



# Imagining Gender in Biographical Fiction: Introduction

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Biographical fiction—or biofiction, as we will mostly call it in this book—has become an immensely popular genre in recent decades. It allows readers to dive into remote periods and places, to immerse themselves in a historical character and imagine what it may have been like to lead the “Cultural Revolution” in Maoist China, or to undergo gender reassignment surgery in early twentieth-century Germany, or to marry King Henry VIII in Tudor England, all while enjoying the evocative imagery, textual playfulness, suspense, and insider’s view that fiction provides. Using the factual outlines of historical lives as springboards for their own imaginative

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narratives, biofictions boldly go where no biography has gone before. Such metaphors of courageous (space) exploration are problematic, of course, not least as they suggest that life stories are “new worlds” just waiting to be “found” by writers. Even with regard to factual biography, the paradigm of discovery has long been troubled by the realisation that life narratives are ideological constructs, more or less carefully crafted for consumption by specific audiences for specific purposes and with reference to existing conventions of genre. Evoking authors’ “boldness” is useful, however, as a way to consider the creative licence of biofiction to stray from the biographical facts—by inventing encounters and dialogues, by writing about the subject’s thoughts and secret motives, or even by inserting fictional characters in their texts, in which such elements mingle with recorded history. It is exactly this narrative privilege that accounts for the fascination the genre exerts on its readers, and it is this privilege that critics periodically use as grounds for invalidating biofiction.<sup>1</sup>

While paying close attention to the productive tensions the genre creates between biographical fact and authorial licence, this volume reads biofiction as a discourse on gender. Following Judith Butler’s understanding of gender as “a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint,”<sup>2</sup> we inquire into biofiction’s improvisations within the constraints of both gender and genre. If, rather than to represent a life faithfully or accurately, the aim of biofiction is creatively to “answer perplexing questions, fill in cultural lacunae, or signify human interiors,” as Michael Lackey posits,<sup>3</sup> gender often constitutes a central axis of its imaginative inquiry into past lives.

## BIOGRAPHY, HISTORY, FICTION: STORIES OF GENDER AND LIMITS OF GENRE

Before we outline what sort of genre we have in mind when we speak of biographical fiction, however, we need to briefly clarify what we mean by genre. Genre is not a kind of box into which a literary text can unambiguously and exclusively be placed. We follow Jacques Derrida’s approach to genre as defined by “the law of abounding, of *excess*, the law of participation without membership, of contamination.”<sup>4</sup> The Derridean concept of genre can be related to Butler’s notion of gender performativity: just as reiterations of gender also open up a space—in the very moment of repetition—for the subversion of normative patterns, so too is contamination an inevitable feature of literary genres, as each new individual text will never be an exact copy of previous specimens. Embracing a dynamic concept of genre does not mean that we insist on postmodern notions of “fluidity” to

declare the idea of genre as void of all meaning or heuristic value. Rather, we take the view that genre as process—as historically conditioned and continuously evolving mode of writing and reading—requires greater specificity and nuance than any “grand theory” of a genre would allow. This process-oriented view of genre suggests a critical engagement that is attentive to the features of a text and its relation to other (bodies of) texts.

We follow a definition of biofiction as literature based on the life of an historical person, using that person’s name,<sup>5</sup> but approaching its subject through overtly fictional means that include varying degrees of invention.<sup>6</sup> As such, biofiction “takes a real person and their real history as the subject matter for imaginative exploration,” as David Lodge states, by means other than “the objective, evidence-based discourse of biography.”<sup>7</sup> Lodge’s statement evokes two obvious reference points for the genre of biofiction: the “imaginative exploration” of “real history” associates biofiction with historical fiction, while the move to distinguish biographical fiction from biography reminds us of the proximity of these genres. In the following, we will discuss biofiction’s relation to historical fiction and biography, and point to some ways in which gender-sensitive criticism of these latter two genres can be productively directed towards biofiction.

The historical novel, according to Jerome de Groot’s broad definition, is “set in the past” and comprises a wide spectrum of forms, including “genre-specific work from detective to horror to romance” and a large segment of “literary fiction”<sup>8</sup> extending also to self-reflexive narratives that “attack historiographical convention.”<sup>9</sup> While some critics consider biographical and historical fiction to be distinct or even opposed forms,<sup>10</sup> we argue that the broad scope of historical fiction outlined by de Groot can also accommodate biographical fiction.

Some recent work on biofiction has indeed been carried out within the framework of historical fiction criticism.<sup>11</sup> Several contributions to this volume also discuss biofiction as a form of historical fiction, and it is easy to see why. Biofiction is concerned with historical lives. Its engagement with history becomes especially clear once one moves away from a view of History as a series of momentous events and inventions, towards a multi-leveled concept of history informed also by more recent currents of historiography, such as social history and microhistory.

De Groot describes the characters of historical fiction as “identifiable to us on the one hand due to the conceit of the novel form, in that they speak the same language, and their concerns are often similar to ours, but their situation and their surroundings are immensely different.”<sup>12</sup> This also holds true for biofictional characters. Biographical fiction oscillates

between two temporal levels, the time of writing and the time in which it is set, creating that “sense of historicized ‘difference’”<sup>13</sup> that de Groot considers definitive of historical fiction and which is the foundation of its dynamic of identification and distance. Reflecting on her queer nineteenth-century protagonist Jenny Bonnet in *Frog Music* (2014), novelist Emma Donoghue describes this mediation between past and present as follows: “I am trying to make two periods resonate through this person. It’s almost like the character I’m focusing on is a time traveler.”<sup>14</sup> Bonnet’s “delightfully self-destructive” behaviour made the author reach for an ADHD diagnosis, for instance.<sup>15</sup> Donoghue notes, “So I’m making her a figure of our era in all those small ways to try and make sense of the historical record of how she behaved.”<sup>16</sup> While Donoghue is indeed interested in shedding light on “history” for her readers and wants to “make sense of the historical record,” she does this by projecting present-day concepts and concerns onto her protagonist so as to render her relatable for present-day readers.

Conceding to biographical fiction a place in the vast domain of historical fiction allows us to read biofictions in the light of critical work on historical fiction and gender. The genre of the historical romance novel, for instance, has given rise to insightful studies of its gender dynamics and politics, and these can also help to illuminate the cultural work of biofictional texts. Diane Haeger’s biographical novel *The Perfect Royal Mistress* (2007) about Nell Gwyn will serve as an example here. While Gwyn’s story may in some ways be inherently suited to the conventions of the classic, heteronormative version of the historical romance novel—offering, for instance, an attractive, empowered young woman,<sup>17</sup> an aristocratic milieu,<sup>18</sup> and a powerful “man of the world” hero<sup>19</sup> in the figure of King Charles II—Haeger’s plot and cast draw on romance conventions rather more emphatically than the subject’s biography would seem to allow. *The Perfect Royal Mistress* opens with sixteen-year-old Nell as a virgin—a scenario that is historically unlikely, as Gwyn probably worked as a child prostitute,<sup>20</sup> but which chimes well with historical romance’s penchant for inexperienced heroines, as diagnosed by Helen Hughes.<sup>21</sup> The young heroine’s first encounter with the king, on page 4, already foreshadows her impending love affair with Charles, as “her knees were suddenly weak” in his presence,<sup>22</sup> but the lovers’ union is then predictably delayed. In a manner typical of romantic fiction, the novel is oriented towards this central love relationship, and organises Nell’s life narrative around it. The figure of Charles is endowed with the generic traits of the romance hero, “saturnine

and abrasive,”<sup>23</sup> and the novel also features those descriptions of “wild explicit sex” that have become a staple of the historical romance novel.<sup>24</sup>

It is most interesting to see, then, how the novel struggles to accommodate the fact that the historical Nell-Charles relationship departs from one of historical romance’s most salient structural premises: the “Happily Ever After” ending of a lasting, monogamous love relationship that is “the promise of the genre writer to his or her reader,” as Kristin Ramsdell states.<sup>25</sup> In historical romance criticism, this is often referred to as the “winning and taming”<sup>26</sup> of the hero by the heroine. Romance writers such as Ann Maxwell and Jayne Krentz describe this in rather more colourful and heteronormative terms when they declare romance novels to be “tales of strong women taming and gentling that most dangerous of creatures on earth, the human male.”<sup>27</sup> Gwyn’s actual biography does not offer a romantically satisfying conclusion of this kind, as Charles never married her, nor was Gwyn the only mistress of the “Merry Monarch”—an inconvenience that the novel makes every effort to smooth over as it follows Gwyn’s life up to Charles’s death, by insisting in various ways that their love was the only meaningful relationship for them both. *The Perfect Royal Mistress* ends on a protestation of romantic fulfilment: “She may not have been the queen, nor even his only mistress—far from that—but she knew with every fiber of her being, and so did their son, that she had been his only love.”<sup>28</sup>

Haeger’s novel demonstrates not only that biofiction can accommodate elements from other genres and subgenres, but also that these may sometimes rub up against each other. Rather than speak of generic blending in such cases, a model of generic layering suggests itself, where elements of different genre conventions—in this case, historical romance and biography—accrue but do not quite merge into a homogeneous whole. It is precisely the fault lines between them that make the gender politics of Haeger’s biofiction most apparent.<sup>29</sup> While the historical Gwyn was one of the first women on the English Restoration stage and one of the most celebrated comediennes of her day—an achievement that biographies tend to trace expertly and at length<sup>30</sup>—the novel’s emphasis on romance leads to a view of her stage career primarily as preparation for her liaison with the king and her life at court, as in a scene when Nell is about to meet Charles and her rival Louise de Kéroualle at the theatre: “She stood, glanced at her own reflection, forced an even more carefree smile, then prepared to receive him. Perhaps he believed she did not know about Carwell’s presence. That was how she intended to proceed. ‘*You are an actress, now act!*’”<sup>31</sup> Haeger’s romance-centred narrative trajectory perpetuates the long-standing image

of Nell Gwyn as “royal mistress,” attributing significance to Gwyn’s life and career only in relation to the king.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that feminist or Marxist critics tend to assess historical romance rather critically. For them, the genre’s iterable plot structure signals its allegiance to patriarchy, as the heroine exchanges independence for romantic love,<sup>32</sup> thereby affirming “the foundational premise of hetero-normative masculinist culture,” as Catherine Roach puts it.<sup>33</sup> The absence of a convincing “Happily Ever After” conclusion in *The Perfect Royal Mistress* inadvertently serves to highlight Gwyn’s precarious dependence and need to maintain the king’s erotic interest in her even more, and the novel’s embrace of historical romance conventions forecloses the telling of Gwyn’s life in a way that could bring alternative aspects of her life and character to the fore.

