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A review of "Autobiography and Gender in Early Modern Literature: Reading Women's Lives, 1600-1680" by Sharon Cadman Seelig

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Sharon Cadman Seelig. *Autobiography and Gender in Early Modern Literature: Reading Women's Lives, 1600-1680*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 214pp. 75.00 cloth; Review by JULIE D. CAMPBELL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY.

In this study on autobiography and gender, Seelig examines the life-writing of six seventeenth-century Englishwomen: Margaret Hoby's diary (1599-1605), Anne Clifford's diaries and annual summaries (1603-1676), Lucy Hutchinson's unpublished fragment of her own "life," set against that of her husband (c.1674), Ann Fanshawe's and Anne Halkett's narrative royalist autobiographies (c. 1676-78), and Margaret Cavendish's *True Relation of My Birth, Breeding and Life* (1656) and *Blazing World* (1666). Addressing her subjects chronologically, she observes that these women's texts "trace a progression from fairly factual documentation of events to more consistent and conceptualized narratives, to extravagant and romantic self-depiction and self-construction" (11). Seelig asks perceptive questions regarding the life-writing of women of this period, such as, "Are these texts in which we might look for coherence, linearity, and consistency? Are these expectations of ours something alien to the writer or something shared by her?" (2). She also considers, "How often did the writer record? What kinds of things did she include? What did she omit? . . . for whom was she writing?" (2). Moreover, she asks, "What happens to me when I read? What patterns do I find in this text? Are they of my making or the author's?" (11). Seelig then provides close readings of the texts based on her responses to such questions. She summarizes her intentions by stating, "My goal is not to arrive at an absolute definition of these forms [of autobiography], but rather to notice how individual texts are related, and how distinguished from each other" (7).

Demonstrating her familiarity with the theoretical territory of autobiographical criticism, Seelig engages with the work of J. Paul Hunter, Georges Gusdorf, Paul Delany, Estelle Jelinek, Sidonie Smith, James Olney, Sara Heller Mendelson, and Elspeth Graham. She especially asserts that Mendelson's and Graham's observations about the difficulties of categorizing seventeenth-century self-narratives are particularly helpful to consider in light of the variety of styles of women's life-writing from this period. She emphasizes that her approach is "to encounter each text on its own terms, without being too categorical at the outset about what those terms might be" (11). She also

states that the “pleasures of these texts are in what they reveal—about the lives, the thoughts, the formal possibilities and constraints of seventeenth-century women writers—and in what they conceal” (14). Regarding her own notion of a theoretical approach, Seelig seems to argue that such texts are best served by close readings couched in historicized frameworks.

In each of her six chapters, Seelig discusses the historical context of the life of the woman in question as she addresses key passages from that woman’s writing. Seelig comments on the passages in relation to the questions she has posed regarding her own reading objectives, and she assesses the writing styles and rhetorical strategies at work in each case. In general, she observes that the earliest two works, those of Hoby and Clifford, are in large part about record-keeping of spiritual exercises and daily life, while those of Hutchinson, Halkett, Fanshawe, and Cavendish “raise much more substantial questions about narrative form and principles” (73). Moving from observing the ways that the “taciturnity, and even the heavily repetitious pattern” of Hoby’s recordings of her spiritual exercises may give readers a “sense of [Hoby’s] agency and confidence” (33) to assessing Cavendish’s “bashfulness” in *A True Relation* vs. her taking “center stage” in *The Blazing World* (153), Seelig combs through the “array of strategies for self-understanding and self-presentation” (11) that she perceives in the works of this group of women.

In addition to asserting that she is reading each work on “its own terms,” Seelig also argues that her selection of texts from the seventeenth century, which are drawn from “the considerably larger body of possibilities” (11), offers “a view of the development of seventeenth-century women’s writing” (154). The statement on the book jacket goes further, noting that Seelig “demonstrates how, in the course of the seventeenth century, women writers progressed from quite simple forms based on factual accounts to much more imaginative and persuasive acts of self-presentation.” Observations concerning development and progression suggest that influences of various kinds were at work, that these women were learning from literary developments in other genres, as well as the life-writing of others. Regarding the former, Seelig does note the increasingly sophisticated literary and rhetorical strategies that these individual women use, saying, for example, that the texts of Hoby and Clifford rely on “devices of time,” while Lucy Hutchinson’s prose particularly recalls that of Richard Hooker, and that Anne Halkett’s

work at times resembles “the best tradition of romantic fiction,” but she does not delve deeply into why this progression might be occurring (131, 75, 115).

Such questions come to mind as, was there really such a linear progression? And, if so, could it be demonstrated in more detail by further consideration and discussion of “the larger body of possibilities”? Were such women reading the life-writings of other women and men, and to what effect? Would it be worthwhile to consider further the development of complexity of style among seventeenth-century women writers of *belles lettres* (she does mention Austen) alongside that of women who wrote these autobiographical works? While it is true these particular texts suggest a progression toward increasingly sophisticated approaches to self-representation in women’s life-writing, Seelig offers little beyond the internal evidence of her selected texts to support this idea; thus, more contextualization of this phenomenon would be useful. She does acknowledge in her conclusion that “one might complicate the picture I’ve sketched” (159).

The picture that Seelig has sketched is indeed a fascinating one of women recording the events of their lives and families, as they see fit, in a variety of autobiographical styles. Her probing questions help to open these texts up for readers in ways that are insightful, and they complicate theories about life-writing as a genre. In her introduction, Seelig points out even those studies that “deal primarily with women’s autobiography struggle to arrive at accurate descriptions or generally valid principles” (5); thus, in her own, she seeks to allow the texts to speak for themselves, discussing on a case-by-case basis what she believes are the shaping forces for each. This study will appeal to scholars of autobiographical and gender studies, as well as to literary scholars and historians, and it will open the way for more questions about the developments in women’s life-writing during this period to be addressed.

The Poems of Robert Parry. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans. Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005. x + 380 pp. \$48.00. Review by GREG BENTLEY, MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY.

Since 1965, the Renaissance English Text Society has been publishing “literary texts, chiefly nondramatic, of the period 1475-1660.” Now, in conjunction with the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, it has