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Feminist Biography: A Contradiction in Terms?

Judith P. Zinsser
Miami University, Ohio

Long ago in the beginnings of 1970s feminism, women's historians forced a new understanding of the construction of all history. Only thus could the elimination of half of humanity from the historical record be explained and remedied. This "postmodern" enterprise proved so successful that it spawned its own angry "backlash" and anguished cries from traditional historians for "a return to narrative." Biography, with its built-in storytelling from birth to death, fell into the center of these disputes as feminist historians of the 1980s formulated the radical deconstruction of this genre as well. "Auto/biography," the intertwining of biographer and subject, was but one of the most important aspects of this ancient art highlighted by feminist critics. Experiments with "life writing," as many came to call it, questioned the nature and uses of evidence, abandoned the construction of any coherent narrative, and focused instead on the self-conscious description of the process by which an individual's past might be imagined in the present.

Initially, even the choice of subject for a biography posed questions for feminists. The elite and educated, those designated as "women worthies," had long been preferred, but feminist historians now hoped to go beyond the "exception" and to chronicle the lives of all women, exploring intersections of race, class, religion, gender, and ethnicity. However, these critical feminist approaches undermined the very definition and purpose of biography, whether feminist or not: to use the historian's evidentiary authority to validate the life, thoughts, and accomplishments of a particular woman. The essay that follows discusses the unfolding of these challenges to traditional biography, the range of responses by feminist historians, and some of the ways eighteenth-century biographers of women resolved the inherent contradictions.

In the 1970s, feminist historians discovered that all but a few women had been quietly eliminated from the formal and informal stories of our past.¹ Gerda Lerner, who wrote on black and white women in the United States, and later on feminism in Western culture, divided and set the tasks. Using the histo-

ries of Europe and North America as her model, she identified “compensatory history” as the first step: the stories of exceptional women, like queens, the wives of presidents, regents, and women exercising male political power. The next step, “contribution history,” told the stories of the reformers, such as Florence Nightingale, Josephine Butler, and Jane Addams. In hindsight, even the suffragists would probably be included here, as Lerner defined the women of this type as those who affected men’s history. They functioned within a male-defined framework, choosing and acting on men’s not women’s terms.

The vast majority of biographies of women, or of men for that matter, whether in the long eighteenth century or any other, added to history in one of these two ways. Biography, by tradition, if not by definition, has been about the extra-ordinary person, a particular individual who in some manner did something deemed noteworthy by the conventional canons of significance. In the eighteenth century, Queen Anne ruled an expanding mercantile nation; Madame Marie Thérèse Rodet Geoffrin hosted the men of Denis Diderot’s circle and facilitated the writing of the *Encyclopédie*; and Laura Bassi and Maria Agnesi participated in the major intellectual conversations of their day, Newtonian optics and the new mathematics, respectively. Even those women who questioned the long-standing constraints on women’s activities, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, asked for a man’s education, for the end of women’s exclusion from aspects of what were in their eras men’s worlds.

The fact of “men’s worlds” cannot be changed for those who study the past. Rather, the feminist historian’s perspective must be different. As Lerner so clearly and emphatically phrased it in her essay “Placing Women in History,” “the true history of women is the history of their ongoing functioning in that male-defined world [but] on their own terms.”² What were women doing while men’s history went on its way? What was the same and what different when seen from women’s perspectives? Women’s biographers, even if not feminists, have participated in this “recovery history,” as it is sometimes called today. First, they have broadened the definition of the extra-ordinary. Although they may have chosen women prominent in another time, they have not been well known in the present. They have, as the English historian Carolyn Steedman describes it, suffered “some form of historical neglect.”³

For example, Nina Rattner Gelbart reconstructed the life and worlds of the eighteenth-century midwife, Marguerite Le Boursier du Coudray, a woman of national significance in the history of French maternal health. Natalie Zemon Davis gave life to late seventeenth-century “women on the margins,” outside the mainstream of their societies: Glikl of Hameln, a Jewish wife and business woman; Maria Sibylla Merian, an artist and naturalist; and Marie de l’Incarnation, the Ursuline nun who ministered to Quebec’s Amerindian women. Most recently, Linda Colley has retold her history of Britain’s eighteenth-century empire as if through the experiences of Elizabeth Marsh Crispe, the wife of an enterprising, if not always successful, merchant.⁴

