

Gaskell the Ethnographer: The Case of “Modern Greek Songs”

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*Reading any good ballad is like eating game;
and almost everything else seems poor and tasteless after it.*
(E. Gaskell, “Modern Greek Songs”)

On 18 February 1854, Charles Dickens wrote to Elizabeth Gaskell: “Such has been the distraction of my mind in my story that I have twice forgotten to tell you how much I liked the ‘Modern Greek Songs’. The article is printed and at press for the next number as ever is” (Dickens 329). A week later, “Modern Greek Songs” appeared in the 25 February issue of *Household Words* as part of Elizabeth Gaskell’s regular contributions to Dickens’ weekly journal together with works by such writers as Henry Morley, William Duthie, James Henry Leigh Hunt, William Blanchard Jerrold and others.

Elizabeth Gaskell’s active interest in popular traditions, customs and folklore was well-known and it was not obviously confined to those of her native England or Scotland or even Wales and Ireland, but was wide enough to include a variety of folkloric traditions of other, often distant, lands and their people as showcased by her interest in “Modern Greek Songs.”¹ Gaskell’s interest in folklore of all kinds, moreover, often becomes manifest in her own literary works, especially as part of the plot in her Gothic pieces, where along with her exploration of the supernatural, she also displays an interest in local lore and traditions.²

Gaskell’s ethnographic strategies, rhetoric and role as mediatrix between cultures, mainly those regarding class specificity and socio-cultural space(s), have been duly discussed

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¹ As A. W. Ward notes in his introduction to the Knutsford edition of *The Works of Mrs. Gaskell*, “Her books and her letters are full of observation of such relics and reminiscences of the past among her own conservative neighbours at Lancashire and Cheshire; and they attracted her in the course of her wonderings home and abroad her readings about distant lands and their inhabitants” (qtd. in Sharps 196).

² It was often the case that Elizabeth Gaskell quoted epigraphs from a variety of popular sources following in a tradition initiated by Sir Walter Scott in the Waverly novels. These would be commonly attributed to popular folk material such as old song or old play both parts of the so-called popular wisdom. A characteristic example of this practice of hers is her use, among other (poetic) works, of the oral traditional “Oldham Weaver”, a Lancashire ballad, in chapter four of *Mary Barton* (1848) as well as her quoting, in the same chapter, from another well-known ancient ballad, “The Demon Lover”.

by scholars mainly in terms of what has come to be known by the term “cultural mapping” in works like *Cranford*, *Mary Barton* and *North and South*. With her “Modern Greek Songs, however, Gaskell embarks further on a comparative exploration of (inter)nationally diverse cultures that nonetheless seem to bear overt similarities albeit their geographical distinctness and distance, thus celebrating cultural diversity as a valuable universal given.

Through “Modern Greek Songs” Gaskell intended to present to her English readership a review of Claude Fauriel’s *Chants Populaires de la Grèce Moderne* (1824-1825) in the form of a general survey of the whole work, including summaries of certain parts of it which she particularly liked. Almost all the information regarding Greek traditions, customs and folksong in Gaskell’s article is drawn from the introduction of volume I of the original French edition of Fauriel’s work (*Discours préliminaire*, p.p. vii-cxLiv). However, Gaskell seems to be well-familiar with both volumes of Fauriel’s study, for she does not hesitate to re-arrange Fauriel’s introduction (from the first part onwards), using at the same time, also material from the second volume of the book in an attempt to unify, by summarizing, her material so as to support her own text while imparting to her reader as much information as she can on Fauriel’s work in its entirety. The material she uses in her article is not, of course, exclusively drawn from Fauriel, but also from personal experience and anecdote through which she draws parallels between the Greek and other cultures including her own. It covers a wide spectrum of Greek provincial life as this is lived through a series of seasonal feasts and celebrations along with all those ceremonial performative acts that underlie life and death, such as customs related to farewell rituals as well as betrothal, wedding and funeral ceremonies. Special mention is also made to the folksongs and ballads that occasionally accompany these events, while a large part of her article is devoted to the Greek armed warriors the Klephts (freebooters) and Armatolians³ who were unofficially involved in the struggle for independence and who are likened to such heroic English outlaws as Robin Hood. This was the time when Greece had been under Turkish rule, for almost four hundred years, as part of the Ottoman Empire since 1453, (which was the year of the fall of Constantinople), during which an