Just as historical fiction studies can help shed light on the gender dynamics of biographical fictions, it is worth examining critical work on life writing in order to establish how insights of this scholarship, too, may be applicable to biofiction. For this purpose, it bears to once more consider the relation between biography and biofiction—to understand what makes biofiction “biographical.” Biography, according to Hermione Lee’s definition, is “the story of a person told by someone else.”<sup>34</sup> “A person” here denotes, of course, a real, historical person. Although “life writing” has gained popularity in recent decades as a more capacious term that, while also referring to actual lives, includes biographical and autobiographical fiction,<sup>35</sup> the term “biography” evokes an expectation that “the story should be true” and the biographer “should tell us what actually happened in the life.”<sup>36</sup> Lee relativises this stipulation by pointing to experimental forms, gaps in the records, agendas of witnesses and biographers, and failures of memory, but the idea of the biographer’s “responsibility to the truth”<sup>37</sup> still holds as a general readerly expectation. The responsibility Lee evokes is not only to factual accuracy and verifiability, however, but also to the notion of character. For her, a central metaphor for biography is the portrait, which “suggests empathy, bringing to life, capturing the character,” as the biographer’s representation of the subject “will shape how posterity views them.”<sup>38</sup> This idea of the textual afterlife and its role in cultural memory is also evoked by John F. Keener, who discusses “biographical narrative” as a continuum that exceeds the book-ends of birth and death dates to encompass the “cumulative, cultural life story” of the biographical subject<sup>39</sup>—which may also include their biofictional reincarnation.

While biofiction is clearly marked as fiction, its reference to an actual person—not least through its use of real names—initiates a way of reading that keeps both the writer’s creative invention and the narrative’s rootedness in a specific historical life in view. Many writers consider this biographical rootedness central to their work. Authors of biofiction “frequently subordinate empirical facts to a symbolic truth,” as Lackey notes.<sup>40</sup> This creation of a symbolic truth is often geared specifically towards being true to the character as the writer envisions it. Emma Donoghue, for instance, speaks of “an obligation”<sup>41</sup> and “ethical commitment”<sup>42</sup> to the historical figures she writes about to “get it right,” which makes her “go to a lot of trouble to write about them when you could just make them up.”<sup>43</sup> Like Donoghue, David Ebershoff evokes the notion of responsibility when explaining his choice to change Gerda Wegener’s name in *The Danish Girl* about Lili Elbe because of the fictional liberties he took with the life of Lili’s co-protagonist.<sup>44</sup> Ebershoff employed “the tools of fiction” in *The Danish Girl* because he believed in “fiction’s ability to mine a character’s inner life” as a way to “show a reader who Lili was, what she thought and felt, and what her life means.”<sup>45</sup> David Lodge similarly points to the affordances of biofiction in capturing a historical figure’s “interiority,” which for him is a declared goal: “If a novel is about a real person, it can use the clues that are available, the information that is available, to try and recreate what that person’s consciousness was perceiving in any given situation. So that’s the point of doing it.”<sup>46</sup> Underlining his concerns with being true to the subject’s life, he reveals a reluctance to “invent whole scenes” in his biofiction “if it can be avoided.”<sup>47</sup> Even novelist Jay Parini, who emphasises biographical fiction’s licence and creativity in engaging with historical figures and opines that a biofiction about Franklin Roosevelt can “let him fly air balloons over France for thirty years,” if the author so chooses, stipulates that the purpose of such inventiveness would be “a clarifying effect”—that is, to “get us closer to some aspect of the personality of F.D.R.”<sup>48</sup> If the notion of biography as portrait points to an artistically inflected, subjective kind of referentiality that nevertheless aims at “catching a likeness,” to use Lee’s phrase,<sup>49</sup> these writers suggest that biographical fiction has something distinctive and valuable to contribute to the biographical effort.

The transparency of an author’s engagement with biographical “raw material” also shapes readers’ expectations. Emma Donoghue, for instance, stresses the significance of back notes and that “readers really do care about facts.”<sup>50</sup> Biographical novelist Kevin Barry recounts how he made

every effort in *Beatlebone* (2015), his novel about John Lennon, to “get the voice right,” because he “realized that a lot of readers were going to have an expectation, before they even got to page one, of what the character should sound like.”<sup>51</sup>

This is not to say that biographical fiction and factual biography can simply be conflated—they clearly operate under different truth contracts. The promise of biography to its readers is, after all, that nothing will be made up, and that speculations, while permissible, will be marked as such. Also, the idea of “getting it right” or “catching a likeness” may be a chief concern for many writers of biofiction, but it is certainly not an obligation. Yet biofiction is, like biography, a form of life writing, and both gesture across time and space towards what Caitríona Ní Dhúill has called “biography’s absent presence”<sup>52</sup>: the once living body from which all biographical discourse ramifies. Gender-focused studies of life writing have long recognised that gendered bodies become subject to specific forms of narrative, and that such narratives, in turn, shape our views and expectations of gendered subjectivity. In what follows, we bring biofiction studies into dialogue with critical work on life writing and gender, illuminating biofiction’s creative dealings with gender—past and present—by relating the genre to other forms of life narrative.

### GENDER, FAME, AND AGENCY IN BIOFICTION

From the late twentieth century onwards, feminist biography scholars have pointed to the inherent gender bias of biography—a genre that celebrates lives unfolding in public fields of action to which women have historically had little access and that long neglected the substantial contributions of those women who were active in such fields. Feminist biographers set out to “restore” women “to the record,” as Sara Alpern points out, and to bring a new “gender consciousness” to a genre that was once a “men’s club.”<sup>53</sup> Fiction writers’ noticeable interest, particularly since the 1970s, in the lives of historical women can in part be understood as contributing to the feminist project of “reclaiming” neglected figures through biographical narrative. A novel that demonstrates this reclamatory potential of biofiction is Anna Banti’s *Artemisia* (1947) about Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi, which even pre-dates the second-wave feminist turn towards women’s lives. As Lucia Boldrini notes, Banti’s text had a share in altering the often dismissive view that art history had taken of Gentileschi: it initiated the painter’s reevaluation as “the woman who stood up to her



rapist in court, who made a name for herself, who was able to establish a school in Naples and earn her living from her work.”<sup>54</sup>

Stephanie Bird, in her study of novels about historical German women, draws an explicit connection between women’s biofiction and twentieth-century feminist movements, observing that “the authors are almost invariably interested in rectifying the injustice of women who, for whatever reason, have not been accorded a historical voice.”<sup>55</sup> Bird links these narratives to the feminist project of “herstory” that sought to uncover the blind spots of traditional historiography and to reevaluate as political the private and domestic spheres to which women had often been relegated.<sup>56</sup> While Bird highlights the value of herstorical biofiction in the context of late twentieth-century women’s movements, she also points to the risks that inhere in upholding the classic division of public/masculine and private/feminine that herstory often reflects, as it may yet again marginalise women “from ‘proper’ history.”<sup>57</sup> Her study is specifically concerned with what biographer and critic Jean Strouse has termed “semi-private lives,” stories of women such as Henriette Vogel and Cornelia Goethe who have entered public consciousness chiefly for their association with famous men. In feminist terms, the challenge of writing about such figures lies in according the female subject a story of her own. Too often, she is employed merely as a new lens through which to view an already famous man and is thus turned into one of biofiction’s “sousveillant” subjects—characters who “observe and narrate” a canonical figure “from below.” Such characters have become a generic staple of biographical fiction.<sup>58</sup>

That “herstorical” biofiction is capable of maintaining a more consistent focus even on the life of a “semi-private” woman is evidenced by Maggie O’Farrell’s critically acclaimed *Hamnet* (2020)—which relegates a famous husband almost entirely to the background of the narrative. O’Farrell’s novel centres in the consciousness of the woman who was married to William Shakespeare. It effectively “plunges the reader into the vivid life of the house, with its smells of a glover’s workshop, the heat and bustle of a cookhouse, the physical effort of planting a garden or twisting out newly washed sheets,” as one reviewer admiringly remarks.<sup>59</sup> Anne or Agnes Hathaway’s sparsely documented and—in traditional biographical terms—unremarkable domestic life gives rise in *Hamnet* to an eerily evocative narrative of loss, grief, and emotional survival.<sup>60</sup> Although the figure of William (who remains unnamed throughout) may well function to kindle readers’ interest and anchor the story in one of the “great lives” of world history, the novel remains centred on *her* story.<sup>61</sup>

Recent decades have seen a notable surge in female-centred biofictions, reflected also in the contributions to this volume. When these are relational biofictions that centre on the heroine's relationship with a (frequently famous) man, they often place masculinity under scrutiny no less than they interrogate female subjectivity. Thus, a biofiction like Judith Chernaik's *Mab's Daughters: Shelley's Wives and Lovers: Their Own Story* (1991) does not just seek to reclaim female literary predecessors, as Beate Neumeier observes, but also to "deconstruct ... the dominant male figures through the female perspective."<sup>62</sup> And indeed, the variety of male subjectivities emerging from the biofictions studied across this book—from an inscrutable and bloody-minded Mao Zedong, to an elusive Henry James and various versions of Henry VIII—testifies to masculinity as provisional, multiple, performative, and related to fluid relations of power and varying degrees of cultural visibility.<sup>63</sup>

For relational biofictions that do not clearly privilege one protagonist, Ina Bergmann suggests the term "double historical biofiction."<sup>64</sup> In her contribution to this volume, Bergmann discusses novels about Frances Sargent Osgood and Edgar Allen Poe, and demonstrates how the gendered positions within even seemingly balanced character constellations merit close attention, particularly with regard to the two subjects' unequal legacies and prominence in cultural memory.

Biofictional narratives featuring double or multiple protagonists help to trouble an all-too-easy alignment of the public/private dichotomy with gender binaries. A novel such as Margaret Forster's *Lady's Maid* (1990), about Elizabeth Barret Browning's servant Elizabeth Wilson, is a case in point. For many years bound in service to a famous woman poet, Forster's Wilson on one level becomes the linchpin for yet another retelling of the Brownings' legendary elopement to Italy and the resounding success of Wilson's mistress among (mostly male) literati. Thus oscillating in its focus, Forster's novel could be said to illustrate through biofiction a problem that has long preoccupied gender-conscious scholars of biography: that the tropes of exceptionality and achievement so bound up with the genre of biography may clear a structural position for some "exceptional" women which inadvertently serves to uphold traditional gender hierarchies, cementing the cultural and political invisibility of those women whose lives chiefly play out in "unexceptional" private spheres.<sup>65</sup> Yet Forster also leaves considerable room for Wilson's own experiences and concerns to unfold independently of, or even run counter to, those of her mistress. *Lady's Maid*

carefully teases out the intersection of gender with class, imagining the specific and too often undocumented experiences of Victorian female domestic servants and the frustrations their positions of dependency entailed.

