

writes towards freedom, for herself, for those around her.

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND GENDER IN EARLY MODERN LITERATURE: READING WOMEN'S LIVES, 1600-1680

Sharon Cadman Seelig
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REVIEWED BY ELIZABETH S. COHEN

Although its title sweeps too broadly, this slim volume, jargon-free and wearing its theory lightly, offers feminist scholars and teachers an accessible and graceful entrée into life-writings by seventeenth-century women in English. Self-representations composed in a world very different from our own, these texts are both compelling and challenging, for the literary scholar as well as for the general modern reader. In her introduction Sharon Cadman Seelig considers, clearly and succinctly, issues both of writing and of reception. There follow six chapters that each study life-writing texts by a single woman: Margaret Hoby's religious diaries; Anne Clifford's lifelong self-records; Lucy Hutchinson's writing herself into her husband's biography; Ann Fanshawe's family history; Anne Halket's autobiography; and, best known of the lot, Margaret Cavendish's flamboyant fictions. Although scarcely typical of their era, these women, well-born and well-educated, shared a time

and a social space. Yet their texts differ markedly from each other in form, length, rhetoric, and content, including religious and political affiliations. Brought together by Seelig, however, their writings offer unusual cross-cultural access to distant varieties of women's experience. Her book provides insight for sister scholars and invites non-specialists on a journey into unfamiliar terrain.

For those engaged with contemporary life-writing let me sketch its deeper context in the late medieval and early modern centuries before 1800. Only a few women, like the English brewster Margery Kempe (died 1439) and the Spanish Saint Teresa of Avila (d. 1582) composed early "autobiographies," modelled in part on St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Other European women, in multiplying numbers from the sixteenth century, wrote (or dictated) self into other genres, including letters, diaries, family histories, memoirs, travel journals, polemics, and judicial testimonies. The fine Other Voice series from the University of Chicago Press offers in translation works of this kind by continental women: for example, the Italian humanist Laura Cereta (d. 1499), the German Protestant reformer Katharina Schutz Zell (d. 1562), and the French duchess, Hortense Mancini (d. 1699). But life-writings composed in English after 1600 have claimed most attention from anglophone scholars. These varied early modern texts, valuable for teaching, first became widely available excerpted in anthologies, notably *Her Own Life* (1989). Later, *English Women's Voices, 1500-1700* (1992) and *Life-Writings by British Women, 1660-1815* (2000) provided further selections. Although some of these materials still remain only in manuscript or in rare early printings, as the field has matured, others have been published in full, modern editions. Even so, we need scholars like Seelig or the Other Voice editors to help us mine these fascinating, but also somewhat alien treasures.

Seelig's approach to seventeenth-

century life-writings explicitly pairs the historical grounding of their composition with the modern experience of their reading. For each of her six subjects she first sets out the particularities of the texts and their author's circumstance. She then develops a compact interpretation that both highlights telling details and assembles them into a cumulative, but never schematic overview. As literary scholar, Seelig attends especially to indeterminacies of genre and fluidities of rhetoric. She also carefully situates these women's expression of self within the hierarchical conventions of seventeenth-century religious and social relations that differ sharply from modern feminist and egalitarian ideals. Those inclined to woman-focused essentialism, take heed.

Seelig is committed to recognizing and mediating difference between the seventeenth century and the twenty-first and among her subjects themselves. Their diversity, however, yields pattern, more literary than historical. While we meet the women according to a rough chronology of generations, there is more overlap than historically meaningful sequence. More centrally, Seelig's order reflects her perception of a generic and rhetorical progression from least to most like the conventions of literary autobiography. She eschews judgment about the virtues of achieving such likeness. Nor does she presume that the more modern presentation of self-consciousness betokens the writer's superior insight. In the end Seelig would have us better understand each woman for herself in her time.

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