



**Julia Novak and Caitríona Ní Dhúill (eds.), *Imagining Gender in Biographical Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2023, ISBN: 9783031090189).**

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Taking its cue from Judith Butler's definition of gender as 'a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint' (2), this volume of essays sets out to explore biographical fiction's innovations in gender, and also in genre. Deliberately avoiding 'grand theor[ies]' (3), the editors offer an understanding of genre as historically situated and in constant flux; like existing tropes of gender, concepts of genre are seen as available to biofiction's rewritings.

The collection is organised into five parts. Part I, 'Recovery, Revision, Ventriloquism: Imagining Historical Women', explores the ethical questions inherent in writing the lives of three twentieth-century figures: Virginia Woolf, Lucia Joyce, and Jiang Qing. Taking issue with Michael Lackey's understanding of *Flush* and *Orlando* as historical fiction rather than biofiction, Diane Wallace reconceives these novels as '(meta-)historical biofictions' (56), through which Woolf revolutionised historiography as well as her stated target of biography. Wallace briefly surveys biofiction on Woolf by Michael Cunningham, Claire Morgan and Maggie Gee, though her conclusion – that these authors use narrative patterning as a means of controlling the subject – denies biofiction about Woolf the narrative innovation that Woolf's own work was seen to offer. Laura Cernat's essay explores the interconnection between gender, art, and mental illness in biofiction about James Joyce's daughter Lucia. She argues that this 'trialectic' (54) – to borrow a term used by Wallace – is better connected in biofiction than scholarly discourse, and that such biofictions are 'future-oriented' (92): less concerned with reconstructing Lucia's struggles than with exploring their contemporary implications. Finally, Silvina Salino's essay on Madame Mao makes

interesting interventions into our understanding of biofiction's relationship with biography. She suggests that biofictions about Jiang Qing do not use conventional biography as raw data; rather, they enable a renewed understanding of biography as similarly subjective, unreliable, and constructed.

Part II, 'Re-Imagining the Early Modern Subject', explores biofiction's persistent interest in the women of Tudor England. The section opens with Bethan Archer's insightful essay on Philippa Gregory's *The Constant Princess*, about Katherine of Aragon. Archer argues that despite Gregory's creation of Catalina as a 'disruptive incestuous figure' who lied about the consummation of her first marriage (137), her character is nevertheless flattened by Gregory's emphasis on her spousal loyalty over her personal ambition. The author shares my fascination with the capacity of biofiction to permanently alter readers' perceptions, such as when historical scenes omitted from the novel are imaginatively reconstructed through the lens of Gregory's characterisation. Another Katherine, Henry VIII's sixth wife Katherine Parr, is central to Alison Gorlier's comparative study of Jean Plaidy and Philippa Gregory's biofictions, and her consideration of how far Gregory's, in particular, can rightly be considered a feminist work. Kelly Gardiner and Catherine Padmore then widen the lens, attempting to understand why Australian writers are attracted to Tudor subjects, despite these subjects' apparent 'double-othering' in place and time (179). Another trialectic, that of 'obsession, advocacy and connection', is used to reconceive the relationship in terms of 'double-ownership' (197), in which these biofictions, like those about Lucia Joyce, are used as a filter to explore contemporary issues.

Part III, 'Writing the Writer: History, Voyeurism, Victimisation', explores how biofiction and gender interact differently when writers' lives are the focus. A particular highlight is Paul Fagan's essay on the two biofictions about Henry James published in 2004, David's Lodge's *Author, Author*, and Colm Tóibín's *The Master*. Fagan charges both novels with deploying the 'suspicious hermeneutics' modelled in biographies of James (220). Their insistence that James's celibacy was a form of closeting is, Fagan suggests, both anachronistic and reductive; it overlooks the 'nonsexual' as an accepted historical identity (229), while also closing down James's literary 'ethics of indeterminacy' (213). Conversely, a less symptomatic and presentist approach could, Fagan suggests, 'accommodate a depthless account of James's life' (214). Ina Bergman's discussion of Frances Sargeant Osgood, an American writer associated with Edgar Allan Poe, shares Wallace's interest in the imbrication of biofiction and historical fiction. Her preferred term 'historical biofiction' denotes a move towards hybridity rather than the eclipse of one genre by another (248). The related terms of 'double historical biofiction' (259) and 'herstorical biofiction' (251)

then offer a useful vocabulary to describe novels about more than one subject and those written in attempt at recovery. The final essay in this cluster, Ksenia Shmydkaya's study of novels about the Polish playwright Stanisława Przybyszewska, initiates the volume's enquiry into how biofiction might propagate 'stereotypical narrative(s) of female victimhood' (272-3). While the subject's difficult life makes her vulnerable to such treatment, she is not uniquely so, as the following cluster makes clear.

The pair of essays in Part IV discuss 'Creativity and Gender in the Arts' (Julia Dabbs on 'Renaissance Virtuosa' Sofonisba Anguissola) and Sciences (Christine Muller on Einstein's wife Mileva Marić). Both share Shymdkaya's interest in the tendency of biofiction to embed stereotypes; in Dabbs's case, the stereotypes concern the 'gifted female' (298), which haunts early modern life stories about Anguissola as well as contemporary biofiction. While this broad historical range makes for a productive dialogue, the essay could have been more attentive to the undeniable differences between these genres. For Muller, Marić shares Przybyszewska's vulnerability to the tragic victim narrative; by emphasising her hardships over her intellectual achievements, Marie Benedict's *The Other Einstein* risks damaging Marić's legacy along with that of her husband.