In each instance, the life of a woman and, by inference, of women in similar circumstances, has been given form and substance. Each life is presented as in some way indicative of women's choices more generally: acceptances, accommodations, compromises, and rejections. Davis sought to understand how each dealt with the "gendered hierarchies of their worlds," hierarchies that placed an added weight on them as females.⁵ As Steedman explains, these are the stories of "the self formed by a historicised world," lives told by biographers "steering a course between these two principles of causation, the internal and the external." These women are all portrayed as active agents, not passive victims, however constraining or limiting their circumstances. These are not simple stories of "power" and "powerlessness," but rather complex examples of how these supposed poles of experience can co-exist in the same moment of a life.⁶ Such studies, even that of the relatively dependent Marsh almost lost in the global mercantile and military changes that Colley wishes to reinscribe, give the missing half of history and decenter the notion of the historical actor. As the editors of an early anthology on feminist biography explain: "When the particular becomes female, the universal can no longer be male."⁷

Just as the choice of subject and the recovery of forgotten women's lives took history away from male elites and their politics, forcing questions about the basic definition of what is considered "history," so "the linguistic turn" challenged the construction of that history whoever or whatever the subject might be.⁸ For biographers, "post-structuralism" raised many questions, all of which challenge the very essence of "biography" as the authoritative teleological narrative of an individual's life. Feminist historians embraced these post-structural sensitivities to language and identity. It became their second contribution to the making of biography. Angela V. John's introduction to her biography of Elizabeth Robins—the actress, novelist, and feminist activist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—describes two of the most important difficulties: those of self "representation" and the "transparency" of sources. Robins kept diaries, but she often wrote multiple versions of events, destroyed others, and presented herself differently yet again in her public discourse and appearances. Thus, John subtitles the biography "Staging a Life" and organizes her narrative around the different personae Robins highlighted at the successive "stages" of her career. The pun is intentional and reminds the reader of both the theatrical life and the theatrical creation that was Elizabeth Robins.⁹

Liz Stanley, the English feminist scholar, took this abandonment of the "woman worthy" and of a positivist seamless life story to its extreme in her desire to make the whole art of biography transparent: Hannah Culwick and Emily Wilding Davison each became what Stanley calls "a plausible creation," women of only fleeting consequence: the one, the subject of an inconsequential nineteenth-century Englishman's erotic life; and the other, the young suffragist who died under the hooves of the royal Derby entry in 1913. Both conformed to Stanley's desire to reveal that all "modern biography is founded upon a realist

fallacy." She chose instead to write what she called "accountable feminist biography" to demonstrate the competing versions of lives and types of evidence, the increasing complexity of the relationship of biographer to subject, of "the power divisions" usually constructed between the writer and her readers, and the blurred lines between fact and fiction and between biography and autobiography. True to another feminist ideal, the Davison biography was not the work of a single author but a collaborative venture.¹⁰

Stanley's fierce clarity about her own goals for feminist biography calls all historical authority into question. Like the postmodern critics such as Jane Flax, it leaves no hope that "there is some form of innocent knowledge to be had." Stanley elaborates on this view: "the past is not 'there' to know; knowledge about it is the product of particular minds creating a symbolic account supported by scraps of evidence."¹¹ Such critiques have led feminist biographers to focus on "sites" and on "representations," rather than the identity of an individual woman, her choices, her actions, or even the context of her life. As an example of the most extreme form of this approach, Mary Beard, in her life of the early twentieth-century Cambridge academic and classicist, Jane Harrison, describes any biography she might write as "myth"; her aim is "not to replace one mythic version with another, an old story with my own brand-new, and necessarily better one." Instead, she produces the biography of this woman's archives and how she, as an author, uses them, thus revealing the procedure by which a Jane Harrison is "invented."¹² Kali K. Israel treated all the sources for the life of nineteenth-century English writer Emilia Dilke as stories, with none "more truthful" than others, only more powerful. No "self" was created, rather "a series of accounts of the production of a subject" had been presented that lacked continuity, and were unstable and open to interpretation from text to text and reader to reader. Thus, Israel placed herself completely outside of any historical reality, however hypothetical, and even distanced herself from what others would consider historical texts. As she explained: "Throughout this book, I write not about what people felt or thought. . . . I write about stories about feelings and thoughts."¹³ In the theoretical writings on biography inspired by subaltern studies, such as those by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the subject disappears even more dramatically in the partial, distorted imperial discourse on India's history: simply, "there is no 'real Rani' [of Sirmur] to be found."¹⁴

