial enterprise are constituted in the Victorian imagination. The significance of this paper, therefore, is to locate Africa within the scientific and imperial context so as to invite further reflections on the representation of the Victorian Empire, the **common** imaginings of the “Other,” as well as the production of scientific knowledge linked with imperial power and cultural superiority.

**Keywords**

Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters*, science, travel  
British imperialism, Africa, exploration

*Wives and Daughters: An Every-Day Story*, Gaskell's last and unfinished novel, has been treated as the *summa* of her career as a provincial novelist. As suggested by the title, the novel centers on stories of three women characters. Molly Gibson, the heroine, is brought up by her widowed father, a town doctor who is free to move within the ranks of the small town regardless of his illegitimate birth. When Dr. Gibson remarries, the stepmother (Claire Kirkpatrick) and stepsister (Cynthia) enter Molly's life: both of them are loveable and charming, but mercenary and worldly. As is typical with other Victorian fiction, the novel revolves around these women's love affairs within a gossipy and watchful society. Also, as the subtitle tells us, *Wives and Daughters* is "an Every-Day Story" that presents a panoramic view of a midland town in the 1820s and 1830s. Essential to the plot development of the novel is Gaskell's meticulous study of social and economic relations in Hollingford, a community stratified by the landed gentry, the newly professional middle class and laborers. This temporal-spatial relationship invariably reflects Gaskell's interest in a local district and her attachment to the village life of childhood remembrance. As the author assures us at the outset of the novel, Hollingford—a rural society that still maintains its hierarchical order and feudalistic tradition—is a place "where a very pretty amount of feudal feeling still lingered, and showed itself in a number of simple ways, droll enough to look back upon, but serious matters of importance at the time . . ." (2; hereafter cited as *WD*). The townsfolk are acutely conscious of the hierarchical order in the close-knit community: land is the standard of social prestige and the gentry are the center of power.

To attack false and sentimentalized presentations of idyllic merriment, George Eliot in her 1856 essay, "The Natural History of German Life," extended Wilhelm Heinrich von Riehl's fundamental idea of European society as "incarnate history" by seeing the novelist as a "natural historian" who portrayed the "natural" history of society. As Eliot claimed in the essay, "any attempt to disengage [society] from its historical elements must . . . be simply destructive of social vitality" (Pinney 287). Similarly, in her masterpiece *Middlemarch* (1871-72) Eliot expressed her belief that evolutionary change was inevitable in a society. On a much larger scale, in *Wives and Daughter* Gaskell also revealed her own sense of a developing society brought about by new forces. In her evocation of a pre-Victorian rural society before the passing of the Reform Bill, Gaskell adhered to the concept of social evolution, acknowledging that historical change is inevitable. In this respect, *Wives and Daughters* is more than a provincial novel—it can be seen as the culmination of Gaskell's career as a novelist of social change following her industrial fiction such

as *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855). Her concern with evolutionary change, as we shall see, is revealed in her focus on science that comes to disrupt the domestic life of Hollingford and serves as a major force in social change. Thus, with her description of new forces and new knowledge, Gaskell is far from being an escapist who withdraws from an existing society and locates values in the past by rejecting the present. On the contrary, she provides an outlook on early nineteenth-century English society in which the leisurely evolutionary pace is traced.

Both Gaskell's and Eliot's novels are historical and concerned with the process of evolutionary change, which is closely linked to the emergence of Darwinian evolution in the 1850s and 1860s.<sup>1</sup> However, compared with Eliot's moral perspective, Gaskell's idea of social change is more historically dynamic. In Pam Morris's view, Gaskell "achieves a sense of the continuities of past, present and future, and she does so by recognizing a key aspect of Darwinism that Eliot wholly ignores: the interconnection of evolutionary theory with constructions of national identity and with the empire" (xxi). Her final novel, in a sense, contains more far-reaching implications than a simple "everyday" tale would be expected to include. In fact, within the context of its domestic agenda, *Wives and Daughters* also feeds the reading public's taste for the exotic, the novel, and the remote with its references to overseas voyages to Africa. Through scientific discourse, Gaskell extends her vision abroad and looks upon the geographical location of Africa as an ideological landscape that contributes to the physical dimension of empire. It would therefore be interesting to develop a critical understanding of Gaskell's imaginative engagement with Africa along the lines of Morris's vast canvas. To this end, this paper first investigates the impact of evolutionary science on the imperial nation at home. It explores how the pursuit of science (principally natural science and geographical exploration) is intimately related to Britain's imperial activity and development overseas by looking at the African tour of Roger Hamley, a scientific traveler in the novel. It then undertakes to address the intriguing issue of scientific imperialism and its practice in Africa, arguing that British imperialism is located in a specific colonial setting and merges with natural science through the culture of exploration. Gaskell's casual references to osteology and the Royal Geographical Society are exemplary in this respect. The questions of blackness, language, and racial identity are also discussed so as to investigate the imaginative geography of Africa in Gaskell's mind.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed account of the idea of Darwinism, see Henkin; Beer; and Levine. Yet these three critics all overlook Gaskell's use of evolutionary pattern in their studies of Victorian fiction and Darwinian theory.