Biofictions such as Forster's, which depict lives circumscribed by their place in a historical class system, call into question the "agency aesthetic" that Lackey locates in biographical fiction as distinct from historical fiction. What readers "want from the biographical novel," Lackey surmises, "is a model of a figure that transcends the deterministic forces of history and the environment."<sup>66</sup> As the notion of agency has played a vital role in social justice discourses—and not least in gender theory—it is worth reflecting on the implications and limits of the agentic figure in biofiction. At first glance, this notion would seem to evoke the classic Carlylean hero whose biographical worthiness is measured by their impact in the public sphere—a model whose gendered undertones have long been called into question by feminist biography scholars.<sup>67</sup> The genre of biofiction is indeed populated by numerous political leaders, famous artists, notorious criminals, and pioneers of all sorts. Yet there are also figures like O'Farrell's Agnes and Forster's Elizabeth Wilson, in narratives that make do almost entirely without the high-flying distinction of Carlylean protagonists of History. Biofictions such as *Hamnet* and *Lady's Maid* highlight how an author's choice of perspective shapes our perception of which lives, occupations, decisions, or spheres of action seem historically significant and worthy of attention, and how gender plays a role in this. As such, they resonate with Virginia Woolf's question in "The Art of Biography":

whether the lives of great men only should be recorded. Is not anyone who has lived a life, and left a record of that life, worthy of biography—the failures as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious? And what is greatness? And what smallness? We must revise our standards of merit and set up new heroes for our admiration.<sup>68</sup>

And in doing so, we might usefully scrutinise our understanding of agency, too. A closer look at subaltern female protagonists of biofiction reveals complex relationships between historical position and agentic possibility, allowing us to question the stark dichotomy of historical and biographical fiction that Lackey proposes. Two biofictions that serve Lackey as evidence for the argument that biographical and historical

fiction are fundamentally distinct invite further reflection: Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings: A Novel* (1979) and Mary Morrissy's *The Rising of Bella Casey* (2013). Bella Casey's "Rising" coincides with the 1916 Easter Rising against British rule in Ireland. At the beginning of the novel, Morrissy's Bella is raped and impregnated by a clergyman. In her despair, and to avoid becoming a social outcast, she seduces her brother's friend, which leads to an unhappy marriage, her husband's early death after a syphilis infection (passed on to him via Bella's rape), and her destitution. During the Easter Rising, towards the end of Bella's life, the protagonist comes into possession of a piano and experiences a rare moment of hopefulness and possibility, followed rather quickly by her decision to take on hard menial labour, which ensues in bouts of sickness and her eventual death. Surprisingly, the short-lived epiphany at the piano—together with the fact that Morrissy has young Bella "ensnare" and "outmanoeuvre" her future husband to cover up her rape and pregnancy—suffices for Lackey to declare that the protagonist "has the desire, ability, and freedom to take agential control over her own life"<sup>69</sup> and leads him to read her story, like that of Ned Kelly in Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*, as a "narrative about the power of individual agency and political autonomy."<sup>70</sup> But if agency can be defined as the "power to take control of one's life,"<sup>71</sup> the few glimpses Morrissy provides of Bella Casey's agency are quickly submerged in the novel's downward trajectory of crippling circumstance, economic hardship, and emotional suffering. Those moments of agency can, of course, be highlighted, insofar as they contribute to the shaping of a convincing, multi-dimensional character. However, if taken as a demonstration of biofiction's commitment to agency, as that which sets it apart from historical fiction, the question arises as to what would constitute a non-agentic protagonist. To put it plainly, it is too easy to find patently agentic figures in "non-biographical" historical fiction—from Umberto Eco's eccentric monk William of Baskerville in *Il nome della rosa* (1980) to Michel Faber's inventive prostitute in *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) to Sarah Perry's amateur palaeontologist in *The Essex Serpent* (2016)—for agency to hold as a defining feature of biographical fiction.

More important in the context of this volume, though, is the historically unequal distribution of crucial forms of agency along gender lines, and the ways in which biofiction reflects or engages with this. It is not least Bella Casey's vulnerable position and upbringing as a woman in late

nineteenth-century Ireland that curtails her possibilities for self-determination and eventually leads to her downfall, as Morrissy's novel makes clear. While it may be possible to read her epiphany at the piano as symbolic of the agency of the Irish nation erupting in 1916 in political insurrection<sup>72</sup> (though Bella's Protestantism would seem to complicate such a reading), an overemphasis on Bella's agency threatens to obfuscate the novel's critical engagement with the sex/gender system of the protagonist's day. Through the figure of Bella, Morrissy's novel marks "the insurmountable distance that existed between male and female societal expectations," as Marisol Morales-Ladrón notes, and throws into relief "the limited choices women had."<sup>73</sup> In other words, the fictionalised suffering of a historical woman—punctured though it may be by brief moments of hopefulness and determination—may also serve to render visible the social pressures and limitations placed on women at the time.

Not only does *The Rising of Bella Casey* point to sexual violence and its dramatic curbing of Bella's options and expectations, it also counters a form of epistemic violence: the erasure of women from biographical and historical discourse. In an interview in which she addresses her feminist sympathies, Morrissy reveals that *The Rising of Bella Casey* was her response to renowned Irish playwright Seán O'Casey's decision, in his experimental autobiography, to move his sister's death forward by ten years: "This literary soricide was what prompted me to write *The Rising of Bella Casey*. I felt his was a failure of the imagination; he couldn't understand what had prompted her downfall and he hadn't the capacity to see beyond appearances."<sup>74</sup> Morrissy's novel thus "raises" the figure of Bella from an untimely textual annihilation and from the obscurity that often befalls female subjects in history—but does so without overstating her agency.

A similar dynamic is at work in Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings: A Novel*, where the female protagonist's experience of sexual oppression and her textual erasure intersect with the factor of race. The novel imagines a series of encounters between Thomas Jefferson's ageing slave mistress Sally Hemings, who bore the late president and Founding Father several children, and census taker Nathan Langdon, who sets out to "white-wash" her record without her consent. The contradiction to which Chase-Riboud's novel points so emphatically is summarised by Lackey as follows: "As the author of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson affirmed the idea that all men are created equal and therefore have a natural right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But as a black woman, Hemings was not considered one of the 'all men,' so she was strategically

excluded from the Declaration's promises."<sup>75</sup> Jefferson's secret relationship with Hemings, the novel suggests, may have been at the heart of his removal of a clause prohibiting slavery from an earlier version of the Declaration of Independence. Focusing on the problematic relationship Chase-Riboud's Sally symbolises between the institution of slavery and the political birth of the United States, Lackey convincingly demonstrates how *Sally Hemings* "offers us a way of understanding what would become America's national identity."<sup>76</sup>

If we approach the agency of the biofictional subject in gendered terms, it is again worth pointing out that as a slave woman, Sally Hemings was at the receiving end of multiple intersecting forms of oppression, as Chase-Riboud's novel makes clear. Already as an adolescent, the fictional Sally is well aware of the limits to her own agency. "Perhaps I had always known that he would claim me. Had not the same happened to my mother and my sisters? ... I could hasten or delay that moment, but I felt powerless to prevent it."<sup>77</sup> Once Jefferson has physically "claimed" her she thinks:

That other face, the public one, was the face of her enemy, her master. But one she owned. ... When would he free her? she wondered. What if she asked him now ... here? ... She couldn't, she was ashamed. The pallor, the soft eyes, the ribbon undone, the mouth softened by their kisses ... He was smiling lazily at her. Even now after their moment of passion, there was a violence and a constraint about him that made her tremble. It was then she realized that he liked owning her.<sup>78</sup>

Chase-Riboud draws a complex portrait of a woman who is simultaneously proud of her master's physical attraction to her, of his need of and dependence on her, and habituated as a female slave into a subaltern position that would make it difficult for her to claim agency and demand her freedom or resist his advances. The narrative does sound out the limited forms of agency available to her, for example, when she later breaks off contact with census taker Langdon. By imagining such instances of self-determination, *Sally Hemings* also resonates with feminist debates about the limited utility of "victim feminism": rather than portraying the central character as deprived of *all* agency, the novel carefully imagines the limited forms of agency available to Hemings at certain times.

Yet *Sally Hemings* does not celebrate these episodes in a manner that would eclipse the structural limitations under which the historical Hemings's life unfolded, nor does Chase-Riboud's protagonist ever really

overcome those limitations. In their discussion of the place of “relational autonomy” in feminist thought, Peta Bowden and Jane Mummary address the scope and meaning of agency under oppressive conditions, noting that “the question remains as to whether choices made under such conditions could ever be autonomous in a meaningful sense. ... Could autonomy really equate to carrying out choices that are just what would be expected on the basis of one’s socialization?”<sup>79</sup> In that sense, a biofiction that over-emphasises its protagonist’s agency may in fact work to downplay the system of often gendered norms and limitations that restricted the historical protagonist’s life course. *Sally Hemings* features a heroine with memories, ideas, and desires of her own, who makes occasional use of the limited agency available to her. But above all, Chase-Riboud’s novel renders visible the realities of those limitations placed on Sally Hemings as a female slave, a woman whose status deprives her of control over her own being and body in more than one way.

It is obvious how a transgender pioneer like Lili Elbe can be said to possess agency—“that power to take control of one’s life.”<sup>80</sup> Biographical novelists may often be drawn to a subject’s agency and highlight their capacity for self-invention. In Ebershoff’s novel on Elbe this becomes apparent not least in the way the author terminates the narrative shortly before the historical Elbe’s death after sex confirmation surgery—a strategy that grants Lili a moment of peace and contentment as her true self. In other biofictions, however, such as *Sally Hemings* and *The Rising of Bella Casey*, the limitations placed on the subject’s agency may be the very point of the narrative and a vital part of its politics. These novels, too, succeed in presenting a complex and engaging figure. Like many other biofictions, Chase-Riboud’s and Morrissy’s novels map a historical character’s outward existence and actions onto an inner landscape of motivation, suffering, beliefs, and desires in a manner that requires the author’s, and activates the reader’s, empathy. Such narratives illuminate how the conditions of agency are always also shaped by historically specific norms of gender, race, and class, which may have become internalised or may simply be too powerful for any one individual to overcome.

