The biographer vindicated: Elizabeth Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë

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by
Christine Alexander
University of New South Wales

Elizabeth Gaskell's biography of Charlotte Brontë is a great portrait. It is a work of art akin to Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*, or to Richmond's fine portrait of Elizabeth Gaskell herself. We recognise in these artefacts the hand of genius—literary or artistic—at work in creating an image. To look for incorrect details or to find fault with the embellishment of a nose or an eye is to miss the point. The portrait should stand on its own as an image of its subject seen through the eyes of the artist.

In recent years Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* has been criticised on a number of issues. In particular, Juliet Barker has accused her of writing 'polemic', of being unjust to Brontë's father and husband, and inaccurate in her facts. She finds it 'astonishing that Mrs Gaskell's personal and professional reputation has remained unsullied despite her underhand and shabby treatment' in the biography.[1] I believe that this type of criticism is misplaced in the case of a literary biography. I want to argue today that the creating of fictions is a legitimate part of the biographer's art, just as the stroke of a brush might accentuate the frown of a subject in a painting. It is the expression of personality, of character, of ambition, of regret, of love and hate that one finds in great portraits; and the background must

necessarily be muted, shaped, perhaps even distorted, to throw the central image into relief.

Now I am not arguing that a biographer should be deliberately inaccurate and falsify facts: 'creative facts' are fine in an historical novel but simply devalue a literary biography. Elizabeth Gaskell did not intentionally get her facts about Mr Brontë wrong and there is no doubt that she should have checked the gossip she relied on. But like all biographers, she selected the facts that supported the image she had chosen to portray. And her emphasis as a Victorian writer was on revealing the 'signs' of a person's life rather than on a bald description of the facts.

For years we have known that some of the facts in Gaskell's biography are wrong; yet the book has stood the test of time. It has been called 'the first and still one of the finest, psychological studies of the writer at work' despite its misuse of evidence and suppression of material.[2] Writers on both Gaskell and the Brontës return to it time and time again, not because it is always correct but because its picture of the Brontës is one of the most interesting and reliable likenesses we have. It is written by a contemporary who knew Charlotte Brontë herself and it is written by a talented verbal artist who was keenly aware of the technique of her portraiture. For years Elizabeth Gaskell's volume accompanied the standard editions of the Brontës' works and its importance has been recognised here in Japan by Professor Nakaoka in his new translation of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*.

I want to concentrate, first, on Elizabeth Gaskell's initial conception of her subject: on the way she first perceived Charlotte Brontë and began to mould her image of the woman she wanted to paint in words. Secondly, I want to look at some of the 'signs' she inserted in her portrait so that her audience could read and recreate for themselves the image she wished to portray. Barker might call it 'polemic' to write a vindication of Charlotte Brontë's character 'from the imputations of the literary critic'; I call it the creation

of literary biography, a portrait in words.

Elizabeth Gaskell first encountered Charlotte Brontë through her writing. Like others of her contemporaries she felt the power of *Jane Eyre*, but was puzzled about its morality. In 1849 she advised one young friend to 'Read "Jane Eyre", it is an uncommon book. I don't know if I like it or dislike it. I take the opposite side to the person I am talking with always in order to hear some convincing arguments to clear up my opinions.' And like her contemporaries, Gaskell was eager to know if 'Currer Bell' was a woman or a man.

You can imagine her delight when Brontë actually wrote to her, not revealing her real identity but making clear the fact that she was a woman and enclosing a draft of *Shirley* for Gaskell's advice. Gaskell wrote back immediately, congratulating Brontë and saying that she intended to keep Currer Bell's works as a treasure for her daughters.

Elizabeth Gaskell was now more curious than ever about the anonymous female author. Despite the fact that she had fought to preserve her own anonymity, she pursued Brontë's identity with vigour. To Catherine Winkworth she wrote excitedly: 'Currer Bell (aha! what will you give me for a secret?) She's a she — that I will tell you — who has sent me "Shirley"'. Soon after, Gaskell heard from Harriet Martineau about Brontë's meeting with her in London and wrote her first description of Charlotte, before she had even set eyes on her:

> a little, very little, bright haired sprite, looking not above 15, very unsophisticated, neat & tidy. . . Her father a Yorkshire clergyman who has never slept out of his house for 26 years; she has lived a most retired life.

Gaskell's curiosity, it seems, was intensely aroused by this 'little woman'.