## Africa within the Culture of Scientific Exploration

Gaskell was an enthusiastic traveler in Europe, making regular visits to France, and also to Germany and Rome. Like most traditional British women, however, she never visited the “exotic” land of Africa. Africa was mostly unmapped in Gaskell’s mind, but the trip of a friend, Mr. Crisp, to Africa in 1854 might have somewhat contributed to her conceptual idea about the foreign territory. As Gaskell described in a letter to her daughter Julia, Mr. Crisp was “very full of his travels, and all the curious things he had seen and done” in Africa, and his story about the wedding ceremony was entertaining:

He had seen a wedding in Africa, where the bridegroom rode very slowly along the streets of the town the night before he was married, and every unmarried person had a right to pelt him with stones, eggs, &c for leaving the number of the unmarried people; and the next day he rides on a very gay horse, with a large box carried after him, and what do you think is in this box? Why! the bride! She has holes to breathe through though. (*The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell* 298; hereafter *L*)

Mr. Crisp’s representation of African people might have projected itself into Gaskell’s own fantasy, although her references to *Wives and Daughters* say little of such activities. However, when we consider the ways in which Gaskell responds to the various features of the African landscape, we may find it helpful to look at the scientific progress at the time. Gaskell’s portrayal of the scientific development in Hollingford indeed invites us to look back at a time when the position of science was a subject of considerable debate in England, and few positions were open to the scientists in education or industry (Basalla 9). The famous scientist Charles Babbage, for example, discussed the problems inherent in the controversial new science by positing its inferior state in his 1830 essay, “Reflections on the Decline of Science in England.” Babbage complained that the role of science was overlooked due to the system of education—“the pursuit of science does not, in England, constitute a distinct profession, as it does in many other countries.” In his view, mechanics, along with engineering, should be taught as an adjunct of other disciplines (10-11). Under the circumstances, the British Association for the Advancement of Science was established to call for the government’s support of scientific activity. Based on a German model, *Gesellschaft Deutscher Naturforscher und Ärzte* (Society of the German Scientists and Physicians), the Association was

founded in 1831 and became an important channel for conveying scientific information to the public. It aimed to revive public interest in science and integrate the culture of science into English society and thought.<sup>2</sup> This might well explain why the revival of the scientific spirit was so important for the British intelligentsia in the process of building a national identity.

Gaskell was well aware of scientific developments in her days and her own outlook on science was, for the most part, influenced by personal acquaintances and family connections. Her father and husband each played a key role in making a contribution to the increase of her scientific knowledge. Gaskell's father William Stevenson wrote an article on science in 1796—"Remarks on the Very Inferior Utility of Classical Learning"—in which he declared that the study of classics was irrelevant to a modern world and addressed the need to regard new learning such as modern languages, engineering, physics, chemistry, and natural history as the staple of education. To fulfill his ideal, Stevenson gave up his teaching at the Manchester Academy and took up scientific farming with his wife in a place near Edinburgh, where he farmed with his friend James Cleghorn, a famous "scientific farmer" (Uglow 9-10). Gaskell's husband William was also a man absorbed in the new scientific studies. Brought up at Warrington (the birthplace of non-conforming dissenters) and educated at the Warrington Academy and later at the University of Glasgow, William was a philosophical and political free-thinker. For him, each scientific advance provided a way to understanding God's plan (Uglow 136). The borrowing records of the Portico Library in Manchester show that William was an avid consumer of scientific knowledge while being a Unitarian minister. Due to his love of science, he gave his daughters elaborate education at home, especially in "the probable lessons in History & Natural History" (Gaskell, *Further Letters of Mrs. Gaskell* 35; hereafter *FL*). Moreover, he was one of the organizers of the 1861 "meeting of Literary & Philosophical Society, making arrangements for the meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science" (*L* 645), which was regarded as the most prestigious scientific institution in Manchester, and its

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<sup>2</sup> As Jack Morrell and Arnold Thackray have observed in *Gentlemen of Science: Early Years of the British Association for the Advancement of Science*, the birth of modern science in Britain could be attributed to the Age of Reform (1820s-1840s). Though a period of social unrest, it was an era in which coalitions or peripatetic organizations flourished—a proliferation of specialist societies emerged to witness the transformation of the scientific world, including the Geological Society, the Astronomical Society, the Royal Asiatic Society, and the Zoological Society. Among various field groups, the British Association was the only one to organize around an appeal to nature and accordingly it served as an instrument of public order and social cohesion.

interaction with the British Association for the Advancement of Science could be understood as a revealing chapter in British scientific-cultural history.

Meanwhile Gaskell herself was intrigued by new branches of knowledge and attracted by scientific travelers. Her understanding of evolutionary theory both as a scientific truth and as a mode of social progress owed much to her Unitarian heritage (Stoneman 191). The intellectual climate and the periodical literature raised her awareness of scientific debates as well.<sup>3</sup> She was a constant reader of the *Athenaeum* and took an avid interest in the culture of natural history in Edinburgh. She had known many important figures involved in scientific research in England and France (Uglow 560). Perhaps most significant for her was her relation to Charles Darwin, who announced a new era in the scientific understanding of the natural world with the publication of *The Origin of Species* (1859).<sup>4</sup> Gaskell's sense of evolutionary change might have been deepened through her intellectual engagement with Darwin, despite her disclaimer that she was "not scientific nor mechanical" after visiting the Great Exhibition in 1851 (Uglow 273-79).