If the feminist historian's awareness of the interposition of self, either by design or by accident, is added to the mix, whatever scrap of authority that remained is lost. Voyeurs reading someone's letters, making selections, giving meaning, biographers can never be considered impartial. Gender, class, culture, disciplinary orientation, and a multiplicity of other factors come into play as the biographer imagines the subject. And what makes one imagining "truer" than another? In addition, with only bits of texts and memories, in a very real sense, any life has been fragmented. The biographer rejoins these pieces in a

way that may have little to do with what the subject knew or experienced. "The framework of interpretation" has been decided by the biographer and may bear no relation to the life as it was lived. There is no teller of the story outside and above this current world. Felicity A. Nussbaum in her study of eighteenth-century autobiographical texts develops the concept of "the historian's moment," this final manufactured influence on the biography—for there is no "autonomous narrator," there can be no "fixed or transhistorical form" in which a subject presents itself. All is influenced by an author's perception, by how the biographer makes the life intelligible. The anthropologist Ruth Behar imagines a blending of consciousnesses of the subject and biographer, so that "in some sense the life history may represent a personal portrait of the investigator as well," a "shadow biography" lurking within the telling of the other life. At best, the historian is "mediator" between the past life and the present audience. Steedman notes that any writing about the past "must always be done out of a set of current preoccupations, and that the literary enterprise of history-writing tells a story about the present using items from the past."¹⁵

Must it be concluded then that "feminist biography" is indeed a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron? For, as one writer/critic notes: "When we read a biography, we must tell ourselves that the author has us in his or her power: to make us feel not only that what we are getting is true, but that there is no other truth which matters. And that—neither they nor we can know."¹⁶ However, to be true to the feminist critique, this should be impossible and undesirable. There should be no focus on an exceptional individual, extra-ordinary because of her place within a male-defined framework, thus closing off awareness of all other women's lives. There can be no uncritical use of sources or of representations and no assertion of one truth over another. In the end, it must be much as the novelist Vladimir Nabokov set the conundrum: "Remember that what you are told is always threefold: shaped by the teller, reshaped by the listener, concealed from both by the dead man of the tale."¹⁷

Needless to say, no feminist biographer has walked away from her chosen subject because of these contradictory imperatives. All must acknowledge, as does Gelbart, that the contradictions are there in "the feminist work of retrieval and rescue."¹⁸ In fact, biographers of women become part of this process; for even the simplest, apparently most inconsequential life, told in unfragmented, monolithic terms, fuels "current preoccupations," as Steedman describes it.¹⁹ For all feminist biographers have a current purpose: to break the cultural traditions that have erased women from historical memory and to offer evidence of what women have accomplished, whatever their place in society.

Three recent feminist biographers of eighteenth-century women present different ways of dealing with these contradictions. Isobel Grundy, in her biography, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: Comet of the Enlightenment*, takes the most conservative approach. She acknowledges the not always flattering reputations of her subject and then, with magisterial use of a vast wealth of sources,

proves that this daring British woman was a versatile and skillful writer. Thus, Grundy revisits a "woman worthy" and forces readers to remember and appreciate Montagu's genius. Grundy gives her subject the literary fame she desired in life.²⁰ In this way, feminist biographers destabilize the categories previously attached to these well-known women and the memories of them primarily constructed around their relationships with men. These newly told lives are provocative in that they argue with the distortions and apparent manipulations of women's past.