## MAKING GENDER INTELLIGIBLE: BIOFICTION, EXEMPLARITY, AND NARRATIVE IDENTITY

Whether biofiction consolidates the status of cultural icons or sets out to rediscover marginalised lives, it partakes in the exemplary function<sup>81</sup> often attributed to biography. The subject of a biographical discourse comes to represent a certain way of inhabiting gender. While in 1994, Linda Wagner-Martin could still observe that female subjects of biographies are perceived as “eccentric rather than exemplary, and eccentricity is not a trait that wins admiration,”<sup>82</sup> recent decades have seen a change in attitudes. The appearance of numerous celebratory “lives” of women in the biography section of bookshops is matched by a similar boom in biofictions about “notable” women. Artemisia Gentileschi, for instance, emerges as an emblem of female artistic production and triumphant survivor of sexual violence in no fewer than five biographical novels.<sup>83</sup>

Nor is female subjectivity—in its many historical manifestations—the only identity for which biofiction can help to create a narrative space. While feminist biographers and life-writing scholars have set the scene for a critique of the politics of exclusion evident in dominant forms of life narrative, movements for the equality of lesbian and gay, trans, intersex, or non-binary people have long discovered the relevance of life writing for their own causes. In his groundbreaking study *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuals* (1998), Jay Prosser claims that for transsexuals, “narrative is not only the bridge to embodiment but a way of making sense of transition, the link between locations: the transition itself.”<sup>84</sup> What Prosser evokes here is the notion of narrative identity—that we are the stories we construct about ourselves. Rather than just making sense of a prior self, narrative thus becomes a way of bringing the self into being in the first place. Following Prosser, Jennifer Cooke posits narratives of self as significant points of identification for others. “If one’s identity is non-normative,” she argues, “then reading other similar personal stories is a (trans)formative act.”<sup>85</sup> Life-writing scholar and gender theorist Quinn Eades illustrates this as he remembers his first encounter with Leslie Feinberg’s autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues*:

It took me 17 years to work out why I couldn’t breathe while I read Feinberg’s words, ingested them, let them lay down in me. That day I pulled my first binder over my head and then struggled the black nylon down to flatten breast chest belly hips, then t-shirt over the top, then mirror gaze



from front and side—a flood of incredulous recognition, an internal and pushing-all-ways yes—and there was Feinberg’s ghost text reaching out from/with the body to touch/stroke/hold/enfold me all over again.<sup>86</sup>

The relevance of others’ life stories to the formation of the self is also stressed by Wendy Moffat when she considers a “documentable queer textual past” as “foundational to the construction of gay identity.”<sup>87</sup> Emma Donoghue, reflecting on the queer protagonist Jenny Bonnet of her biographical novel *Frog Music*, makes the same argument with reference to biofiction: “I think it’s crucial for us to know about queer life before now. If we only seem to exist now, then we look like a shallow phase. We look like a meme, something that’s just gone viral. Establishing a history that was not very visible before makes you feel like a grownup.”<sup>88</sup>

Going beyond literature’s role of helping to consolidate one’s own identity, Moffat also evokes the function of life narrative—including biofiction—as a “call for empathy” towards other identities. As such, literature can, for instance, become a means of “awakening us to the lived experience of transgendered people.”<sup>89</sup> In her recent book *Transgender and the Literary Imagination* (2017), Rachel Carroll goes one step further as she explores the extent to which transgender narratives “give visibility or voice to transgender histories and identities.”<sup>90</sup> Looking beyond the individual reader’s experience of empathy, Carroll notes “the role played by historical, literary and film narrative in shaping ‘conditions of intelligibility.’”<sup>91</sup> Referencing Judith Butler’s work,<sup>92</sup> Carroll thus highlights the broader cultural implications of transgender narratives as vectors of empowerment and acknowledges the role of fiction in carving out a discursive space in which diverse and non-normative identities can become culturally intelligible.

Biofiction specifically can take on a vital role in endeavours to explore and expand possibilities for certain identities, not just through its referentiality—that is, its grounding in, and reference to, real lives—but also because of its affective power and reach. David Ebershoff’s award-winning novel *The Danish Girl* (2000), about Lili Elbe, illustrates this. Based on Niels Hoyer’s account of Elbe’s transition in *Man into Woman: The First Sex Change* (1933), Ebershoff’s book became an international bestseller at a time when LGBT groups worldwide were campaigning for equality and more inclusive legislation. In 2015, the novel was adapted into a screenplay by Lucinda Coxton; the motion picture *The Danish Girl* was eventually produced and released in 2015 to great acclaim, under the

direction of Tom Hooper and starring Eddie Redmayne as Einar Wegener/Lili Elbe and Alicia Vikander, who went on to win an Academy Award for her performance as Wegener's wife Gerda. Based on Ebershoff's novel, the film was largely considered an important step in rendering historical trans experience visible on a broad scale. The avid debates about its (lack of) historical accuracy and criticism of the casting<sup>93</sup> testify to the significance that may be attributed to fictional representations of exemplary figures. The example of *The Danish Girl* demonstrates not only how biographical fiction can work to amplify trans history but also how it can assume a mediating function between different life writing media and genres.

Some lives become starting points for multiple—and often conflicting—trajectories of gendered identification and appropriation even within the genre of biofiction. James Miranda Barry, an illustrious Irish-born army surgeon who was reportedly revealed on his death to have been biologically female, is a case in point here. When US-American author E.J. Levy announced in 2019 that her forthcoming novel *The Cape Doctor* would centre on James Miranda Barry, “a heroine for our time, for all time,” and referred to her subject as “she,”<sup>94</sup> the novelist attracted criticism from transgender communities for disrespecting Barry's self-chosen masculine identity. In response, Levy pointed to various biographical treatments of Barry as a cross-dressing woman to justify her approach—a gesture that ties her biofiction to “factual” biography. And indeed, as Ann Heilmann's comprehensive study of “Neo/Victorian Biographilia” about Barry, which also examines several biofictions, illustrates, the surgeon's gender identity was overwhelmingly given as female in textual treatments of the past 150 years—“as a cross-dressing woman rather than a transman.”<sup>95</sup> June Rose's 1977 biography *The Perfect Gentleman: The Remarkable Life of Dr James Miranda Barry, the Woman Who Served as an Officer in the British Army from 1813 to 1859* (which also uses female pronouns) illustrates the pervasiveness of this view, as does the title of the 2016 book by Michael du Preez and Jeremy Dronfield, *Dr James Barry: A Woman Ahead of Her Time*.<sup>96</sup>

Moving away from the idea of Barry as a feminist icon of gender transgression, other narratives cast Barry as a transgender man or an intersex person.<sup>97</sup> Patricia Duncker, who discusses her acclaimed 1999 novel *James Miranda Barry* in the final chapter of this volume, also chose a rather different approach to her subject. Duncker's biofiction, which shifts between narrative perspectives and pronominal markers of gender, does not settle

on a single or stable gender identity for its protagonist. Her *Barry* novel can thus be said to do the work of “queer life-writing” as defined by Dallas Baker: a type of life narrative that undertakes “a critical and radical deconstruction of identity, of heteronormativity and of binary gender and sexual norms.”<sup>98</sup> As such, queer life narratives unsettle the link between bodies and gendered subjectivities, as Duncker’s text does in more than one way: it leaves both the gender identity and the protagonist’s sense of self in flux and open to conjecture.

Carroll explains the conspicuous divergence between narrative versions of a transgender life with reference to the varied meanings that “the historical practice of ‘gender crossing’ has acquired ... in women’s, lesbian and gay, and queer historiography.”<sup>99</sup> Her study addresses the often problematic effects of such competing claims, for instance, when the conventions of transsexual life writing erase intersex narratives (in the case of Ebershoff’s biofiction of Elbe<sup>100</sup>) or when “feminist narratives of women’s gender crossing ... have the effect—however inadvertently—of erasing transgender narratives” (in the case of Duncker’s *James Miranda Barry*<sup>101</sup>). Carroll’s study also demonstrates that the varied meanings of certain gendered practices come particularly to the fore in comparative readings of narratives about the “same” historical subject, an approach that has variously been called “comparative biography”<sup>102</sup> or metabiography.<sup>103</sup> The case of James Miranda Barry demonstrates how renowned subjects can go through cycles of reclaiming, mythologisation, and revision in biographical discourse—including in biofiction. With the boom in biographical fiction over the last decades and the accumulation of fictional texts about certain illustrious individuals, it is unsurprising that scholars have increasingly taken an interest in the evolution of fictional treatments of prominent subjects.<sup>104</sup> A cross-textual analysis, as can be found in some of the contributions to this volume, does much to clarify the different meanings that become attached to a figure in various cultural and historical contexts. What Ní Dhúill has proposed for biography studies also holds true for biofiction: that a metabiographical approach, which focuses on “how the biographical discourse on a single figure shifts and accumulates over time to form a complex palimpsest of portraits,” can “reveal much about the changing positions of biographer and reader, about changing conceptions of subjectivity, and about the changing understanding of how individual lives relate to larger structures and processes.”<sup>105</sup> More specifically, metabiographical readings of biofiction can serve to establish what the possibilities of fiction are when it comes to imagining the experience of gender

in past lives. By reading differently imagined versions alongside and against each other, metabiographical analyses help to highlight innovative treatments of gendered identities and plots or, conversely, reveal the persistence of conventional tropes of femininity, masculinity, and gender normativity in biofiction.

### THE ETHICS OF BIOGRAPHICAL FICTION

Levy's novel *The Cape Doctor* has since been published, its protagonist renamed "Jonathan Mirandus Perry," in all likelihood to evade criticism for the author's choice of pronouns by lightly decoupling her text from the historical figure. While this decision moves *The Cape Doctor* into the realm of what Kohlke has termed "glossed biofiction,"<sup>106</sup> the controversy around the novel also highlights what is at stake in re-imagining famous lives in fiction. Various communities are invested in historically "correct" representations—in gender terms—of Barry, regardless of the fact that today we have no way of knowing with any certainty how Barry would have self-identified in an age when present-day categories of gender identity were unavailable. The status of a text as fiction does not apparently relieve an author of their perceived responsibility either towards the historical individual or towards constituencies of readers who have a gender-political stake in the individual's biography.

The idea of the writer's responsibility towards the historical subject and their afterlife in cultural memory brings us to the question of biofiction's ethics, which has implications beyond narrative gender assignment. The genre's creative licence renders it a site of important cultural work in the view of many readers and critics. Thus, biofiction is often said to "give a voice" to disenfranchised subjects—a metaphor that enjoys some popularity in biofiction scholarship and also appears repeatedly in contributions to the present volume. The idea is that biofiction can help redress a lack of representation that is manifest on various discursive levels—in biography and historiography but also on the primary level of archival material. Where factual biography finds itself impoverished by the gender bias of archives or works around the gaps by meticulously pointing them out to the reader,<sup>107</sup> biofiction, powered by imagination, can venture right into the void. The liberty of novelists or playwrights may be curbed somewhat by the possibility of legal disputes when subjects or their direct descendants feel misrepresented by a text,<sup>108</sup> but the artistic ethos of novelists or playwrights does not dictate close adherence to biographical facts.

