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0521856957 - Autobiography and Gender in Early Modern Literature: Reading Women's Lives, 1600-1680

Sharon Cadman Seelig

Excerpt

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Introduction: mapping the territory

The question posed by Margaret Cavendish at the end of *A True Relation*, “Why hath this lady writ her own life?”, has proved provocative enough to stay with us over the centuries and even to inspire a number of recent titles.¹ Why indeed hath this lady writ her own life? Quite often, of course, she did not, preferring instead to write someone else’s life – most frequently her husband’s – and to define her role within their mutual destiny; often, early modern women wrote no life at all. But despite Virginia Woolf’s famous assertion that there were almost no women writers in this period (because “any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at”), a remarkable number of women did record aspects of their lives in diary, autobiography, poetry, confession, or tract.²

In the case of Cavendish, as I shall argue, the writing of her life seems to have been an act of self-preservation of the most elemental and perhaps desperate kind. And Anne Clifford, who began compiling a family history to establish her place among her distinguished ancestors and to justify her inheritance, continued keeping records until the day she died. In fact, the reasons behind these early self-presentations or self-constructions are nearly as many as the writers themselves: to record daily events; to monitor one’s own activities; to present a record to the world; to justify oneself; to place oneself in the midst of past and present events and persons; to place oneself in a more favorable or dominant or more subordinate role than one perhaps occupied; to find or create a pattern, a meaning in life itself; to go beyond the details of life to the trajectory of fiction.

In this book I’m concerned with the autobiographical impulse, with the desire to represent oneself as it is seen in a variety of forms – diary, memoir, autobiography, fantasy – in texts by six early modern British

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women. Although these texts differ strikingly from one another, they do share a common enterprise: they construct the self in written form; they present particular images or conceptions of the self, whether in isolation or in connection with others, whether intended to be shared or kept to oneself. They range from brief notation to extended narration; they move from the factual and documentary to more fully elaborated and persuasive accounts. They represent, as James Olney puts it, that “act of autobiography [that] is at once a discovery, a creation, and an imitation of the self.”³

But just because Cavendish, Clifford, and other early modern women felt strongly about these attempts at self-representation does not mean that we should. I want to ask not only why early modern English women wrote their own lives, in forms from diary and autobiography to lyric verse to mother's testaments to utopian fiction and romance, but also why we read these lives. Although I began by wanting simply to know which texts existed, I grew increasingly interested in their remarkable range and variety. I have furthermore been intrigued by the very fact and degree of their appeal. For the terrain is uneven: these texts can be perplexing, frustrating, inconsistent, forbidding. What keeps us reading; what are our expectations and assumptions? What are we looking for in these texts, and what do we find there? To what extent do our assumptions and experiences shape or illuminate what we read?

Early and late I had questions about how to read: do these texts merit the kind of detailed attention I have given them? Is such a mode of reading useful or rewarding? Does it distort the object of attention? Are these texts in which we might look for coherence, linearity, and consistency? Are these expectations of ours something alien to the writer or something shared by her? There are related questions about women's lives: are women's autobiographical texts less unified than those of their male counterparts, as has been claimed? If so, is it because women's lives are less coherent, or is it rather that women are more likely to conceive of their role as subordinate or dependent, less driven by individual ego?

In considering a variety of texts and their ways of recording and interpreting life experiences, I have tried to notice generic clues without imposing rigid generic expectations. One of my first concerns was accurate description: what kinds of diaries or life records are these? How often did the writer record? What kinds of things did she include? What did she omit? Why did she do so? For whom was she writing? Who in fact might have read this text and why? Such questions, though they have received some attention, remain important because these diaries and

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autobiographies are so different from what we would understand by the terms. We so often think of life-writing as confessional that we may not know what to make of contrary examples. We may mistake generic differences for temperamental differences, aspects of function for matters of choice or expression (or failure of expression).

