

NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Civale, Susan. *Romantic Women's Life Writing: Reputation and Afterlife*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2019. 304 pages.

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<1>In *What the Victorians Made of Romanticism: Material Artefacts, Cultural Practices, and Reception History* (2017), Tom Mole asserts “‘authors’ reputations never simply endure... either they are renewed or they are forgotten” (2-3). This idea is at the heart of Susan Civale’s *Romantic Women’s Life Writing*, an exploration of the life writing of and about four Romantic women writers who were immensely popular during their lifetimes, but whose reputations scholars have claimed were damaged by the personal revelations and generic idiosyncrasies of their life writing. Civale challenges the scholarly commonplace that these women writers were forgotten in the long nineteenth century and uncovers how their reputations were posthumously renewed, in part because they themselves strategically crafted life writing to shape their futures. Organized as a series of four unique case studies, *Romantic Women’s Life Writing* traces how Fanny Burney, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson, and Mary Hays each forged unique strategies of self-representation that encouraged active, empathic reading and that contributed to their afterlives in the long nineteenth century. According to Civale, each woman chose life writing as a means to shape her literary posterity and, in the process, created generic innovations in Romantic life writing.

<2>Although it might seem common sense to choose life writing to shape reputation, Civale demonstrates that such writing involved professional risk for early nineteenth century women writers and for these four writers in particular. As the first British woman writer to publish her diary, Burney risked the carefully calibrated image of propriety she had fashioned beginning with the anonymous publication of *Evelina* (1778). Especially after the ageist “ad feminem” attacks on *The Wanderer* (1814), Burney faced charges of vanity and egotism, which resurfaced in her publication of her father’s papers. Unlike Burney, Wollstonecraft, Robinson, and Hays all had to contend with publicized sexual histories that transgressed gender norms of femininity. Wollstonecraft, too, worked hard to forge a professional reputation that could have been undermined in the single mother persona of *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1797). Despite her careful calculation of the costs, her husband William Godwin, to use Robert Southey’s words, “stripp[ed] his dead wife naked” (*Collected Letters: Part 3*, Letter 958) in the posthumous *Memoirs* (1798), his life writing seemingly overwriting hers. Robinson continued to confront competing narratives about her affair with the Prince, many of which framed her as a sexual commodity; to return to that narrative was to reanimate such versions. And Hays had to overcome her portrayal as a follower, Godwin’s disciple, after the publication of *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), a view that displaced her Dissenting values and led to cruel personal attacks on her body and her morality. Life writing becomes, in Civale’s

argument, a necessary risk, an act of agency that counters gendered narratives that would limit women's authorship, professional lives, and legacies.

<3>As Civale illustrates, these four writers productively managed such risks and created strategies of self-representation that guaranteed them reputations in the long nineteenth-centuries. Instead of finding disrupted life narratives, Civale uncovers continuities across each woman's writing life and her life writing, tracing how her strategies developed. Culling a wide range of qualitative and quantitative sources to bridge the fields of life writing and book history, Civale meticulously supports her contention that each of these writers produced generic innovations. Her argument builds on important recent collections on women's life writing, such as Daniel Cook and Amy Culley's *Women's Life Writing, 1700-1850: Gender, Genre and Authorship* (2012), and monographs, including Felicity Nussbaum's *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (2009), Amy Culley's *British Women's Life Writing, 1760-1840: Friendship, Community, and Collaboration* (2014), and Caroline Breashears' *Eighteenth-Century Women's Writing and the 'Scandalous Memoir'* (2017). In focusing on Romantic women in particular, Civale's monograph extends current work on eighteenth-century and Romantic life writing, memoir, and auto/biography by Patricia Meyer Spacks, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, and James Treadwell, as well as collections edited by Eugene Stelzig, Zachery Leader, Felicity James and Julian North, and Arthur Bradley and Alan Rawes. Perhaps most originally, Civale revises Andrew Bennett's gendered claims in his groundbreaking *Keats, Narrative and Audience: The Posthumous Life of Writing* (1994) through extensive analysis of reception and print history that reveals women writers' investment in their posthumous lives and reputations.

<4>Chapter 1: "Nothing is so delicate as the reputation of a woman': Frances Burney's *Diary* (1842-46) and the Reputation of Women's Life Writing" argues that Burney was adept at negotiating the literary marketplace and carefully crafted the relationship between her personal and professional identities throughout her life. Civale juxtaposes Burney's comments on the publication of her novels in the *Diaries* with their actual reception to highlight Burney's "professional approach to authorship" (27). By the time the *Diaries and Letters* (1842-46) were published, Burney had negotiated the publication of multiple novels and the challenge of her father's *Memoirs* (1832). Civale argues that "Burney's afterlife involved a complex, reciprocal relationship between the reading of the novels and the life writing" (62), both of which were in print throughout the long nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Published posthumously, the *Diaries* strengthened Burney's reputation because she had formed a "middle ground, embracing her professional history within the record of family, personal and social life" (62). A hybrid "species," blending "social chronicle, personal memoir, and professional history," their popularity, Civale shows, led to the "literary and moral respectability of the genre" and created a "subgenre in women's life writing" (59).