³ “In fact these blind beggars are the novelists and the historians of modern Greece; but if one subject be more clear to them than another, it is always the deeds of arms of the Klephts; the Adam Bells, and Clyne o’ the Cloughs, or perhaps still more the Robin Hoods, of Greece” (6) Gaskell notes. The description of the Klephts and the Armatoloi are also presented in Sheridan’s translation at some length:

The Klephtai (or Plundereres) are either Greeks, who originally never submitted to the Turkish yoke, but sacrificed the possession of more fertile lands to the love of liberty, established their home and country in the wild and extensive mountain tracks of Epirus and Acarnania, and from thence kept a desultory, but still renewed, warfare against the usurpers of their possessions; or they are Armatoloi, subsequently pillaged and outraged into rebellion (Sheridan 2).

For an extensive presentation of their role, lifestyle and deeds see, Charles-Brinsley Sheridan as *The Songs of Greece, from the Romaic Text, Edited by M.C. Fauriel, with Additions. Translated into English Verse*. London: Longman, 1825.

extended guerrilla war against their oppressors was systematically fought by these armed warriors. Their daily habits, living conditions, characterized by their laborious struggle for survival, occasional battles with the conquerors of their country, strict code of honour and their patriotism are duly emphasised: "These are", Gaskell tells us, following Fauriel, "the Adam Bells, and Clyne o' the Cloughs, or perhaps, still more the Robin Hoods of Greece" ("Modern Greek Songs" 6), while she draws explicit parallels between their habits and lifestyle:

These mountain peasantry came down in armed bands upon the fertile plains and the luxurious towns, and stripped the Turks and those who had quietly submitted to their sway, whenever they could; it was from those who were thus robbed, that the mountaineers received the name of Klephts. But our Saxon ancestors did the same to the Normans; Robin Hood was an English Klepht, taking only what he thought was unjustly acquired, and unfairly held. The Turks found it rather difficult to make war against these guerillas; they fled to wild and rocky recesses of the mountains when pursued (8).

By being particularly defensive of the Klephts, comparing their acts to those of her own Saxon ancestors, Gaskell seems to be making an indirect, albeit explicit, comment on the same practices followed by the people of her own culture when it comes to celebrating similar heroic deeds by native heroes. She thus sets a contrast between the way readers might tend to judge and then the way they might think of their own history, in an attempt on her part to soften their judgment.

Gaskell often re-arranges the information that is scattered in various parts of Fauriel's ninth-part introduction thus smoothly introducing her reader to this type of Greek popular lore, tradition, folksong and custom. The origin of the songs, ballads and dances that accompany the victories and the feasts of these outlaws, usually chanted and performed after victorious battles is also given special attention as part of the blind poets tradition, the so-called local minstrelship. "All these songs are chanted to particular airs. The poet must be also his own musician: if he can also improvise he is a fully-accomplished minstrel" (6) Gaskell notes, while also providing a detailed account of both the origin of the creators, "the little Homers of the day" as she calls them, and of the songs themselves as well as of the dances that often accompany their performance. She writes:

These minstrels are divided into two sets; those who merely remember what they have learnt from others, and those who compose ballads of their own, in addition to their stores of memory. These latter, in their long and quiet walks through country which they know to be wild and grand, although they never more may see it, "turn inward," and recall all that they have heard that has excited their curiosity, or stirred their imagination either in the traditional history of their native land, or in the village accounts of some local hero. Some of the minstrels spread the fame of men whose deeds would have been unknown beyond the immediate mountain neighbourhood of each, from shore to shore. In fact these blind beggars are the novelists and the historians of modern Greece (6).

