Narrative Theory Unbound

Warhol, Robyn, Lanser, Susan S.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Warhol, Robyn and Susan S. Lanser.
Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions.
The Ohio State University Press, 2015.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/39797.

👉 For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/39797

🔗 For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1518426
Digital humanities” (DH), or computational research in the humanities, is rapidly evolving in an environment that has undergone several geological events in recent decades, including the seismic shift of feminist studies. In this new millennium, I along with others who work on women, gender, literature, history, and related matters have been inducted into DH, with its tools that recondition practice and in turn challenge both old and new theories and aims. DH has changed how I spend my time and has led me to collaborate with librarians, programmers and designers, research assistants, and far-flung professors of history as well as literature (including Classicists and Medievalists). A digital project feels as much like building or quilting as like writing and editing; we create a terminus of many routes, a web—poetic figures dominate the technological as much as the interpretative, shaping the very infrastructure of inquiry. I’m not pushing a utopian vision that would

1. In the past decade, voices have been raised to challenge digital projects’ apparent blindness to diversity and theoretical critique (race, gender and sexuality, postcolonial, and disability studies). See Martha Nell Smith, “Frozen Social Relations,” 403–10, citing her own and others’ previous interventions on identity politics in DH.

2. There is, after all, a language of programming code which a computer is said to read; data exist as such only after they are labeled. Ryan, in “Cyberage Narratology: Computers, Metaphor, and Narrative,” considers the metaphors in narratology and computer technology (113). I have experienced DH as a process of learning new nouns and verbs (how to commit to
leave behind longstanding inquiries. Rather I hope to illustrate a project that is more of an expansion than a departure from the project of feminist narratology. My Collective Biographies of Women project (CBW), begun as an online annotated bibliography, has also become a digital prosopography and an experiment in narrative theory. What I mean by these terms will I hope become clear in the following pages.

Feminist literary studies, narrative theory, and DH, three fields that intersect in CBW, would benefit from more interaction and user-friendly communication with outsiders. I introduce aspects of the CBW project, and in particular our detailed analyses of short biographies of women, for the sake of furthering such influence and collaboration. Postclassical narratology can behave as if it has heard everything that feminist and queer theories have to say. Digital humanities can be preoccupied with new tools without taking stock of theoretical challenges within historical disciplines. Yet DH practitioners often have more engagement with so-called Theory and critique of representation than colleagues in humanities departments give them credit for (Bauer). Narratology, computer science, and engineering or design all have high thresholds for the uninitiated to join the conversation; even those who write about the culture or poetics of new media can be hazy on the nuts and bolts of computer programming or markup (the work with software that instructs computers how to read our data). Narrative theory has concentrated on fiction (in print or film), largely overlooking what is distinctive in nonfiction, and the Web presence of this work tends to consist of encyclopedias or digitized articles. The considerable activity today in computational models of narrative structure (relating to artificial intelligence), big-data textual analysis or topic modeling (as in digitization of the novel in English), or born-digital narratives (as in hypertext collaborative narratives or videogames) has so far offered little for a historical inquiry into the life narratives of women that have circulated in print.

Although in early days of feminist theory computation seemed a masculine, technocratic domain, and there are still signals that the hacker or gamer is presumed heterosexual white or Asian male, DH as an international community strives to see itself as blind to embodied or economic differences. There have been successful feminist digital projects such as Orlando and the Women Writers Project (formerly at Brown University). CBW, too, is a literary study with a database of historical women. Yet unlike comparable or larger projects, CBW is not limited to women writers nor is it a collection of

subversion is a daily procedure, not a call to social action). DH also has a funhouse effect on time, slowing it down and speeding it up: any phase of a project can take many person-hours over years, and technology supersedes a process before it is fully implemented.
edited digitized texts. The printed biographical collections accessed in CBW, written by men as well as women, feature famous and obscure women, from many nations and historical contexts and representing most possible occupations. CBW began with a bibliography of all the English-language books published during the period 1830–1940 that include biographies of three or more women (we record many texts before and after), for a total of 1,270 collections. CBW collects information about short nonfiction narratives in these collections—a rich corpus upon which to build a model of nonfiction and add to the few existing theoretical or formal studies of biography. Instead of an edition, CBW is a study of trends in the representation of historical women in groups, and a study of a narrative genre in relation to social networks and ideology of gender, class, and other social difference. Collective biographies or prosopographies of women can reveal conceptual or practical networks among women of various kinds, and revise our retrospective interpretations. Instead of deriving our pictures of gender ideology from the pronouncements of Sarah Ellis, John Ruskin, Margaret Fuller, or Charlotte Perkins Gilman, we might find unexpected alternatives in the narratives reproduced in these books.

The wealth of contradictory models, as well as the multiple versions of the same historical persons and events, makes this a fascinating dataset for women’s biographical history, measuring trends in gender ideology from within the horizons of Anglo-American literate or upper classes. Among some 8,000 women and more than 13,400 chapters (including numerous versions of the same individual and some multisubject chapters), we find some diversity of race, nationality, and sexuality, and some address to working-class audiences. Women who love women or women who self-fashion as masculine did infiltrate the lists because of their achievements in war, the arts, or literature. In many (but not all) of the collections, an implied young female audience or an implied Protestant corporate authorship have their normative effects. Taking account of the revision some historical women actually made in expected life trajectories, nineteenth-century biographical collections can be more flexible than mainstream fiction at the time, so that Rosa Bonheur, Harriet Hosmer, and Charlotte Cushman, for instance, are openly honored artists without denial or censure of their performed masculinity or lesbianism. Biographies do have a limited number of plots or ideological scripts, but nonfiction treatments of historic individuals also exceed the emplotment of the good daughter, wife, or mother, the virago, or the tragic lover.

CBW has a range of distinctive features that should be especially interesting to those engaged in feminist studies, narrative theory, or both. The long-standing feminist initiative to recover women’s biographies and histories can
be revitalized with deeper and broader study of publications in the print era, informed by critical examination of our terms of inquiry. Structural narratology can be revived in a morphology of a nonfiction genre, across national and historical boundaries, because new mediation allows us to make really big generalizations and qualify them at the same time. Among the many features of CBW, in this essay I shine light on the sample corpora or documentary social networks focused on certain persona types, and the markup schema that we have devised for interpreting the variations within the conventions of these clustered narratives about women’s lives. Our work with the sample corpora and the Biographical Elements and Structure Schema (BESS), very much in progress, hopes to foster dialogue among feminist studies, narrative theory, and digital innovation.