While attending to these questions, I shall pay relatively little attention to several other important issues raised by recent studies of early modern women – female literacy and the right to write. That is because questions of literacy, in particular differential rates of literacy for men and women, and the disjunction between the teaching of reading and writing, though of great value to our general understanding of the period, are not crucial to the writers of this study.⁴ If the upper-class women I've considered did not enjoy the level of education offered to their brothers (Margaret Cavendish makes the point; Lucy Hutchinson is the exception), they all had easy access to books, whether read alone or in the company of others. Margaret Hoby frequently read with her chaplain, Anne Clifford more often with members of her household. Clifford was tutored by no less than the poet Samuel Daniel, and in the great portrait she commissioned, she chose to be pictured with her books, significantly disordered as if by use; she refers frequently to reading that ranges from Augustine, Josephus, and the Bible to Sidney and Ovid, Spenser and Montaigne; she credits her beloved Chaucer with keeping her from melancholy in the North. Lucy Apsley Hutchinson loved books more than playmates her age; her learning was one of the things that, in her telling, most attracted her future husband. And Margaret Cavendish, for all the gaps in her formal education, conversed with Thomas Hobbes and Pierre Gassendi.

I do not, moreover, share the preoccupation of many earlier critics with the cultural constraints that discouraged women from publishing. By their very nature these diaries and autobiographies – with the notable exception of Cavendish's *A True Relation* – were not meant for publication; at most they were intended for distribution within the family. The diary of Margaret Hoby can have been intended for no one but herself, and the daybooks of Anne Clifford, though they may have been used as a basis for later narrative constructions, also seem like a way of speaking to herself. Clifford's annual summaries, apparently based on more detailed daily records, move from private to public as part of a family chronicle; and the narratives of Lucy Hutchinson, Anne Halkett, and Ann Fanshawe either emerge from or move toward narratives grounded in the family. With regard to these writers, general questions of what women might or

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might not write, or what they might or might not publish, have seemed less important than attention to what they did write, why, and to whom. As J. Paul Hunter notes, "Personal writings were in the seventeenth century private writings, and they were legion."⁵ And the kind of self-scrutiny and self-examination Hunter refers to was practiced by women as well as by men.

In turning from seventeenth-century texts to ways of reading them, one quickly discovers that the study of autobiographical texts and theory has within the last thirty years become not only a growth industry but also the site of considerable disagreement⁶ – disagreement over the texts to be included and the methodology to be used; over whether general conclusions may be drawn from specific examples; whether texts by men and by women diverge absolutely or whether they may fruitfully be considered together; whether authors exist, and if they do not, what becomes of the recent discovery of texts written by women.⁷ I want briefly to review some of this discussion in order to locate my concerns within its context.

The writing of autobiography, it has been argued, is connected with the heightened sense of history and self-consciousness associated with the early modern period. In his seminal essay Georges Gusdorf maintains that "autobiography is not possible in a cultural landscape where consciousness of self does not, properly speaking, exist," and that autobiography depends on the conscious awareness of each individual life.⁸ Although we are less likely than Gusdorf or his predecessor Georg Misch to speak of "the Renaissance" or to assume that it was a period of general awakening, it is certainly the case that there were very few autobiographies in our modern sense before the seventeenth century and that, after 1640, the number of such texts increased sharply.⁹ As Paul Delany writes in his study of British autobiographies, "Fundamental to the autobiographical urge is a sense of one's importance as an individual; in the twentieth century this is usually taken for granted, but in the seventeenth it was neither taken for granted – except in so far as men claimed significance because they lived under God's providence – nor supported by a general theory of democratic individualism as it is today. The seventeenth-century autobiographer tends to claim individual significance by virtue of some specific quality or accomplishment, or because he has been a witness to the affairs of the great; hence the variety of motivation and subject-matter in his works."¹⁰

But arriving at valid or even useful definitions of autobiography has proved extremely difficult. James Olney, who uses the term in a very

