The emergence of the English author

Scripting the life of the poet in early modern England

Kevin Pask
Concordia University

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Introduction

By focusing upon the development of the genre of the "life of the poet" in England, this book describes the historical process through which vernacular poets acquired the prestige which continues to be ratified in the institution of the school – that of the poetic "author" whose life-narrative circulates as a necessary pendant to the poetic oeuvre. The manner in which students confront "literature" (a term which became current in the familiar sense only in the nineteenth century), the canonical organization of texts dominated by "name" authors, is the institutional form which survives the transformations of cultural authority in early modern Europe. The authority of the canonical poet levels the radically different circumstances in which writers such as Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, and William Wordsworth produced and circulated their texts. (The pedagogical status of Shakespeare's popular spectacles as "poetry," for example, testifies to the power of this leveling transformation.) By tracing the process through which the poet was accorded a life-narrative, the book also describes the early history of the construction of the poetic author.

The point of departure for any contemporary investigation into the history of the author is Michel Foucault's influential formulation in the essay "What Is an Author?" (1969) of the "author-function" as a historical phenomenon. Arguing that the author-function is assigned to discourses under particular historical circumstances, Foucault writes, "Discourse that possesses an author's name is not to be immediately consumed and forgotten; neither is it accorded the momentary attention given to ordinary, fleeting words."[1] Foucault's thumbnail sketch of the transformation of the author-function in early modern Europe points out the growing ascription of an author's name to "literary" discourse which had circulated semi-anonymously through medieval culture. More recently, Roger Chartier's important reconsideration of this history amends Foucault's description of a historical reversal of the authority granted to "scientific" and "literary" discourse:

In reality, a basic distinction must be made between the ancient texts – whatever their genre – that founded their authority on the work's attribution to a name ... and works in the vulgar tongue for which the author-function was constituted around a few great "literary" figures – in Italy, Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. In this sense, the trajectory of the author can be thought of as a gradual change in the way texts in the vernacular were regarded, attributing to them a principle of designation and election that had long been characteristic only of works that were referred to an ancient *auctoritas* and that had become part of a corpus of works continually cited and tirelessly commented upon.[2]

My own work also emphasizes the importance of the distinction between ancient (generally Latin) *auctoritas* and the vernacular author rather than "literary" and "scientific" texts. With this emendation of Foucault, the result of the historical retooling of the "author-function" is the authority of the vernacular poet whose contours are still recognizable – secular, national, non-aristocratic – and which produces the emergent narrative of the "life of the poet."

The creation of the poetic author entails the creation of a life-narrative which organizes what Foucault terms the "principle of unity in writing where any unevenness of production is ascribed to changes caused by evolution, maturation, or outside influence" (128). The "principle of unity" is commonly thematized in literary studies as the "poetic career."[3] Because the life-narrative retrospectively helps to provide the poet's work with such narrative coherence, the emergence of the "life of the poet" is a sign of the authority accorded to vernacular literature. Thus, the history of Shakespeare criticism has been enormously and repeatedly agitated by Shakespeare's status as a biographical cipher: why did no one in Renaissance England, apparently including Shakespeare himself, consider the life of "England's National Poet" a narratable one? Both the lack of a Renaissance life of Shakespeare and the consequent fixation upon that absence indicate something of the upheaval of authority described by Foucault. The transition from a literary culture almost devoid of such narratives in sixteenth-century England to the Restoration and eighteenth-century culture in which "lives of the poets" proliferated, culminating in the marketing scheme that appended Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets* to an edition of *English Poets* (1779–81), testifies to the new importance accorded poetic authority in the emergent *national* culture of eighteenth-century England.