After introducing a general view of prosopography and a more inside view of CBW’s ongoing study of biographical narrative, I will return to the implications of scale and method for a digital feminist narratology. Questions of method and professional affiliation touch on the matters of agency, recognition, and collectivity at the heart of a feminist or queer narrative theory. Digital projects, for all their gleaming thresholds, only warrant the labor of building them if they accommodate living inquiry on an unprecedented scale. From another angle, the technology can yield spectacular information that has no salience if our projects have not been designed with attention to the ongoing dialogues of criticism and theory in the disciplines in the humanities—as if providing answers to pointless questions. That’s where a thorough grounding in the humanities comes in, to keep the digital side of the equation on its mettle.

**Sample Archives and a New Narrative Analysis**

While documenting a forgotten genre, my book *How to Make It as a Woman* (2004), and hence its digital sequel, sought to trace a history of categorization and comparison of representative figures and clustered types, from Joan of Arc, Queen Victoria, Madame Roland, and Isabella Bird to some obscure minister’s wife who helped to settle Oklahoma. In the Scholars’ Lab, we initi-

---

3. Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) derived a morphology of 31 elements or functions (further developed by Greimas) that recur in Russian folktales. Mark Alan Finlayson at MIT claims to confirm Propp’s model on natural-language texts using Analogical Story Merging on his Workbench, an annotation tool.

4. It seems inevitable now that the annotated bibliography, too large for the printed book, came to flourish in its searchable and accessible form on the University of Virginia Library’s server (Booth, “The Collective Biographies of Women: Preface”). The bibliography is accessible at http://womensbios.lib.virginia.edu. Every year more of the world’s libraries are
ated steps toward studies in a narrative genre, as our open-source project links to Google Books and to WorldCat (the database of library catalogs), with more immediate access to page images and portraits. Along with an interactive chart of the most popular subjects and types, we developed Featured Subjects (incorporating students’ research) as starting points for research on individual women. More recently we have concentrated narrative analysis on subsets of the bibliography’s list, sample corpora of the collections that include a certain woman and the networks of other personae associated with her. (A sample corpus consists of a set of about 9 to 25 books in the form of page images, TEI [Text Encoding Initiative] files of the prose, and our separate files of analysis of the narratives [in XML, or Extensible Markup Language].)

We centered the first two sample corpora on two antithetical Victorian women, Sister Dora and the adventuress Lola Montez, chosen in part because there is no overlap—no book that holds Sister Dora ever includes Lola Montez. Sister Dora, or Dorothy Wyndlow Pattison (1832–78), a clergyman’s daughter from Yorkshire, became internationally renowned as a version of Florence Nightingale, a modern Saint Theresa or precedent for Mother Teresa. Becoming an expert in surgery and treating wounds, she ran small hospitals for victims of industrial accidents or smallpox epidemics near Birmingham in the 1870s. She was revered for some fifty years—in nineteen collective biographies of women between 1880 and 1930—and then dropped out of sight (in one collection of 1993). In what circumstances did her kind of career become possible and then lose its appeal? How did the treatments of her life reconcile her performance of a saintly type with mundane evidence, in the age of newspapers, photography, and railroads, and with witnesses who knew her in daily life? What kinds of collections included Sister Dora? Her life is retold in collections of “Noble Workers,” as I call them, from a title by Jennie Chappell. Noble Workers (the 141 women who one or more times share a volume with Sister Dora) defy the oxymoron of status in this phrase; they are ladies engaged in social work of some kind, often taking responsibility for the souls,

available online. CBW was peer-reviewed by Networked Infrastructure of Nineteenth-Century Electronic Scholarship (NINES) in 2007. I worked with Bethany Nowviskie and Joe Gilbert in the Scholars’ Lab; in 2009, I started as a fellow of the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities at UVA, collaborating with Worthy Martin and Daniel Pitti. The current database is accessible at http://cbw.iath.virginia.edu/cbw_db/ and a new design (in progress) can be seen at http://cbw.iath.virginia.edu/public/index.php. Rennie Mapp has been Project Manager from 2013 to 2014.

5. She garnered a couple of full-length biographies almost a hundred years apart, by Lonsdale and Manton, and a TV miniseries. For more on Sister Dora, beyond our Featured Subject treatment, see Booth, “Recovery.” The versions of her life in collective biographies show little interest in Victorian social context and never focus on her brother, Mark Pattison, the Oxford don associated with George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*. This introduction to Sister Dora and Lola Montez overlaps with Booth, “Prosopography.”
appetites, and discipline of the poor, often with an attachment to regimen-
tals or orders: in one collection of 1898, a composite frontispiece (see fig. 8.1) unites Frances Willard of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union; Agnes Weston, the Sailor’s Friend; Catherine Booth in the Salvation Army, and Sister Dora (Booth and Dora adopt uniforms of sanctity).

A strikingly different constellation of types of personae appears in the sec-
ond corpus, which we call “Women of the World,” fourteen collections that include Lola Montez (250 other women accompany Montez in these books, some several times).6 The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB) labels Lola Montez (who was born in Ireland in 1821 and died in New York in 1861) with the occupational term “adventuress.”7 She was also a world-traveled performer: a self-styled Spanish dancer famous for her spider dance. In a brief star turn, she became the mistress of Ludwig I of Bavaria, who created her Countess of Landsfeld; her anticlerical influence and popularity among the students led to a revolution in 1848. In collections in CBW, she finds herself classified with other wild beauties born in Ireland, with pretty horsebreak-
ers of Mayfair or with hard-living entertainers in the gold rush of Australia or California (settings of her various triumphs and scandals). In How to Make It as a Woman, I noted that the collection of “bad” women largely goes underground during the nineteenth century; an eighteenth-century relish for French and English courtesans and adventuresses resurfaces around the 1890s. The 1920s were a heyday of such volumes as Gallant Ladies by Cam-
eron Rogers, which featured women from Mata Hari to Calamity Jane.8 Like

6. In 2014, we have extended our samples to books that include the scientist Caroline Herschel, the novelist Frances Trollope, Cleopatra, and the French assassin Charlotte Cor-
day, with numerous other women. The CBW database assigns types both to collections and to persons based on the argument of tables of contents and narratives themselves as to the biog-
raphies’ relevance: women of the Bible, mothers or wives of leaders, and so on. Investigation
of networks and texts in the sample corpora will reveal less manifest typological relationships
among personae (versions of life narratives). Statistics are in flux in any active database.

