



Edited by James Fitzmaurice, Naomi J. Miller,  
and Sara Jayne Steen

# Authorizing Early Modern European Women

## From Biography to Biofiction

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# Authorizing Early Modern European Women



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# Gendering the Late Medieval and Early Modern World

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This series provides a forum for studies that investigate women, gender, and/or sexuality in the late medieval and early modern world. The editors invite proposals for book-length studies of an interdisciplinary nature, including, but not exclusively, from the fields of history, literature, art and architectural history, and visual and material culture. Consideration will be given to both monographs and collections of essays. Chronologically, we welcome studies that look at the period between 1400 and 1700, with a focus on any part of the world, as well as comparative and global works. We invite proposals including, but not limited to, the following broad themes: methodologies, theories and meanings of gender; gender, power and political culture; monarchs, courts and power; constructions of femininity and masculinity; gift-giving, diplomacy and the politics of exchange; gender and the politics of early modern archives; gender and architectural spaces (courts, salons, household); consumption and material culture; objects and gendered power; women's writing; gendered patronage and power; gendered activities, behaviours, rituals and fashions.



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*From Biography to Biofiction*

*Edited by  
James Fitzmaurice,  
Naomi J. Miller, and  
Sara Jayne Steen*

Amsterdam University Press



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# 1. Introduction: Biography, Biofiction, and Gender in the Modern Age

*James Fitzmaurice, Naomi J. Miller, and Sara Jayne Steen*

## Abstract

Focusing attention upon early modern European women as creators and practitioners, the essays in this volume examine women from saints to midwives, visual artists to writers, who authored their own visions and who have in turn been “authored” and “authorized” by modern writers interested in telling their stories in biographies and through fictionalizations. This opening chapter introduces the contemporary scholars and creative writers who are grappling with the challenges of re-creating early modern women from Spain, Flanders, Scotland, England, Italy, the Netherlands, and Mexico (then New Spain); and provides a framework for their assessments from the emerging field of biofiction, or fictionalizations of actual figures.

**Keywords:** historical fiction, biofiction, gender, early modern women, biography, Michael Lackey

A surge in recent attention to the parameters of biofiction,<sup>1</sup> thanks in large part to the pioneering work of Michael Lackey, has illuminated some of the tensions distinguishing critical reception of novels with that label.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it’s not simply a matter of scholarship. When contemporary journalists respond to a literary genre with reporting that connects the challenges facing contemporary

1 *Biofiction* is a blended term for *biographical fiction* and refers to fictionalizations of actual figures whether on the page or in performance. Biographical films have become popular enough to have their own term, *biopics*.

2 Significant evidence of this surge can be seen in the international conference on *Biofiction as World Literature* in Leuven, September 2021, as well as in the upcoming Bloomsbury series, *Biofiction Studies*, edited by Michael Lackey, Monica Latham, and Lucia Boldrini.

novelists with “ripped-from-the-headlines events,” their attention to the implications of biofiction has relevance for the general reader as well as the scholar. A case in point: Ron Charles, the Book World Critic for *The Washington Post*, broke a story in which the real lawyer Alan Dershowitz claimed a fictional lawyer had defamed him; Charles insisted that the “implications for novelists are very real.” Pointing out that novels that “borrow, embellish, and manipulate the details of well-known people’s lives [...] freely mingle fiction and nonfiction,” Charles drew a connection to the early modern world, where “the challenge of blending real and invented characters wasn’t so theoretical for William Shakespeare,” whose powerful queen, Elizabeth I, might have responded definitively to a stage portrayal of her father (Charles).<sup>3</sup>

Focusing on the distinctions between historical and biographical novels, Michael Lackey has argued that whereas “the ideal character of a historical novel,” according to Georg Lukács’s 1937 definition, is “supposed to symbolically represent [...] the objective social and political forces of the age,” biographical novelists “gravitate towards quirky characters that defy their age and function as forward-thinking agents of change” (2017, p. 4). In a nuanced analysis of the strengths of biofiction, Lackey maintains that “for the author of biofiction, of utmost importance is the artist and his or her creative vision and not the historical past or the biographical subject,” because such novelists “do not pretend to give readers unadulterated historical or biographical truth” (2019, “Agency Aesthetics,” pp. 6–7). Indeed, one of the biographical novelists interviewed by Lackey concludes that “readers don’t come to biographical fiction for truth. They come to biographical fiction for possibilities.” In Lackey’s own words, “biographical novelists use rather than do history” (2019, “Agency Aesthetics,” pp. 8, 15).