Scientific figures appear frequently in Gaskell's novels. In *Mary Barton* (1848), for example, Gaskell indicates the links between natural science and the working class by portraying Job Legh's interest in natural history. Later in the short story "Mr. Harrison's Confession" (1851), she projects her scientific interest into the characterization of Mr. Harrison, a physician. While in *Wives and Daughters* Gaskell reveals her admiration for scientific amateurs through her depiction of the intelligentsia such as Mr. Gibson, Roger Hamley, and Lord Hollingford. As Gaskell portrays him, Mr. Gibson is a leading medical man with intellectual authority, who enjoys meeting the leaders of the scientific world and is fond of sending contributions to medical journals (*WD* 37). Similarly, Lord Hollingford and Roger Hamley are described as gentlemen belonging to the privileged class and pursuing their new knowledge in a provincial town. In Gaskell's account, Hollingford society thinks highly of Lord Hollingford: he is respected as the head of their community and also as a gentleman of science. Roger Hamley, the younger son of the local squire, in turn typifies the energy of new professionalism and the man of the future, standing in sharp contrast to his traditional family. As we are told, Roger's father Squire Hamley is very traditional: he clings to an outmoded mode of thinking,

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<sup>3</sup> The Gaskell sale catalogue in Manchester Central Library might provide an important source of information about the Gaskells' interest in empire and evolutionary theory. The Gaskells' collection includes *Imperial Dictionary*, J. W. Graham's *Evolution and Empire*, and L. T. Hobhouse's *Morals in Evolution*. See *The Sale Catalogue*.

<sup>4</sup> Darwin was a cousin on Gaskell's maternal side and her daughter Meta went on holiday with Darwin's sister several times. For details see Uglow 219, 397.

regardless of the evolutionary pace in his time and therefore he fails to notice the trend towards more professional estate management. Moreover, Squire Hamley and his wife, who both have only a partial view of science, think that Roger is not likely to have as brilliant a career as his older brother. For the parents, their youngest son "does not care for poetry, and books of romance, or sentiment"—he is "so fond of natural history" (*WD* 65). However, Roger proves himself an outstanding scientist at the end of the novel: he provides financial support so that the squire can put the estate in the order and subsequently restores the family name. By contrast, his brother Osborne fails to complete his studies at Cambridge; he even marries a Roman Catholic French nursemaid and succeeds, in the eyes of Squire Hamley, to disgrace the family name. Up to a point, then, both Roger and Lord Hollingford offer Gaskell a convenient paradigm to present characteristic Victorian attitudes toward scientific culture.

In many ways, *Wives and Daughters* can be read as an indicative of Gaskell's engagement with scientific culture. The allusions to scientific developments in Africa in the novel in particular provide a good starting point from which to survey how Gaskell extends her vision of the imperial enterprise abroad. Science, as many commentators have pointed out, offers common ground between home and abroad in *Wives and Daughters*. A telling example of the interconnections between science, Hollingford, and the larger world is Gaskell's description of Roger Hamley's travel to Africa. Travel, in the case of Roger, is more than a journey to the reaches of empire; it is embedded within the new science of natural history. As Lady Harriet tells her female friends, Roger is to carry out his scientific research in Africa under the patronage of Lord Hollingford:

Did not you hear of that rich eccentric Mr. Crichton, who died some time ago, and—fired by the example of Lord Bridgewater, I suppose—left a sum of money in the hands of trustees, of whom my brother is one, to send out a man with a thousand fine qualifications, to make a scientific voyage, with a view to bringing back specimens of the fauna of distant lands, and so forming the nucleus of a museum which is to be called the Crichton Museum, and so perpetuate the founder's name? Such various forms does man's vanity take. Sometimes it stimulates philanthropy; sometimes a love of science! (*WD* 378)

In Lady Harriet's words, the primary purpose of Roger's travel is to collect the native fauna in Africa and bring them back for public exhibition in the Crichton Museum. Such collection of scientific data provides the initial opportunity for the English young man to observe raw materials produced in the distant land. The museum in this instance constitutes an essential part of the imperial enterprise. As Inderpal Grewal writes, the museum presented "not only a history of the whole world but also that of England, for it inculcated the opposition of Self and Other, subject and object. Such an opposition was also crucial to a national pride in English ability to gather knowledge and display the world in glass cases" (90). Read in this way, we may regard Roger as a scientific traveler with the traveling eye of metropolitan science and his quest, a process of conquest and possession. Alternatively, Africa, with a variety of specimens of fauna, was a place where a man like Roger could pursue his career and gratify his vanity. The scientific expedition "stimulates philanthropy," a prevalent idea that reminds one of Charles Dickens's earlier satire on Mrs. Jellyby's "telescopic philanthropy" in *Bleak House* (1852).

In a letter to the publisher George Smith, Gaskell revealed her intention to model the characterization of Roger on Charles Darwin. She wrote: "Roger is rough, & unpolished—but works out for himself a certain name in Natural Science—is tempted by a large offer to go around the world (like Charles Darwin) as naturalist . . ." (L 732). This letter implies that "to go around the world" is a great temptation to a young man, and the quest for scientific information involves a wide field of vision. Darwin was a young distinguished scientist whom Gaskell had the privilege to know as a close relative and friend. Yet since she wrote a novel rather than a fictionalized biography, Gaskell had the freedom to portray the young hero as dictated by her plot or directed by her fancy. As a Darwin surrogate, Roger thus encompasses the features of most English travelers—youth, learning, manliness, and social standing. To provide Roger with a legitimate motive for an African tour, Gaskell identifies him as a scientific observer prior to his departure. The young man is a great lover of natural history and comparative anatomy who has published a paper in a scientific periodical to "confute some theory of a great French physiologist," and the paper has "proved the writer to be possessed of a most unusual amount of knowledge on the subject" (WD 311). He has also made a reply to a French osteologist (WD 383), an expert in the study of the structures and functions of bones (in particular between apes and human races), by publishing another scientific article. Apart from his achievement in science, Roger is selected for his ability to make a difficult journey and still survive—he is "of the right age,

in the very prime of health and strength, and unshackled by any family ties" (*WD* 384). As Mr. Gibson puts it, "only half of Roger's success was owing to his mental powers; the other half was owing to his perfect health, which enabled him to work harder and more continuously than most men without suffering" (*WD* 385). Together, both his physical fitness and intellectual vitality enable Roger to carry out scientific experiments in Africa.