7. Apparently, she is one of five women so designated in the ODNB, though many a mistress, wife, or ancestor of a famous man, as well as a range of writers and performers, are alleged to be adventuresses within their biographies in the ODNB (the word appears twenty-
two times). The exact word does not delimit the type. There are 66 returns for a search of “courtesan” in the ODNB, including multiple references to famous individuals; “mistress” 1,473 (including the “demi-mondaine” Montez); “adulteress” is a term applied seven times (includ-
ing to Montez). “Dancer” is an appellation used 474 times, and it includes a high proportion of men and gay lovers as well as women or wives of famous men. “Performer” appears 566 times but is not used in reference to Montez. Some men appear under the vocational type “rogue” or “adventurer.”

8. Some pieces are reprinted from The Pictorial Review. “The very term ‘Gallant Ladies’ connoted carnal misdemeanors and bawdy overtones deserving of condemnation and deletion,” though Rogers begins by noting that male adventurers get an easier pass and insists that regard-
ning his own heroines, “the word ‘gallant’ denotes not sexual aberration, but courage, resource
other digital studies of archives, we can trace chapter and book titles to capture different social values. Lola Montez and Sister Dora, with their adopted professional names and costumes, were British contemporaries (Lola Montez died in New York in 1861, Sister Dora in Walsall in 1878), and books promoting Noble Workers overlap with the years of publication of books of Women and character, “the issue of chastity being more “no more consequential” in their lives than it would be in the narratives of Odysseus or John Paul Jones (11–12).
of the World. Nevertheless, Lola Montez, famous and much written about, only surfaced in biographical collections after 1897, since her story cannot be shaped into a positive model of femininity. If Sister Dora appears in her white starched cap, Lola Montez wears black lace and wields a whip.

To analyze the assorted narratives in such sample corpora, we developed an editorial system called Biographical Structure and Elements Schema (BESS). Comparative evaluation is imbedded in collected life narratives, and our editorial schema, using a large set of controlled vocabulary (more on this later), records the textual location (the numbered paragraph) of kinds of events, social encounters, rhetoric, and other features. The computer can then retrieve and collate any passages in all twenty versions that represent the event type recognition, for example, as in the statue erected in memory of Sister Dora, and align it with this event type in other women’s biographies. Or we can compare versions that deploy the standard rhetoric of analogy among models, as when Sister Dora is likened to Florence Nightingale, to Saint Theresa (Baring-Gould), or even to Christ (Green-Armytage 117). A book that includes Sister Dora, such as Rosa Nouchette Carey’s Twelve Notable Good Women of the XIX Century (London and New York, 1899), also features the prison reformer Elizabeth Fry alongside lives of a similar type, female philanthropists such as Angela Burdett-Coutts (each with her own recognition or analogy, and so on). What then can we make of all the versions of Fry over time; the rise and fall of interest in Burdett-Coutts; the common ground or variation among chapters in the same volume; and the assorted networks of representation formed by collections of similar or different types across this genre?

We are beginning to flesh out a morphology of biography (based on our model of short, collected biographies of women). In this brief essay I cannot elaborate on the poetics of third-person life narrative that I will develop elsewhere. Suffice it to say that the key distinctions from standard narrative theory that we find in third-person narratives about real people fall under four headings: the author-narrator role; referentiality and verifiability; the status of versions; and construction of the audience.9 As in many forms of nonfiction, the person named on the title page, the voice of the preface, the implied author, and the teller of the tales are so similar that the distinctions have little use. Unlike fiction, the discourse of biography arranges a story that is presumed to be true (rather than the reader’s reconstruction of imagined events), and hypothetically any number of versions could attempt an accurate reference to those extratextual matters of fact. (Writing one’s own life makes

---

9. A few studies of the difference of nonfiction have been helpful, notably Eric Heynè’s, and most recently, a fine synthesis by Monika Fludernik. Yet these have overlooked biography, whether single or collective.
a truth claim but does not invite anyone else to have an equal say.) It’s a sign of nonfiction that all versions of a known life (or historical events) potentially could be verified or improved by further research (they are not more or less faithful adaptations of a fairy tale or a novel). Finally, biographies unlike political histories present themselves in the mode of communication between flesh-and-blood author and reader about a real individual, in the often-explicit expectation that the audience identifies with a flesh-and-blood person and pursues similar experiences in the real world. The method and design of BESS will improve as we interpret different types of sample corpus. Formal studies of a genre require more than the data mining of masses of digitized texts. We hope to show that our method of digital analysis at mid-range scale, beyond close reading of a few canonical works, can be adapted to other narrative genres and contexts.

Protopography, Documentary Social Networks, and the BESS Schema

Modern conceptions of life narrative privilege the unique, self-fashioning individual (Booth, “Prosopography”). Yet the uses of biography should alert us to a positive ethics of sharing identities. Feminist, queer, postcolonial, and other perspectives have favored a conception of the subject as constructed from intersecting positions. Collections of life narratives, from pantheons and hagiography through printed books, exhibit lives in overlapping contexts and roles, placing even more than the usual pressure on all life narrative to assimilate personal details into narratable forms. Any biography shapes the profile according to social and generic conventions that guide audience response. Collections of brief lives enhance this collocation and colloquy. Even today, with distrust of authority and inauthenticity, we respond to lives as models more or less positive or negative, from Facebook pages to reality television to biopics and the Biography channel.