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broad sense, points out that autobiography includes the simplest and commonest of literary forms as well as the most elusive; it is a genre for which no general critical rules are available: either autobiography vanishes before our eyes, or everything turns into autobiography.¹¹ Moreover, descriptions of the nature of autobiography, or of the autobiographical impulse, are likely to be particularly problematic in the case of texts written by women. Part of the difficulty is that critical discussion of autobiographical forms has focused so largely on those written by men that they are considered the norm, and those by women the exception, even an aberration.¹² For example, the chief forms of seventeenth-century British autobiography, both secular and sacred, have been carefully catalogued by Paul Delany, but of his 175-page study, only one brief chapter is devoted to texts written by women. The very useful series of essays edited by James Olney, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, also puts women's autobiographical writings in a separate category, devoting only one essay to them.¹³ And a study by Susanna Egan, *Patterns of Experience in Autobiography*, includes no women because "female autobiography . . . deserves a study of its own."¹⁴ It is a great oddity, as Domna C. Stanton notes, that even though women's writing is often seen as autobiographical, their work is so largely excluded from studies of autobiography.¹⁵

If many studies give insufficient attention to texts written by women, even those that deal primarily with women's autobiography struggle to arrive at accurate descriptions or generally valid principles. According to Estelle Jelinek and Sidonie Smith, the genre as so often defined – a story of a success, the achieving of a goal, a picture of a representative life, a life that gives us as well a sense of the times in which it was lived – does not often apply to the autobiographical texts written by women.¹⁶ The question is perhaps usefully problematized – though not resolved – by using terms like *self-writing* or *life-writing*, which convey the multiplicity of forms involved and the lack of adherence to certain predetermined generic types. Smith argues that it is virtually impossible for a woman to be representative of her period and to write; that kind of authority would come closer, in fact, to making her representative of men of her period. Rather, she asserts, women's autobiographical writings tend to be about personal encounters or about family life; insofar as they are about a broader social experience, a number of these were undertaken to inform their children about their fathers' character and accomplishments. Mary G. Mason sees a difference between the prototypical male autobiographies and those written by women, asserting that in contrast

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to the self-revelatory approach of Augustine or Rousseau, “the self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some ‘other.’”¹⁷ Estelle Jelinek argues that male “autobiographers consciously shape the events of their life into a coherent whole,” constructing “a chronological, linear narrative . . . by concentrating on one period of their life, one theme, or one characteristic of their personality.” By contrast she sees women’s autobiographies as characterized by “irregularity rather than orderliness, . . . not chronological and progressive but disconnected, fragmentary, or organized into self-sustained units rather than connecting chapters.”¹⁸

These comments assume a significant difference between the experience of men and women, one that translates into differences in the texts they create. But while it is useful to reject the notion of a single (male) model and to broaden the range of works considered in an analysis of the genre, it is surely not the case that all autobiographies written by men are linear and unified, and all those written by women are discursive and fragmentary.¹⁹ Jelinek’s assertions about the characteristics of male and female autobiography, although based on a fairly broad temporal spectrum, seem to me too categorical, true in some but not all cases, based in part on more recent texts than those that concern me. But her comments do raise important questions about the relationship between women’s lives and the texts that represent them. If in fact women’s life experiences are less coherent than those of men, will the narratives women construct likewise be less coherent? *Are* women’s lives less unified than those of their male counterparts, or is it rather that women are more likely to conceive of their role as subordinate or dependent, less driven by individual ego? Such a view of the self as part of a larger social order may well affect the kinds of narratives women construct. And yet, given the examples in this study, I would not want to advance the notion of female textual subordination as universal; for as I write, several ghostly figures rise up to contradict or qualify such a view: Anne Clifford, whose life and writing were powerfully focused on the image of herself as heir to George Clifford, daughter to Margaret Russell, and rightful owner of the family’s property; Margaret Cavendish, intensely ambitious of renown; Anne Halkett, determined to defend her reputation for integrity; Lucy Hutchinson, taking a starring role in her biography of her husband.²⁰

In articulating the differences between early modern forms and present-day self-representation, and the necessity of bearing these differences in

