

SAA 2013

Writing Lives in Early Modern England

Leader: Alan Stewart (Columbia University)

Respondent: Adam Smyth (Birkbeck, University of London)

ABSTRACTS

Rebecca Ann Bach (University of Alabama at Birmingham)

John Donne's *Devotions*: Associations and Autobiography

Although some critics have acknowledged the autobiographical character of John Donne's *Devotions*, the book's autobiographical meanings are largely unplumbed. In a recent important, Kate Narveson distinguishes Donne's text from autobiography on the grounds that it does not have a narrative structure like that of Augustine's *Confessions*. However, it may be precisely its associative, non-narrative structure that enables its reading as a document of Donne's psychology. While the text is clearly highly crafted, it may have been crafted out of what were associative musings and Donne's commonplace book notes. The associative character of much of *Devotions* may be a consequence of the speed of Donne's production, and if so, that character could also point to a lack of internal censorship. Produced in an exhale of relief at its author's survival, it may also be more revealing of its author's personal concerns. Also, Adam Smyth's work leads us to question easy assumptions about the identity of autobiography and a chronological account of incidents. In my paper for the seminar, I will propose a reading of the *Devotions* that sees it, or at least its central portion, as an autobiographical text in Smyth's terms, as revealing something about Donne's commonplace identity and, perhaps, given the text's similarities to psychoanalytic process notes, as revealing something about the contents of Donne's mind.

Diana Barnes (University of Tasmania)

Dorothy Osborne, a life in letters

Our understanding of Dorothy Osborne's life is largely based on a collection of courtship letters written to Sir William Temple, her future husband, during the early 1650s. These epistolary remains have certain limitations, however: only Osborne's side of the correspondence is extant, the letters are undated, the letters only represent the couple's courtship (and not their life beyond), and the impassioned tone of the letters could be and have been misinterpreted by readers today. These limitations have skewed accounts of

Osborne's life. There is only so much that can be done to correct the first three problems: Temple's side of the correspondence may yet surface, the missing dates can be roughly calculated by cross-referencing events mentioned, and alternative sources can be used to fill in other periods in Osborne's life. The fourth item, relating to the passionate tone of the letters, can be partially corrected by reading the letters more carefully. Nineteenth and twentieth-century historians and literary critics have often read them anachronistically in terms of epistolary conventions of their own day. Furthermore they have sometimes assumed that a woman of the seventeenth century would be primarily concerned with the social, domestic and familial matters of the private sphere and that the public sphere was the domain of their husbands, fathers and brothers. It is true that women could not formally take on the active political roles available to men, however, Osborne's manipulation of the form in which she wrote provides evidence of a woman engaged with the political events of the day. In the early 1650s the memory of the Civil War was fresh, a Republic had been established and Cromwell was consolidating his power. In this climate no royalist, male or female, could safely address contemporary politics directly, rather they would do so indirectly sometimes in cipher, or metaphor or by reference to classical literature, as Osborne does. In this paper I will identify some misunderstandings characteristic of Osborne biography and briefly sketch an alternative way of interpreting her epistolary remains.

Megan Heffernan (University of Chicago)

Against Selection: Spenser's Poetic Patterns

This paper considers Edmund Spenser's *Shepherdes Calender* (1579) as an early attempt to tie a fictional life of the poet to the design of physical book. Analyzing two elements of Spenser's debut collection, the month of "October" and a confused etymological history of the eclogue, I consider Spenser's attempts to write through what his editor figure E. K. calls a "paterne," a paradigm of poetic authorship that contributes to both formal and textual structures. Rather than accepting the *Calender's* claims for a purely vatic poetics of absence, I recover the volume's explicit concerns with the poet's fictional compilation of the volume. The *Calender* thus demonstrates an attempt to draw together a poetics of inspiration and organization, in fact embedding vatic transcendence within the activities of book-making. As we will see, this yoking of two distinct poetic practices was aided by the model of life writing advanced in the almanac tradition. The result was a rigorous poetic selfhood that, by positing organization as authorial, could claim to precede the merely editorial design of multi-author poetry collections fashionable in the decades after Richard Tottel's *Songes and Sonettes* (1557).