In order to track the early stages of the cultural transformation which made possible Johnson's *Lives*, the book constructs what Foucault calls "a sociohistorical analysis of the author as an individual" (115). This project entails elucidating questions which Foucault explicitly sets aside for the polemical purposes of his essay: "the status we have given the

author, for instance, when we began our research into authenticity and attribution; the systems of valorization in which he was included; or the moment when the stories of heroes gave way to an author's biography; the conditions that fostered the formulation of the fundamental critical category of 'the man and his work' " (115). In attempting to describe this historical transition, the book provides a history of what Richard D. Altick aptly describes as "Literary Biography Before Its Time."[4] Although such a "history of the literary author" is currently under way with regard to individual English writers – primarily Shakespeare – or to discrete historical periods, a literary history of the emergence of the English poetic author over the breadth of the early modern period is still needed. The "life of the poet," moreover, has received little attention as a direct historical by-product of new conceptions of poetic authority – that of "the man and his work" – even though such life-narratives themselves constitute one of the earliest forms of literary-historical writing in the European vernaculars.

Foucault's own work has impelled critics working in his wake to consider the appearance of the vernacular author-function as one essentially delimited by Foucault's dialectic of discipline and transgression. "Speeches and books were assigned real authors, other than mythical or important religious figures, only when the author became subject to punishment and to the extent that his discourse was considered transgressive" (124). Recent scholars have construed, often quite usefully, the history of literary authority as one constituted by the juridical dynamic of censorship and, from the eighteenth century onward, copyright law. As my first chapter makes clear, however, I consider the role of discipline – understood as censorship – secondary in the early authorization of the vernacular English poet.[5] My own account locates this history in the negotiations over what Pierre Bourdieu terms "cultural capital" among numerous conflicting modes of early modern authority, and it tracks these cultural negotiations as they inflect the early life-narratives of English poets.[6] An examination of the sedimentary record of social struggles thus somewhat displaces the recent literary-historical practice of subordinating literary production to sociopolitical concerns. Instead of analyzing literary texts' thematization of power and their subversion of or collusion with it, I regard poetic authority as itself a site of social contestation. The history of a genre – the "life of the poet" – moreover, necessarily produces a methodology both intertextual and historically contextual. "The mediatory function of the notion of a genre," Fredric Jameson argues, "allows the coordination of immanent formal analysis of the individual text with the twin diachronic perspective of the history of forms and the evolution of social life."[7] This "twin perspective" is the

goal of a historical analysis which covers virtually the entire period now termed "early modern."

My analysis of this historical trajectory is indebted to Benedict Anderson's account of the origins of European nationalism in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983). Anderson adapts Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin's ground-breaking history of the print-culture, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450–1800* (1958), to describe the cultural origins of European nationalism in the unified vernaculars and growing reading publics created by print-capitalism's quest for markets. The "revolutionary vernacularizing thrust of capitalism" produced "print-languages" as "unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken vernacular."[8] The transformation of the book into the first mass commodity also created a new form of authority connected to the marketing of vernacular texts. Anderson traces this phenomenon to the printing of Martin Luther's texts in German. "His works represented no less than one third of *all* German-language books sold between 1518 and 1525. Between 1522 and 1546, a total of 430 editions (whole or partial) of his Biblical translations appeared ... In effect, Luther became the first best-selling author *so known*. Or, to put it another way, the first writer who could 'sell' his *new* books on the basis of his name" (43). Anderson's account of the new form of the "name" author underpins my own research into the re-creation of English poets as authors whose life-narratives became a part of the process of marketing their "works."

Despite the importance of the role of the print-culture in the history of the "life of the poet," the print-language also derives, as John Guillory has argued, from an earlier appropriation of literacy in the vernacular as a form of cultural capital by the late-medieval nobility, resulting in the creation of a vernacular *diglossia* (a term used by sociolinguists to describe a system for differentiating social/linguistic functions within the same community).[9] This appropriation produced for the first time in medieval European culture a vernacular *Hochsprache*, a literary language which Erich Auerbach usefully defines as "not only the written language but also the spoken, everyday language of the educated classes" along-side and often in conflict with the Latin of the clergy.[10] The authority of English poets reflected the linguistic capital of a vernacular *Hochsprache*, even when a *written* literary language diverged from the "everyday language of the educated classes," and the book is therefore particularly attentive to the school as the privileged agent for the reproduction of linguistic capital as well as to the historical shifts in what constituted such linguistic capital.[11] The book describes the vicissitudes of the literary language from its appropriation by the late-medieval nobility to

its role as the Standard English of the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie. Throughout, the analysis attends to the manner in which these social formations in turn condition the historical development of the "life of the poet."

