



Distortions in Women's Life Writing of the Long Nineteenth Century

[*Biographical Misrepresentations of British Women Writers: A Hall of Mirrors and the Long Nineteenth Century*](#). Ed. Brenda Ayres. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 291 pp.

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<1>This edited collection, which comprises an introduction and fourteen essays, examines the biases, motivations, and distortions involved in biographical texts about controversial British women writers in the long nineteenth century. Published as part of the 'Palgrave Studies in Life Writing' series, *Biographical Misrepresentations of British Women Writers* covers a variety of authors, from those whose biographical writing(s) are already well known, including Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, and Charlotte Brontë, to those whose biographies may be less familiar to readers, such as Sydney Owenson, Florence Dixie, and Edith Simcox. As Brenda Ayres suggests in her 'Introduction,' the volume uses this broad range of case studies 'to expose the distortions, gaps, inconsistencies, biases, contradictions, mistakes, misconceptions, and misappropriation of information' of women writers in order to reveal 'not necessarily who the woman was but how she has come to be depicted' (4, 5). Ayres argues for the 'hall of mirrors' as a fitting metaphor for biographical records which often 'reflect more of the biographer and his or her audience than [...] the subject herself' (14). Each of the essays included here supports and expands on this thesis in its own ways. Noting the personal and political agenda(s) of the biographers, the historical and literary contexts in which biographies are published, and the myriad strategies of (mis)representation employed, the collection also sheds new light on the influence of life writing in forming and transforming women writers' reputations.

<2>The collection is arranged chronologically, starting with an essay on the bluestocking Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) (a 'precursor to nineteenth-century women' [5]), which is followed by five more on Romantic-period authors: Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, Sydney Owenson, Letitia Landon, and Felicia Hemans. The rest of the book is devoted to Victorians, with chapters on Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Caroline Norton, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Bronte, Florence Dixie, George Eliot, and Edith Simcox. Though some figures are conspicuous by their absence here (Catharine Macaulay, Mary Shelley, Christina Rossetti, any of a number of New Women writers), the volume's broad scope and mixture of canonical and lesser-known women writers make for compelling reading.

<3>Magdalena Nerio's consideration of the rhetorical strategies and personal agendas behind two Victorian biographies of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu provides a fitting first chapter. Through analysis of revisionist attempts to recast Lady Mary as a moral heroine and a genteel proto-feminist palatable to a Victorian readership, Nerio flags the 'complex negotiations' (21) involved in biographical recovery. In the case of Montagu, the scandalous aspects of her history must be marginalised, and the noble ones—particularly her mentorship by Mary Astell and by her own principled grandmothers—must be emphasised (if not embellished). Brenda Ayres touches on similar issues as she explores the 'multitude of causes and approaches to women's rights' (38) that have driven the varied biographical versions of Wollstonecraft. Though the essay refers briefly to Wollstonecraft's own writing and to William Godwin's infamous 1798 memoir of his wife, it is mainly a synthesis of Wollstonecraft's reception in modern biographies, critical studies, and anthologies. Ayres mentions (but does not enumerate) the 'mistakes' (44) that recur in many of these texts, and identifies sexuality, gender, and religion as the most contested elements of Wollstonecraft's life. Sarah Faulkner's essay addresses Wollstonecraft's friend and fellow radical, Mary Hays, taking a much more narrow focus: the transformation of Hays into a sentimental heroine in *The Love-Letters of Mary Hays 1778-1780*, a volume of Hays's correspondence edited by her great-great-niece A. F. Wedd. Faulkner argues persuasively that Wedd's editorial practices, which involve, for example, adding titles that mimic the chapter headings of a romantic novel and excluding epistles that discuss Hays's involvement in contemporary political and literary culture, 'diminis[h] the original agency of the letters as acts of defiance to social constriction and eras[e] her intellectual and literary achievements' (71). Julie Donovan's essay on Sydney Owenson rounds out the eighteenth-century figures considered here, focusing on questions of veracity and bias, and exploring the tension between relaying facts and narrating stories. Donovan draws interesting parallels between Owenson's treatment at the hands of biographers, and her own attempt at the genre in her *The Life and Times of Salvator Rosa* (1824).

<4>The collection moves into the nineteenth century with essays on two poets whose biographical representations speak to the expectation that a woman writer's personal life mirror the character of her literary works. For Katherine Montwieler, competing critical assessments of Letitia Elizabeth Landon often hinge on whether her cultivation of a public image as the 'archetypal poetess, a necessarily young, vulnerable feminine figure' (98) is seen

as a reflection of a conventional life or the strategic appropriation of cultural norms. It can be difficult, she suggests, for biographers to reconcile apparent paradoxes in their subjects' lives and not simply to conflate a writer and her heroine(s). In one of the most interesting essays in the collection, Helen Luu picks up on this issue as it arises in biographies of Felicia Hemans. Henry F. Chorley's *Memorials of Mrs. Hemans* (1836) sparked controversy because it revealed her sharp wit, unsparing humour, and undomestic mores, thus undermining her reputation as a paragon of femininity. In her discussion of Chorley's *Memorials* and the responses to it, Luu thus touches on a key nineteenth-century debate: is the purpose of biography 'to provide an objective account of the subject's history through a chronology of dates and events, or is it to illuminate, through personal anecdotes and insights, the subject's character?' (113) Family members such as Hemans's sister (who wrote a 'corrective' to Morley's *Memorials*) often seem to favour the former, invested as they are with protecting the posthumous reputation of their loved one.

