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## Review of Autobiography and Gender in Early Modern Literature by Sharon Cadman Seelig

Brooke Conti

Cleveland State University, [b.conti@csuohio.edu](mailto:b.conti@csuohio.edu)

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Autobiography and Gender in Early Modern Literature: Reading Women's Lives, 1600-1680. *Sharon Cadman Seelig*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. vii+214.

Are there meaningful differences between men's and women's autobiographies? Although many scholars over the past twenty-five years have suggested that there are—that, among other things, women's life-writing tends to be more fragmented and irregular than men's—in *Autobiography and Gender in Early Modern Literature: Reading Women's Lives, 1600-1680*, Sharon Cadman Seelig resists this conclusion. Indeed, while she herself focuses exclusively on women's autobiographies, and while her title promises some consideration of the role of gender in shaping their autobiographies, Seelig questions whether a gender-based approach to women's life-writing is a useful way of illuminating those texts. As she notes, not all autobiographies written by men are "linear and unified," nor are all those written by women "discursive and fragmentary" (6). The reader need only consider Thomas Browne's generically problematic *Religio Medici* (1643) or the unexpectedly autobiographical portions of Milton's prose tracts to agree with Seelig that some of the qualities that have often been regarded as characteristic

of female authorship might instead reflect the instability, in the early modern period, of autobiography itself (7).

The wide range of possibilities for textual self-fashioning open to early modern writers is demonstrated in the authors and texts that Seelig considers. The autobiographical works of Margaret Hoby, Anne Clifford, Lucy Hutchinson, Ann Fanshawe, Anne Halkett, and Margaret Cavendish span the seventeenth century and include diaries and personal records, leisurely family histories, and narratives seemingly influenced by the conventions of fiction. In chapters dedicated to each author, Seelig provides a brief but thorough biography and a careful description of each woman's autobiographical text(s). She also steps back to ask the questions that some scholars might rush past: Why would this particular woman have wanted to write an account of her own life? Why might she have chosen the form that she did? And what assumptions do twenty-first-century readers bring to those texts that might prevent us from reading them as they were originally intended? As those questions suggest, Seelig's book is as much an account of her method in approaching these texts as it is an analysis of them, and Seelig's patient, delighted descriptions of these six writers' works provide some of her book's greatest pleasures.

Seelig's first two chapters concern the diaries and personal records kept by Margaret Hoby and Anne Clifford. Hoby's diary, spanning the years 1599–1605, focuses initially on its author's spiritual exercises (when she said her prayers, how long she read and took notes in her Bible) but over time comes to deal increasingly with the secular events of Hoby's daily life. Throughout, however, the diary is, as Seelig notes, a "strangely resistant" text, giving no indication of Hoby's feelings or attitudes toward the events she describes (15). Nevertheless, Seelig argues, it would be a mistake to see Hoby's diary as simply straightforward and transparent, a reflection of a dull or religiously obsessive life. Hoby's text, as much as a more "literary" one, is crafted toward a particular end: representing its author as godly and her life as continually focused on work and prayer (23). Like Hoby's, Anne Clifford's many diaries and personal records reveal a deliberate attempt at self-construction. Throughout much of Clifford's 1616–19 diary, there are notes in the margins by an older Clifford that comment on the earlier entries, draw connections between events, or provide information that would have been unavailable to Clifford at the time she originally wrote. This double-entry system, combined with the complicated record keeping and revisions demonstrated by Clifford's other autobiographical texts, show Clifford engaged in the process not only of recording her life as it happened but constantly returning to its events in search of patterns and meaning.

Seelig's next two chapters concern women writing in the wake of the Civil War. Although Lucy Hutchinson and Ann Fanshawe's autobiographical works are more fully retrospective than Hoby's or Clifford's, they take the seemingly less personal form of family histories or biographies. Hutchinson did write a brief autobiography, *The Life of Mrs. Lucy Hutchinson, Written by Herself* (1806), but in her monumental biography of her husband, the *Life of John Hutchinson of Owthorpe* (1806), she appears as only a supporting character. The difference in length between her husband's biography and her autobiography might suggest that Hutchinson sees her life as inconsequential compared to his, but Seelig regards Hutchinson as a dominating textual presence, one who may have found that discussing herself in the third person allowed her to play a more central role in her narrative than modesty would have permitted had she been writing in the first person (82). Ann Fanshawe does something similar in the family history that she wrote for her son a decade after her husband's death. Like Hutchinson, Fanshawe often explicitly subordinates herself to her husband, but the stories that she actually tells—such as her account of disguising herself in boys' clothes to come above deck while their ship was under attack by a Turkish galley (101)—show her to be a woman who is active, bold, and resourceful on both her own and her family's behalf.

If Fanshawe's narrative sometimes seems the stuff of romance, the last two chapters of Seelig's book deal with women whose life-writing takes on even more of the characteristics of fiction, Anne Halkett and Margaret Cavendish. Anne Halkett's autobiography, although also covering the period of the Civil War and recounting some of its author's political activities, focuses on her romantic adventures: first as a young woman whose dowry was considered too small for her to marry the passionately devoted Thomas Howard and some years later when she developed an attachment to the perfidious Colonel Joseph Bampffield, who falsely claimed himself a widower. Her tale is full of such seemingly stock characters and situations, and Halkett's autobiography shows her fashioning herself as just such a typical—and perhaps therefore believable—character (117). One of the two works by Margaret Cavendish that Seelig considers actually is fiction, although *The Blazing World* (1666) nevertheless contains Cavendish as a character—the Duchess of Newcastle. Both this fictional work, and Cavendish's earlier, more conventionally autobiographical *True Relation of my Birth, Breeding, and Life* (1656), are distinguished among the other works considered in Seelig's volume by having been published by their author during her lifetime. Perhaps because Cavendish published these works, she also reflects more explicitly upon her autobiographical project than any of the other authors do; in the *True Relation* she confesses to

her own sense of ambition but also to her fear that, unless she recounts the specifics of her life, no one else will, and no one will remember her once she is gone (133). On some level, a similar fear may have motivated some of the other women in this study.

Seelig's book is both an excellent introduction to early modern women's life-writing and a useful reframing of the terms of the debate for those with some familiarity with the texts she examines. However, while Seelig asks essential and provocative questions, suggesting a multitude of possible directions for further study, her book is more descriptive than it is argumentative, and at times one wishes that she had been bolder in her conclusions or had provided an argumentative through line that better explained what these six works have in common. If it is the case that women's life-writing does not differ from men's in the ways that are usually claimed, are there other ways in which it does differ? And if not, why write a book specifically devoted to women's autobiographies? Although more of an attempt to draw conclusions from the texts she so carefully examines would have been welcome, Seelig's book is a richly detailed and thoroughly enjoyable addition to early modern autobiography studies.

Brooke Conti

*State University of New York at Brockport*