If we look at the history of British geographical exploration in Africa, we can also find that most early nineteenth-century explorers were men of action, trying to make their way into the world: they were young and ambitious to venture into the unknown region.<sup>5</sup> In writing about their endeavors to cross national boundaries or imperial frontiers, these explorers frequently evoked the British self-image—fitness, masculinity, and adventurousness. Literary representations of exploratory travels and overseas voyages, therefore, raise the issue of English character and national identity in a time of imperial expansion. In *Wives and Daughters*, the characterization of Roger reflects exactly the ideological production of a national imperial consciousness and the culture of scientific exploration. Along with Darwin's South American tour, Roger's scientific travel to Africa helps us read a global image of Englishness within the context of colonialism and imperialism. Moreover, the resemblance between Roger and Charles Darwin reflects the wider influence of Darwinian evolutionary theory on the plot development in *Wives and Daughters*. Patsy Stoneman, for one, declares that *Wives and Daughters* reflects the most advanced preoccupation of its time and accordingly charts Gaskell's enthusiastic acceptance of evolutionary theory (in particular Darwin's conception of "Sexual Selection") both as a scientific truth and as a mode of social progress (191-92). Hilary M. Schor likewise claims that Gaskell's narrative progress is closely connected with Victorian science. She argues that "[t]he scientific structure echoes and expands the 'fictional' structure of the novel, for it includes both history—the concern with the origins and stories of families and of community—and, in its widest form, the 'origin of species,' the entire evolutionary model" (184). Deirdre D'Albertis also traces Gaskell's use of

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<sup>5</sup> Research has shown that only nine women traveled in West Africa and published their travel accounts between 1830 and 1915. For example, Elizabeth Melville, the aristocratic wife of a colonial judge, visited Sierra Leone between 1840 and 1846; Mary Slessor, a working-class missionary, lived in the Calabar region (south-eastern Nigeria) between 1876 and 1915; Zélie Colvile, the aristocratic wife of the Acting Commissioner of Uganda, traveled around Africa in 1889; and Constance Larymore, the wife of a military colonial administrator, took trips to Nigeria between 1901 and 1907. The most famous woman traveler at the time was Mary Kingsley, who circumnavigated West Africa as an independent traveler/explorer between 1892 and 1895. Please see McEwan 381.

evolutionary pattern in *Wives and Daughters*, saying that the novel in its very form underlies Darwinian ideas of natural and sexual selection. Since the characterization of Roger is based on Darwin, Gaskell is aware of “a longstanding tradition of exploration and classification” (138; 217). Here these three commentators all suggest that the evolutionary model is applicable to English provincial society in *Wives and Daughters* in which social change is of great concern to Gaskell. Even so, they fail to notice one thing: the novel itself embodies aspects of evolutionary thinking that provide an explanation of Africa’s place in natural history and its connection with an imperial culture. Thus, to understand the significance of Gaskell’s treatment of evolutionary Darwinism in *Wives and Daughters*, we have to consider the role played by Africa within the context of Victorian natural history.<sup>6</sup>

We cannot forget that *Wives and Daughters* was written at a time when “‘natural history’ was still close to everyday life” (Stoneman 184) and when Africa was becoming in British culture the focus of scientific investigation and geographical exploration. In the wake of Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*, Europeans began to rethink the natural world in terms of biological and evolutionary concepts. They took an avid interest in the classification systems for specimens of plants and animals, particularly those belonged to the world beyond the imperial center. The exotic land was seen as an ideal laboratory for experiments, while natural science assumed an increasing role in the expansion of empire overseas. As John M. McKenzie points out, “Imperial power . . . and research in the natural sciences were closely dependent in the nineteenth century.” “Science, as well as technology,” he adds, “is essential to a full understanding of the expansion of Western influence, of the relationship between metropolis and periphery and dominant and subordinate people” (vii). Taken together, then, Gaskell’s geographical references to the tropical landscape of Africa in *Wives and Daughters* articulate a sense of scientific imperialism.

As mentioned earlier, Roger has once published an article on anatomy in reply to a French osteologist, an expert in the study of the structure and development of bones. This allusion is of great interest in that it demonstrates contemporary scientific discourse about the nature of species. During the Victorian period, the study of the structures and functions of bones reflected a highly topical concern with the need to distinguish humankind from animals, especially from apes, and with the attempt to discriminate between white Europeans-as-Self and black

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<sup>6</sup> In terms of Darwinism, Anne McClintock points out that “[w]ith social Darwinism, the taxonomic project, first applied to nature, was now applied to cultural history. Time became a geography of some power, a map from which to read a global allegory of ‘natural’ social difference” (37).

humans-as-Other. In 1861 Paul du Chaillu, a French-American explorer, exhibited his collection of decapitated ape-heads under the auspices of the Royal Geographical Society when he published his *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa* in England. After the publication of du Chaillu's work, a poem entitled "Monkeyana," with an illustration of a gorilla displaying a sign "AM I A Man And A BROTHER?" (a motto of the Anti-Slavery Society) soon appeared in *Punch* on May 18, 1861. In 1862, the biologist Thomas Huxley had an ape-brain brought onto the stage at the meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Cambridge. One year later, the first exhibit of the Anthropological Society of London was the skin of a large male gorilla. All of these events show that the scientific study of the relationship between humankind and animals was of great importance in the 1860s (Hodgson 228-51). The events register not only the mid-Victorians' attempt to distinguish between humans and apes but also their desire to differentiate themselves from black races.