The book is organized around the set of now-canonical English poets who received early life-narratives: Geoffrey Chaucer, Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, John Donne, and John Milton. As a generic history, it traces the emergence of the poet's life through its imbrication with earlier genres of life-writing which retained their pre-eminence in the period. Sidney's life was almost exclusively written as the life of an aristocratic hero; the early lives of Spenser highlighted his dependence upon Sidney as an aristocratic client; and Izaak Walton's *Life of Dr. Donne* recorded the life of a religious divine. The book examines the transformations in the life-narratives as they develop into lives of poets or as the earlier narratives are received as lives of poets. One form of cultural authority did not always translate smoothly into another, and, as the chapters on Sidney and Donne testify, the transition to the status of poet occurred along with the derogation of these men's earlier cultural authority as an aristocratic hero and high-ranking clergyman respectively. For Chaucer and Spenser, on the other hand, poetry and thus the association with a literary language marked the only ground of their accession to cultural authority, a fact which partially accounts for the much more prolonged and incomplete development of their life-narratives. Milton was in a position to construct his poetic career as a narratable one, a Protestant "life-work," and that self-construction plays an important role in the shape of his early life-narratives. Although each chapter concentrates upon an individual poet, the book is not simply concerned with the rise or fall of individual reputations. It focuses, rather, upon the social forms and historical trajectories within which the "life of the poet" appears and begins to acquire its cultural value. In some instances, moreover, the book points, however briefly, toward the continuities between the shape of the early life-narrative and the later form of the poet's cultural authority in the professionalized university of the past one hundred years.

The opening chapter on the early lives of Chaucer serves to introduce the distinction between the medieval *auctor* and the early modern author and to interpret the intimate relationship between the creation of a vernacular *Hochsprache* and the construction of the "life of the poet" – in Chaucer's case a life-narrative almost entirely fictional. The chapter explores the role of the centralizing Tudor state in the authorization of Chaucer, particularly the brief life-narrative produced by John Leland, an antiquarian in the service of Henry VIII. Throughout the Tudor

period, however, Chaucer occupies an unstable position in the struggle between humanists (whose power base was the school) and the aristocratic taste of the Tudor court – between "Greek" and "Goth," as Roger Ascham put it – for cultural authority, and that instability leaves its traces on Spenser's appropriation of Chaucer's "Gothic" authority in *The Shepheardes Calendar* (1579). I argue that Thomas Speght's 1598 and 1602 editions of *The Workes of our Antient and Learned English Poet Geffrey Chaucer* marked a watershed in the authorization of Chaucer as well as of the English poet altogether, and it devotes a close analysis to the editorial framework of the texts and especially to the life of Chaucer appended to the edition. The chapter proceeds to describe Chaucer's privileged position as a national author in the cultural conjuncture of *la cour et la ville*, the Court and the City, after the Restoration, a position which was increasingly associated with his ability to produce particularly English "characters."

The second and third chapters share an interest in the aristocratic figure of Sidney and the vicissitudes of aristocratic narratives throughout the early modern period. Sidney's life-narrative, the subject of chapter 2, was almost exclusively written in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the life of an aristocratic hero, particularly in Fulke Greville's "Dedication" to Sidney (c. 1610). Greville's "life" is the centerpiece of the chapter's discussion of the role of aristocratic life-narrative in the construction of Sidney's prestige in the Renaissance. Such a life-narrative required the *dissociation* of the aristocratic hero from the status of a "youthful" poet, but the early popularity of the *Arcadia* eventually ensured Sidney's association with what the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries considered a "feminine" genre, the prose romance. This derogation of Sidney's aristocratic status, moreover, inflects the third chapter, which addresses the representation of the patron-client relationship of Sidney and Spenser and its later transformation into an *interpoetic* relationship. The chapter closely examines the editorial apparatus of *The Shepheardes Calendar* as well as the published correspondence of Spenser and Gabriel Harvey, both of which were widely used by later writers to construct a close connection between Sidney and Spenser. The early lives of Spenser highlighted his dependence upon Sidney as an aristocratic client, but the relationship was increasingly transformed into one between "intimate" friends and fellow poets. The chapter thus describes the movement from Sidney's greater prestige as an aristocratic patron to the elaboration of Spenser's specifically poetic authority. This transition, however, never provided Spenser with more than a rudimentary life-narrative, and I therefore explore the fact that Spenser's authority was

consistently represented as a literary patrimony which substituted for a charismatic life-narrative.