Biofiction thus has a vital role to play in rendering visible those subjects and experiences that have fallen through the grid of traditional androcentric history. Hence, with regard to women's lives, fiction can paradoxically become "an arena for granting female experience an equivalent reality in the public sphere," as Max Saunders points out.<sup>109</sup>

The "voice" metaphor is problematic, however, when we consider its epistemological implications. Biofiction may well be "one of the aesthetic forms par excellence for mediating, remediating, and shaping popular perceptions of the past," as Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben state,<sup>110</sup> but the kind of knowledge it produces about its subject is qualified by the text's status as fiction. Obvious though it may seem, the biofictional subject's experiences, thoughts, and utterances spring from the writer's mind and are based to varying (and sometimes negligible) degrees on historical research. To put it plainly: the "recovered voice" is not recovered but invented. In this sense, the "voice" granted a subject through biofiction is that of a ventriloquist,<sup>111</sup> raising critical questions around agency and appropriation.

On a related note, biofictions can be seen as invading the privacy of their subjects, filling certain gaps that historical persons may well have left on purpose. Even where public achievement governs the choice of subject, the historical reputation of the central figure often functions as a point of entry into their *private* tribulations and intimate experiences—irrespective of their gender. The decision to re-write the life of an already famous woman may be a politically motivated attempt to elevate the private sphere as a historically significant zone of human (inter-)action, but it may also align with contemporary celebrity culture's voyeuristic desire to pry into the privacy of prominent figures.<sup>112</sup>

Such invasions assume particular poignancy in the context of transgender biography, as Jack Halberstam notes. Halberstam discusses transgender biography as "a sometimes violent, often imprecise project which seeks to brutally erase the carefully managed details of the life of a passing person" and which often "recasts the act of passing as deception, dishonesty and fraud."<sup>113</sup> In the context of biofiction, the re-telling of trans lives may seem less problematic with a figure like Lili Elbe, who collaborated in Niels Hoyer's account of her transition. Hence David Ebershoff's novel about Elbe was based on her public self-disclosure and her own view of her identity. By contrast, the lived reality of the private parts and sexual preferences of James Miranda Barry were not disclosed by the subject, yet

fictional accounts often take the ethically questionable step of imagining these disclosures.<sup>114</sup>

That said, biofiction has its own means of interrogating its fraught relation to the historical subject and challenging readers' expectations with regard to gendered plots and subjectivities. An example is the suicide plot, which has become a gendered blueprint for telling creative women's lives. Feminist critics have often denounced as reductive and disrespectful the way in which the work of female authors is read in relation to mental health and suicide at the expense of a sufficient focus on their creative output.<sup>115</sup> Accounts of Sylvia Plath's life and work, for instance, have traditionally been overshadowed by the author's early suicide, epitomised by the title of Ronald Hayman's book *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*. It is all the more remarkable, then, that novelist Kate Moses ended *Wintering: A Novel of Sylvia Plath* on a hopeful note, before the poet's suicide, thus foregoing such easy teleology and sensationalism. It can, of course, be argued that biofiction as a genre is tacitly proleptic in that readers will be aware of the basic outline of a famous subject's life story from the start, and that Plath's suicide will always be an unspoken presence in the novel. However, with her "omission"—as some readers will surely perceive it—of the suicide, Moses can be said to take a stand for the inherent value of the poet's lived experience and creative achievement.

Apart from such basic structural decisions, there are other textual choices that signal an author's engagement with ethical questions. In her monograph *Autobiographies of Others*, Lucia Boldrini pays close attention to the ethical implications of narrative situations and pronominal choices in what she terms "heterobiography": "novels that gesture towards historical factuality and literary fictionality, towards 'truth' and invention, and exist under the sign of an essential displacement (the 'autobiography' is written by another) that brings to the foreground structural, narrative, and ethical issues also central to autobiography itself."<sup>116</sup> Engaging with the dialogic structure of Anna Banti's *Artemisia*, Boldrini reads Banti's novel as "a reflection of the difficulties that exceptional women encounter in trying to assert themselves."<sup>117</sup> Significantly, the heterobiographical "double I" of the first half of the novel gives way to a third-person narrative which, for Boldrini, signals the narrator's "moment of letting go," that is, "of recognition and respect for the integrity, unknowability, separateness of the other woman."<sup>118</sup>

Patricia Duncker's play with narrative and pronominal situations in *James Miranda Barry* is another case in point here. Beyond illustrating the

inscrutability of her subject's gender identity, Duncker's fragmented approach also speaks to our necessarily tenuous grasp of all past subjectivities. Reflecting on Duncker's strategies of deliberate fragmentation and ambiguity, Heilmann muses that "it is as if the Barry of fiction much more than that of biography existed only in fragments, always at a distance from us, ultimately unknowable."<sup>119</sup> In her refusal to construct a coherent inner life for her protagonist, Duncker "deliberately foils readerly identification processes, instead splintering her narrative as a marker of the patchy and erratic nature of the 'evidence' of Barry's life and the futility of attempting to confine Barry to an orthodox textual/sexual framework," as Heilmann notes.<sup>120</sup> Through the means of experimental fiction, Banti's and Duncker's biographical novels can thus be said to flag their speculative relationship to a past life with greater honesty than many a biography. What these experiments in biofiction accomplish is to open up a space for metabiographical reflection.<sup>121</sup> It is this space that the chapters of this volume seek to map in greater detail.

## THE CHAPTERS IN THIS BOOK

The chapters that follow investigate how biographical fictions reflect and re-write available narratives and tropes of gender. The analyses they offer uncover tensions between relationality, empowerment, and agency in life stories within and beyond the gender binary and relate them to cultural and historical differences in both "raw" biographical material and fictional reworking. Exploring the role of creativity in imagining feminist, queer, and non-binary pasts, they investigate the processes of identification and (re-)imagination, instrumentalisation, and distortion that shape historical lives into fiction.

Part I—"Recovery, Revision, Ventriloquism: Imagining Historical Women"—examines the positioning of historical women in biofiction, exploring the ethical questions that arise when novelists re-tell the story of an other person's life. Diana Wallace's opening chapter "Everything Is Out of Place': Virginia Woolf, Women, and (Meta-)Historical Biofiction" takes Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) as the starting point of a reflection on the interactions of biography, history, and fiction in meta-historical biofictions by and about Virginia Woolf. Keeping Woolf's own metaphor of the "out of place"-ness of women's stories in view, Wallace develops a model of reading biofiction that troubles binary oppositions. Drawing on Monica Latham's work in dialogue with Edward Soja's

trialectical thought, Wallace's analysis of five novels about Virginia Woolf demonstrates contemporary authors' creative engagement with Woolf's life and thinking while also pointing to their reliance on conventionally gendered narrative patterns that Woolf herself rejected. While Virginia Woolf as a "world-historical" woman writer has long served other authors as a reference point of literary achievement, interest in Lucia Joyce—the subject of Laura Cernat's chapter "Fictional Futures for a Buried Past: Representations of Lucia Joyce"—is a more recent phenomenon. Cernat discusses biofictional portrayals of Lucia Joyce in light of the one-sided representation of her in biographical sources as the mentally ill daughter of a renowned and brilliant father, and focuses specifically on the alternative futures such fictions develop for their subject. Cernat then contrasts these biofictions with representations of Lucia Joyce in visual media—a graphic novel and films—to compare their effectiveness in reclaiming the subject as an accomplished dancer and in projecting a subtler understanding of the intersections between her gender and her mental life. Silvia Salino's chapter "Imagining Jiang Qing: The Biographer's Truth in Anchee Min's *Becoming Madame Mao*" also examines a biofictional counter-narrative to dominant androcentric histories—an effort at reclaiming a female point of view which in Min's novel also takes on an intercultural dimension. Salino draws on Linda Hutcheon's theory of postmodernism to shed light on Min's deconstruction of the prevalent historical discourse about Jiang Qing and the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 70s. Highlighting Min's trope of life as performance, Salino uncovers a level of metabiographical self-reflection in the novel's appropriation of Qing's voice that points to the epistemological pitfalls of biographical reconstruction and highlights the importance of narrative perspective in biofiction.

The three chapters in Part II—"Re-imagining the Early Modern Subject"—look at biofictions in which Tudor England, with its familiar royal cast, serves as a site of re-negotiation with regard to gender roles. In her chapter "From Betrayed Wife to Betraying Wife: Rewriting Katherine of Aragon as Catalina in Philippa Gregory's *The Constant Princess*," Bethan Archer reads Gregory's novel of 2005 against the foil of historical and popular representations of Henry VIII's first queen as pious and undesirable obstacle to Anne Boleyn's ascent. Gregory recasts Katherine as a scheming figure whose progressive political vision is likely to resonate with modern readers; her "Catalina" becomes a surprisingly agentic character. On close inspection, however, Archer finds the heroine's



transgressions tempered by narrative choices that can be understood as concessions to a conservative readership. Alison Gorlier's chapter "Jean Plaidy and Philippa Gregory Fighting for Gender Equality Through Katherine Parr's Narrative" offers a comparative reading of two novels published over six decades apart, both centred on Henry VIII's sixth marriage. Relating each narrative to the social conditions and gender equality policies of its day, Gorlier reveals a subtle shift from pre-second-wave feminist thought to contemporary (post-)feminist concerns. At different points in time, both narratives thus anchor women's struggle for equality in a historical figure who emerges as an exemplary—if anachronistic—emblem of female survival and emancipation in the context of patriarchal oppression. Interactions between self and other, distant past and present in biofiction are rendered more complex still in Australian authors' novels about the Tudors, as Kelly Gardiner and Catherine Padmore observe. In their chapter "Australian Women Writing Tudor Lives," the authors take their cue from Jerome de Groot's notion of "double othering," which describes the distance between the cultural context of writers and readers of historical fiction and the often distant or different cultural settings of the narratives they read and write. Examining recent novels by four Australian women authors—Jesse Blackadder, Jane Caro, Michelle Diener, and Wendy J. Dunn—which feature historical Tudor heroines and drawing on these writers' paratextual statements about their work, Gardiner and Padmore tease out the specifically Australian elements in Australian Tudor biofictions. They perceptively demonstrate how the novelists' feminist search for ownership of Tudor history is complicated by their postcolonial position.