Jennifer Higginbotham (The Ohio State University)

Dead Women Writing: Narrating the Early Modern Female Voice

My paper examines the intersection between fictional and non-fictional accounts of women's lives as told from the perspective of women who are anticipating their own deaths. Focusing specifically on Margaret Clifford's autobiographical account of the stages of her life and Nicholas Breton's fictional novella *The Miseries of Mavillia*, I consider the role that death plays in early modern women's life writing. The consensus has long been that pregnant women were authorized to write advice manuals for their children because of their potential proximity to death, but death also seems to have played an important role in the narrating of female lives more broadly. Margaret Clifford's patterning of her life after "The Pilgrimage of the Dance of Grief" in a letter to her chaplain bears a striking structural resemblance to Breton's long-suffering heroine Mavillia in the emphasis on the trials and tribulations that each stage of life brings. In turn, Breton's technique resonates closely with several other generic traditions for representing female lives, particularly the female complaint poems of Michael Drayton and Samuel Daniel. In Drayton's *Rosamund* and Daniel's *Matilda*, the ghosts of dead historical women come back to haunt the present with their verses, telling the stories of their tragic deaths. Like these fictional voices of historical women, Mavillia comes to her voice only as a dead woman looking back on her life. If to write is to initiate one's own death, as Roland Barthes suggest, so too is death a way to initiate their own narrative for some early modern women.

Nicole Jacobs (California Polytechnic State University)

The Heroine's Virtue from Romance to Secret History

This essay will address how the representation of the romance heroine in the seventeenth century helps to cultivate a niche within the print market for secret history, fictional autobiography, and scandal chronicle in the eighteenth century. The actions of heroines in early modern literary romance establish an economy of virtue for fictional female characters. Because public discourse of the seventeenth century often emphasized loyalty, justice, and devotion--the mainstays of the romance heroine--this character became an important voice for promoting social and political reform. And yet real women could never live up to the impossible standards of this idealized figure. Indeed, by the turn of the eighteenth century, women writers reacted against this restrictive literary paradigm, inverting the expectations for women's sacrifice and virtue. In this essay, I will focus on Delarivier Manley's career in life writing to chart the shift from the fictional paragon of virtue to the scandalous woman of the secret history, accounting for the ways that she writes her own life and those of their contemporaries for political, social, and monetary purposes.

Sarah Linwick (University of Michigan)

Prison Intercourse, Life Science, and Collaborative Autobiography in William Shakespeare and John Fletcher's *The Two Noble Kinsmen*

Shackled within an Athenian prison, Arcite and Palamon, the eponymous protagonists of John Fletcher and William Shakespeare's *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, worry that they will wither away before they can father "figures of ourselves." As this particular turn of phrase suggests, the kinsmen understand sexual reproduction to be a form of self-representation. Once the kinsmen come to regard the figures they collaboratively generate with their imaginations as their legacies or heirs, however, they also realize the extent of their reproductive power as artists. Consequently, the kinsmen formulate a theory of social reproduction that rethinks the relationships between species, sex, and gender; in doing so, they effectively challenge the distinction between natural and artificial life. Their discourse in prison raises two specific questions: What counts as life? And what does it mean to reproduce life? In this paper, I aim to demonstrate how the play's meditation on life invites scholars from three ostensibly different fields--sexuality studies, science studies, and autobiography studies--to collaborate as they think through these questions.

Erin Murphy (Boston University)

Claiming a Life: Margaret Cavendish and the Martyrdom of Sir Charles Lucas

Margaret Cavendish's writings about her own life and that of her husband have received ample scholarly attention, but it has gone relatively unnoticed that before she wrote these texts she responded to the martyrdom of her brother, the royalist hero Charles Lucas, by representing his life and death in three very different modes—the elegy, the generic dramatic lament, and the autobiographical sketch. Despite his surrender at the siege of Colchester in 1648, Lucas was executed, and he quickly became, after Charles I, the second best known royalist martyr of the English civil wars. At the same time, however, that Lucas was being absorbed into this broader propagandist narrative, his sister composed a series of texts implicitly reflecting upon such representations of fallen soldiers. Cavendish even publishes two of these texts in the same volume, in which they seem to offer a kind of silent generic commentary on each other. Through an exploration of these generic experiments, as well as other contemporary works about Lucas, this paper aims to consider the way in which texts about the lives claimed by the English civil wars might inform our ideas about writing as a means of reclaiming a life.

June Schlueter (Lafayette College)

The *Album Amicorum* as Life-Writing

Although the literature on early modern autobiography is considerable, I was taken by Adam Smyth's expansion of the genre to include the almanac, the financial account, the commonplace book, and the parish register. A year after Smyth's *Autobiography in Early Modern England* appeared, I published *The Album Amicorum and the London of Shakespeare's Time*. Although not primarily concerned with life-writing, the book implicitly proposes what I will argue in my paper: that the *album amicorum*, or autograph album,

which flourished in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, also belongs in this genre. Signatures in albums were conventionally accompanied by a well-chosen motto and a carefully crafted dedication. One signed upon invitation of the album owner, who was intent on representing himself as a person of stature with an extensive circle of friends and acquaintances. For the contributor, it was an opportunity not only to pay tribute to the album owner but also to show something of himself. His words, after all, would be read not only by the album owner but also by subsequent contributors—and they would endure. At each stage of its construction, and upon its completion, the *album amicorum* offered glimpses into individual lives.