<5>By contrast, Godwin's life writing about Wollstonecraft led to controversy that she had worked hard to quell. But, Civale suggests, the *Memoirs* did forge a complex heroine of sensibility with intense "emotional appeal" (128) that later generations returned to and that Wollstonecraft introduced in *Letters*. Civale makes a complex recuperative move in Chapter 2: "A man in love': Revealing the Unseen Mary Wollstonecraft," recovering a wealth of understudied nineteenth-century sources to counter a long-standing view that Wollstonecraft's

work disappeared in the later nineteenth century. In *Letters*, Civale argues, Wollstonecraft constructed a new hybrid form, “a travelogue-journal-letter” (88) and a unique voice combining “philosophical reflection and emotional confession” to create “a more affective connection with her reader” (87) that supplemented the philosophical self-fashioning in both *Rights* volumes. Despite their infamy, Godwin’s *Memoirs* intensified this affective relationship, transforming Wollstonecraft into “a figure with a protean capacity for meaning” (103). Civale contends that *Memoirs* also “fashioned [Wollstonecraft] into a figure for study and inspiration for others” (111), and she continued to be read throughout the nineteenth century, especially by those invested in women’s and civil rights, precisely because of her affective connection with readers.

<6>Mary Robinson chose a different strategy, one equally attuned to bonding with readers. In Chapter 3: “‘Beyond the power of utterance’: Reading the Gaps in Mary Robinson’s *Memoirs* (1801),” Civale argues that instead of reading the disjunctions of Robinson’s *Memoirs* as a sign of defect or incompleteness, we should read them as a rhetorical strategy used by Mary Robinson, her daughter, and editor Richard Phillips to “straddle the contradictory identities of the victimized heroine of sensibility and the titillating actress” (141). These gaps, Civale shows, create a “pattern of silence” (145) that theatrically produced sympathy and curiosity in Robinson’s readers. Comparing her use of such gaps with their effect in novels by Lawrence Sterne and a scandal memoir, *the Life of Mrs. Gooch* (1792), Civale highlights how such junctions reveal Robinson’s authenticity, and “her protean capabilities” (155). Through a gesture of “semi-concealment” (163), Robinson “reveal[ed] herself while maintaining the privacy and mystery so important to the cultivation of enduring interest” (167). In retelling her story, later biographies like Mary Craven’s, fictionalizations like Stanley Makower’s, or literary responses like those of Violet Fane mirror Robinson’s own “perplexing and paradoxical” literary strategies (191), at once “virtuous and coy” (190).

<7>Although Richard Polwhele’s *Unsex’d Females* lumped Hays together with Wollstonecraft and Robinson, Civale’s Chapter 4: “‘By a happy genius, I overcame all these troubles’: Mary Hays and the Struggle for Self-Representation” emphasizes the difference of her life writing and its legacy. Rejecting the idea that Hays was silenced by hostile responses to the autobiographical *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, Civale turns to *Female Biography* and interprets it as an innovative act of life writing that “furthered the feminist, pedagogical and political principles she had long espoused and accommodated an oblique self-defence” (204). Civale argues that Hays’s early work as Eusebia and as a periodical writer established her reputation in the Dissenting circle as a proponent of women’s education. In “Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft” and *Female Biography*, Hays reasserts her belief that “female lives [serve] not only as sources of inspiration...material for [feminist] political analysis” (225), and “her own self-fashioning (229). The 300 alphabetically-listed biographies in the six volumes of *Female Biography* present women as “three-dimensional individuals and agents of historical and political change” (232). Together, Civale contends, they critique masculinist history, reveal an ongoing pattern of sexual inequality, and create, through non-linear reading and actual quotation of women’s life writing, “active reading practices in her female audience” (229). Hays’s niece, Matilda Mary Hays (1820-97), whom she tutored, embodied Hays’s legacy in the nineteenth century.

<8>The brief Coda on “Virginia Woolf’s *Common Reader* Essays and the Legacy of Women’s Life Writing” provocatively suggests that Woolf took sustenance from female life writers for her

own life writing, especially in combining “moral and literary judgment” with “affective response” (263). Woolf, Civalé, suggests, understands how these earlier texts invite “empathic readers” in unconventional ways and crafts her own “hybrid subgenre” (264), the perfect combination of “strategic personal revelation and generic innovation” (262).

<9>As all good scholarship, Civalé’s book opens the door for more, especially on the relationship of Woolf’s life writing and on Hays’s later work, as Civalé suggests. I would also like to know more about how Robinson’s literary works relate to her life writing and its legacy, a dynamic Civalé stresses in all of the other chapters. Overall, this carefully researched, clearly-written monograph makes an invaluable and original contribution to life studies, to women’s writing, and to Romanticism. The continuities Civalé establishes between Burney and the radical Romantic women offer new narratives of women’s writing; the long nineteenth-century reception history turns on its heads long-held assumptions about women writers’ legacies. In a social media world of trumped up “facts,” where gendered reputation feels increasingly contested, we should prize even more how these women writers’ life writing sustained their legacies.