

‘Do the duty that lies nearest to thee’: Elizabeth Gaskell,
Philanthropy and Writing

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Abstract

This thesis examines the relationship between Gaskell's philanthropy and her three social problem novels. Examining Gaskell in the context of Victorian philanthropy, I will argue that this is a relationship of far greater complexity than has previously been perceived. Gaskell's Unitarian faith will be of particular relevance as different denominations often had unique approaches to philanthropy, and I will begin by examining Gaskell's participation with philanthropy organised by her congregation, taking the charity bazaar as my example of this. Examining Gaskell's three social problem novels in chronological order I will demonstrate that Gaskell rejects these forms of organised Victorian philanthropy, referred to as 'associated philanthropy,' in favour of developing her own vision of philanthropy in her novels. I will examine how Gaskell's participation with 'associated philanthropy,' and the individual pursuit of her own philanthropic interests, shapes the development of her philanthropic vision in her fiction. I perceive her first novel, *Mary Barton*, as a tentative exploration of this vision, and by examining Gaskell's three philanthropic novels in chronological order, I will demonstrate how Gaskell rewrites the traditional philanthropic relationship to offer a reciprocal form of philanthropy which has the ability to cross class boundaries in both directions. I argue that Gaskell's rejection of associated philanthropy was an integral part in the development of this vision, as inspired by her faith, she founds her own vision in a more personal approach.

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