She admitted to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth (14 May 1850) that she was drawn to Brontë by 'glimpses one gets of *her*, and her modes of thought, and all unconsciously to herself, of the way in which she has suffered. I wonder if she suffers *now*?' Already we have here the interest of the biographer, drawn to the subject rather than simply to the work.

Thus it was with considerable expectation that she went to Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth's rented villa, 'Brierley Close', at Lake Windermere in the summer of 1850 to meet Charlotte Brontë. Brontë, fearful of being lionised by patrons like Sir James, was a reluctant guest; but she was delighted to meet Mrs Gaskell. She admired *Mary Barton*, Gaskell's only novel at this stage, and had been more than comforted by her letter of encouragement for *Shirley* ('I feel the sting taken from the strictures of another class of critic.').

Brierley Close is an expansive long residence, with a delightful garden and an excellent view of the lake. I have walked around it with Margaret Smith and can imagine how Elizabeth Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë must have done the same. They were thrown together to enjoy each others' company — talking over needlework, walking in the garden, driving in the countryside. One can picture Gaskell collecting information on Brontë, both consciously and unconsciously, to relay to her friends. The usually reticent Brontë warmed to her fellow guest, revealing much of her past life and many of her anxieties for the future. They did not agree about everything but 'like[d] each other heartily', and agreed to correspond.

Gaskell's first impressions of Charlotte were committed to paper as soon as she arrived home. She wrote to friends describing her encounter, shaping and moulding her story as if she were already conceiving an image she intended to paint. Even in these early descriptions Brontë has taken the shape of the eventual biographical subject. Gaskell perceived her as an enigma, a silhouette that must be fleshed out: 'a little lady in black silk gown, whom I could not see at first for the dazzle in the room'. She was touched and

amazed by the small childlike chest, the hands that were so small and thin that they were 'like birds' claws', the extreme short-sightedness that together with her painful shyness made Brontë appear an object of pity. Brontë was 'altogether *plain*' yet her opinions were formidable. This so-called enemy of religion, Gaskell told her friends, was actually a deeply Christian, high-minded and noble woman whose life had been blighted by tragedy.

Unfortunately Gaskell relayed not only her own impressions but also hearsay she had gleaned about Brontë from Lady Kay-Shuttleworth and her untrustworthy informant — 'an old woman of Burnley' — a disgruntled nurse who had been dismissed by Mr Brontë. Gaskell's sources here were poor and she should never have relied on them. This was the beginning of her image of Brontë's background: an isolated existence remote from civilized society, enduring the demands of a peculiar and difficult father, and the trials of a debauched brother. Charlotte Froude was assured that 'Miss Brontë *was* a nice person.' If she had faults they were 'the faults of the very peculiar circumstances in which she had been placed ....the wonder to me is how she can keep heart and power alive in her life of desolation'.

For Elizabeth Gaskell, then, Charlotte's life and person were intriguing and tragic. Her circumstances were the antithesis to her own busy life of duty as mother, wife and parish worker. She could scarcely snatch the time to indulge in the 'selfish' urge to write; but write she must and she could not help turning lives like Brontë's into stories. Here, too, she would find a cause to defend.

Gaskell's early view of Charlotte Brontë as tragic heroine ripened with acquaintance. Brontë visited Plymouth Grove three times (in 1851, 1853, and 1854), allowing Gaskell to observe her over a period of years. She watched Brontë's response to children, her acute shyness in company and her conflict over her decision to marry. After her second visit, Elizabeth Gaskell's fascination for Charlotte Brontë turned to love:

> I thoroughly loved her before she left, —and I was so sorry for her! She has had so little kindness & affection shown to her; she said that she was afraid of loving me as much as she could, because she had never been able to inspire the kind of love she felt.'

They were intellectual companions, but there was also a deep bond between the two women that was to colour Gaskell's future portrait. She felt Brontë's superior genius yet was acutely conscious of her helplessness as a suffering woman. She was sure that Charlotte Brontë 'works off a great deal that is morbid *into* her writing, and *out* of her life'.

This was reinforced by Gaskell's own visit to Haworth in 1853, which she found dreary in the extreme. The weather was 'dull, drizzly, Indian-inky.... The wind goes piping and wailing and sobbing round the square unsheltered house in a very strange unearthly way.' Again, in her letters she described her impressions of the parsonage and its inhabitants as if recording them for the biography she would later write. She was impressed by the courtesy of Mr Brontë, 'a tall, fine looking old man', but she was predisposed to fear him: 'I was sadly afraid of him in my inmost soul; for I caught a glare of his stern eyes over his spectacles at Miss Brontë once or twice which made me know my man.' And she was keenly aware that Mr Brontë carried a loaded pistol around with him wherever he went. Her reports were circulated, even published,[3)] and one letter was later included in the *Life*.