Gaskell probably got to know Fauriel and his work through her close association with her Paris-based friend, Madam Mohl, (born Mary Clarke), wife of the German orientalist Julius Mohl. Besides being an influential literary patron and art connoisseur, Madam Mohl was one of the best-known salonists of the Parisian intellectual circles, whose drawing rooms were frequented by some of the most sophisticated intellectuals/literary celebrities of the time including Stendhal, Chateaubriand and, of course, Claude Fauriel himself.⁴ “A woman of genius, but a genius for people, not on the page” Jenny Uglow notes, “Mary Clarke-Mohl, Clarkey, as her friends called her, “wore an air of freedom that seemed unattainable for women in the British society” (347). Mary Clarke had been in love with Fauriel for some years, but he would not respond to it, although he shared her life as a regular member of her salon, and it was four years after he died, according to Jenny Uglow, that Mary Clarke finally married Julius Mohl, Fauriel’s younger friend (348).

It was also through Felicia Hemans’ version of “The Message to the Dead” which she explicitly mentions in the article itself, that Gaskell developed an interest in Fauriel’s text. She also mentions an occasional encounter with a Greek family and their traditions and customs during the festive Easter period, which bears significant importance in the Greek Orthodox tradition. Indirectly, also, through Gaskell’s allusion to Felicia Hemans’s poetry, which often refers to the contemporary Hellenic reality, it becomes clear that it is not only Fauriel’s work that provides Gaskell with a link to the Greek folkloric background, but, also, a whole body of contemporary poetry that dealt with things Greek, both ancient and contemporary, such as an ancient glorious past, but also a less fortunate present characterized by the Greek struggle for independence against the Ottoman empire.

Claude-Charles Fauriel (1772-1844) himself was a remarkable scholar of excellent reputation a prolific writer and well-versed in comparative literature, but, also, a man with an eye for other generic forms, especially those springing from the oral tradition, such as folk literature, as his work on “Modern Greek Songs” illustrates. His book was widely read in France and was obviously inspired by Fauriel’s own interest in and enthusiasm for the cause of the Greek struggle for independence already under way well before the year his work was published, and was at its very height in the year 1824, the year when Fauriel’s work was published. As is evident from the introduction (Preliminaire) of the book, Fauriel displays an unusual familiarity with the Greek language, traditions and customs, which might partly

⁴ As Pamela Law notes, “the *salons* in their diversity were still functioning in the nineteenth century as complex ‘public spheres’ useful in the formation of opinion, taste, manners and morals” (61) especially when conducted by such connoisseurs as Madame Récamiere and Mary Clarke the latter having been a regular attendant of Madame Recmiere’s circle and salon before starting her very own.

account for Gaskell's mistaken information about his being Greek "in spite of his French name" ("Modern Greek Songs" 1), whereas it was common knowledge that he was French and a native of Saint Etienne, having spent his childhood in Vivarais.⁵ Although Sheridan's English translation (an abbreviated version of the original two-volume text) of *Chants Populaires de la Grèce Moderne* appeared in 1825, that is, shortly after the original French text, Gaskell seems to be unaware of this for all her references are to the French original without avoiding, however, some inaccuracies as she quotes from it.⁶

What were the reasons, one might wonder, behind Gaskell's decision to present to her English reading audience an account of Fauriel's book? She provides a couple of them in the introduction of her article, the main one pertaining to the exceptional interest this particular work presented to its French readers upon publication and the hope that it will be equally interesting to the readers of *Household Words*, since it deals with "the manners and peculiar character of the people among whom these ballads circulate and the history of whose ancestors and popular heroes they commemorate" (1). She also claims, rather enigmatically, and in contradistinction to her previous statement, that the work is no longer in circulation and for this reason largely unknown to the majority of her English readers as it has already been twenty years since its publication without mentioning, however, Sheridan's own statement in his English translation of Fauriel's work that the original text had been widely known among the scholarly circles of London for quite some time after it was originally published: "I have lately met with a French book which has interested me much; and, as it is now out of print, and was never very extensively known, I imagine some account of it may not be displeasing to the readers of *Household Words*" (1), Gaskell tells us at the beginning of "Modern Greek Songs" further adding to her reasons for her choice the fact that Fauriel's text deals with "the habits and customs of a people whom we are apt to moan over, as having fallen low from the high estate of the civilization of their [polished] ancestors" for "it becomes worth one's while to learn something of their present state" (1).