A comparative rhetorical network is common to biographies in all formats, but especially those that sort and collect persons by social category, as in the books incorporated in Collective Biographies of Women. The longstanding conventions of biography in the West were reinforced, since the Reformation, by Protestant martyrologies and, with the growth of capitalism and literacy, by lives of worthies or writers and by self-help auto/biographies.

10. Many legends such as Faust or Cinderella migrate in various versions (and characters such as Dracula escape their original texts to function in new versions). But biography has a particularly interesting relationship between the ur-text of an actual person and the various personae presented in various representations of the life.
In CBW, these narrative conventions encounter prescriptions about women’s lives and an array of affiliations and aims that motivate a particular volume. The underlying concept of my research is prosopography, which has been defined as collective biography, as I generally use it. Social histories, movements, and commemoration, in print and other media, turn to selections of names and life narratives. Prosopon, from ancient Greek, indicates the face or personal appearance, and graphy of course refers to writing. Although at one time prosopography referred to describing a single person’s appearance, it became a term for a scholarly method of representing plural personae, locating and reconstructing the life histories of members of certain social groups, usually from eras before printing and public record-keeping were well established. In addition to its multiple-personae form, its rhetoric tends to be elegiac as well as exemplary. A few persons must stand in for hidden faces among the ancestors. Each persona is thus a metonymic figure for a social role. Over time and across many texts, the same individual receives many different discursive treatments, adding to the sense of subjectivity as a field of sliding signification rather than identity.

In CBW’s bibliography, for example, A. J. Green-Armytage’s Maids of Honour (1906) gathers twelve short biographies (with portraits) to demonstrate achievements of unmarried women in a range of careers. In such a book, a well-known woman will be assessed in comparison to other eminent women, to her sex in general, or to men of achievement. To understand such documentary or constructed social networks, we design searches and displays of “degrees of separation” between individuals, for instance to show how any of the eleven women with “one degree” of separation from Sister Dora in Maids of Honour might be assorted in other volumes (the possible combinations quickly reach the thousands). These virtual associations of women (docu-
mentary social networks because constructed, without necessary interaction during their lifetimes) will be correlated with data such as time or place. The publications show very little concern for intellectual property; they offer a kind of literate, crowdsourced folklore, recirculating previous versions and conventions of biographical narrative. Nevertheless, some fidelity to the documented events in individual lives makes the narratives diverge from prescribed radial graph. The graph shows seventeen women appearing in four collections with Sister Dora. Agnes Weston, Catherine Booth, and Frances Willard appear in two collections with Dora, a160 and a162, both by Chappell.
tions of gender and other templates for a socially conditioned life. Material of this scope and complexity begs for a digital platform.

The more innovative experiment in the CBW project is a contribution to narrative theory, an XML stand-aside markup schema called Biographical Elements and Structure Schema or BESS, designed in collaboration with Worthy Martin, Daniel Pitti, and Suzanne Keen. With small teams of graduate research assistants, I have been analyzing the 20 versions of Sister Dora’s life and the 14 versions of Lola Montez’s life, and have branched out to the other subjects in these 34 collections, the Noble Workers and Women of the World. Thus we can measure variations among versions of one person and among multiple lives narrated by the same author. The formal techniques of biographical narrative resemble those of fiction, and they embed recurrent motifs or ideological scripts as well as “action macrostructures” (García Landa) that—so far—require human interpretation. Each BESS XML file becomes a kind of abstract outline associated with the numbered paragraphs of the text.

One of our key elements is “Stage of Life,” before, beginning, middle, culmination, end, and after. These named stages resemble the Aristotelian idea of the beginning, middle, and end, and the Freytag triangle of the rising and falling action, and allow us to outline the discourse of the short biography in relation to the historical chronology of the person’s life. Biographies, especially in factual summaries or short form, tend to be chronological, yet narrative discourse may vary this order for different effects. Suzanne Keen emphasizes narrative theory’s concepts of pace as well as the order/disorder of the story/discourse distinction: where do we find expansion or digression, gaps, pauses, foreshadowing or retrospection? A biography often inserts future or posthumous events as reflections on the development or impact of the subject’s life. The first paragraph of some biographies includes all stages of life in a summary, and this seems more common if the story is controversial as well as eventful on the world stage. Some biographies omit narration of ancestry

---

14. BESS is a system of standardized conceptual elements and a vocabulary of “controlled values,” using the Extensible Markup Language or XML coding language. To identify the type of each element that appears in a specific paragraph of text, we insert the appropriate value or term in the element tags within a separate XML document. This annotation of what appears in each paragraph of a text can then be measured and compared to other versions of the biography or to many other biographies in the corpus.

15. Emma Kafalenos has contributed to structural analysis of narrative in terms of Greimasian functions, and in “Not (Yet) Knowing” she contributes to ways to detect narrative in action. In BESS, we often translate the terms of narratology into more accessible language, given that we rely on a team of editors. DH often captures significant omissions or disruptions in repetition, as narratology may highlight the not-narrated or “disnarrated” (Dannenberg 305).
or birth (before or beginning), and many later nineteenth-century collections represent living members of societies or causes without anticipating end or after. In our terms, beginning includes birth, education, possibly marriage, and may extend well into middle age for some who find career late in life. Middle consists of recurrent activity in the persona’s recognized role, be it motherhood or recording data from a telescope or exploring Africa. Culmination is our term to avoid the narrower terms “climax,” “crisis,” or “triumph”; to be tagged as this stage of life, paragraphs must narrate a specified event in time and place that in some way tests human powers, begins with an uncertain outcome, or transforms further events. In spite of the triangle of plot, culmination can happen early or often in a persona’s life. A biography might consist almost entirely of culmination, as some chapters about a named individual record only a “noble deed” or emergency episode (female heroism in a shipwreck rescue or in combat are favorites of this sort). Still other kinds of chapters represent groups, networks, or movements rather than individual chronicles, as in anonymous characterization of Women of the East or galleries of the beauties of Versailles. The variety of pace and order in the emplotment of women’s collective biographies correlates with different types of personae and collection, as our project can demonstrate.