The fourth chapter interprets the fate of Donne's status as an ecclesiastical authority, the source of his prestige in Izaak Walton's *Life of Dr. Donne* (1640), as it intersects with Donne's growing reputation as a "libertine in wit" in the literary culture dominated by the Court and the City after the Restoration. The radical transformation of the Renaissance divine into a Restoration libertine is one indication of the sea-change in the shape of cultural authority after the English Revolution. In order to provide a measure of this transformation, I analyze both Donne's reputation as a "divine wit" among his contemporaries and the obsolescence of that reputation after the Restoration. The chapter utilizes Thomas Sprat's *Life of Abraham Cowley* (1667), the first widely known "life of the poet" in England, in order to describe the new cultural conjuncture of the Restoration. It is that field of literary production which renders the Renaissance prestige of Donne's "divine wit" a merely "Metaphysical school" of rhetorical excess and thus "libertinage."

The final chapter on the life of Milton up to and including Johnson's *Lives* takes the opportunity of examining the efflorescence of the "life of the poet" in eighteenth-century England. It begins with an examination of what Jürgen Habermas terms the "bourgeois public sphere" in eighteenth-century England, a social formation which it links to the emergent "life of the poet" through the greater interest accorded to the poet's "domestic" life in the period. This "domestic" interest of course was also characteristic of the genre which emerged alongside the "life of the poet," the novel – the ambient narrative genre in the period – and the chapter proceeds to sketch the relationship between the two genres. I argue that Milton is probably the first English poet to conceive of his own life as a narratable "life-work," and in fact the early lives of Milton tend to ratify Milton's self-conception in the anecdotal form of his work habits. Later in the eighteenth century, however, the operative contradictions in the "bourgeois public sphere," particularly regarding the position of the growing numbers of women readers and writers in the period, increasingly troubled the lives of Milton, most famously in the concern with the story that the blind Milton forced his daughters to read to him in the classical languages which they did not understand. Johnson condemned Milton for his "Turkish contempt of females," while other writers, notably William Hayley, responded to the same problem by representing Milton as a "man of feeling."

My construction of a literary history of a genre currently unfashionable in the academy, literary biography, positions my work somewhat aslant recent studies of the English Renaissance. The New Historical

inclination of much recent Renaissance literary criticism has defined itself
against both traditional literary history shaped in the nineteenth century
by Wilhelm Dilthey's *Geisteswissenschaft* and the psychoanalytic version
of a purely interpoetic literary history formulated by Harold Bloom. In
doing so, it has sent literary history back to the archive where it is
shrouded in apparent blandness and opacity, opting instead for a
historical contextualization which defamiliarizes (but, nevertheless,
sometimes recuperates) the category of literature. Stephen Greenblatt's
influential redefinition of Renaissance literary studies emphasizes what
he has recently termed "negotiations" among contemporaneous dis-
courses.[12] My own work examines such synchronic negotiations among
discourses, but it also attempts to account for the historical changes in
such discursive conjunctures through a return to literary history which
builds upon Foucault's and Chartier's historiographical interventions
and Bourdieu's sociology of symbolic power. This return to literary
history takes the traditional tools of literary history themselves – includ-
ing the "life of the poet" – as texts to be interpreted rather than as
perspicuous evidence readily available to the often literal-minded narra-
tion of older literary history. Thus, in place of a positivist attempt to
verify the life-narratives which it examines, the book interprets such
narratives in order to describe their roles in a complex sociocultural
process of poetic authorization. By constructing a preliminary model for
understanding the transformation in poetic authority from Shake-
spearean to Johnsonian "negotiations" as diachronic transactions
between overlapping forms of cultural authority, the book retools an
older form of literary history in order to illuminate the preliminary
conditions for the emergence of the historical category of English
literature.