What was Elizabeth Gaskell's relation to the Greek civilization, both ancient and contemporary? This is another question that might arise as one looks into the reasons for her choosing to write about things Greek. As it becomes clear from the article itself, as well as

⁵ According to Michael Hertzfeld, European scholars such as the French Claude Fauriel and the German Werner von Haxthausen never visited Greece, despite their active interest in, extensive research in the field of its folkloric tradition and their subsequent recording of them.

⁶ While, for instance, Fauriel explicitly mentions that the population of Greece at the time was between seven and eight million (Quant aux sept ou huit millions d' homes, *Discours Preliminaire* vii), Gaskell restricts it to four million ("as there are four millions of men", "Modern Greek Songs" 1). She also records the name of the Greek klepht Niko Tsaras as Niko Isaras. The former error could be attributed to haste (it is well-known that she was always under pressure with her writings amidst her numerous daily duties and responsibilities) the latter being probably a typo.

from the information we have as regards her general educational background, Gaskell developed a familiarity with the history and mythology of ancient Greece. Place names like Thessaly (referring to the central municipal division of Greece) and various forms and deities, such as Oreads, Satyrs, Graces, Hamdryads, Nymphs, Neriads are mentioned in “Modern Greek Songs” thus proving a certain familiarity with ancient Greek mythology, but Gaskell appears to be informed, up to a point, also on contemporary Greek reality as her account of her visit to the Manchester Greek family during the festive period of Easter shows. However, Gaskell’s interest in, even admiration, for a most glorious ancient Hellenic past must be seen in light of the influence of Romanticism on her as well as her love for all sorts of genuinely popular verse and folksong and their creators endorsed by such celebrated poets as William Wordsworth, Gaskell’s own favourite poet. Popular verse and poetry constitute for her, “real ballads – poems springing out from the heart of the nation whenever it is deeply stirred, and circulating from man to man with the rapidity of flame never written down, but never forgotten” (7), since these cultural products, springing from the very centre of human existence and experience, never cease to accompany almost all aspects of human activity. Gaskell shows a lively interest in the indisputable artistic and literary value of folksongs (“very poetical, and full of meaning in themselves”, as she claims), drawing parallels with those of the Scottish tradition, thus attempting a comparative approach of the two cultures very important in itself, while also drawing an analogy between these orally transmitted songs as well as between certain customs and superstitions common to various cultures as these become manifest through folksongs.⁷

Gaskell’s fascination with local lore, popular custom and folksong becomes manifest in the very beginning of her article, where she draws a parallel between Fauriel’s study and Sir Walter Scott’s, the historical novelist and poet’s, three-volume set of collected ballads, titled *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802- 1803), which displays a similar structure to that of Fauriel’s work, comprising an extensive, annotated introduction just like Fauriel’s study. There are, moreover, references to other scholars, such as to the Scottish geologist, writer and folklorist Hugh Miller (1802-1856) which further testify to Gaskell’s lively interest in various forms of folklore. Also of note, is Gaskell’s use of comparative comments to complement and expand those of Fauriel’s text, a fact that testifies to her ability to trace and display the similarities between traditions and customs which are in other ways diverse.