Like all studies of narrative, BESS focuses on events (including actions) and agents (our term for actants, from people to weather). A life story, we expect, is made up of events and agents in real times and places, in various relations to the focal individual. Here are three paragraphs (9–11) from the beginning stage in a version of Sister Dora’s life (a185.bio02):

9 Once, when Dorothy was away from home, one of the village boys fell ill with typhoid fever. His one wish was to see “Miss Dora,” as he called her, and the poor child listened anxiously every day for her carriage wheels. At last she came, and he was the first to hear her. “There’s Miss Dora! There she is!” he cried, and, exhausted by the effort, fell back on his pillow.

10 She went to him at once and remained to the end, nursing him with loving care, and cheering him with her bright smile and comforting words. This was the first time she had done anything of the sort, and even then she was more influenced by the desire to be kind than by the child’s suffering.

11 She was now growing tall and strong like her father, and beautiful of face like her mother. She delighted in games of all kinds, but particularly those best suited to boys. Nothing gave her so much pleasure as a good gallop across the moors, or a ride to hounds with her brothers. Whatever she did,
whether work or play, she did with her whole heart: there were no half measures with Dorothy Pattison; if a thing were worth doing, she did it well.
(a185 b1002)

A sample of the event markup in BESS may be efficient here:

```xml
<event>
  <textUnitRangeReference>
    <start>9</start>
    <end>10</end>
  </textUnitRangeReference>
  <type>illness, nonfamily individual</type>
  <type>nursing, local amateur</type>
  <agentType>male patient, poor</agentType>
  <agentType>boy, unrelated, unnamed</agentType>
</event>
```

Events in BESS allow more than one type and various so-called *child elements* or subentries; most notably, if the text specifies someone or something interacting with the persona or protagonist, we mark AgentType. Our vocabulary for agents is designed to bring out the social structure: what sorts of events correlate with what social roles in the narratives of which type of persona?

The bare-bones account of a life has certain determining cruxes, “kernel” events necessary to any version of the story, as well as factual details not transferable to another person. Seymour Chatman develops the narratological distinction between kernels and “satellites,” the intervening events that devolve from kernels and are less necessary to the causality of the story (54–55). We can demonstrate how various versions of a single life select, omit, or arrange the typical and unique, the ubiquitous kernels and optional satellites. Having analyzed all versions of Sister Dora’s life, the team has named and given unique ID numbers to recurrent events; her story has ten *kernels*, rarely if ever omitted; ten common *satellites* or embellishments inessential to her unique narrative; and seven rare satellites, including this one, “Dying Village Boy Waiting for Dora’s Return” (E00020); analysis of a corpus of versions of a historical life allows us to build a theory of narrated events in terms of frequency rather than causality.16

16. Precise counts of rates of the named events in all versions will be forthcoming. In other versions, this *childhood anecdote, talent predicted* is supplanted by a story (E00021, a rare satellite) that she stayed out one night to nurse a dying old woman and was told by her angry family
In an interesting shift of tone, paragraph 11, above, calls for analysis in these BESS terms: Event types: riding; games, playing; hunting; Topos type: physical prowess, athletics; family, genetic heritage of persona; PersonaDescription types: physically strong, beautiful; skilled, masculine leisure activity; skilled, athletic; energetic or untiring; Discourse types: summary, more, much or all life in less prose; iterative, repeating or persistent.\(^7\) This paragraph's events are neither kernels nor satellites that develop Sister Dora's narrative but recurrent activities that we do not tag with ID numbers and names. Her brothers are the agent types in these events; the location is open country. Arguably the aim of the above paragraphs (9–11) is to characterize the persona in youth, in a kind of forecast of her vocation. The ministering angel at the bedside becomes surprisingly vigorous, a tomboy. Obviously our vocabulary must omit some details and qualities for the sake of comparative economy. The reward will come in contrasting the distribution, presence, and absence of various element types according to the type of persona (nurse vs. adventuress) and the type of collection, correlated with date of publication and religious, political, regional, or other affiliations. We can also trace the “style” of different biographers, who may have repertoires of persona description, discourse, or topoi, applied to very different subjects in a collection.

Along with the events and persona description, these narratives are dedicated to various social values and discursive effects that still require human interpretation. I have already given some impression of the element topos, a spatial concept for the structures of feeling and/or habitual social interaction beyond the explicit level of observed action. The biographies in CBW inevitably share topoi with biographies in general. Thus in these three paragraphs, we encounter dying or deathbed (TextUnitRange 9–10) and another topos, family, genetic heritage of persona (TextUnit 11), important to any biography. Similarly, another key element in BESS, discourse, traces textual effects common to many kinds of narrative. Thus for example paragraph 9 deploys focalization, when the dying boy listened and “was the first to hear” the carriage bringing

---

not to come home till summoned. Named events, linked to data about time and geo-location, will form part of interactive timelines revealing historical networks among the women studied in our sample corpora.

\(^7\) See http://cbw.iath.virginia.edu/exist/cbw/dual/a185/bio02 for an html display of the text and BESS markup. A prototype tool for visualizing BESS analysis with text is accessible at http://cbw.iath.virginia.edu/cbw_db/bess.php. We can elicit patterns of co-occurrence such as the Topos “duty,” PersonaDescription “humble,” and Discourse “evaluation” in paragraphs in different stages of the life of Caroline Herschel. “Duty” is a topos that never appears in a life of Lola Montez. Force-directed graphs can visualize the comparisons of clustered or mutually exclusive terms in groups of texts.
Sister Dora back to care for him. Narratives in the Florence Nightingale line tend to exploit the Dickensian sentiment of the patient’s perspective.\textsuperscript{18}

In the vocabulary for the element “discourse,” we identify quotations of various kinds, in this case \textit{quotation}, \textit{agent’s speech}, \textit{unique}, because these are guides to narrative levels, as when the biographer invents dialogue or copies from an interview or autobiography. In contrast with the \textit{scene} in paragraphs 9–10, we flag \textit{summary} and \textit{iterative} discourse in paragraph 11, as indications of pace. We find differing discourse according to different persona types, which naturally attract different terms of persona description. For example, narrators of Lola Montez’s life often adopt \textit{irony} in a sophisticated tone and style suited to an adult, modern audience such as men in their clubs. Women of the World discourse includes more \textit{evaluation} (expressed judgment of behavior), more \textit{emphasis in typeface, punctuation} (can you believe she did this!), and more doubt: \textit{versions of story compared, disputed}. Sister Dora is \textit{self-sacrificing}, not so Lola; the magnificent Montez is \textit{violent} and \textit{wild}, Dora never is.