<5>The issue of who has the authority to write a biography surfaces in Deborah Logan's essay on Harriet Martineau. Looking at Martineau's *Autobiography* (1877), the *Memorials of Harriet Martineau by Maria Weston Chapman* (1877), Florence Fenwick Miller's *Harriet Martineau* (1877), and Theodora Bosanquet's *Harriet Martineau* (1927), as well as later biographical works, Logan identifies an ongoing battle to pen the definitive version of Martineau. She also demonstrates how these 'biographies reflect the attitudes and social mores of the time in which they are written' (130). Elizabeth Way's essay on Elizabeth Barrett Browning also underlines the importance of historical context. She argues that 'the shifting curations of Barrett Browning's life, work, and reputation [...] are a direct function of the time in which the biographer is writing' (150), and she illustrates how emphasising the life at the expense of the works (or vice versa) allows the meaning of 'EBB' to shift at different points in history.

<6>Attention to the representation of, and relationship between, an author's life and her work resurfaces in the next three essays. One of the gems of this collection, Gail Savage's essay examines Caroline Norton, who is known for referencing her own personal life in support of a self-interested argument for women's rights, and who is often contrasted with her contemporary Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon's more organised and objective political activism. Savage questions the 'binary opposition' that is set up between Bodichon and Norton, suggesting the ways in which their rhetorical strategies, personal connections, and political aims overlap. Yet the scandal of Norton's personal life continues to seduce modern biographers away from the nuances of her work, thus propagating what Savage regards as a distorted estimation of Norton's place in literary and feminist history. Anna Koustinoudi's chapter continues this thread by looking at Elizabeth Gaskell's affinity with her subject in her *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) before turning to several biographies of Gaskell herself. Koustinoudi pinpoints one of the conundrums of biography as a genre: the desire to know an author stems from interest in that author's work, and yet an undue emphasis on the author's life can obscure—if not supplant—the record of that writer's literary achievements. Sarah E. Maier

takes a different perspective on the Brontë myth, tracing the 'misrepresentation and sensationalism that follows from early critics to present-day biographers and neo-Victorian biofiction' back to 'the Brontës' self-mythologizing' (224). Maier underlines Charlotte Brontë's self-fashioning, in particular, and suggests how omissions and selective emphases in biographical writing on the Brontës have perpetuated certain versions of the sisters.

<7>In a fascinating case study about the gendered effects of media coverage on a woman's reputation, Taryne Jade Taylor's chapter introduces Lady Florence Dixie, a Victorian feminist writer, sportswoman, and political activist. Taylor claims that Lady Dixie's radical politics (at odds with conventions of gender and class) made her a target for a violent assault, and shows how the reportage of that incident in the press undermined her credibility by turning her into a feminised, and therefore unreliable victim.

<8>The last two essays of the volume address George Eliot and her friend Edith Simcox, respectively. Nancy Marck Cantwell surveys the depiction of Eliot's sexual and intellectual autonomy in recent biographies of Eliot. She argues that an undue focus on 'the scandalous aspects of her sexual associations' works to contain her literary genius and to 'diminish her accomplishments as a nineteenth-century professional woman' (262-3). Constance Fulmer, in turn, scrutinises the sexual and gender biases and scholarly contradictions involved in Gordon Haight's selective appropriation of Edith Simcox's autobiography: Haight mines Simcox's journal for information (which he often reproduces without acknowledgement) on Eliot and yet dismisses her as a mentally unstable lesbian and an unreliable source. Recent scholars have begun to regard Simcox with more respect, however, and Fulmer indicates that an objective reassessment of her life writing is needed.

<9>This is a rare volume of essays that assembles a convincing collective argument without repeating itself or rehearsing the same analytical moves from one chapter to the next. Key issues in life writing (the difference between a public history and a private character, the difficulty in reconciling differences between a writer's work and her life, the balance between attention to the life and the work, the role of self-fashioning, the biases of the biographer, reader, and cultural context(s) of publication, and the effects of biography on literary afterlife) run through the volume, but each essay retains an individual focus and presents a compelling microargument of its own. As such, *Biographical Misrepresentations of British Women Writers* marks an important and much needed contribution to the growing body of scholarship on nineteenth-century life writing, but is also relevant to the fields of canon formation, reception, literary afterlife, gender studies, and print culture.