Emilie de Breteuil, marquise Du Châtelet, is a classic example of a "woman worthy" in need of this feminist approach to biography. In my prologue to *Emilie Du Châtelet: Daring Genius of the Enlightenment*, I create a dialogue with readers about the previous accounts of the marquise's life, those portraying the French translator of Isaac Newton's *Principia* as the delightful mistress of the great Voltaire and little else. I present three alternative beginnings to the biography and thus show the alternative ways in which this woman's history could be created and the effects of each such creation, from appreciation of her intellectual accomplishments and the range of her activities to a smile when she becomes a subject for Voltaire's wit and contemporary ridicule.²¹ As with Grundy's biography of Montagu, I am claiming Du Châtelet's place in the intellectual developments of her day, establishing that this unorthodox marquise in her French context was a *philosophe*. In this way, like Grundy, I show what Nussbaum identifies as "the gaps in the patriarchy," how these women, while far from feminists themselves, resisted "hegemonic ideas of female character."²²

Similarly, Gelbart writes of du Coudray in order to gain for her the recognition that was accorded her by contemporaries despite numerous obstacles, such as her lowly origins and lack of formal education. In this way, Gelbart demonstrates "the originality of the strategies [women] designed to overcome those obstacles, the way they scrambled cultural expectations regarding gender, class, and age."²³ Gelbart does not hide the process of creating this biography. Instead, she accepts it as one of her primary goals, and wants readers to see "that many of the pieces are missing, that the puzzle will be full of holes."²⁴ Like John in her biography of Robins, Gelbart uses the organization of the life story to highlight this authorial decision: sections relate to the different stages of her subject's career, but each chapter within the section is determined by a part of du Coudray's recorded life, a site at which she appears in the contemporary record. By this stratagem the reader is continually reminded of the literal piecing together of this story and of the many ways in which the times and du Coudray herself presented her activities, from the scant information of baptismal records of infants whose births she supervised to the textbooks she wrote, rich with the sound of her chosen voice and the fictions she created, "fashioning as she went along what real life failed to provide."²⁵

The first draft of my biography of Du Châtelet included many interpositions about my own life, ways in which twentieth-century realities seemed to

echo those of the eighteenth, or to influence decisions about the framing of that distant life for the present. Rather than the blurring of "auto/biography," described by Stanley, I made explicit these shifts back and forth between my experiences and those of the eighteenth-century marquise. A wise editor insisted that they be eliminated. They hampered the flow of the narrative, she argued, and obscured Du Châtelet's story with their abrupt changes in place, time, and voice. A friend who read most of the manuscript thought that they destroyed any authority otherwise claimed by me as the biographer. In the final version, these musings appear only in the prologue and epilogue. Perhaps if Du Châtelet's story had been better known, if such extensive rewriting of her intellectual reputation had not been needed, then this feminist-inspired honesty would have been a more appealing and appropriate addition. Thus, each feminist biographer makes choices about which of the feminist historian's imperatives to follow and to what degree. All is choice, all is "fictive," in the eighteenth-century meaning of the word: created with a purpose. For most of us, that purpose is personal and political, mirroring feminist choices in all endeavors, not just our writing and scholarship.

NOTES

1. For more on the evolution of these ideas and their context, see Judith P. Zinsser, *History and Feminism: A Glass Half Full* (New York, 1993).

2. Gerda Lerner, "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges," *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York, 1979), 145–59, 148, see also 145–47.

3. Carolyn Steedman, *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain: Margaret McMillan 1860–1931* (London, 1990), 6.

4. See Nina Rattner Gelbart, *The King's Midwife: A History and Mystery of Madame du Coudray* (Berkeley, 1998); Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995); and Linda Colley, *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History* (New York, 2007). Note that Laura Thatcher Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York, 1991) would also fall into this category of women's biography, as would Ann B. Shteir's *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora's Daughters and Botany in England 1760 to 1860* (Baltimore, 1995), to name only two better-known works that focus, as Shteir explains it, "on the women and their individual stories," despite theoretical critiques of such simple purposes (7).