Such patterns will emerge as we tag these elements in the versions of women’s lives in various networks. The potential micro-interpretation, familiar from the techniques of close reading a single poem or paragraphs in a novel, underlies the BESS analysis at every phase. The digital interpretation tagging elements to paragraphs is that much more laborious than a good close reading. The cost of that labor must be assessed against the value of quantifiable comparison in support of a new vision of the networks of representation of women in this context, and a new model for narrative theory in digital terms. The texts are always there to be reread for the details, and other editors can always reinterpret them. Printed prosopographies provide a rich opportunity for systemic interpretation because they build in comparative modulation of conventions while striving to adhere to some degree of fact. Are some narrative devices and structures specific to one network or one period of biographical representation? Do others “travel” remarkably consistently across gender and other categories of identity?

Within any cohort, variants are telling, and further probing reveals that individuals might belong to other persona types or cohorts. The astronomer

\textsuperscript{18} As I’ve said, we’re interested in documenting the distinction of nonfiction. In nonfiction, it is no solecism to introduce an unnamed person who never reappears; Dickens, for example, would not squander the opportunity of this boy as a character. What becomes of narrative theory applied to a biographical and historical discourse such as this? What of Mieke Bal’s terms, for instance, for fabula, story, and text? From a version that we read, do we reconstruct the historical person as we reconstruct the fabula of fiction? In practice, though biographical texts are referential, the past is another country and we can’t fully verify other than through other documentation.
Caroline Herschel, for example, shares a volume with Sister Dora three times. Herschel, known for being the sister of the famous astronomer William Herschel (rather than a self-appointed religious “sister”), also has twenty-five books to her name, among 268 women of widely different eras, nationalities, and occupations. Herschel began life in Hanover (then ruled by England), and at the end of her life resided there; she died in 1848, just at the time of the revolution in Munich sparked by Lola Montez. But Herschel is known for domestic service and scientific learning rather than cosmopolitan venture. The most renowned scientist in the CBW archive, Herschel implied women’s worthiness for higher education. Her virginal, self-sacrificing persona would look foolish among the Women of the World, and Herschel never shares a book with Lola Montez. Yet at one phase of her life Herschel was a successful musical performer (and housekeeper) while her astronomer brother made his living as a musician in Bath. Sister Dora and Caroline Herschel, unmarried, are consistently portrayed as heroic in self-denial and hard work, day and night. Beautiful, autocratic Sister Dora repeatedly overcame epidemics and industrial disasters; homely, submissive Caroline Herschel repeatedly discovered comets. In contrast, the repetitions in Lola Montez narratives are less about service or achievement than romance and scandal: redundant marriages (including bigamy) and adulteries, debuts on stage, violent episodes, and exile. The portraits of Sister Dora always show her in the self-designed uniform, and are often the same profile image, seated, from the waist up—many based on the same photograph. I have seen only a handful of engraved portraits of Caroline Herschel in CBW books or elsewhere. Lola Montez appears in a wide array of images, including photographs and caricatures, as her celebrity spread around the world. Nurse reformer, scientist, adventuress—the substance and manner of their written lives must vary. And so does the kind of collection in which they appear.

Studies of genre and theories of narrative have always been concerned with the recurrence and variation within conventions. Our in-depth comparison of versions of different personae and collection types will bring out the effects of gender ideology; CBW and projects like it can also coordinate literary analysis with biographical, historical, and geospatial data. Users should be able to ask questions and search and sort our data in ways that we don’t yet predict. Visualizations may reveal patterns generated by our analysis that challenge inferences drawn from poring over a shelf of books. The tools of digital inquiry, conversely, need critical and theoretical insight if they are going to answer questions worthwhile to humanists, whether or not these are the questions we are already in the habit of asking. The findings through the use of the schema should benefit both studies of life narrative and feminist
literary history. It’s unwarranted here to tell you all about Sister Dora, Lola Montez, or Caroline Herschel, but I can illustrate the potential interpretation with a few examples of typical scenes in the life of Sister Dora. Take a common satellite event that we have called “Sister’s Arm” (E00014 in the database): once, Sister Dora defied a surgeon who determined that a young workman’s right arm, crushed by machinery, must be amputated to save the man’s life. She said she would take responsibility for trying to save the arm, in spite of the risks, and the surgeon angrily gave in. For days she watched over and tended to the arm. In the end it healed and she saved the arm and the patient’s life and livelihood. “She called it her arm”; and when she in turn lay ill, the worker “would ring at the hospital door to inquire how she was,… ’Tell Sister it’s her arm that pulled the bell!’” (Green-Armytage 105; Lonsdale 73; Manton 189; Chappell, *Four Noble Women* 105). Another common satellite event (E00013) dramatizes one of her countless house calls to smallpox patients in the slums. In a cottage one night she found a man on his deathbed, abandoned by his family and friends. A woman whom she had sent to buy another candle never returned, and she sat alone with the suffering man with his seeping sores. He begged, “Sister, kiss me before I die.” She embraced him and remained all night, in the cold dark after the candle burned out, with the dying man in her arms. In the morning he was dead (Lonsdale 68; Manton 202; Foster 145; Chappell, *Four Noble Women* 105). The experience of such an event must have been harrowing, but as a story, necessarily originating with the survivor herself, it becomes iconographic. We call this recurrent scene “The Case of the Man Who Died in the Dark.” Both these named scenes deal in the topos physical contact with man, permitted because of the threat of death. If a feminist scholar happened to read all the biographies of Sister Dora, she or he might notice that all versions feature these or other anecdotes of intimate nurture of working men in defiance of conventional medical practice.” From another angle, a digital humanist might have set up a program to search for frequencies or proximities of words or phrases related to “arm” or “die” or “man.” But such discoveries are improbable without an interpretative schema designed for this archive and prepared to detect gender and class and psychosexual implications, informed by theoretical paradigms of the body and representation.