⁷ She writes: “Many ballads are composed expressly for these occasions; nor can there be a surer mode of securing their popularity. One sung for the first time at a panegyri is circulated the next day through eight or ten villages. Some of these songs are literally ballads in the old Provençal sense of the word” (7)

A parallelism between feasts and customs in Scotland and Greece that occur throughout the annual time cycle constitutes her initial object of comparison. The New Year's Day celebrations of the Greeks are compared to those of the Scottish tradition, as these were collected and recorded by Sir Walter Scott's in his *Border Minstrelsy*. "In both cases" Gaskell tells us, there is a preliminary discourse explaining the manners and peculiar character of these people among whom these ballads circulate" (1) as well as certain similarities, but also differences in the ways their customs are practiced.

Let us take the household songs. There are two feasts which are celebrated in every house. The first is on New Year's Day, the feast of St. Basil in the Greek Church. The account which M. Fauriel gives reminds me much of a Scottish New Year's Day. The young men pass from one house to another until all their friends have been visited; bringing with them presents, and going, in glad procession, to salute all their acquaintances. But, instead of our "I wish you a happy new year and many of them", the young Greeks, on entering each house, sing some verses in honour of the master or head of the family; others in honour of the mistress; the sons of the house have each their song, nor are the daughters forgotten. Those who are absent or dead receive this compliment last of all (1).

Similarly, the celebrations and festivities performed in connection with the reception and/or welcoming of Spring, which in Greece, customarily coincides with the first of March of each year, are compared to those performed in celebration of the same event on the first of May in England:

In Greece this is held on the first of March; the first of May would often be early greeting to the spring in England. At this pretty holiday, the children in their spring of human life join the young men, and go singing about the streets, and asking for small presents in honour of the soft and budding time; and every one gives them an egg, or some cheese, or some other simple produce of the country. The song they sing is one which, for its grace and the breath of spring and flowers which perfumes it, is known in many countries, as well as in Greece, under the name of the Song of the Swallow. The children carry about with them the figure of a swallow rudely cut in wood, and fastened to a kind of little windmill, which is turned by a piece of string fastened to a cylinder (2).⁸

Another interesting comparison relates to the similarities, "and slight differences" (7) between the so-called Greek Panegyris, "feasts in honour of the patron saint of some one hamlet" (7) and English wakes:

They must bear a close resemblance to the wakes in England; for they are always held on the Sunday after the saint's day to whom the parish church is dedicated. But there are some slight differences between a Greek panegyri and English wakes; the Eastern festival is gayer and more simple in character (7).

Comparisons, however, are not restricted to customs and rituals within the time cycle. Gaskell is also interested in betrothal and marriage as well as funeral rituals and folksong, the latter known as "myriologia" all of which have constituted an integral part of provincial everyday life in Greece, particularly during the years when Greece was under Ottoman rule and occupation. "At every one of the ceremonials...a song appropriate to the occasion is chanted; they explain the motive of each particular act – of what event in human life is to be

⁸ The Song of the Swallow is a custom that still revives in many parts of Greece on the 1st Of March of each year.

considered a type” (4), she tells us. What is also of interest to the reader of “Modern Greek Songs” is the fact that although Gaskell is intent upon giving a strictly descriptive account of how these ceremonies are performed, she also alludes to the cultural norms, conventions and stereotypes governing the social bonds and relations of those inhabiting these rural communities. The bride’s position, as an object of display as well as one of exchange and as agent of servitude in her husband’s family, within society is not to pass unnoticed here. She will remain symbolically veiled and unseen until the middle of the banquet and throughout her married life living in the shadowy margins of her newly acquired patriarchal family under the rule of her in-laws and husband, which is from now intent upon replacing that of her father.

[A]fter the *cortège* has borne the bride to the house of her husband, the whole party adjourn to church, where the religious ceremony is performed. Then they return to the dwelling of the bridegroom, where they all sit down and feast; except the bride, who remains veiled, standing alone, until the middle of the banquet, when the paranymph draws near, unlooses the veil, which falls down, and she stands blushing, exposed to the eyes of all the guests. The next day is given up to the performance of dances peculiar to a wedding. The third day the relations and friends meet all together, and lead the bride to the fountain, from the waters of which she fills a new earthen vessel; and into which she throws various provisions. They afterwards dance in circles round the fountain (4).