In her description of Roger's African tour, Gaskell provides an insight into the history of natural science in the nineteenth century as Britain and other European powers began to appropriate the natural resources of the rest of the world. Roger's scientific travel brings to our attention Britain's contacts with the outpost in the early nineteenth century. The expedition reinforces a white man's imperial power in Africa where, as Joseph Conrad has aptly put it in "Geography and Some Explorers," untamed nature is "replaced by exciting spaces of white paper" (254). To put this another way, science in the text of *Wives and Daughters* is set in the context of Britain's possession of a colonial empire. In this way, Roger's scientific expedition not only signals the expansion of knowledge in natural science in an epoch of geographical exploration and discovery but also reinforces Britain's increasing concern with the geography of Africa. As Gaskell writes, Roger embarks on his first journey to Abyssinia-Huon (*WD* 433), the location of rivalry between English and French explorers and missionaries during the 1830s. Then he takes a trip to Arracuoba, a place of Gaskell's invention and "a district in Africa, hitherto unvisited by any intelligent European traveler" (*WD* 473). Finally he visits "Africa on the eastern side until he reached the Cape" (*WD* 620), which was a base for British expansion into other parts of Africa and also, a vital stopping-off point where scientific travel and inland expansion began in the early nineteenth century. Roger's itinerary in general registers Gaskell's geographical knowledge and fantasy about tropical Africa, partly factual and partly imaginative.

Of the African setting in the novel, Deirdre D'Albertis declares that the popular notion of Africa as the origin of all cultures is an important dimension of

Gaskell's account of Roger's scientific travel to Africa (146). Edgar Wright in turn suggests that Gaskell made a deliberate decision to substitute a journey to Africa for Darwin's South American tour. He argues that a strong contemporary interest in Africa increased following the publication of Richard Francis Burton's travel writing and John Hanning Speke's accounts of the discovery of the Nile in the 1850s and 1860s (221). What the explorers had done for the map of Africa might have somewhat shaped Gaskell's perception of the peripheral world. In this account, the exotic setting of Africa directs to our attention its crucial role in British history and more, the popularity of exotic settings in English literature such as travel writing and adventure stories. Later novelists, notably Henry Rider Haggard, would explore this popularity to the full. It can therefore be argued that the sense of the culture of geographical exploration is anticipated in Gaskell's depiction of scientific travels in *Wives and Daughters*.

The spirit of geographical exploration is made clear in the dialogue between Molly and her stepsister Cynthia. As Molly tells Cynthia, during Roger's stay in Arracuoba, he has sent Lord Hollingford a letter about "many curious particulars," which is read at the annual gathering of the (Royal) Geographical Society. The reading of Roger's letter "had been received with the greatest interest, and several subsequent speakers had paid the writer very high compliments" (WD 473). Roger is also invited to address the Society on his return to England. It is interesting to notice that the Royal Geographical Society (hereafter RGS) was an institution founded in 1830 for "the promotion and diffusion of that most important and entertaining branch of knowledge, GEOGRAPHY." It was arranged and conducted on a principle that geography's "advantages are of the first importance to mankind in general, and paramount to the welfare of a maritime nation like Great Britain, with its numerous and extensive foreign possessions" (*Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London I* (1831): vii). The original 460 members of the RGS in 1830 were almost entirely men of high social standing, including gentleman travelers, soldiers and sailors, with a number of natural scientists, especially geologists. The aristocratic background of the members of the RGS might well explain why Roger is the right person to carry out his scientific research in Africa despite his limited experience.

The connection between Roger and the RGS points to the fact that the British were preoccupied with exploratory travels and geographical discoveries in the nineteenth century. The RGS was instrumental in extending the cultural hegemony of empire; equally imperial activity in Africa was central to the geographical institution. As an outgrowth of the African Association and the Raleigh Club, the

RGS claimed a long-standing interest in the exploration of the African continent. While the African continent remained part of an enduring imaginative geography in most Victorian minds, the RGS had begun to assume a central role in the opening up of the African hinterland. The RGS first began to realize that it could achieve the twin aims of "the encouragement of scientific expeditions and the dissemination of geographical knowledge" through the sponsorship of African exploration in the 1850s and 1860s (Barnett 241). Under the auspices of the RGS, numerous expeditions, notably those of David Livingstone, Richard Burton, John Hanning Speke, and Henry Morton Stanley, were launched to open up the continent's interior. These explorers' geographical exploits in the service of the RGS invariably linked them to the making of imperial myth. They were men of action and energy, trying to make their way into the foreign domain and inscribe their names on its map. Of "the vast enterprise and unconquerable energy of the Anglo-Saxon race," *The Illustrated London News* reminded its reader on 13 October 1849: "The British people are in a far greater degree than any other the messengers of civilization. They have already done more by themselves and by their progeny for the extension of geographical and scientific knowledge, and the general progress of humanity, than any other people under the sun. . . ." British explorers were ambitious to venture into the unknown region, charting and rendering exotic and unfamiliar landscapes through which they have traveled. Their travel narratives often took the reader on a journey to foreign territories and created a cultural space in which geography and empire were constructed. Inevitably the explorer became one of the heroes of the colonial landscape who offered "moral models for a generation of empire builders" (Driver 27).

It is at this point that one may place the narrative of Roger's scientific travel in *Wives and Daughters* within the history of Britain's contact with Africa to present a clear picture of evolutionary theory as well as of the pursuit of science and the expansion of empire overseas. Imperial power and research in natural science cannot exist without one another. The scientific venture is inextricably interrelated with the imperialist project since Africa is a foreign territory upon which Roger exercises his "great natural powers of comparison, and classification of facts" (*WD* 384). Science in this instance constitutes a major contribution to our understanding of the relationship between metropolis and periphery. As Mary Louise Pratt observes, "[t]he systematizing of nature represents not only a European discourse about non-European worlds . . . but an urban discourse about non-urban worlds, and a lettered, bourgeois discourse about non-lettered, peasant worlds" (34-35). In this regard, Roger's quest implies that the study of animal and plant distribution over

the globe must be seen as a colonialist activity. The interplay between imperial space and intellectual authority is reinforced through the natural scientist's exploratory travels overseas.