Biofictions about authors refract larger questions of gender through the specific challenges and motivations of the creative life, as the chapters in Part III—"Writing the Writer: History, Voyeurism, Victimisation"—demonstrate. Such "author fictions"<sup>122</sup> also have the merit of "opening" historical authors to a contemporary readership, as Monica Latham observes in her study of Virginia Woolf's afterlives.<sup>123</sup> While the fresh critical engagement with women's lives offered by many of the chapters highlights the need for continued re-reading and re-imagining of biofictions within and beyond binaristic paradigms, Paul Fagan's contribution in this section is specifically addressed to the possibility of writing non-normative masculine identity in biofiction. In a comparative reading of two biographical novels on Henry James—Colm Tóibín's *The Master* and David Lodge's *Author, Author*—Fagan shows how the plot needs of biofiction

combine with a modern conception of compulsory sexuality to determine the narration of celibacy. The speculative space of biofiction is viewed in its full ambivalence here, as a field of indeterminacy which, paradoxically, can enforce a particular reading of gaps and silences. Ina Bergmann's chapter "In Poe's Shadow: Frances Sargent Osgood" deals with the representation of relationship in biofictions that remain within a conventionally heteronormative framework. Interrogating biofiction's role as a form of popular literary history, Bergmann examines two novels about the nineteenth-century poet Frances Sargent Osgood, whose standing in American literary history has been eclipsed by her personal relationship with Edgar Allan Poe. Bergmann proposes the label "double historical biofiction" to capture the novels' approach of giving room to, and thus creating interest in, their heroine while still relying on the male subject's fame. Here as in other chapters, we are reminded of the risks of relational biography—in which a female life is "recovered" from the shadow of a prominent male life. In her chapter on biographical dramas centred on the life of the Polish modernist playwright Stanisława Przybyszewska, Ksenia Shmydkaya explores the possibilities and limits of "biodrama" and identifies the ethical pitfalls of theatrical versions of Przybyszewska's story. Shmydkaya notes how the temptation to reduce the subject to a cipher—for damaged female genius, insanity, and victimhood, or, when seen from a Western vantage point, for a distinctively Polish tragic artistic identity—results in a failure to engage with Przybyszewska's works and thought, or to take seriously the philosophical edifice she erected from a lifelong preoccupation with the French Revolution. As with the biofictions on Frances Sargent Osgood discussed in Ina Bergmann's chapter, here too we are confronted with a gesture of recovery that can tend to reinscribe the patriarchal conditions it sets out to illuminate.

Tensions between the demands of creativity and the constraints of gender are a perennial theme in biographies and biofictions of women artists, writers, and scientists and are explored in detail in Part IV, "Creativity and Gender in the Arts and Sciences." We might expect treatments of this theme to be historically mutable, shifting to reflect the changing concerns of biographers and biofiction authors and their readers, so it is all the more striking to find continuities between accounts that are remote from each other in time. Julia Dabbs reads two recent biographical novels on the early modern artist Sofonisba Anguissola, comparing these with the early modern treatments that founded the biographical discourse on this *virtuosa*. The desire for independence and the mastery of technique in a

male-dominated field of endeavour are key themes across both the early accounts and the later fictional reworkings; more surprising is the reworking of plot elements from the early modern sources that go against the grain of conventional understandings of historical gender relations. Thus, if Anguissola proposed marriage to a sea-captain during a voyage to Genoa—as the historical sources have it—then we may be perplexed to read a twenty-first-century fictionalised account that domesticates this biographeme by reinstating the more usual gender roles. Here as elsewhere, the novelist’s understandings of gender work with the dictates of genre and the expectations of readership to determine the construction of gender relations in the text. A different kind of creativity is at the centre of Christine Müller’s chapter “The ‘Mother of the Theory of Relativity’? Re-imagining Mileva Marić in Marie Benedict’s *The Other Einstein* (2016).” Albert Einstein’s first wife emerges in biofiction as a tragic figure whose brilliance remains unrecognised, her ambitions thwarted in the patriarchal field of science. Through a critical feminist perspective and with reference to the history of women in science, Müller points up the ambivalence of Benedict’s novel, which reclaims Marić as an exemplary female scientist while resorting to standard tropes of female inspiration and victimhood.

The final section, “Queering Biofiction,” considers the contrast between conventional illusionistic biofiction and experimental biofiction on the boundaries of prose, poetry, and epistolary life writing, probing the possibilities of writing gender in more exploratory ways. Iseult Gillespie’s reading of Aaron Apps’s prose-poem sequence *Dear Herculine* reveals a complex layering of dialogic auto/biographical reflection, in which the contemporary author speaks across time to the historical figure of Herculine Barbin. Brought to prominence through her catalytic effect for the gender philosophy of Michel Foucault, Barbin is imagined, in Apps’s text, in terms that seek to honour and not domesticate the experience of intersex embodiment. Refusing to contain his subject within the medicalising discourse which imposed a gender reassignment on the historical Barbin, Apps draws on archival documents, including Barbin’s memoir, as well as on personal experience of intersex subjectivity to create a resonant poetic text that, as Gillespie shows, pushes against the limits of biofiction. The volume is rounded off by an interview the editors conducted with eminent novelist and literary critic Patricia Duncker on her neo-Victorian biofictions *James Miranda Barry* (1999) and *Sophie and the Sibyl: A Victorian Romance* (2015), the latter revolving around nineteenth-century

novelist George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans). In the interview, Duncker historicises responses to Barry and explains her own approach to transcending gender binaries in creative fiction. Reflecting on her work on Eliot, she addresses the problematic idea of a female line of tradition and her own particular urge to “write back” to her famous predecessor. She outlines the possibilities, but also the ethical limits, of the licence to speculate in biofiction and criticises the tendency of historical fiction to “assault the nineteenth century with the sensibility of the twentieth” (and twenty-first).

Attentive to a range of approaches to fictionalisation that reclaim, appropriate, or reinvent their biographical “raw material,” the chapters of this volume variously demonstrate the effect of cliché, gender norms, and established narratives in biographical fiction, while also exploring the potential for subversion and critique that inheres in biofiction’s speculative and imaginative engagement with past lives.

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## NOTES

1. For a discussion of the reception of biofiction, see Michael Lackey’s introduction to *Truthful Fictions: Conversations with American Biographical Novelists* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014) and “Locating and Defining the Bio in Biofiction,” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 31, no. 1 (2016): 3–10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2016.1095583>.
2. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.
3. Michael Lackey, *The American Biographical Novel* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 14.
4. Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” *Glyph* 7 (1980): 210.
5. As regards recent biofiction scholarship, Michael Lackey defines the genre exclusively as “literature that names its protagonist after an actual biographical figure” (e.g. Lackey, “Locating,” 3), while Marie-Luise Kohlke includes fictions about famous historical characters who have been assigned different names as “glossed biofiction.” Kohlke, “Neo-Victorian Biofiction and the Special/Spectral Case of Barbara Chase-Riboud’s *Hottentot Venus*,” *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies* 18, no. 3 (2013): 11. We agree with Lackey that the actual name of the protagonist accomplishes something specific in biofiction. As in its neighbouring genre the biopic, biofiction’s use of the real name “suggests an openness to historical scrutiny” that accounts for biofiction’s dual allegiance to cre-

ative invention and biographical fact. George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 8. The case could be made, though, that a narrative whose characters and plots are very obviously based on certain historical personages will initiate a similar kind of hybrid reading.

Moving to the other end of the spectrum, there are fictions that rely on a famous name but hardly refer to the historical subject's biography. We would again consider texts such as Stephanie Barron's *Jane Austen Mysteries* as on the very fringe of biographical fiction, as the historical author is turned into a detective figure who solves murder mysteries that clearly bear no relation to Austen's life. Hence, as Barron's fictions display very little interest in Austen's "real history," it would be difficult to justify calling them "biographical." Such loose referentiality may be better captured by a term such as Wolfgang Müller's "interfiguralty." See Müller, "Interfiguralty. A Study on the Interdependence of Literary Figures," in *Intertextuality*, ed. Heinrich F. Plett (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991), 101–21. The distinction is one of degree rather than kind.

6. This latter criterion helps to distinguish biofiction from literary biography, whose artful style may often approach that of fiction, but which avoids making things up. See, for instance, Julia Novak, "Experiments in Life-Writing: Introduction," in *Experiments in Life-Writing: Intersections of Auto/Biography and Fiction*, Palgrave Studies in Life Writing 3, ed. Lucia Boldrini and Julia Novak (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2017), 7–8, [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-55414-3\\_1](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-55414-3_1).

Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben further understand biofiction as "a multi-media umbrella term" that includes biographical motion pictures. Kohlke and Gutleben, "Taking Biofictional Liberties: Tactical Games and Gambits with Nineteenth-Century Lives," in *Neo-Victorian Biofiction: Reimagining Nineteenth-Century Historical Subjects*, ed. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2020), 3. While we acknowledge the affinity of biofiction with biopics, we do not treat the latter in this volume, unless where films about a certain subject throw into relief the work of the biofictions (as in Laura Cernat's contribution). Biopic scholarship has gained much traction within film studies in recent decades and has brought forth its own extensive body of media-specific research. For a recent, gender-focused contribution to the field, see the *European Journal of Life Writing's* special issue on "Women's Lives on Screen," edited by Eugenie Theuer and Julia Novak.

7. David Lodge, *The Year of Henry James: The Story of a Novel: With Other Essays on the Genesis, Composition, and Reception of Literary Fiction* (London: Penguin, 2007), 8.

8. Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel*, *The New Critical Idiom* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1.
9. *Ibid.*, 2.
10. See Michael Lackey, “The Rise of the Biographical Novel and the Fall of the Historical Novel,” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 31, no. 1 (2016): 33–58. Lackey proposes a “shift from the historical to the biographical novel” in the twentieth century (Lackey, “The Rise,” 54), and that the biographical novel has “supplanted the classical historical novel” (Lackey, “The Rise,” 33; see also “Introduction: The Agency Aesthetics of Biofiction in the Age of Postmodern Confusion,” in *Conversations with Biographical Novelists*, ed. Michael Lackey [New York: Bloomsbury, 2019], 1–20). In our estimation, such a view can only be maintained if one considers - as Lackey does - Georg Lukács’s (1937) partial conception of the work of Scott, Balzac, and Tolstoy as representative of “the historical novel” in general, and if one ignores the varied directions in which historical fiction has developed over the past century. While biofiction has certainly become a prominent form of historical fiction particularly in recent decades, “non-biographical” historical fiction continues to enjoy both tremendous popularity and critical success. Nor do we subscribe to an opposition of biographical and historical fiction on the basis of a realism/surrealism dichotomy or the protagonist’s agency. While realism can indeed be said to be a dominant mode of historical fiction today, there are also biofictions such as Margaret Forster’s *Lady’s Maid* that are staunchly realist, as well as other forms of historical fiction that break with realism, such as historiographic metafiction. We discuss agency in gendered terms below.