At the same time, while we celebrate the growing body of scholarship about biofiction that treats female figures, and considers contemporary novelists such as Emma Donoghue and Margaret Atwood, it is important to note a more reductive creative trend that compounds the unevenness of attention to early modern women as subjects, let alone as creators in their own right. Many existing novels about Renaissance women picture them in relation to powerful men – as lovers, mistresses, wives, or daughters – “legitimizing” attention to these women by positioning them in direct relation to already canonical or culturally powerful men.<sup>4</sup> Popular examples

3 For another journalist’s take, arguing that a “new kind of historical fiction has evolved to show us that the past is no longer merely prologue but [the] story itself,” see Megan O’Grady.

4 Lackey acknowledges that biographical novelists frequently take “liberties with the biographical subject in order to project their own creative vision” (2016, p. 7).

include the wives of Henry VIII and invented characterizations of the “Dark Lady” believed to be Shakespeare’s muse.<sup>5</sup>

By contrast to this trend, the essays in *Authorizing Early Modern European Women* focus attention upon early modern women as creators and practitioners. The volume sheds light upon women who authored their own visions, whether individually or communally, and who have in turn been “authored” and “authorized” by modern writers interested in shedding light on their stories. While the #MeToo attention to women’s voices might suggest a healthy market in popular culture for representations of the struggles and triumphs of earlier women, the varied range of twenty-first-century fictionalizations suggests a more complicated interrelation between celebrating women and perpetuating popular stereotypes, which includes suppressing historical facts in the effort to entertain.

The essays gathered here explore these intersections with regard to the lives and works of early modern women across western Europe. The geographical exception is the Mexican poet and nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, included because she is considered the last great writer of the Spanish Baroque, and colonial Mexico (Nueva España / New Spain) was then part of the Spanish monarchy. The essays are grouped by theme, rather than by genre, chronology, or person, in order to draw out related conceptual topics: *Fictionalizing Biography*, *Materializing Authorship*, *Performing Gender*, and *Authoring Identity*. We hope that readers will find connections within and across thematic categories.

The essays in the first section, *Fictionalizing Biography*, directly address challenges associated with modern fictionalizations. The opening pair of essays examine novels that fictionalize the Spanish saint Teresa of Ávila and the Flemish painter Levina Teerlinc, emphasizing the women’s significance in their own era while reflecting twenty-first century concerns with gender. In the initial piece, “*Sister Teresa*,” Bárbara Mujica explains the ways in which she dealt with the issue of fictionalizing a saint, such as drawing on Teresa’s letters and inventing a fictional nun as foil, in order to remain respectful of Teresa’s status as a saint and still create a vibrant, exciting novel with sexual tension and current questions about gender and spirituality. Catherine Padmore, in “*Portrait of an Unknown Woman*,” explores Levina Teerlinc’s

5 One of the most lauded recent biographical novelists, Hilary Mantel, can be said to perpetuate this pattern in her treatment of Anne Boleyn in relation to powerful men who surround her, from Thomas Cromwell to Henry VIII, whose lives are the primary focus of the novel (*Bring Up the Bodies*, 2012). For analysis of biofiction about Aemilia Lanyer, represented as Shakespeare’s Dark Lady, see the essays in this volume by Susanne Woods and Hailey Bachrach.





life and artistic legacy and analyzes the ways Teerlinc is imagined in five novels – often as a supporting character or in relation to male miniaturist Nicholas Hilliard – and how at the same time the “lost” Teerlinc is being made visible again through works that affirm female agency and signify ongoing concern about gender inequities among artists.

By contrast, in “An Interview with Dominic Smith, Author of *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos*,” Frima Fox Hofrichter, a consultant to Smith, speaks with the novelist about his fictional Dutch painter Sara de Vos, her name drawn from a guild painter for whom no works survive and her character modeled on the actual Judith Leyster. Hofrichter explores with Smith the methods he used to capture the seventeenth century and juxtapose it so strikingly with the twenty-first.

