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

Sharon Cadman Seelig

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND GENDER IN EARLY MODERN LITERATURE

Early modern autobiographies and diaries provide a unique insight into women's lives and how they remembered, interpreted, and represented their experiences. Sharon Seelig analyzes the writings of six seventeenth-century women: diaries by Margaret Hoby and Anne Clifford, more extended narratives by Lucy Hutchinson, Ann Fanshawe, and Anne Halkett, and the extraordinarily varied and self-dramatizing publications of Margaret Cavendish. Combining a fresh account of the development of autobiography with close and attentive reading of the texts, Seelig explores the relation between the writers' choices of genre and form and the stories they chose to tell. She demonstrates how, in the course of the seventeenth century, women writers progressed from quite simple forms based on factual accounts to much more imaginative and persuasive acts of self-presentation. This important contribution to the fields of early modern literary studies and gender studies illuminates the interactions between literature and autobiography.

SHARON CADMAN SEELIG is Professor of English at Smith College. She is the author of *The Shadow of Eternity: Belief and Structure in Herbert, Vaughan, and Traherne* (1981) and *Generating Texts: The Progeny of Seventeenth-Century Prose* (1996), as well as numerous articles on seventeenth-century English literature.

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For my father, 1902–1972
And my mother, 1905–

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Preface

My awareness of seventeenth-century women's writing began with poetry (by Mary Wroth, Katherine Philips, and Aemilia Lanyer), with drama (by Elizabeth Cary), and with fiction (by Aphra Behn and Margaret Cavendish). But my interest in a wider variety of texts was awakened by the brief selections of first-person narratives in the volume entitled *Her Own Life* and by the larger, complete texts made available, first in hard copy and later online, by the Brown Women Writers Project. And gradually I turned to nonfiction prose – to diaries, memoirs, and other autobiographical texts – as forms of self-representation and as a window on a period I had long studied with attention to its male writers. Along the way, I met with occasional discouragement. In 1996, while on sabbatical in Europe, I was poring over the diary of Lady Margaret Hoby in somewhat constrained working conditions. Our sixteen-year-old son, looking over my shoulder at the text, and aware that pleasure as well as work should attend such a leave, said, "You're on sabbatical, right? You could read anything you want, right?" Then, in response to my affirmative, he said, "I think that's just sick." We've continued that conversation since, and though I can't claim to have converted him to the reading of early modern women's diaries, I'm the more inclined to explain why I keep reading these texts and what I think can be learned from them.

I take pleasure in acknowledging help, support, and advice I have received from generous friends and colleagues: most especially I thank Betsey Harries, Bill Oram, and Naomi Miller, who read drafts of the whole and made many valuable suggestions; and Andrea Sununu and Carrie Klaus, who as co-organizers of a workshop at the conference on Early Modern Women helped develop some of the ideas of the study. I gratefully remember Ron Macdonald, who turned out not to be a skeptic but a supporter of this project. Participants in several conferences at which these ideas were presented have helped with their questions and further suggestions: the meeting of the Margaret Cavendish Society at Wheaton

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College in 2001 and the conference on Attending to Early Modern Women at the University of Maryland in 2000. Members of the Smith College faculty heard earlier drafts of several chapters, and participants in a Kahn Institute Project on Life Writing in 2003–4 provided insight and encouragement. My students at Smith College let me try out texts and ideas on them and responded with interest, enthusiasm, and a lively diversity of views. I gratefully acknowledge a grant from Smith College that allowed me to travel to England to answer scholarly questions and survey landscapes, and a summer grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities that enabled me to bring this study to its conclusion. I wish to thank two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press for their warm endorsement of my project and their thoughtful challenges to it. To my family, my husband, and now grown children, who have sustained, nourished, and even distracted me during the gestation of this book, my love and deepest thanks. Finally, I owe much to my mother who, like Anne Clifford, kept a diary as long as she was able, and who demonstrates many of the qualities of the women of this study: persistence and piety; a love of detail and a devotion to family history; a sense of adventure and drama; a desire to be well dressed; and better handwriting than the Duchess of Newcastle. But I owe no less to my father, for like Anne Clifford, I have aspired to be my father's daughter, and am pleased when others see some resemblance.