

Despite feminist reassessments to the contrary, the conventional view that Elizabeth Gaskell personified the Victorian feminine ideal is still very much in place today. Challenging that view in an experimental biography, Felicia Bonaparte proposes that there lived in Mrs. Gaskell another, antithetical self, a daemonic double, that was not an angel in the house but instead a creature born to be a gypsy-bachelor. Bonaparte does not dispute that Mrs. Gaskell did exist, but she suggests that Gaskell conceived her, as much as any fictional character, out of a desperate need produced by her childhood experience of rejection and abandonment, in order to gain the love of friends and family and the approval of the world. Gaskell herself, Bonaparte argues, told the story of her double in images encoded in her letters, fiction, and life. Using the methods of literary criticism for biographical ends, Bonaparte traces a pattern of these images, showing how a metaphor that may turn up as a figure of speech in one of Gaskell's letters may be embodied in a character in one of her short stories, dramatized in an incident or plot in one of her novels, and even actualized in an action or a relationship in her life. To reach the inner woman, Bonaparte claims, it is necessary to read Gaskell's letters, fiction, and life as a single poetic text. In addition to presenting a radically different interpretation both of Gaskell and of her literary work, Bonaparte's unique approach opens up interesting possibilities in a number of other areas: in the writing of biography, in the analysis of metaphor in the nineteenth-century novel, in the study of the relationship between literature and life, in the exploration of links between the inner and outer self, and in women's studies generally.

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