5. Davis, 1–4, 203, 212.

6. Steedman, 247; see also Liz Stanley, "Biography as Microscope or Kaleidoscope? The Case of 'Power' in Hannah Cullwick's Relationship with Arthur Munby," *Women's Studies International Forum* 10, no. 1 (1987): 19–31, 22.

7. Sara Alpern, Joyce Antler, Elisabeth Israels Perry, and Ingrid Winther Scobie, eds., "Introduction," *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing the Lives of Modern American Women* (Urbana, 1992), 1–15, 6. See also Personal Narratives Group, eds., "Origins," *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington, 1989), 3–15.

8. The phrase is from Kathleen Canning's article, "Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience," originally published in *Signs* 19, no. 2 (1994): 368–404. For excellent studies of this phenomenon in historical writing generally, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004); and the forthcoming *A Handbook of Historical Theory*, ed. Sarah Foot and Nancy Partner (London, 2010).

9. Angela V. John, *Elizabeth Robins: Staging a Life*, rev. ed. (1995; repr., Stroud, 2007), 1–13 and 15–28. For other contemporary biographers who offer similar imaginative introductions and comments through their texts, see Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, rev. ed. (New York, 1999.); and Nancy Milford, *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York, 2001). More conventional biographers are aware of the creative aspects of their craft; see, for example, the collection *The Troubled Face of Biography*, ed. Eric Homberger and John Charmley (New York, 1988), in which selections by Victoria Glendenning, “Lies and Silences” (49–62), and Hilary Spurling, “Neither Morbid Nor Ordinary” (113–22), discuss these same problems and offer similar, if less daring solutions.

10. See Stanley, “Biography as Microscope,” 19–22, 30–31; Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography* (New York, 1992), 7–10, 86; and Stanley and Ann Morley, *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison: A Biographical Detective Story* (London, 1988).

11. Jane Flax, “The End of Innocence,” *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York, 1992), 445–63, 447; Stanley, *Auto/Biographical I*, 86.

12. Mary Beard, *The Invention of Jane Harrison* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), 8–11.

13. Kali K. Israel, “Introduction,” *Names and Stories: Emilia Dilke and Victorian Culture* (New York, 1999), 3–18, esp. 8, 16. See also Ruth Behar, the anthropologist, who writes: “There is no true version of a life, after all. There are only stories told about and around a life” (*Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza’s Story* [Boston, 1993], 235).

14. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives,” *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History* 24, no. 3 (1985): 247–72, 271.

15. Thoughts in this paragraph are freely combined from the following sources: Personal Narratives Group, 201; Stanley, *Auto/Biographical I*, 211; Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Baltimore, 1989), xii, 17; Behar, 320; and Steedman, 245.

16. John Worthen, “The Necessary Ignorance of a Biographer,” *The Art of Literary Biography*, ed. John Batchelor (Oxford, 1995), 227–44, 241.

17. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, rev. ed. (1941; repr., Norfolk, Conn., 1959), 52.

18. Gelbart, 12.

19. Steedman, 245.

20. Isabel Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: Comet of the Enlightenment* (New York, 1999).

21. Zinsser, *La Dame d’Esprit: A Biography of the Marquise Du Châtelet* (New York, 2006), retitled *Emilie Du Châtelet: Daring Genius of the Enlightenment* for Penguin, 2007. Such an approach is similar to the “dialogic” writing described by Dominic LaCapra in his *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, 1983). See the description of LaCapra’s approach in Philippe Carrard, *Poetics of the New History: French Historical Discourse from Braudel to Chartier* (Baltimore, 1992), 196. Davis uses the dialogue in another way in her prologue, as a literal conversation between the biographer and her three subjects (1–4). Gelbart, in her prologue and epilogue, describes the sense of du Coudray’s presence, even contestation, as she wrote of her.

22. Nussbaum, xviii.

23. Gelbart, 280.

24. Gelbart, 11.

25. Gelbart, 14.