For a detailed discussion of definitions of historical fiction, see the first chapter in Caterina Grasl, *Oedipal Murders and Nostalgic Resurrections: The Victorians in Historical Middlebrow Fiction, 1914–1959* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2014). On the development of the historical novel in the twentieth century, see, for instance, the works of Elodie Rousselot (“neo-historical novel”), Ina Bergmann (“new historical fiction”), or Ansgar Nünning, who sketches various innovative directions in which the historical novel has developed over the past decades in terms of a spectrum of variants rather than placing experimental, self-reflexive modes such as historiographic metafiction in opposition to the more traditionally realist currents of historical fiction. Rousselot, ed., *Exoticizing the Past in Contemporary Neo-historical Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Bergmann, *The Nineteenth Century Revis(it)ed: The New Historical Fiction*, *Routledge Studies in Nineteenth Century Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Nünning, “Von der fiktionalen Historie zur metahistoriographischen Fiktion: Bausteine für eine narratologische

- und funktionsgeschichtliche Theorie, Typologie und Geschichte des postmodernen historischen Romans,” in *Literatur und Geschichte: Ein Kompendium zu ihrem Verhältnis von der Aufklärung bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Daniel Fulda and Silvia Serena Tschopp (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 540–69. On the gendered implications of rigid definitions of the historical novel, see Diana Wallace, *The Woman’s Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900–2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 10.
11. See, for instance, Grasl, *Oedipal Murders*; Bergmann, *The Nineteenth Century Revis(it)ed*; Katherine Cooper and Emma Short, eds., *The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Dorothea Flothow, “*Those Gay Days of Wickedness and Wit*: the Restoration Period in Popular Historiographies (18th–21st Centuries)” (Heidelberg: Winter, 2021); some contributions in Kelly Gardiner and Catherine Padmore, eds., “Historical Biofictions from Australia and New Zealand,” special issue, *TEXT* 26, no. 66 (2022).
  12. De Groot, *The Historical Novel*, 3.
  13. *Ibid.*, 4.
  14. Emma Donoghue, “Voicing the Nobodies in the Biographical Novel,” interviewed by Michael Lackey, *Conversations with Biographical Novelists: Truthful Fictions across the Globe*, ed. Michael Lackey (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 85.
  15. *Ibid.*, 83.
  16. *Ibid.*, 85.
  17. Kristin Ramsdell, *Romance Fiction: A Guide to the Genre* (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1999), 115.
  18. Helen Hughes, *The Historical Romance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 2; Ramsdell, *Romance Fiction*, 138.
  19. Hughes, *The Historical Romance*, 17.
  20. Derek Parker, *Nell Gwyn* (Stroud: Sutton, 2000), 11–12; Charles Beauclerk, *Nell Gwyn: Mistress to a King* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005), 37–39.
  21. Hughes, *The Historical Romance*, 127.
  22. Diane Haeger, *The Perfect Royal Mistress* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007), 7.
  23. Hughes, *The Historical Romance*, 39.
  24. See Ramsdell, *Romance Fiction*, 114.
  25. *Ibid.*, 19.
  26. Hughes, *The Historical Romance*, 17.
  27. Ann Maxwell and Jayne Krentz, “The Wellsprings of Romance (1989),” in *Women and Romance: A Reader*, ed. Susan Ostrov Weisser (New York: NY University Press, 2001), 351.
  28. Haeger, *The Perfect Royal Mistress*, 399.

29. *The Perfect Royal Mistress* is, in fact, one of several novels published about Gwyn in recent decades. For a more detailed critique of Gwyn novels, see Julia Novak, “Nell Gwyn in Contemporary Romance Novels: Biography and the Dictates of ‘Genre Literature,’” *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 8, no. 3 (Oxford UP, 2014): 373–90; and Novak, “Feminist to Postfeminist: Contemporary Biofictions by and about Women Artists,” *Angelaki* 22, no. 1 (2017): 223–30. See also Laura Martínez-García, “Restoration Celebrity Culture: Twenty-First-Century Regenderings and Rewritings of Charles II, the Merry Monarch, and his Mistress ‘Pretty, Witty’ Nell Gwyn,” *Anglia* 138, no. 1 (2020): 118–43.
30. See, for instance, Parker, *Nell Gwyn* 2000; Beauclerk, *Nell Gwyn*.
31. Haeger, *The Perfect Royal Mistress*, 320.
32. Barbara Fuchs, *Romance: The New Critical Idiom* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 126. See also Hughes, *The Historical Romance*, 129.
33. Catherine Roach, “Getting a Good Man to Love: Popular Romance Fiction and the Problem of Patriarchy,” *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 1, no.1 (2010): 6.
34. Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 5.
35. See Zachary Leader’s definition of life writing as “a range of writings about lives or parts of lives, or which provide materials out of which lives or parts of lives are composed. These writings include not only memoir, autobiography, biography, diaries, autobiographical fiction, and biographical fiction, but also letters, writs, wills, written anecdotes, and positions, court proceedings ..., marginalia, nonce writings, lyric poems, scientific and historical writings, and digital forms.” Leader, “Introduction,” in *On Life-Writing*, ed. Zachary Leader (Oxford: OUP, 2015), 1. Biofiction research has also been featured by life-writing journals, see, for example, Michael Lackey’s (ed.) special issues on biofiction in *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 31, no. 1 and 36, no. 1; Boldrini and Novak’s (eds.) volume *Experiments in Life Writing* in the Palgrave Studies in Life Writing series; and Novak’s article on Clara Schumann and Artemisia Gentileschi biofictions: “Father and Daughter across Europe: The Journeys of Clara Wieck Schumann and Artemisia Gentileschi in Fictionalised Biographies,” *European Journal of Life Writing* 1 (2012): 41–57, <https://doi.org/10.5463/ejlw.1.25>.
36. Lee, *Biography*, 6.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, 2.
39. John F. Keener, *Biography and the Postmodern Historical Novel* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 2001), 2.
40. Lackey, *The American Biographical Novel*, 12.



41. Donoghue, "Voicing the Nobodies," 82.
42. *Ibid.*, 86.
43. *Ibid.*
44. David Ebershoff, "The Biographical Novel as Life Art," in *Truthful Fictions: Conversations with American Biographical Novelists*, ed. Michael Lackey (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 100 and 102.
45. *Ibid.*, 103.
46. Lodge, "The Bionovel as a Hybrid Genre," interview by Bethany Layne, *Conversations with Biographical Novelists: Truthful Fictions across the Globe*, ed. Michael Lackey (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 120.
47. *Ibid.*, 122.
48. Jay Parini, "Reflections on Biographical Fiction," in *Truthful Fictions: Conversations with American Biographical Novelists*, ed. Michael Lackey (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 212. These novelists' statements thus resonate with Ina Schabert's view of "fictional biography"—a term often used synonymously with biofiction—as "engaged in the comprehension of real historical individuals by means of the sophisticated instruments of knowing and articulating knowledge that contemporary fiction offers." Schabert, *In Quest of the Other Person: Fiction as Biography* (Tübingen: Francke, 1990), 4.
49. Lee, *Biography*, 3.
50. Donoghue, "Voicing the Nobodies," 91.
51. Kevin Barry, "Positive Contamination in the Biographical Novel," interviewed by Stuart Kane, in *Conversations with Biographical Novelists: Truthful Fictions across the Globe*, ed. Michael Lackey (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 24.
52. Caitríona Ní Dhúill, *Metabiography: Reflecting on Biography*, Palgrave Studies in Life Writing (Cham: Palgrave, 2020), 122.
53. Sara Alpern, ed., *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing the Lives of Modern American Women* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 5–7.
54. Lucia Boldrini, *Autobiographies of Others: Historical Subjects and Literary Fiction*, Routledge Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature 26 (New York: Routledge, 2012), 153.
55. Stephanie Bird, *Recasting Historical Women: Female Identity in German Biographical Fiction* (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 1.
56. *Ibid.*, 16.
57. *Ibid.*, 17.
58. Ní Dhúill, *Metabiography*, 79. In this context, Kohlke proposes the category "biofictions of marginalized subjects." Kohlke, "Neo-Victorian Biofiction," 9. Gender hierarchies are, of course, not the only principle governing the positioning of sousveillant subjects in biofiction. Like

- Richard Burton's servant in Trojanow's *Der Weltensammler* (*The Collector of Worlds*), such figures can equally be found in colonial contexts, where they may or may not articulate a postcolonial critique of their famous co-subjects. See Ní Dhúill, *Metabiography*, chapter 4, for a more detailed discussion of this point.
59. Stephanie Merritt, "Tragic Tale of the Latin Tutor's Son," review of *Hamnet*, by Maggie O'Farrell, *The Guardian*, March 29, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/mar/29/hamnet-by-maggie-o-farrell-review>.
  60. Ibid.
  61. John Mullan, "A Brilliantly Observed Historical Novel," review of *Hamnet*, by Maggie O'Farrell, *New Statesman*, November 18, 2020, <https://www.newstatesman.com/Maggie-ofarrell-hamnet-review>.
  62. Beate Neumeier, "The Truth of Fiction—The Fiction of Truth: Judith Chernaik's *Mab's Daughters*," in *Biofictions: The Rewriting of Romantic Lives in Contemporary Fiction and Drama*, ed. Martin Middeke and Werner Huber (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 1999), 108.
  63. See also Raewyn W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), xii–xiii.
  64. Bergmann, *The Nineteenth Century Revis(it)ed*, 158.
  65. See, for instance, Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (London: The Women's Press, 1989), 81.
  66. Lackey, "Introduction: The Agency Aesthetics," 8.
  67. For a more detailed critique of Carlylean heroic discourse and its masculinism, see Ní Dhúill, *Metabiography*, 55–57. See also Liz Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); Jean Strouse, "Semiprivate Lives," in *Studies in Biography*, ed. Daniel Aaron (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 113–29; Esther Marian, "Zum Zusammenhang von Biographie, Subjektivität und Geschlecht," in *Die Biographie—Zur Grundlegung ihrer Theorie*, ed. Bernhard Fetz and Hannes Schweiger (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 169–98; Ann-Kathrin Reulecke, "'Die Nase der Lady Hester': Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von Biographie und Geschlechterdifferenz," in *Biographie als Geschichte*, ed. Hedwig Röckelein (Tübingen: Edition Diskord, 1993), 117–42.
  68. Virginia Woolf, "The Art of Biography," in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth, 1981), 125.
  69. Michael Lackey, *Biofiction: An Introduction* (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2021), 54.
  70. Ibid.
  71. Michael Lackey, interview with Ebershoff, "The Biographical Novel," 96.
  72. See Lackey, *Biofiction*, 55.