### **Homemade Maps of Africa**

In her portrayal of Roger's scientific expedition to Africa, Gaskell invariably conjures up the prevalent Victorian imagery of an exotic land. Roger's trip to the frontier, one might say, is instrumental in defining the domestic space itself and locating the periphery at the margins of the imperial map. As Gaskell makes clear in the novel, the places where Roger has visited are unknown to most of the Hollingford inhabitants. When Molly Gibson asks her stepsister Cynthia Kirkpatrick where Roger is, the latter simply answers: "Where? Oh, I did not look exactly—somewhere in Abyssinia-Huon, I can't read the word, and it does not much signify, for it would give me no ideas" (WD 433). Cynthia's words reveal that she does not care much about where Roger is, but they also reflect the prevalent imagery of Africa as an unknown land in nineteenth-century Britain.

In the history of Britain's imperial interest, India was always the center of empire and referred to as the jewel in Britain's imperial crown. By contrast, Africa was of secondary concern—it was not the setting for great power rivalries until the age of "the scramble for Africa" in the late nineteenth century. Before that, the African continent was consistently regarded as the most unknown and unknowable region of the world, a "nullity," in European minds. Sir Roderick Murchison, a contemporary of Gaskell's and the president of the RGS, stated that Africa in most English minds was "old": it was "a geographical blank," a "terra incognita" waiting for the imperial nation to discover and explore it.<sup>7</sup> The stereotyped image of the unknown world of Africa is best seen in an 1850 presidential address of the RGS to David Livingstone for his contribution to the opening up of the continent:

Geographical discovery in Africa has long commanded, and will ever command, a greater degree of interest than in, perhaps, any other portion of the globe; and with reason: for while it was one of the earliest inhabited portions of the world, and some of its people shone

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<sup>7</sup> Presidential address, *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, xiv (1844), cxviii. Sir Roderick Murchison played a pivotal role in developing the culture of exploration during his presidency of the RGS between 1850 and 1870.

before all other nations in the scientific and industrial arts, it is now the least known and least civilized of any. Indeed, the intelligent races of Europe have less knowledge of it in the present day than they had 2000 years ago; and ignorance, with debasing and repulsive barbarism, reign almost supreme from one end of that vast peninsula to the other. (*Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* xx (1850): xxxiii)

Africa was regarded as "the least known and least civilized" of any place in the Victorian geographical imagination, despite European endeavors to discover and explore it.

Africa held a particular place in the British geographical imagination in a time when the mysteries of the continent remained mostly unsolved and when the issue of the Dark Continent was intriguing and popular in most British minds. It can be suggested that Gaskell picked up the received ideas of her time about African culture and people by depicting the foreign land as a place of hostility and terror. To present readers with the experience of geographical displacement and the complexities of life in the imperial frontier, the space of cross-cultural encounters, Gaskell exposes Roger to the perils of traveling as a white man in Africa, showing her readers how he comes to terms with the problem of survival in the wilds of untamed nature. The perception of illness had always been a threat to the Englishman traveling in Africa. Playing on this fear, Gaskell refers to Roger as an English man who "has had a slight touch of fever" during his stay in Abyssinia-Huon (*WD* 433). Roger's suffering and misery, as a consequence of fears about solitude and death, are implicated in his account to Mr. Gibson after his return—"Twelve months' solitude, in frequent danger of one's life—face to face with death—sometimes ages a man like many years' experience" (*WD* 677). As in traditional adventure fiction, interracial relationships with other women are also treated as part of the overseas travel experience in *Wives and Daughters*. An important passage in the novel may raise the issue of a black woman's racial identity. In Chapter 35, Squire Hamley tells Mr. Gibson that his son Roger might recognize the foolishness of his engagement to Cynthia after his two years' stay with "the black folk." Mr. Gibson, however, rejects this idea by saying that this will not happen owing to Cynthia's "white skin," a symbol of racial superiority as compared with that of an African woman:

" . . . He'll be wiser by the time he comes home. Two years among the black folk will have put more sense in him."

“Possible, but not probable, I should say,” replied Mr. Gibson. “Black folk are not remarkable for their powers of reasoning, I believe, so that they have not much chance of altering his opinion by argument, even if they understood each other’s language; and certainly if he shares my taste, their peculiarity of complexion will only make him appreciate white skins the more.” (WD 410-11)

Squire Hamley believes that Roger will forget all about Cynthia because of his two-year stay with the “black folk,” whereas Mr. Gibson thinks Roger will not be tempted since black women are so very different from English ideas of womanliness. Roger would still love Cynthia owing to her superior racial stock, her white skin in particular (D’Albertis 147). Given the situation, African women’s skin color can be taken as the prime signifier of racial identity as well as a cultural signifier for articulating a racial hierarchy on the globe.

The dialogue between Mr. Gibson and Squire Hamley further evokes the image of the evolutionary ladder and reflects an imperialist perception of race. Mr. Gibson’s allusion to black folk as lacking “powers of reasoning” and possessing peculiar complexions conveys his inherent racial prejudice. His color consciousness is implicated in such words as “black” and “white.” Alternatively, his assumption of reason as racial superiority supplies an example of the representation of the colonial land and its people as the Other. Mr. Gibson’s view of the native of Africa is shaped by Western perceptions of selfhood—of mastery and control, of rationality and cultural superiority.