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mind in any critical analysis or even description of texts, the comments of Sara Heller Mendelson and Elspeth Graham are particularly helpful. In her consideration of what she calls “serial personal memoranda” from the Stuart period, Mendelson points out that “seventeenth-century memoirs had not yet crystallized into their modern-day forms, the diary and the autobiography. Instead, they represent a continuum from one genre to the other, ranging from the daily journal to a variety of sporadic memoranda.”²¹ Elspeth Graham concurs, suggesting a useful approach to generic questions: “Rather than attempting to ‘sort out’ forms by considering what they later become, we should perhaps focus on the significances of fluidity itself . . . It is not surprising . . . in this context of general generic instability, that self-narratives are enormously variable in structure and focus.”²² Hence, at least for the early modern period, some of the quality of discursiveness or fragmentary construction that might be attributed to female authorship or to the particular nature of women’s lives may well be a matter of broader generic instability.²³ In my analysis of diaries, annual summaries, memoirs, family and personal narratives, and fantastic self-fashioning, I’ve found it less helpful to assign individual texts to a particular generic category than to use those categories to understand the contexts in which a text may be read. My goal is not to arrive at an absolute definition of these forms, but rather to notice how individual texts are related, and how distinguished from each other. I’m concerned not just with autobiography as we currently understand it, but also with the autobiographical impulse more broadly understood, with the variety of forms and conceptions for which “modes of self-representation” might be a more accurate designation.

Even as we qualify Jelinek’s generalizations about men’s and women’s lives and the texts they construct, her comments prompt useful questions about what we should be looking for in these autobiographical texts. Are coherence, linearity, consistency, and progressivity especially to be prized or seen as the mark of literary excellence? Should we be looking for literary excellence? Are these literary texts? In fact her assessment should make us more open to a variety of writing, just as we are open to a variety of recorded life experiences. Such openness, vital to the reading of autobiography, is even more essential in the reading of journals and diaries, as we attempt to describe the text and to take account of the reader’s response to it. Although these texts were in fact not intended as *belles lettres* by their authors, it is perhaps inevitable that we will look for coherence, unity, and purpose in them, without necessarily assigning a definitive value to such qualities.

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As Mendelson points out, a number of the texts I consider predate the categories we associate with autobiography, most especially the spiritual diary and the daily records kept by Hoby and Clifford. But without forcing early modern texts into a procrustean bed, some awareness of the generic possibilities open to these writers is helpful. One of the models available for mid-seventeenth-century autobiography, adopted by both women and men, is the conversion narrative, the account of one's spiritual existence that assumes a particular direction, a plot in which prior experience, often of perceived dissipation or at least of spiritual lethargy and insensitivity, is seen as the prelude to new insight and a new way of life. Since, as Delany points out, the writer of an autobiography must have some reason to believe his or her life worth recounting, such a spiritual transformation supplies that rationale, even, or perhaps especially, for members of the middle or lower classes.²⁴ Although none of the autobiographies I consider follows this pattern throughout, the account of one's spiritual journey, broadly conceived rather than being defined by a single incident, is important in several of them – as Anne Halkett, although rejecting the notion of a misspent youth, presents a case for her integrity; or as Anne Clifford, coming into her property, celebrates her vindication by the God of Isaiah, Psalms, and Proverbs; or as Lucy Hutchinson sees Providence bringing her and her future husband together. For these writers the spiritual autobiography may be a touchstone rather than a model.

Another frequent justification for writing one's life is the wish to present a family history, to preserve a record of parents or grandparents for the next generation, an enterprise concerned not simply with facts or deeds but with values and principles. This particular rationale dominates the life stories of Fanshawe and Halkett, while in the case of Hutchinson and Cavendish the family addressed is the world at large.²⁵ In some of these texts, the self is represented primarily as an individual carrying out spiritual obligations; in other cases its significance is seen in relation to the husband and the family whose story the writer preserves; in still others it is more closely linked with a community, justified before the law of the state or of God. In Anne Halkett's autobiography, with its vivid depictions of particular scenes and its assertions of faithful accuracy, there are strong resemblances to such fictional forms as romance or drama. Thus, while early modern texts do not display the generic form that we, on the basis of our own literary experience, might expect, a single text may partake of a number of generic models, models that were available and useful, though not definitive and determinative for early modern women writers.