Within the same context, Gaskell pays particular attention to the death and funeral rituals performed once a beloved person has died. Following Fauriel’s paradigm, the myriologia, funeral folksongs chanted in mournful sadness exclusively by women who sit around the dead person’s coffin receive Gaskell’s attention as a universal cultural phenomenon accordingly practiced not just by the Greeks, but also by her contemporary Irish as well as by the ancient Hebrews:

When any one dies, his wife, his mother, and his sisters, all come up to the poor motionless body, and softly close the eyes and the mouth...Other women are busy with the corpse while they change their dress in a neighbour's house; the body is dressed in the best clothes the dead possessed; and it is then laid on a low bed ... leaving the door open, so that all who wish once more to gaze on the face of the departed may enter in. All who come range themselves around the bed, and weep and cry aloud without restraint. As soon as they are a little calmer some one begins to chant the myriologia - a custom common to the ancient Hebrews, as well as to the more modern Irish - with their keenness and their plaintive enumeration of the goods, and blessings, and love which the deceased possessed in this world which he has left. In the mountains of Greece, the nearest and dearest among the female relations first lifts up her voice in the myriologia; she is followed by others, either sisters or friends (4).

Special mention is also made of the habit of the mourners to use the dead person as a medium to send messages to their dead relatives, a custom widely practiced also in the Highlands of England, Lancashire in particular:

Occasionally there is some one among the assemblage of mourners who has also lately lost a beloved one, and whose full hearts yet yearn for the sympathy in their griefs or joys which the dead were ever ready to give, while they were yet living. They take up the strain; and, in a form of song used from time immemorial, they conjure the dead lying before them to be the messenger of the intelligence they wish to send to him, who is gone away for ever. A similar superstition is prevalent in the Highlands.” (5).

The article concludes with an extensive reference to a number of Greek pagan traditions and superstitions, drawn from the fifth part of Fauriel's introduction. As these have survived from ancient times, many of them constitute remnants of the Greek antiquity intermingled with a later Christian tradition. Although, "the Greeks would shudder if they thought they preserved any of the old Pagan superstitions" Gaskell notes, "without their knowing it, much of the heathen belief is mingled with their traditional observances" (10), noting shortly after that "[m]any of the superstitions derived from their ancestors are common to all nations" (10). Interestingly, it is this sense of universality viewed, perhaps, through the prism of Gaskell's own Unitarian background that permeates Gaskell's text throughout, probably springing from her own Unitarian Background. It hints, somehow, at a belief in faiths older, larger and more universal and encompassing than Christianity alone.

An analogy is finally drawn between the way plague is personified "as a blind woman, going from house to house giving death to all whom she touches" (10) in a similar way both in Scotland and Greece as well as the habit, common both in the English and Greek folk tradition, of resorting to euphemism in order to refer to a number of evil forms, evil sates, disease, even death itself:

The Furies are no longer known; but every one remembers how the attempt was made to propitiate them by calling them the Eumenides; just as in Scotland the fairies, who stole children and performed all manner of small mischief, were called "the good people ... The small-pox is personified as a woman scowling on children, but who may be mollified by calling her, and invoking her under a Greek name which means "she who mercifully spares;" the small-pox indeed is universally spoken of as Eulogia - the "well spoken-of", she whom all are bound under pain of terrible penalties to name with respect ... Death is personified under the form of a stern old man, who comes to summon the living to leave the light of day. He is called Charon, although his office is more properly that of Mercury (11).

Through her "Modern Greek Songs" Gaskell succeeded in presenting the readers of the really popular *Household Words*, with some interesting aspects of the life of the people inhabiting the Greek provinces of the time. At the same time, along with many other literary intellectuals of her country, Lord Byron being the most prominent among them, she further contributed to the development of a philhellenic spirit towards the cause of the Greek liberation that was already under way within the scholarly circles of England and she did so in a most pleasant way by incorporating into her work "something she had herself observed, and in such way as to grace it with a touch of poetry and romance" (Sharps 195).

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