

Elizabeth Gaskell, Victorian Culture, and the Art of Fiction

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**Elizabeth Gaskell,
Victorian Culture, and the Art of Fiction**

Original Essays for the Bicentenary

Sandro Jung
(Ed.)



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Sandro Jung (ed.)
Elizabeth Gaskell, Victorian Culture, and the Art of Fiction – Original Essays for the Bicentenary

Gent, Academia Press, 2010, v + 217 pp.

ISBN 978 90 382 1629 4
D/2010/4804/108
U1438

Layout: proxess.be

Cover: Nevelland.
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Preface

In September 2006 a group of international scholars gathered in the Victorian Peel Building at Salford University in Greater Manchester to engage in critical dialogue with the works of Elizabeth Gaskell. The setting was fitting, especially as Gaskell spent a large part of her writing life in Manchester, the city whose cultural hybridity and discursive plurality, even in the early Victorian period, inspired and shaped her astute observational and creative powers. Nowadays, significant collections of Gaskelliana are held in special collections at the John Rylands Library, Manchester Central Library, and the Portico Library, and scholars wishing to study the genesis of some of her texts can consult autograph material alongside an extensive range of secondary print sources at these libraries. Equally, important loci associated with Gaskell, 84 Plymouth Grove, her home in Manchester, and Cross Street Chapel, where her husband, William, was the Unitarian minister, can be visited today.

The present collection of scholarly essays on Gaskell's writing was conceived as a contribution to the commemoration, in 2010, of the bicentenary of Gaskell's birth; while some of the essays derived directly, albeit in shorter form, from the proceedings at the conference, others were solicited during the long gestation process of this composite contribution to Gaskell studies. The enthusiastic participation of both national and international scholars in a critical exploration of Gaskell's oeuvre conducted to the success of the event. It is hoped that the expansion of the papers presented and the inclusion of further essays will make this publication an equally successful scholarly endeavour. This assemblage of essays on the contexts, discourses, and cultural milieu of Gaskell and her writings, as well as investigations of the authorial uses of the various "mes" that she fashions throughout her career, takes stock of earlier important scholarship; while consolidating established routes of access, the essays also indicate areas such as the constructions of authorial personae in her letters and the *Life of Charlotte Brontë* that reveal her as a more ambivalent figure. She is eager to negotiate her relationship with Brontë to her advantage, and her performative self-fashioning goes beyond the roles of the benevolent and socially aware writer, mother, and wife – in short,

what earlier twentieth-century critics have captured in the unsatisfactory title of “Mrs. Gaskell.” Other areas of reassessment include Gaskell’s often underrated work for journals, her short stories and tales, while yet others include the revisiting of oft-explored issues such as gender-specific constructions in the Victorian period. Medical discourses are discussed alongside discourses of moral and gendered notions of deviance and representations of female liminality in the form of the coquette. Some of the studies interrogate philosophical questions, especially in *Sylvia’s Lovers*, which aim to complement earlier readings and conduce to holistic appreciations of Gaskell’s *Weltanschauung*, while another offers a comparative perspective on the complicated notion of literacy in Gaskell and Dickens. Context-driven research is complemented by textual criticism. In that regard, micro-textual analysis reveals the craft of the author’s “fiction” – a term interpreted to comprise all of Gaskell’s writings, including her letters, for, as a number of contributions demonstrate, Gaskell constructs even her “private” epistolary voice in ways that invoke her professional strategies of self-fashioning. Yet other essays address questions of masculinity, especially Gaskell’s conceptualisation of the Victorian gentleman, her constructions and functionalisation of humour and femininity in *Cranford*, emotional commitment and deceit, class (and Gaskell’s personal negotiations of relationships with figures from a different class than her own), or the Wordsworthian presence in the author’s early writings. The volume concludes its critical interventions with an insightful Darwinist contextualisation of *Wives and Daughters*. All contributions effectively respond to some of the discursive needs of Gaskell scholarship at the beginning of the twenty-first century that the plenary speaker, Alan Shelston, the President of the Gaskell Society, pointed out in his conference address. The address is the opening piece in this collection and formulates some of the objectives of exploration and critical investigation that the essays following it perform in their assessments of Gaskell’s work.

The spirit of collegial exchange that informed the atmosphere at the conference has served the contributors to expand their arguments; the result is a wide-ranging collection that clearly reflects the authors’ expertise and the desire to share insights and interrogate formulated positions in Gaskell studies. Ultimately, it is hoped that this critical intervention will encourage further reflection and engagement with Gaskell’s works. Three editors of Gaskell’s works participated in the conference: Alan Shelston, Joanne Shattock (the general editor of the “standard” modern edition of Gaskell’s works published by Pickering and Chatto in 2005-2006), and Angus Easson. The latter, the doyen of Gaskell studies and emeritus professor at Salford University, had kindly agreed to attend the conference and act as a respondent, offering help and guidance to all colleagues, especially in the concluding roundtable discussion. The audience included members of the

Gaskell Society who raised questions, offered comments, and contributed to the lively debate.

The contributions in this volume have made this collection a truly international publication. Essays by scholars from Australia, Belgium, Italy, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America stand next to each other and bear testimony to the enduring appeal of Gaskell in all these countries and their academic communities. Without the authors' cooperation this publication would not have been possible, and I am appreciative of their patience while I was seeing the volume through the publishing process. Equally, I gratefully acknowledge the financial support granted by Paul Bellaby, then director of the Institute for Social, Cultural, and Policy Research at Salford University. A personal word of thanks to my former colleagues and students at Salford is in order, too, as it was they who explored with me the literature of the Victorian period and offered new insights. I am especially grateful to Brian Maidment for his support and advice. At Ghent University, I have benefitted from the good cheer of my Victorianist colleague, Marysa Demoor, who encouraged the publication of the volume. Thanks are also due to Pieter Borghart of Academia Press who has been an excellent and enthusiastic editor and who directly expressed his interest in publishing such a fitting tribute to celebrate the art of Elizabeth Gaskell. Lastly, I acknowledge my gratitude to the Manchester City Council – Archives and Local Studies for granting permission to print the image of Gaskell on the cover of this book.

Sandro Jung
Ghent, June 2010