Gaskell does not overlook the fact that it is commonplace to associate blackness with inferiority in the popular imagination. In contrast to the eighteenth-century literary figure of the “noble savage,” an image of other peoples as simple and noble, black people in the nineteenth-century English literature are frequently described as a degenerate Other—less human, less civilized, savage, wild, or animal-like. This derogatory stereotype of non-whites appears mostly in travel writing or adventure fiction. We can see a similar pattern in *Wives and Daughters* in which Africa is depicted stereotypically as a dark land of savagery and wilderness. The contrasts between center and margin, domestic and foreign/other as well as home and away are reiterated in Gaskell’s treatment of the dark continent and its people. In particular, we see a British picture of Africa through the eyes of the Gibsons, who have no direct experience of the inter-racial contact in the hinterland, but often reveal their fears of going native. Mrs. Gibson’s recollection of the nineteenth-century imagery of Africa in geography books is typical in this respect.

On one occasion, Mrs. Gibson recalls the nineteenth-century imagery of Africa by saying that "Africa is not merely an unhealthy—it is a savage—and even in some parts a cannibal country. I often think of all I've read of it in geography books, as I lie awake at night . . ." (551). Terms such as "unhealthy," "savage," and "cannibal" reveal Mrs. Gibson's bias against Africa and more, stress the binary opposition of civilization and savagery/cannibalism. The image of Africa can be said to arise from the meeting of the imperial center with geographical "others," cannibals or savages, within her own imagination. Her description indicates her desire to trace cannibals, man-eaters, or anthropophagite, over the blank spaces on colonial maps.<sup>8</sup> But Mrs. Gibson's remarks also focus on a further dimension: they imply racial stereotyping was widely disseminated through school texts and other books prepared for education or amusement in nineteenth-century England. The English woman's perception of Africa indicates the close tie between the promotion of empire and geographical education that comes to provide an ideological foundation for underpinning of a wider world: school geography texts help to facilitate the "domestication" of foreign lands and their people by bringing the world back home.

Like her stepmother Mrs. Gibson, Molly Gibson maintains a similar attitude towards the peripheral world. While holding a letter from Roger, who is "far away in mysterious darkness of distance" (*WD* 488), Molly begins to think about the wilderness of Abyssinia:

Molly took the letter, the thought crossing her mind that he had touched it, had had his hands upon it, in those far-distant desert lands, where he might be lost to sight and to any human knowledge of his fate. . . . But, as he said in apology, what had he to write about in that savage land, but his love, and his researches, and travels? There was no society, no gaiety, no new books to write about, no gossip in Abyssinian wilds. (*WD* 434)

Clearly Molly sees Africa in stereotypical terms. The derogatory image of Africa is evoked when she clings to a European concept of civilization—"society," "gaiety," "new books" and "gossips." Her ideas about "Abyssinia wilds" reflect a common

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<sup>8</sup> Mrs. Gibson's bias against Africa is combined with her contempt for Roger's scientific work. For her, Africa is the place where Roger earns his reputation as a scientific traveler simply because he "has been into more desert places, and eaten more extraordinary food, than any other Englishman of the day" (*WD* 626).

European myth that “Africa had no memory of the past, no tradition and no literature” (Curtin 396). Her perception of Africa in turn illustrates contemporary assumptions about the polarity between backwardness and refined culture. Thus, it can be said that Gaskell reflects the common thought of African culture and people through her treatment of the foreign land as a place of “mysterious darkness,” still unknown and uncharted.

The accounts of Molly and her stepmother both direct to our attention the general attitudes towards non-white races of their age. The discourse of race was, in fact, a product of science during the Victorian period. Science intensified the Victorian ideology of racial difference and the national imagery was consistently linked with biological and racial attributes. In the 1850s and 1860s, the scientific discoveries and the awareness of the accelerating pace of change made the Victorians “intensely interested in what they saw as the organic simplicity of the medieval world or the high culture of the Ancients.” What they could not admire were societies, which “might have an exotic fascination but were thought to have no history: no laws, no great towns, monuments or artifacts” (Bolt 130). Thus it can be said that the colonial landscape of Africa in *Wives and Daughters* was linked with a lower form of life opposed to the highly civilized life of England.

An emblematic scene in *Wives and Daughters* might well explain nineteenth-century British attitudes to blacks. The picture of inferior African people is summed up by Mr. Gibson’s exchange with his daughter about Roger’s physical appearance and language upon his return to Hollingford:

“Oh! is he changed?” asked Molly, a little disturbed by this account.

“No, not changed; and yet not the same. He is as brown as a berry for one thing; caught a little of the negro tinge, and a beard as fine and sweeping as my bay-mare’s tail.”

“A beard! But go on, papa. Does he talk as he used to do? I should know his voice amongst ten thousand.”

“I did not catch any Hottentot twang, if that’s what you mean. Nor did he say, ‘Caesar and Pompey berry much alike, ’specially Pompey,’ which is the only specimen of negro language I can remember just at this moment.” (WD 621)

Roger turns out to be a more manly/masculine figure after his voyages across the dark continent of Africa. Mr. Gibson thinks that Roger looks “broader, stronger—more

muscular" than ever before, while Molly views Roger's physical transformation as a product of "the climates" and "constant thought and anxiety" which deepen "the lines of character upon a face," making the "merry boyish" Roger turn into a "bronzed, bearded, grave man" (*WD* 624). Clearly in her depiction of Roger, Gaskell equates imperial manliness/manhood/masculinity with adventurous explorers, treating Africa as a testing ground for turning English youth into men. Roger's quest for scientific information and his imperial projects consequently constitute a basic element in Victorian patriarchal authority.

