Portrait of the Woman Artist: Gender and Genre in Biofiction

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Abstract

The past fifteen years have seen an astonishing proliferation in novels about the lives of notable historical women artists. Reputed literary authors and lesser known writers alike have contributed to this remarkable trend, creatively narrating the stories of esteemed women artists such as Artemisia Gentileschi, Clara Schumann, and Sylvia Plath in “fictionalised biographies”. The fictionalised biography (biofiction) is an intriguing hybrid genre, placed, somewhat uncomfortably, between historiography and the art of fiction. Occupying this liminal space permits texts to disregard certain expectations raised by ‘factual’ biographies – for instance that authors should strive for ‘objectivity’ or ‘truthfulness’, and that their work be founded entirely on verifiable documentation. Consequently, fiction writers can be said to enjoy greater freedom in representing, and appropriating, their subject, and it is not least the narrative privileges of fictionalised biographies which make them such a fascinating field of critical inquiry.

Despite the remarkable popularity of such biographical fiction and the simultaneous growth of life-writing research in recent years, little scholarly work has been undertaken towards examining this trend in terms of the representation and ideological functionalisation of the woman artist. The aim of this project is to fill this gap with a comprehensive critical study of the representation of historical women artists in narrative fictionalised biographies, through the lens of gender-theoretically informed approaches to biography. This analysis will take as its starting point the hypothesis that in fictionalised biographies of women artists the biographee’s gender is foregrounded in the representation and evaluation of her professional and private conduct. Thus, particular focus will be given to the artist figure’s position in the sex/gender system of her respective historical and cultural context. Specifically, this project will examine the privileges of fictionalised biography in ‘re-imagining’ its subject and will survey the inventory of narrative strategies, plot models, models of female subjectivity, and (gender-) political agendas to be found in fictionalised biographies of women artists.

In recent years, gender theorists have produced important work on the ways in which the discourse of biography is entangled with the constitution and reproduction of gender identities. Theories of subjectivity and genre have been reexamined with regard to aspects such as the gendered representation of public and private spheres, and productive and reproductive work in biography. In the proposed project, central concepts developed in such gender-theoretically informed studies of biography will be applied to comparative critical readings of fictionalised biographies of women artists. The analysis will further draw on the research on biofiction/historical fiction/historiographic metafiction so as to assess the relationship between fictionalisation and gender representation.

This project brings together a recent and under-researched corpus and a body of theoretical work currently experiencing a rise in academic attention: studies on the interrelation of biography and gender. It will illustrate, for the first time, how gender-theoretically informed studies of biography can be fruitfully applied to biofiction in a sustained manner, thus shedding light on the genre’s contribution to the discursive construction of gender identities.