When Charlotte Brontë died, soon after marriage, Gaskell felt it was 'as sad as her life'. She regretted that she had not known of her friend's illness and had been unable to help her. She determined, in a note to George Smith, the publisher, that someday if she lived and 'no one is living whom such a publication would hurt', she would publish what she knew of Miss Brontë 'and make the world (if I am but strong enough in expression), honour the woman as much as they have admired the writer.' Two weeks *after* this she received a request from Mr Brontë to write the life of Charlotte.

Even before she was asked to write Charlotte's biography, then, Gaskell had conceived of an image of her friend and a plan to execute it: 'the time may come when her wild sad life, and the beautiful character that grew out of it may be made public'. She wanted to overturn the view of those who had read Lady Eastlakes's offensive speculations that if 'Currer Bell' was a woman she must be one who had forfeited the society of her own sex. To achieve this Gaskell had to mould and select her facts, weaving them into the acceptable pattern of a high-minded woman devoted to duty, a woman whose creative potential had been thwarted by her coarse and lonely environment.

Now this is all good biographical practice; it is not a disregard for the facts but a recognition of the need to interpret them. No biography can be objective. This is logically and artistically impossible. A biographer will always impose his or her view on the material, will always frame his or her gaze from a particular perspective. The philosopher Karl Popper once said: 'Observation is always selective.'[4] Every observation requires 'a chosen object, a definite task, an interest, a point of view, a problem' otherwise it is valueless. The biographer should 'lay bare the facts of the case, as [she] understands them'. The *Life* is Elizabeth Gaskell's portrait of Charlotte Brontë, seen from her perspective. She began with a thesis—a concept of character—that then shaped her discoveries and use of facts.

Popper also pointed out that what we know or learn is the result of how we approach what we are looking for. Most biographers, then, begin with a well-developed idea of their subject and this influences their choice of evidence. They inevitably chose their facts to support the pattern. We have seen that even before she met Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell had a concept of her character. When she met Brontë her initial image was reinforced and with every subsequent meeting Gaskell looked for corroboration of her initial intuition. As she later told Ellen Nussey (1857): she had 'weighted every line with all my whole power & heart, so that every line should go to its great purpose of

making her known & valued, as one who had gone through such a terrible life with a brave & faithful heart'.

The form and structure of the work, then, is what creates a great biography. And Elizabeth Gaskell's skill as a novelist allowed her to draw on her narrative techniques to shape her portrait of her friend.

Gaskell was committed to the importance of form in a work of art: she arranged her work in such a way as to throw light on the particular image she wanted to convey. By stressing certain key aspects of Brontë's life— her religion, her self-sacrifice, her family responsibilities and her dedication to literature, Gaskell was successful in 'correcting' the image created by the popular press. Of course she left out another view of Charlotte Brontë: the fiercely independent and passionate woman. Gaskell suppressed the facts about Brontë's infatuation for Monsieur Heger; they had no place in the pattern of a moral or self-sacrificing life. This material was part of a different narrative of Charlotte Brontë, a different portrait, that has been told in recent years by feminist biographers like Margot Peters or Lyndall Gordon—biographers with an alternative pattern of character and with an alternative thesis from which to view their facts.

I'd now like to examine two of the 'signs' in *Gaskell's Life of Charlotte Brontë* that allow us to interpret her portrait as she wished. It is important that we—as readers—should be aware of her method and of the role of the biographer herself in the work she has created. It is too easy for the reader to treat the narrative of a biography as if it is transparent and to concentrate on the content alone. We need to be alert to the style, the patterns in the narrative that frame the subject and that affect our vision of the life.

Gaskell had a 'wild sad life' to tell. She was concerned with analysing the source of Brontë's dark attitude to the world, portrayed so poignantly in *Villette*. Charlotte had told her once that she believed that 'some were appointed beforehand to sorrow and much disappointment.' She believed she

was one of these; there was nothing for her to do in life but to cultivate patience and resignation. She must 'school herself against ever anticipating pleasure.'