---

19. Both Lonsdale and Ridsdale reported Pattison’s obvious preference for men: “she disliked the sole company of women” (Ridsdale quoted in Manton 158) and primarily nursed male victims of industrial accidents (Lonsdale 85). Usually the only motive for reading many versions of one life is to prepare for another version; a biographer of Sister Dora would collate authoritative versions and try to confirm the original events, narrating the life once more.
There is another aspect to the “Man Who Died in the Dark” episode, involving a pattern of imagery of dark or light (we identify such figures or images under the element “discourse”) associated with the social spaces and class and gender roles of philanthropy. One biographer, Wilmot-Buxton, refers to the need for “moral as well as actual sunshine” in the zones of industrial poverty (275), and many note that Dorothy Pattison’s nickname as a child was “Little Sunshine.” In the CBW narratives, a lady often figures as a beacon or source of light entering the darkness of streets or impoverished homes. Digital tagging can now trace this imagery to specific kinds of events or activities, settings, and types of collection or persona. The underlying typology or topos of such scenarios we have called lady braving dark space. Word searches can take us only so far; contexts and correlated values bring out more of the rhetorical design. For example, I examined references to “night” and “work” in narratives about Sister Dora and Caroline Herschel, realizing that both the nurse and the astronomer work at night, but for the latter it is an entirely positive condition for observing celestial rather than human bodies. I laughed to realize that Lola’s performance of menacing sexuality also could be regarded as working at night. Her attribute is a whip, not a telescope or a bandage. Biographers explicitly censure Montez, “a woman who, in the full light of the nineteenth century, renewed all the scandals that disgraced the Middle Ages,” showing that “vice can sometimes triumph” before “a fall” (Wyndham; emphasis mine).

Implications for Feminist Narratology in a Digital Age

In digital humanities as well as feminist studies, it is not uncommon to retell how we or I got here. The history of my digital project reveals stages in the development of gender-inflected humanities as well, like screenshots of a longue durée. Invited to contribute reflection on the history and future of feminist and queer narrative studies, I had the unsettling sense of leaping toward a new horizon while reaching back over two hundred years. This divided movement is not merely a consequence of the fraught interaction of the three fields I noted at the beginning: feminist studies, narrative theory, and DH. It is also because technology has stirred up old desires for universal

---

20. Conference panels in DH can be overtaken by show and tell, and it’s hard not to be preoccupied with narrating what happened in transformative innovations in research. We can make allowance for this as similar to the poster sessions or exhibitions at meetings in health professions, sciences, or social sciences, calling for timeliness and applied research.
or global models. My graduate training coincided with the rise of feminist theory, women's history, and flourishing studies of Victorian literature and culture, in the 1980s—all instilling distrust of universals (though not, in practice, eschewing heroic biography). But as personal computers and the Internet transformed research methods in the 1990s, I shifted into bibliography, a field I once considered dreary and untheoretical. Digitization of texts and online access to library archives made it possible to investigate the history of print in unprecedented ways, and a Web-based bibliography invited expansive use and new functions. Meanwhile I was also influenced by narrative theory as it intersected with poststructuralist ideological criticism in the 1980s and 1990s. At Narrative conferences I joined panels with queer theorists, feminist critics of Victorian novelists, narratologists studying race in contemporary film or graphic novels—the rich array of what with Rita Felski and others I would call strategic formalism.

In an era that distrusted formalism as an evasion of ideology, our strategy was to conjoin poststructuralist approaches to textuality, narratological and aesthetic approaches to written texts, and feminist and ideological critiques of texts, culture, and history. I would never have undertaken bibliography of a print genre without digital resources and without the shared precept that narratives perform cultural work as fundamental as the construction of gender, class, and race. A potential corpus of all narratives in all genres and contexts, in print or born digital, would—some say it already has—transform what it means to read or interpret narrative.

Susan Lanser, in her classic 1986 essay “Toward a Feminist Narratology,” rightly claimed that till that point narratology and feminist studies had ignored each other (674). Significantly, she commended a “sociological poetics,” “abstract and semiotic” but also “concrete and mimetic” for relevant feminist critique (Lanser). It was a topos of that time to end an essay with a hopeful sidestep from the dead end of poststructuralist feminist theory, an appeal to both/and rather than either/or; feminist narrative studies, accordingly, called for both the “-ism” and the “-ology,” both political and formal commitments. At the symposium, Lanser proposed a similar balance of goals, but I heard a shift in the emphasis for our global, digitized era: we need an inductive, particular method that also reaches out to the scale of Franco Moretti’s literary histories. In a quarter century, feminist narrative studies have thrived as the “-ology” has been muted: all sides have eschewed “scientistic . . . high structuralism” with its “terminology and . . . taxonomies,” as David Herman puts it. More positively, Herman and others develop a post-

---

21. The idea is comparable to Gayatri Spivak’s strategic essentialism, a claim of coherent and shared identity (such as gender or race) for political and historical purposes. Strategic formalism provisionally brackets the hermeneutics of suspicion or critique.
classical narratology uniting “formal and functional” models to address “new questions about (the relations between) narrative structure, its verbal, visual or more broadly semiotic realization, and the contexts in which it is produced and interpreted” (Herman 3, 8, 9). A postclassical feminist narratology joins poetics and rhetoric, the parole of usage and the langue or extensible system. There is all the more vitality in a renewed structuralism because of the capability of digital study to encompass masses of minute particulars, by both human curation and unsupervised learning, as we say. We can reveal both subtle and huge patterns invisible to the human being reading a small set of texts. The risk might be a reinstatement of scientistic, universalizing perspectives. Instead, I urge that we remember, as this retrospective invites us to do, the reasons for a feminist critique of structuralist normative models.