The preceding passage, on the other hand, stresses the crucial nexus between language and cultural/racial traits. Language, as mentioned in the conversation between Mr. Gibson and his daughter, provides a critical focus for ethnological enquiry, a basis for racial classification. Both Molly and her father are afraid that Roger might be assimilated to the African way of thinking and action during his stay with them. He might, they fear, catch the "Hottentot twang" (a language spoken by the Nama people in the Cape of Good Hope), and be rendered unable to speak standard English. The remark may be made in jest, but both Molly and her father speak in a language of racism—English, in their eyes, is the only official language, while the negro language is non-standard, retrogressive and degenerate. In short, their knowledge of Africa and its people is filtered through their cultural/racial bias, a product of metropolitan England.

In their refusal to accept "the negro tinge," the doctor and his daughter both display their distaste for black people, or xenophobia, fear of the foreign. Their prejudice against Africanized English indicates their cultural chauvinism: they tend to regard language as a racial trait. For them, language is not only a means of communication, but a sign of racial/cultural consciousness. Their ethnocentrism only allows them to think in terms of a cultural hierarchy in which color and language are the keys to an understanding of race as well as to a construction of identity. In some way, Mr. Gibson refers to the names of Caesar and Pompey used for slaves by repeating the clichéd jokes of Negro people looking alike. His remarks, however, only emphasize his naivety ironically—he knows nothing about the African language, but has taken his information from representations of blacks, or as Angus Easson suggests, the speech in Ethiopian (Negro) minstrel shows.<sup>9</sup> The minstrels were a popular form of entertainment from the 1840s to the 1870s, and in

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<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Gaskell's intention to portray British racial attitudes of her time by using the clichéd jokes of Negro people in minstrel shows can be seen as anachronism. The main action in *Wives and Daughters* is set in the 1820s and 1830s, yet black and white minstrels, which originated in America, did not appear on the English stage until 1836. For a detailed account of the origin of minstrel shows, see Lorimer 86.

origin they appealed to anti-slavery sentiment and provided a popular extension of philanthropic views of the Negro. Such manifestations of popular culture consistently created a disparaging and racial stereotype of blacks and stressed the growth of English racial conceit in the Victorian era. Taken together, then, Mr. Gibson's remarks represent the characteristic English opinions about colored races. Due to their ethnocentrism, the English think of their place in the world only in terms of cultural hierarchy; they tend to glorify their Anglo-Saxon race by displaying contempt for non-white races. The image of Africa, therefore, remains "the negative reflection, the shadow, of the British self-image" (Hammond and Jablow 197)—the concept of the British themselves determines their concept of Africa.

Gaskell's representation of Africa in *Wives and Daughters*, as we have seen, is based primarily on fantasies, desires, and imaginings: the exercise of imagination is most crucial to her pursuit of an imperial geography. Africa is largely *terra incognita* in Gaskell's mind and therefore her understanding of the far-off land is conceptual, rather than physical. But the significance of her imaginative engagement with Africa lies in the fact that the exotic setting provides a convenient paradigm for Gaskell to portray an aspect of scientific exploration of the Victorian period, and to act as a female agent assisting in the imperial project by writing about the outpost of empire. Gaskell, however, never finished her study of "the natural history of a provincial life" in her last novel. With only a chapter or so left to write, she died while taking tea with members of her family in November 1865. Frederick Greenwood, the *Cornhill's* editor, concluded the novel by ringing wedding bells for Molly and Roger, the latter later "[becoming] professor at some great scientific institution, and wins his way in the world handsomely" (WD 684). Overall, Roger's outstanding achievement invites us to reflect upon his scientific research in Africa. Scientific investigation makes Africa a repository of raw materials to fit into a *white* man's categories of knowledge. At the same time, Africa is also a geographical territory where we can address issues of language, blackness, and racial identity within the context of Victorian imperial culture. These issues are functional in that racial differences and cultural hierarchy form an important part of Victorian popular evolutionary theory. More importantly, they suggest a dichotomy between center/metropolitan and margin/hinterland, a dichotomy that is suggestive of the representation of Britain's cultural identity, the common imaginings of the "Other," as well as the production of scientific knowledge linked with imperial power and cultural superiority.

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58 quotes from Wives and Daughters: "Sometimes one likes foolish people for their folly, better than wise people for their wisdom." "How easy it is to judge rightly after one sees what evil comes from judging wrongly." Elizabeth Gaskell, Wives and Daughters. tags: evil, judgement, right. 1212 likes. Like. "There is nothing like wounded affection for giving poignancy to anger." Elizabeth Gaskell, Wives and Daughters. tags: affection, anger, betrayal, father-and-son, love, parent-and-child. 229 likes. Like. "I won't say she was silly, but I think one of us was silly, and it was not me." Elizabeth Gaskell, Wives and Daughters. 175 likes. Like. "The French girls would tell you, to believe that you were pretty would ELIZABETH GASKELL'S WIVES AND DAUGHTERS, often considered her finest and most psychologically complex novel, tells its story through narrative indirection" what Gaskell's heroine Molly Gibson identifies in a conversation late in the novel as telling a story with a "mental squint; the surest way to spoil a narration" (623; ch. 58). In this conversation, Molly is conscious of her audience"her admiring and encouraging aunts and her less admiring and less encouraging stepmother. Like Gaskell, Molly is conscious of the presence of a "critical listening." Reading "an every"day story" through bifocals: Seriality and the limits of realism in Elizabeth Gaskell's Wives and Daughters. Chapter. Jan 2015. J.M. Chavez. View.