73. Marisol Morales-Ladrón, “Mary Morrissy’s *The Rising of Bella Casey*, or How Women Have Been Written Out of History,” *Nordic Irish Studies* 15, no. 1 (2016): 36.
74. Mary Morrissy, “On the Brink of the Absolutely,” interview by Loredana Salis, *Studi irlandesi: A Journal of Irish Studies* 6 (2016): 314. We came across this interview and the remarkable story behind Morrissy’s novel in Claire Palzer’s unpublished MA dissertation, which we gratefully acknowledge.
75. Michael Lackey, “The Bio-national Symbolism of Founding Biofictions: Barbara Chase-Riboud’s *Sally Hemings* and Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*,” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 36, no. 1, 2020: 30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2020.1775983>.
76. *Ibid.*, 31.
77. Barbara Chase-Riboud, *Sally Hemings: A Novel* (London: Virago Press, 1979/2002), 122.
78. *Ibid.*, 147.
79. Peta Bowden and Jane Mummery, *Understanding Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 135.
80. Lackey, interview with Ebershoff, “The Biographical Novel,” 96.
81. Chapter 2 of Hermione Lee’s *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* offers a historical perspective on the notion of the “exemplary life.”
82. Linda Wagner-Martin, *Telling Women’s Lives: The New Biography* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 21. What Wagner-Martin demonstrates convincingly in this context is how popular biographies about female stars tend to focus on a woman’s love relationships and sexual exploits, thus directing attention away from her achievement and her path to stardom, which male quest plots typically outline. *Ibid.*, 151ff.
83. So far, biofictions about Artemisia Gentileschi include Anna Banti’s *Artemisia* (1953), Alexandra Lapierre’s *Artemisia: A Novel* (1998), Susan Vreeland’s *The Passion of Artemisia* (2002), Joy McCullough’s *Blood Water Paint* (2018) and Linda Lafferty’s *Fierce Dreamer* (2020).
84. Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia UP, 1998), 9. For a more thorough discussion of Prosser’s argument, see Judith Halberstam, “Telling Tales: Brandon Teena, Billy Tipton, and Transgender Biography,” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 15, no. 1 (2000): 62–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2000.10815235>. On the relevance of transsexual life narrative in a clinical context, see also Sandy Stone’s groundbreaking essay “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 1987/2006), 221–34; and Rachel Carroll, *Transgender and the Literary*

- Imagination: Changing Gender in Twentieth-Century Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 129–31. See Annette Runte’s essay “Biographie als Patographie: Lebens- und Fallgeschichten zum Geschlechtswechsel,” in *Spiegel und Maske: Konstruktionen biographischer Wahrheit*, ed. Bernhard Fetz and Hannes Schweiger (Vienna: Zsolnay, 2006), 128–42—an early exploration of transgender life writing.
85. Jennifer Cooke, *Feminist Life-Writing: The New Audacity*, Cambridge Studies in Twenty-First-Century Literature and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 137.
  86. Quinn Eades, “Holograms, Hymens, and Horizons: A Transqueer Bodywriting,” *Parallax* 25, no. 2 (2019): 175, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0/13534645.2019.1607234>.
  87. Wendy Moffat, “The Narrative Case for Queer Biography,” in *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, ed. Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2015), 219.
  88. Donoghue, “Voicing the Nobodies,” 84.
  89. Moffat, “Queer Biography,” 218.
  90. Carroll, *Transgender*, 31.
  91. *Ibid.*
  92. Judith Butler, “Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 7, no. 4 (2001): 621–36.
  93. See, for instance, Carol Grant, “Regressive, Reductive and Harmful: A Trans Woman’s Take On Tom Hooper’s Embarrassing ‘Danish Girl,’” *IndieWire.com*, December 3, 2015, <https://www.indiewire.com/2015/12/regressive-reductive-and-harmful-a-trans-womans-take-on-tom-hoopers-embarrassing-danish-girl-213499/>; Nick Duffy, “Masterful but *The Danish Girl* Is Still Flawed,” *PinkNews*, January 1, 2016, <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2016/01/01/review-eddie-redmayne-is-masterful-but-the-danish-girl-is-still-flawed/>; Alex von Tunzelmann, “The Danish Girl Transforms Fascinating Truths Into Tasteful, Safe Drama,” *The Guardian*, January 13, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jan/13/the-danish-girl-transforms-fascinating-truths-into-tasteful-safe-drama>.
  94. Alison Flood, “New Novel about Dr. James Barry Sparks Row over Victorian’s Gender Identity,” *The Guardian*, February 18, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/feb/18/new-novel-about-dr-james-barry-sparks-row-over-victorians-gender-identity>.
  95. Ann Heilmann, *Neo-/Victorian Biographilia & James Miranda Barry: A Study in Transgender & Transgenre* (Cham: Palgrave, 2019), 7.

96. Michael du Preez and Jeremy Dronfield, *Dr James Barry: A Woman Ahead of Her Time* (London: Oneworld, 2016).
97. For Barry as an intersex person, see Rachel Holmes, *Scanty Particulars: The Scandalous Life and Astonishing Secret of Dr. James Barry, Queen Victoria's Preeminent Military Doctor* (London: Viking, 2002).
98. Dallas Baker, "Queer Life Writing as Self-Making," in *Offshoot: Contemporary Life Writing Methodologies and Practice*, ed. Donna Lee Brien and Quinn Eades (Perth: UWA Publishing, 2018), 149.
99. Carroll, *Transgender*, 7.
100. *Ibid.*, 29.
101. *Ibid.*, 102–03.
102. Richard Holmes, "The Proper Study?" in *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, ed. Peter France and William St Clair (Oxford: OUP, 2002), 7–18.
103. Nicolaas A. Rupke, *Alexander von Humboldt: A Metabiography*. Chicago: ChicagoUniversity Press, 2008.
104. Some examples of such comparative metabiographical studies are Luke Ferretter on Plath biofictions ("A Fine White Flying Myth of One's Own: Sylvia Plath in Fiction—A Review Essay," *Plath Profiles* 2 [2009]: 278–98); Julia Novak on Nell Gwyn ("Nell Gwyn in Contemporary Romance Novels"), Elizabeth Barrett Browning ("The Notable Woman in Fiction: Novelistic Afterlives of Elizabeth Barrett Browning," *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 31, no. 1, special issue on Biographical Fiction [2016]: 83–107, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2016.1092789>), and Clara Wieck-Schumann ("The (Re-)Making of Clara Wieck-Schumann: Celebrity and Gender in Biofiction," in *Search for the Real: Authenticity and the Construction of Celebrity*, ed. Andrew J. Sepie [Oxford: Interdisciplinary Press, 2014], 97–112); Bethany Layne on Henry James (*Henry James in Contemporary Fiction: The Real Thing* [Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020]); Monica Latham on Virginia Woolf (*Virginia Woolf's Afterlives: The Author as Character in Contemporary Fiction and Drama* [London: Routledge, 2021]). Some studies that centre on textual afterlives of one individual integrate biography and biofiction in their analyses, signalling an awareness that these two forms perform similar work with regard to cultural memory—for instance, Heilmann on James Miranda Barry (*Neo-/Victorian Biographilia*); Sarah Churchwell on Marilyn Monroe (*The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe* [London: Granta, 2004]).
105. Ní Dhúill, *Metabiography*, 6.
106. Kohlke, "Neo-Victorian Biofiction," 11.
107. See, for instance, Katerina Bryant's recent article about her work on Loretta La Pearl, the first woman clown in America. Bryant says: "It is my

- role as biographer to respect these gaps, enacting a refusal to ‘pretend’ that her life has not been erased, even as I am trying to speak to and remedy this. To the reader, I will highlight these gaps as well as the way I have selected and processed archival material.” Bryant, “Speculative Biography and Countering Archival Absences of Women Clowns in the Circus,” *Life Writing* 18, no. 1 (2021): 34–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2021.1866777>.
108. On this point, see Naomi Jacobs’s chapter on “Lies, Libel, and the Truth of Fiction,” in *The Character of Truth: Historical Figures in Contemporary Fiction* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990).
  109. Max Saunders, *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiographical, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 10.
  110. Kohlke and Gutleben, “Taking Biofictional Liberties,” 3.
  111. For a discussion of the ventriloquism metaphor in biofiction criticism, see Kohlke and Gutleben, “Taking Biofictional Liberties,” 19–22.
  112. For a discussion of the relevance of celebrity studies to life-writing research, see Sandra Mayer and Julia Novak’s edited volume *Life-Writing and Celebrity: Exploring Intersections* (London: Routledge, 2019).
  113. Halberstam, “Telling Tales,” 62.
  114. In her monograph on Barry, Ann Heilmann discusses the questionable ethics of biofictions as occasions for scopophilic pleasure. See Heilmann, *Neo-/Victorian Biographilia*, 19.
  115. On this point, see, for instance, Hermione Lee, “Am I Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” in *Writing the Lives of Writers*, ed. Warwick Gould and Thomas F. Staley (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 224–37.
  116. Boldrini, *Autobiographies of Others*, 1.
  117. *Ibid.*, 153.
  118. *Ibid.*, 160.
  119. Heilmann, *Neo-/Victorian Biographilia*, 175.
  120. *Ibid.*
  121. Ansgar Nünning proposes “fictional metabiography” and “biographic metafiction” as “two postmodernist variants of biofiction.” Nünning, “Fictional Metabiographies and Metaautobiographies: Towards a Definition, Typology and Analysis of Self-Reflexive Hybrid Metagenres,” in *Self-Reflexivity in Literature Text & Theorie* 6, ed. Werner Huber, Martin Middeke, and Hubert Zapf (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005), 202. According to his typology, fictional metabiographies “explore, revise and transform the conventions of the traditional biography ..., but what they formally foreground are the problems of ‘life-writing’ and the forms of historical consciousness,” whereas biographic metafiction “explicitly thematizes and undermines the conven-

tional boundaries between biography and fiction by deploying the devices of metafiction.” Ibid.

122. See Laura Savu, *Postmortem Postmodernists: The Afterlife of the Author in Recent Narrative* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), 9.
123. Latham, *Virginia Woolf’s Afterlives*, 225.

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