The final pair of essays in this section reflect on myths that have been extended in recent biofictions. Susanne Woods, in “Lanyer,” considers modern fictionalizations of poet Aemilia Lanyer, including two plays and three novels that perpetuate the myth of Lanyer as Shakespeare’s Dark Lady, despite the absence of any historical evidence, because such myth-making both responds to and feeds popular assumptions about women deemed interesting when situated in (sexual) relation to famous men. Woods asks whether it matters when writers base their fiction on an earlier fiction that is so pervasive as to seem historical fact. Similarly, in “Archival Bodies, Novel Interpretations, and the Burden of Margaret Cavendish,” Marina Leslie examines myths perpetuated by both scholars and novelists when records are incomplete and inconsistent. She focuses on two novels that incorporate the discredited characterization of Cavendish as “Mad Madge” and suggests how scholars and novelists alike “read” and reproduce Cavendish.

The second section, *Materializing Authorship*, attends to early modern women who themselves materialized their lives through a range of Renaissance artforms. In the opening essay, “Bess of Hardwick,” Susan Frye explores Bess’s embroidered room-sized hangings featuring mytho-historical women as autobiography in textiles. Frye argues that modern biographers and novelists have re-created Bess in stereotypically gendered ways, overlooking both her artistry and her own questioning of gender roles. In “The Queen as Artist,” Sarah Gristwood treats modern representations of Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth I, two queens who were practitioners of their own arts as well as rulers of their respective realms, finding spaces for self-expression in writings and needlework. The essay queries to what degree those later fictions, whether on page or screen, were prefigured or contradicted by their own versions of their stories.



The desire to materialize one's life story through narratives can be identified as well in the plays, poetry, and prose produced by Mary Sidney Herbert and her goddaughter Mary (Sidney) Wroth, whose lives and stories are currently available to modern audiences largely through biographies, while biofiction about these figures has recently appeared or is under way. Complementing one another in their attention to these two women, the following two essays consider how biofiction can and must differ from biography, particularly in instances that address early modern women creators. In "Very Secret Kept," Marion Wynne-Davies explores the difficulties faced by literary biographers, focusing on an analysis of two key aspects of literary biography in Margaret P. Hannay's works: verifiable facts and the imaginative recreation of events. In "Imagining Shakespeare's Sisters," Naomi J. Miller introduces her debut novel about Mary Sidney Herbert, *Imperfect Alchemist*, as an example of how biofiction can differ from biography in imagining and making visible both individual convictions and strategies of authorship that worked to challenge and transform popular assumptions about gender in another era. In the final essay, "Anne Boleyn, Musician," Linda Phyllis Austern examines the close interplay among history, biography, fiction, the performing arts, and material culture in characterizing Anne Boleyn not primarily as the wife of a powerful man, but as a reputedly skilled musician and composer.

Biofiction on the topic of early modern women rulers has a long history in film and on stage, as Sarah Gristwood notes. One thinks of Glenda Jackson in the BBC *Elizabeth R* (1971) and Bette Davis in *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939). Stage history is even longer and includes *Mary Stuart*, a play by Friedrich Schiller that was first performed in Weimar in 1800. Mary's story as found in Schiller's play went on to be reworked into an opera by Gaetano Donizetti in 1835. However, the early modern women treated in the third section of this volume, *Performing Gender*, are only now coming into their own on screen and stage. In "Artemisia Gentileschi Speaks to the Twenty-First Century," Sheila T. Cavanagh considers dramatic formats that have ranged from a one-woman show to full production tours and, during the pandemic, electronic Zoom scenes, in three productions circa 2020, exploring how these productions translate Artemisia's creations and painful personal story into powerful contemporary theater.

The next two essays reflect approaches to performing early modern women and gender. Hailey Bachrach, in "Beyond the Record," analyzes the stage play *Emilia*, whose popularity with audiences at the Globe Theater and London's West End arose in part from its identification (again) of Aemilia



Lanyer as Shakespeare's Dark Lady. Bachrach deals with the tensions that arise when a playwright constructs a strong secular feminist biofiction that "erases" the early modern religious feminism of its subject, as well as the feminist scholarship that brought her to attention. Bachrach goes on to take the measure of social media response.