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The amount of recent scholarship devoted to autobiography indicates the importance attached to it and the sophistication with which it is now read. But the question may still persist: why should we read the diaries, memoirs, and self-representations of early modern women? What will we find in them? That the particular texts I have chosen have been published, often in more than one very good modern edition, suggests that although most were never intended for public circulation and waited long to appear, they are a source of considerable interest today. Part of the reason may be rarity or accessibility: since so few diaries by early modern women remain to us, why not choose to transcribe and edit those that are extant? For historians as well as literary scholars, these are very useful sources of information about social conditions, attitudes, and behavior. Yet a number of these texts are both strangely recalcitrant as a source of information and persistently intriguing. This is especially true of the diaries, which, while recording the events of particular days of the writers' lives, also seem to leave so much unsaid.²⁶ Throughout this study I have asked: what purpose does the diary serve for its author; what assumptions of our own affect or distort our reading? Such questions pertain as well to the longer narratives I consider and even to Cavendish's remarkable fiction, which seems to adhere to few or none of the generic rules familiar to us.

Women readers and critics have been understandably eager to connect with these early writers, to know about the circumstances of their lives, their attitudes and beliefs, the reasons why they wrote. Germaine Greer, for example, expresses the hope that by careful study of earlier authors, we will be able to "grasp what we have in common with the women who have gone our chosen way before us."²⁷ But therein also lies the difficulty: in our enthusiasm for the rediscovery of the texts and lives of early modern women, we run the risk of confusing their attitudes and aspirations with our own, or at least viewing them not only as forebears but forerunners of who and what we are, seeing them as particularly repressed and perhaps eager to break out of these restraints to join us in a fully empowered existence. As Margaret Ezell asks, "Are we actually seeing all that there is to see in the past, meeting all our relatives, in our genealogical sweeps? Or are we so concerned with establishing continuity that our vision of the life of a woman writer, before 1700 in particular, is exclusive and selective? Have we, to use Jerome McGann's terms, gerrymandered the past in order to support a particular present concept of the woman writer?"²⁸

While it is certainly true that early modern women faced cultural assumptions and received hortatory advice at considerable variance from

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what is in fashion today – amply evidenced in pamphlets, homilies, and works of controversy – and that they were repeatedly urged to modesty and silence, we now know that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women wrote a good deal and in many forms. Perhaps ironically, two early studies that contributed greatly to our awareness of women's writing – Suzanne Hull's *Chaste, Silent, and Obedient* and Margaret Hannay's *Silent but for the Word* – have to some extent perpetuated in their very titles some of the misconceptions that the authors themselves complicate or challenge.²⁹ Although Hull emphasizes the limitations on what women were expected or encouraged to read, the lists she provides also indicate the great increase in books for women between 1570 and 1640 (127–39). Hannay's volume demonstrates the ways in which religion, despite a patriarchal bias that silenced women's original speech, also gave them opportunities for expression. Taking the point further, Margaret Ezell contests the idea that seventeenth-century notions of femininity “had sufficient force to control the extent of female participation in the intellectual world and the forms in which women could ‘safely’ write.”³⁰ And in response to the oft-cited paucity of works by women, she underscores the role of manuscript circulation and correspondence networks for both men and women, noting that a reluctance to see one's work in print was not “a peculiarly female trait, but a manifestation of a much more general, and much older, attitude about writing, printing, and readership.”³¹ Ezell takes an important step toward seeing seventeenth-century women writers in a historically accurate context, arguing for a definition of private and public more appropriate to the period and urging us to consider the full range of women's writing before 1700, not just those genres congenial to us or those more obviously related to those of subsequent periods.³²

If, with the help of historically based criticism of seventeenth-century texts, we escape seeing them simply through a particular set of contemporary lenses, we must also guard against another limitation of perspective – reading these texts as transparent, as simply conveying information, without regard to generic shaping or experimentation.³³ While the diaries and autobiographies of early modern women are indeed useful sources of information about their lives, experiences, and attitudes, if we take them simply at face value, we may reach inappropriate conclusions about what these texts say or mean. In the case of Margaret Hoby, for example, we might think that she had no life outside the rigorous devotional practice she records. Or in the case of Ann Fanshawe we might conclude that the daring young woman of the early years “dwindled into a wife,” that she had few