The final section, 'Queering Biofiction', turns from 'conventional illusionistic biofiction' to more experimental works that fulfil the volume's promise to explore improvisations on the theme of gender (27). Iseult Gillespie discusses Aaron Apps's poetic *Dear Herculine*, a riff on biofiction that blends multiple genres in order to foreground the relationship between the author and the subject. In stark juxtaposition to the unmet potential that Fagan perceived in Lodge and Tóibín's novels, Gillespie explores how Apps's rich 'biological imaginary' enables Herculine Barbin's intersex body to slough off 'imposed, gendered meaning' (343, 348). The volume closes with the editors' interview with a contemporary biofiction practitioner, novelist Patricia Dunker. The interview's focus is on two contrasting novels by Dunker, *Sophie and the Sibyl*, which concerns a modern reader's response to the gender-concealing George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), and *James Miranda Barry*, whose eponymous hero/ine has been seen as 'an icon of gender resistance' (369).

One illuminating theme of this collection concerns the extent of biofiction's ethical responsibility to its subjects, and to an abstract notion of 'truth'. Certainly, a moral dimension raises itself when dealing, to quote the narrator of *The Aspern Papers*, with 'those who are dead and gone and can't, poor darlings, speak for themselves' (James 105). Bergmann, as well as Gardiner and Padmore, explore the potential for recovery inherent in biofiction; yet as the editors acknowledge, 'the "recovered voice" is not

recovered but invented' (21). Whereas Aspern's narrator sees himself as speaking on behalf of his idol, it is an unavoidable truth that 'the "voice" granted a subject through biofiction is that of a ventriloquist' (21). Acknowledging this slippage queries Shymydkaya's notion of a 'pact... between the author and their protagonist's historical prototype' (274). In other words, however limiting the portrayals of Gregory's *The Constant Princess* or Benedict's *The Other Einstein* might be, these concern the invented characters of Catalina and Mileva far more than their historical counterparts. However, I concede Shymydkaya's point that biofiction about little-known figures carries more risk of damage to the subject's legacy than those for whom more counter-evidence exists.

This leads to a related concern about the treatment of what Woolf called 'the Lives of the Obscure' in the collection. Some of the essays tend toward granular detail about little-known figures and would benefit from further contextualisation to be accessible by a wider readership. Others provide perhaps too much biographical detail, slowing down the essay's argument, whereas Salino's, by contrast, provides an ideal amount of biographical context for readers unfamiliar with her subject (Madame Mao). The accessibility of an author's style also goes a long way towards engaging the reader with an unfamiliar figure, and this is particularly strong in Archer's essay. What I felt was missing, however, in that piece, as well as in Gorlier and Dabbs's, was a sense of the novelists' status within literary fiction more widely. For instance, Phillipa Gregory is predominantly associated, as least to my mind, with the dubious genre of bodice-rippers; while mentioned in the concluding paragraph of Gorlier's essay, this is surely necessary context to the preceding discussion of whether *The Taming of the Queen* is a feminist text. Similarly, Dabbs discusses the popularity of Sofonisba Anguissola as a biofictional subject as though this were accepted knowledge, yet none of the texts listed in the endnotes has reached a wide readership.

Despite these minor reservations, the volume as a whole is of great value to scholars and students of biofiction as a genre. The majority of essays also work in isolation for those interested in the authors and historical subjects represented. The volume is perhaps less useful, however, to those interested in gender than genre. The majority of the essays concern female subjects, which is a valuable intervention given Wallace's observation that women have previously been under-represented in biofiction (51). Yet the presence of a female subject does not automatically entail a concern with gender as a concept, and Fagan and Gillespie's explicit grappling with the subject seem to be the exceptions, rather than the rule. Given that most of the biofictions in question engage only implicitly with the introduction's aim to 'reflect and rewrite available

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narratives and tropes of gender' (23), I wondered whether the inclusion of the term in the title was entirely representative.

By contrast, the introduction's stated concern with generic interventions is fully actualised in the collection as a whole. The editors set out to reunite biofiction with historical fiction, using an illuminating 'model of generic layering' (5), in which genres coexist rather than coalescing. Disputing Michael Lackey's emphasis on the subject's agency as biofiction's defining feature, and instead finding examples of agency in historical fiction, the editors resist the siloing of the genres and pave the way for productive conversations. These include Wallace's essay, which argues that 'the majority of biographical novels are also historical novels' (53), and Bergmann's, whose term 'historical biofictions' (248) enables Gardiner and Padmore to draw further parallels between the two genres. As Wallace observes, Lackey's influential separation of biofiction from historical fiction is grounded in Georg Lukács male-centric view of historical fiction (52), which by now is showing its age. As biofictions and their critics continue to multiply, it will no longer be possible, or desirable, to police the boundaries of the genre. I hope, then, that this volume paves the way for a more inclusive and flexible understanding of biofiction. As it stands, it represents a welcome addition to life-writing scholarship. It effects a productive dialogue between biographical and historical fiction and intervenes in the legacies of numerous biofictional subjects, both the well-known and the undeservedly forgotten.

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## Works Cited

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