Not that feminist literary studies have always gotten it right in the past. In spite of the drive to expand the archives under consideration, histories of women’s writing or narrative and gender have been too narrow. One of my goals is to loosen the novel’s grip on narrative theory of all kinds and to enhance theories of nonfiction, specifically biography. You might say there has been plenty of feminist narrative theory devoted to lifewriting; the symposium included a range of examples of it within the framework of individual and group recognition and self-expression. In both history and literary studies, attention to autobiography and memoir far exceeds consideration of biography or prosopography (exceptions include Caine and Hill). To a large extent discussion of biographies of women have focused on a single person or text, or generalized about the privacy or tragedy of women’s lives. In the first volume of the journal Narrative (1993), Linda Wagner-Martin, biographer of Plath and Stein, deplored the prescriptive plots for female biography in the 1990s: “the only biographies of women that will sell are those of the aberrant, the misfit, the sensationalized,” rather than “another domestic story” (266–67). Disregarding the collective biographies that kept being printed by trade publishers throughout this period, Wagner-Martin overlooks thousands of female biographies that conform to the masculine individualist model as she describes it: a narrative that presupposes “that the subject has led an exemplary life, that this life is best treated chronologically and pegged on historical events external to the subject, that the subject’s internal life is not intrinsically significant” (267–68).22 Carolyn Heilbrun, in her influential Writing a Woman’s Life of 1988, had similarly segregated the entrenched gender plots of biography, suggesting that “only in the last third of the twentieth century”

---

22 In a book first published in 1994, Wagner-Martin observes that a surge in biographies of women by women has begun to “shift” the “conventions for biography” (Wagner-Martin, Telling Women’s Lives 159).
might a woman’s life be written as an ambition plot (60). In How to Make It as a Woman I challenge the standard feminist histories of life narrative, and I don’t need to repeat the refutation now. Presuppositions about gender and biography have been based on a handful of monographs about famous individuals, primarily writers. Comprehensive studies like CBW can uncover far wider variation in gender and genre.

Recuperative work in any field of advocacy, including race, gender, and sexuality, tends to foreshorten the history of representation. There were varied models of women’s lives available well before second- or third-wave feminism and we cannot presuppose their difference from men’s biographies, and still less their reductive similarity to each other. The quantity and variety of print-era collective biographies of women is still news. In 2010 it gets scant notice in Barbara Caine’s overview, Biography and History, a contribution to a Palgrave series, Theory and History. After several academic generations in which biography has been frowned upon as a method or topic in both history and literature departments, it remains crucial in the humanities. We can brace ourselves against the illusions of transparency or hero worship. Narrative theory needs to acknowledge the vast range of writing in referential or nonfiction modes, and feminist studies should encompass a wide spectrum of representation in the print era rather than perpetuate the belletristic definition of literature and a narrow focus on women poets or novelists.24

A history of feminist narrative studies is no simple story of progress; I have already remarked on the shifting dimensions of time in reflections such as this. It was in 1994 that Margaret Homans rightly warned against presuming that “narrative and social structures are cognate” (9). Homans nevertheless shared the feminist poststructuralist suspicion of “linear narrative and history”; “beginning, middle, and end’ . . . and . . . the unified consciousness of a ‘hero who acts as the subject’” (12) cannot be adapted for the narratives of Other experience. For better or worse, linear plots of triumph over adversity, heroic action, and public recognition are narratable and often prospectively useful in prosopographies as well as single biographies of marginal subjects. Narrative and social structures are not cognate. A biography of Lola Montez may replicate her nonlinear, shape-shifting adventures in its structure.

23. Caine notes a few “collective biographies devoted entirely to women” since the eighteenth century, and devotes short sections to prosopography (which she associates with the 1920s and restricts to nonbiographical analysis of data about aggregates of individuals [58]) and group biography, “one of the most significant new developments . . . since the 1970s” (61). Her account is plausible if you overlook several recent studies including my own; it repeats the rhetorically useful notion that the records of women have gone missing.

24. Feminist studies in early modern or medieval periods do attend to diaries, letters, ecclesiastical writings, and histories.
yet rhetorically elicit sophisticated contempt or male heterosexual desire for sexual rough play. The study of printed biographical collections in relation to a database of historical persons provides an experimental setting for better understanding of the social contexts of narrative, in this instance, Anglo-American women’s history and biography.

Digital scholarship and techniques of reading may reveal the fine-grained and the worldwide significance of this body of Victorian life narratives, much as Google Earth flies in or out, from the spinning globe through layers of national histories to the unique coordinates. I have suggested that our method combines close and distant readings, in a middle range. Franco Moretti’s “comparative morphology” traces literary forms through history and across the globe in what he calls “distant reading.” Wai Chee Dimock retains a commitment to the text itself; the literary field “needs to maintain an archive that is as broad-based as possible, as fine-grained as possible” because there will never be a totalizing “law of literary evolution” as Moretti believes (Dimock 79). In another dimension, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus argue for surface reading as a corrective to the customs of Jamesonian critique or symptomatic reading that plumbs what the text represses; surface reading includes bibliography and poetics, as the CBW project does. The computer doesn’t supersede various ways to read. Female prosopography is suitably vast, varied, visual, and collaborative for online presentation. Within this expansive global horizon, CBW also remains committed to the microscale of close and surface reading of texts and book designs, while it updates comparative studies of folklore or archetypes with current transnational concepts of “traveling genres” developed by Dimock, Margaret Cohen, and others.

Feminist and queer narrative theorists have learned that the ideological uses of aesthetic forms or discourses cannot be prejudged. Moreover, we know that older or newer approaches may be taken in directions impossible to map as strictly progressive or the reverse. I suggest that my discoveries of the variety and recurrent patterns in the printed versions of women’s lives are only apparently at odds. The systems and networks can attend to conditions of individual lives that queer the categorical binaries. A postclassical narratology helps us deploy digital tools to magnify and expand our readings. If literature has been the quintessential apparatus for the discovery of the individual, it has always also constructed adaptable roles and types. Prosopographical approaches acknowledge the intricacies of literature, individual without being individualist, collective without being universalizing, in networks of intersectional representation. Users of CBW may build their own analyses of parallel lives across different social sectors or of multiple versions of one life, of publication history, historical developments and geographical distributions, and
of conventions of biographical narrative. Without putting ourselves in the position of the readers of these books as originally published, we nevertheless can participate in the social exchange as well as diverse narrative potential generated by the expansive conventions of prosopography.

Works Cited


Lonsdale, Margaret. *Sister Dora, a Biography.* Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1880.