Gaskell was appalled by such an attitude. She was determined to trace its roots. So by analysing her subject's environment, education and childhood, she focused on the formative elements that restricted Charlotte's social development. At the same time, she managed to show how such early restriction stimulated Brontë's imaginative development; and how—as a creative being—Brontë managed not only to survive but to triumph over acute isolation, disappointment and duty.

The first 'sign' I want to look at is Gaskell's perceptive use of Brontë's early writings. In Chapter 5 of the first volume of the *Life*, we are introduced to Tabby, the servant, and her powerful influence on the children's imaginations. We are told that 'Tabby 'had known the "bottom," of valley in those primitive days when the fairies frequented the margin of the "beck" on moonlight nights, and had known folk who had seen them. But that was when there were no mills in the valleys; and when all the wool-spinning was done by hand in the farm-houses round. "It wur the factories as had driven 'em away,"' Tabby had said.

Having established the influence of folk-lore and lurid tales on the young Brontës, Gaskell then introduces their own tales as a natural consequence. Her technique here is particularly skilful: the reader shares her moment of discovery of the manuscripts:

> I have had a curious packet confided to me, containing an immense amount of manuscript, in an inconceivably small space; tales, dramas, poems, romances, written principally by Charlotte, in a hand which it is almost impossible to decipher without the aid of a magnifying glass.

The participation of the biographer herself here dramatises the situation and

reinforces her authority to write about the author she knew and whose work she has seen. The device of revealing her own active role in Brontë's life personalises the biography. In this particular case, it draws attention to one of the most significant moments in the book: the revelation of Brontë's 'secret' juvenilia — the fantasy world of Glass Town and Angria that preoccupied her until the age of twenty-four. Gaskell was unaware of the full significance of these writings or of the extent of the web of stories, plays and poems that Brontë and her siblings wove around their imaginary kingdoms. Nor did Gaskell realise the psychological hold this dreamworld had on the mind of the adolescent Charlotte. Nevertheless, Gaskell was the first to recognise these minuscule manuscripts as Brontë's apprenticeship in writing. Here were positive signs of the creative life of the future novelist.

Furthermore, Gaskell involves the reader here in the process of the biography. Not content with mere description, she forces the reader to participate in the text. As she says: 'No description will give so good an idea of the extreme minuteness of the writing as the annexed facsimile of a page.' And she includes a facsimile page from one of Charlotte's early stories 'The Secret', written when she was seventeen. The reader then tries to decipher the minuscule script, just as the biographer herself tried to do when she first saw the manuscripts. Gaskell doesn't provide a transcription of this manuscript reproduction, so if the reader wants to discover new elements in this piece of writing she must do it herself.

Further extracts from a number of early fragments and poems, this time transcribed by Gaskell, then fill the rest of the chapter. The reader can become intimately involved in the early creative life. He can read Brontë's work and judge for himself the precociousness of the young writer.

This involvement in the life reinforces the pattern of the biography: the reader can experience early 'signs' of later themes. The emphasis on the early writings here signifies not only Brontë's later talent but the naturalness of literary creativity. This is part of Gaskell's plea in the biography for women

to be allowed to pursue their desires, especially to write, and not to be morally condemned for it. Gaskell is setting the scene for her later theme of the need to reassert the importance of a woman novelist as a woman and not as 'someone who has forfeited the society of her own sex'. She began this theme in her epigram, taken from Elizabeth Browning's poem, *Aurora Leigh.* It appears on the title page of the original edition:

> Oh my God,
> — Thou hast knowledge, only Thou,
> How dreary 'tis for women to sit still
> On winter nights by solitary fires
> And hear the nations praising them far off.

It is a tragedy for an active mind to be prevented by circumstances from engagement with the world. We have seen this active mind early in Brontë's childhood in her early writings, and Gaskell reveals it again in key episodes in the biography.

The second 'sign' I want to examine is a reference to the art of the Brontës, to the famous painting by Branwell Brontë of his three sisters (*plate* 1). These are life-size portraits, images painted by Branwell in about 1834, when he was seventeen years old. It has suffered the neglect of time — the creases are lines where it has been folded. But time has also revealed a fourth portrait in the centre of Branwell himself, that was originally painted out with a column. This was how Elizabeth Gaskell saw the portrait (with a column in it), when she was shown it by Charlotte after Branwell and her two sisters were dead.