The one-woman-show format served Karen Eterovich well as she projected the fiery passion of Aphra Behn for nearly two decades, starting in the mid-1990s. James Fitzmaurice, in "Writing, Acting, and the Notion of Truth," considers the degree to which Eterovich's monologue rings true, is "on the nose," in relation to Behn's letters on which it is based. In Fitzmaurice's 2017 play on Margaret Cavendish, his student actor, Emilie Philpott, dealt with the demands of truthful depiction in contrast to dramatic surprise, when she "jumped the shark." Fitzmaurice explores whether a fully truthful play or screenplay is always as effective as one that is "just a bit slant."

In the final essay in this section, "Jesusa Rodríguez's Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz," Emilie L. Bergmann treats two audacious and successful plays performed over decades in which playwright, actor, and activist Rodríguez portrays colonial Mexican nun and poet Sor Juana as a feminist intellectual. One play is contemporary political satire, and the second a one-woman performance of Sor Juana's complex *Primer sueño*, a poem that Rodríguez hopes to make accessible to all Mexicans. If performance-based biofiction of the lives of early modern women writers is only a recent phenomenon, it is certainly plentiful.

Section four, *Authoring Identity*, ranges across media to consider early modern women practitioners of poetry, painting, autobiography, and midwifery, from the courtesan poet Veronica Franco and the visual artists Sofonisba Anguissola and Artemisia Gentileschi, to letter writer and royal claimant Lady Arbella Stuart, and two seventeenth-century midwives, Jane Sharp and Sarah Stone. It explores how these early modern women created identities through their works and how biographers and biofiction authors have employed (or failed to employ) the works to re-create the subjects for modern audiences. In the opening essay, "From Hollywood Film to Musical Theater," Margaret F. Rosenthal considers how Veronica Franco's literary works have been reduced for popular consumption, as a screenplay that attempted to draw attention to Franco's courageous advocacy for women's equality and autonomy became a film focused on a love story privileging male power.

By contrast, Julia Dabbs in "The Role of Art in Recent Biofiction on Sofonisba Anguissola" analyzes two novels in which authors bring Anguissola's



artworks, their creation and her processes, into the novels as key elements of plot and character. Since both novelists make illustrations available through print or electronic media, Dabbs, in a Renaissance *paragone*, or debate, compares the use of image and word in the art of re-creating an artist's identity. In "I am Artemisia," Stephanie Russo similarly explores female creativity and identity, in this case in a young adult novel for the #MeToo generation, suggesting that Artemisia's first-person narration and talent for capturing the trauma of rape in paint can act as a conduit for the history of women's suffering at the hands of men and reassure young women about the potential for recovery. In "The Lady Arbella Stuart, a 'Rare Phoenix'," Sara Jayne Steen explores the relationship of biography and fiction in selected re-creations of the Lady Arbella across the centuries, noting how an author's era influences the presentation of Arbella's character and identity (particularly at times when women's roles are undergoing reassessment) and considering the evolution and intersection of biography and biofiction as fields.

Arriving full circle from the growing but still too often missing attention to biofiction about women that spurred the creation of this volume, the final essay, "*The Gossips' Choice*," is authored by Sara Read, a novelist who drew on the published writings of midwife Jane Sharp and the case notes of the otherwise-unknown Bristol midwife Sarah Stone to create an invented (but historically compelling) character for modern audiences. This essay supports the critical framework for the volume as a whole, expanding on Lackey's definition to make the case that biofiction's protagonists need not be named after discrete historical figures to be significant.

Viewing diverse authorial strategies across its thematic sections, the volume offers readers an opportunity to consider how modern creators of biography and biofiction about women face cultural challenges in exploding stereotypes, while celebrating early modern women creators who forged their own opportunities for materializing authorship, performing gender, and authoring identity. Given Michael Lackey's observation that biographical novelists take liberties with the biographical subject in order to project their own creative vision, it becomes all the more notable to consider those biofiction authors who offer what might be termed a three-dimensionalized treatment of early modern women as creators that incorporates the modern writer's vision as well as the vision embodied in the early modern woman's own creations. Exceptional in their modern attention to early modern women as creators, then, the authors and their subjects surveyed in this volume exemplify an array of biofictional practices for the modern age.



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**Sara Jayne Steen** has authored and edited five volumes largely on early modern women and theater, including *The Letters of Lady Arbella Stuart*, and has received awards for teaching and scholarship. She was faculty member, chair, and dean at Montana State University and is president emerita of Plymouth State University.