Emily G. Sherwood (The Graduate Center, CUNY)

“[C]onsele my life”

In Elizabeth Bourne’s letter to Julius Caesar dated 18 August 1582, she writes “nowe I ame dryven to consele my lyfe and to absent my selfe from the counseles letters through feare of Mr Bournes vyolence and leste he should take me in to his posessyon agaynst my wyll” (BL, Add. MS, 12507, fol. 204, 18 Aug 1582.). The precarious position in which she finds herself is evident: Elizabeth must respond to the letters of the Privy Council; however, if her whereabouts are known, her husband Anthony may demand that she live with him. She fears for her safety, but understands that hiding is not a permanent solution. She must go to law. Though she “consele[s]” herself, details of her life and the life of her husband are revealed and reshaped through her letters to Caesar, her family, and her petition for divorce. Throughout this paper, I will explore how letters and legal complaints provide Elizabeth a place where she can narrate her own story, influence the biography of Anthony’s life, and negotiate for a legal identity and space separate from her status as a wife.

Marilyn Simon (University of Toronto)

“Love-devouring death”: The *Possibility* of Spiritual Reality in *Romeo and Juliet*

Ewan Fernie’s claim in the recent collection of essays, *Spiritual Shakespeares*, is that “spiritual alterity is aesthetically and theoretically interesting because it is configured not just as totally different from ordinary life but also as ultimately significant and real” (3). Shakespeare’s spirituality, Fernie contends, is not “orthodox or systematic”; that is, “[i]t is necessary to think in terms not so much of spiritual truth as *truths*[...] spirituality is not a secure given, so much as a questionable and open structure of being and experience. Shakespeare’s is the drama of the *possibility* of spirituality” (7). My paper will look at *Romeo and Juliet*’s love as spiritually *real*, or in John D. Caputo’s words, “*hyper-real*.” Their love opens up a space for a hyper-real transcendent moment to occur, and their self-identities are formed, paradoxically, through what Cynthia Marshall terms the “shattering of the self,” or what I term intersubjective dissolution. My paper will focus specifically on

how the interiorities of the young lovers are defined through their mutual self-sacrifice, and argue that the fullest realization of their individual identities is intersubjective and spiritually hyper-real. At the same time, however, the teenage lovers' identities are embodied, socially determined, and utterly material. The text allows for one to see the *possibility* that the star-crossed lovers' suicides are an act that opens a space for them to become a part of the stars themselves, to become eternally conjoined *spiritually* through their deaths; yet simultaneously the text suggests that their deaths *and* their love may amount to no more than the rash stumbling of teenage affection and the tragic end to the patriarchs' feud. My paper, then, investigates the way that Shakespeare takes seriously this paradox of selfhood, both as material reality and as spiritual hyper-reality, and thus will attempt to unpack the "truths" of the spiritual component of "writing lives" in early modern England.

Janet Wright Starner (Wilkes University)

The "Three Dayes King": Constructing a Royal Life, circa 1636:

In August 1636, King Charles I, his wife Henrietta Maria, and their two nephews visited Oxford University. In preparation for that event, William Laud planned multiple entertainments at different venues on campus to amuse the royal family. The recorded offerings include four plays, various speeches, and at least two poems. The speeches and the dramatic events were public productions, staged at various colleges, and in full view of the university community, while the poetry seems to have been intended for more private venues and audiences. The King's visit is briefly noted in many accounts of the years leading up to the Civil War, along with suggestions that the program of presentations was strategically designed by Laud (then university Chancellor as well as Archbishop of Canterbury) to forward both his educational and religious agendas. This paper will examine how identities/lives are constructed by the dramatic performances staged for the royal family at the 1636 visit: how does the staged representation of character construct identity for the only spectators who really matter? What is the relationship—in this specific venue—of "character" to spectator? how do the plays, speeches, and poetry performed construct the King's life? how do all the various performances construct the life of a "good" ruler? how might all the "performances" staged for the King be in dialogue with one another?

H. Austin Whitver (University of Alabama)

"Writing a life on the battlefield: Talbot, Salisbury, and the drive to monumentalize on enemy soil"

My paper deals with an unusual attempt to "write a life" found in Shakespeare's *1 Henry VI*. In the play, the English hero Talbot attempts simultaneously to commemorate his fallen comrade Salisbury and to plant a material marker of English military supremacy on French

soil by constructing a tomb in the “chiefest temple” of the enemy. I examine this passage in conjunction with more conventional expressions of extemporaneous and emotional battlefield commemoration, most notably the example found in Heywood’s *The Second Part of King Edward IV* (as well as similar instances in *Edward III*, and *Thomas of Woodstock*). I hope to offer an alternative look at period attempts to frame and to write lives in the moments after death as well as to suggest why this particular usage of tombs onstage, to claim a physical space within the fictive, dramatic world of the playhouse, failed to catch on in early modern drama.