How does Gaskell present this painting to her readers? There is no simple description of the facts of the scene, yet the facts are clearly there. What we have in this scene is a series of layered perceptions that stand as a

microcosm of the writing of the biography itself.[5]

To begin with, Gaskell herself is again an actor in the scene she recounts. She tells of the visit she made to Haworth in 1853, during which Charlotte went upstairs to fetch this portrait of the three sisters so that Gaskell could assess the artistic talent of her dead brother. The novelist/biographer encapsulates the moment of Charlotte standing on the stairs, holding the portrait in front of her, and the viewer (the narrator and biographer) comparing the portrait with the real subject. Gaskell comments:

> Not much better than sign-painting, as to manipulation: but the likenesses were, I should think, admirable. I could only judge of the fidelity with which the two other were depicted, from the striking resemblance with Charlotte, upholding the great frame of the canvas, and consequently standing right behind it, bore to her own representation, though it must have been ten years and more since the portraits were taken.

Here Gaskell enacts the process of biography. She compares the real and the represented, and as she does this she recreates the scene for us, the readers. Her presence in the scene validates not only her judgement of Branwell's portrait but also the composition of her own portrait of Charlotte in the biography. Gaskell's pronouncement of a 'striking resemblance' between the real Charlotte and Branwell's painting proves the fidelity of his image; and Gaskell's presence in the scene validates her own impression of her subject. Fact and image unite here in the process of biography.

Gaskell's choice of scene has further significance. It is not simply to show how good Branwell was at capturing a likeness despite his crude application of paint and poor craftsmanship; and it is not simply to prove that this surviving portrait is a fair likeness of Charlotte Brontë and therefore justifies its prized position amongst the collection of the National Portrait Gallery in London. It has a symbolic value in the interpretation of the biography. It

is a 'sign' of Charlotte's role in the family and should be read as part of the text of Gaskell's artistic portrait. As she stands on the stairs—the last of her siblings—holding Branwell's picture, Charlotte can be seen symbolically as the supporter of her family: the eldest, the longest-living, the most famous in her lifetime. She is also the silent suffering woman Gaskell intended her to be, still supporting the burden of the deaths of her sisters and brother whose images she displays in front of her to her biographer and friend.

Thus, the scene is not simply fact; it involves a complex artistic process of multiple perspectives. And the presence of the biographer in her work is crucial, constantly moulding and creating the particular view of Charlotte that she wants to present. Furthermore, we as readers of Gaskell's biography need to be more aware of her literary techniques and strategies. She was a careful practitioner of form. Her biography gives the illusion of reality, of a 'striking resemblance', but this is only achieved through narrative strategies like those we have been discussing.

All biography, like all portraiture, is selective and interpretative. Gaskell's biography is no different. Thus the criticism of Barker and others is misplaced: it centres on the content rather than on the form of biographical writing, and in doing so it undermines the value of the biography as a work of art.

I'd like to conclude with a passage from a letter by G. H. Lewes, written in 1857 to Elizabeth Gaskell shortly after he and George Eliot had read the first edition of the *Life*. It is significant, I think, that Lewes speaks of the book in terms of a painting, and he perceives the importance of literary techniques and strategies in creating a chosen image of one's subject:

> The book will, I think, create a deep and permanent impression; for it not only presents a *vivid picture* of a life noble and sad, full of encouragement and healthy teaching, a lesson in duty and self-reliance; it also,

> thanks to its *artistic* power, makes us familiar intimates of an interior so strange, so original in its individual elements and so *picturesque* in its externals—it *paints* for us at once the psychological drama and the *scenic* accessories with so much vividness—that fiction has nothing more wild, touching and heart-strengthening to place above it.[6] (The italics are mine.)

Lewes clearly recognised that Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* was not simply a record of an individual's life, but a complex narrative portrait, 'a vivid picture of a life'.

Notes:

1) Juliet R. V. Barker, 'Saintliness, Treason and Plot: The Writing of Mrs Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*', *Brontë Society Transactions*, vol 21, part 4, 1994, p. 114.
2) Coral Lansbury, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1975), p. 129.
3) Barker points out that an unsigned article in *Sharpe's London Magazine*, vol 6 (Jan-June 1855), pp. 341-2, is based on Gaskell's letters though it is not clear that she authorised their use.
4) Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations, The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, 2nd edn (New York: Basic Books, 1965), p. 46.
5) The following discussion is based on Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography Fiction, Fact and Form* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 2.
6) Gordon S. Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters* (Yale University Press, 1954), vol. 2, p. 315.