

The Subject of Biography

“there are things to which subjectivity is blind and which only those on the outside can see.” (Zadie Smith)

“we are, therefore I am” (African proverb cited by Barbara Newman)

“biography [...] makes us imagine and understand what it’s like to be somebody else. That’s why it matters.” (Hermione Lee)

Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* is fantasy: it tells the story of an individual who is a young man in 1553 and still living – as a woman – in 1928. Orlando changes sex and gender, travels the world, and bestrides the centuries. Subtitled, ‘A Biography,’ it is also the story of Vita Sackville-West, closely tracking specific events, relationships, and legal battles in her life, and depicting her family history and her ancestral home in visceral and resonant detail. Woolf was fascinated by stretching the boundaries of genre, as we see in her reframing of the novel through extraordinary experiments such as *Mrs Dalloway*, *To The Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*. In *Orlando*, she writes a ‘biography’ that she calls ‘truthful; but fantastic,’ a book that engages with ‘the common life which is the real life.’¹ In *The Permeable Self*, Barbara Newman asks, ‘what does it mean to be a person, a human self?’² *Orlando* is an answer to that question, an answer that suggests that a person, a self, is porous and changing, affected by the long history of their family and genes, and by the physical environment in which they live. They are borne along in the slipstream of time, part of stories whose origin and ending they do not know. Their identity is open and expansive. Woolf also suggests that a person can only be understood or represented through innovative approaches, especially if that person is a woman, or is marginal in some other way.³ This idea of a biography that is ‘truthful; but fantastic’ makes a claim about how a life can best be written in a way that challenges the traditional cradle-to-grave biographies of the great men of history – in which context it is worth remembering that Woolf’s father was a biographer and editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary*, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1953), 157; Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 148.

² Barbara Newman, *The Permeable Self: Five Medieval Relationships* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 1.

³ She writes passionately about the erasure from the historical record of the talents of women such as the imagined Judith, Shakespeare’s sister. Woolf, *Room of One’s Own*, 60-64.

This exploration of the subject of biography encompasses both the topic (subject) of biography and the nature of the individual (subject) about whom a biography might be focused. Biography – life-writing – has changed and expanded immensely over the last couple of decades. There are biographies of ideas (*Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea*), of books (*The Ministry of Truth: The Biography of George Orwell's 1984*), and of literary characters (*The Wife of Bath: A Biography*).⁴ Both Chaucer and Shakespeare have been the subjects of place-centred biographies (*The Lodger: Shakespeare on Silver Street; Chaucer: A European Life*), and of biographies that focus on just one year (*1599; The Poet's Tale*).⁵ More broadly, the boundaries between biography and fiction have become increasingly blurred in the current literary landscape. Some of the most skilful and intelligent contemporary novelists have crafted novels that are also known as fictional biographies, books that are built from the ground up on careful, detailed, archival and historical research, but which are avowedly works of fiction (*The Magician, The Master, A Place of Greater Safety, the Wolf Hall* trilogy).⁶ Very recently, Victoria Mackenzie has penned a novel that attempts to reconstruct the meeting between Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe and Claire Gilbert has written *I Julian*, a fictional autobiography of Julian of Norwich.⁷ And perhaps the most startling development has been the vertiginous rise of autofiction, books that trample all over the boundary between fact and fiction, author and character, autobiography and novel; books that ostentatiously parade their authenticity and their unreliability (by authors including Sheila Heti, Rachel Cusk, and Karl Ove Knausgård).

In thinking about how to write a biography, it is vital to think about what a biographical subject is. We need to know what a person is before we can work out how to approach studying them. The historiography of understandings of medieval subjectivity is complex. While the old idea of the rise of the individual in the sixteenth century has been

⁴ Charles Seife and Matt Zeimer, *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea* (London: Souvenir Press, 2000); Dorian Lynskey, *The Ministry of Truth: The Biography of George Orwell's 1984* (London: Picador, 2019); Marion Turner, *The Wife of Bath: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

⁵ Charles Nicholl, *The Lodger: Shakespeare on Silver Street* (London: Allen Lane, 2007); Marion Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); James Shapiro, *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005); Paul Strohm, *The Poet's Tale: Chaucer and the year that made the Canterbury Tales* (London: Profile, 2014).

⁶ Colm Tóibín, *The Master* (London: Picador, 2004); Colm Tóibín, *The Magician* (London: Viking, 2021); Hilary Mantel, *A Place of Greater Safety* (London: Viking, 1992); Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009).

⁷ Victoria Mackenzie, *For Thy Great Pain Have Mercy On My Little Pain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), Claire Gilbert, *I Julian* (Hodder and Stoughton, 2023). Although more overtly fictional, Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet* (London: Tinder Press, 2020) is another fascinating example.

discredited in many different ways, recent and current thinking has focused not on pushing back the date for the discovery of subjectivity, but on ways of considering the subject that move beyond Enlightenment ideas of a bounded and enclosed self.

Late-medieval authors frequently write about the problems of attempting to enclose the self in a bounded room, using the image of the threshold to stage a more connected idea of selfhood. Chaucer, in the *House of Fame*, describes his avatar as going home to his room, and closing himself off: he is sensorily deprived – unable to hear, speak, or see properly – and creatively deprived, unable to think or to write. He should, instead, be going to the doorway, to listen to his neighbours, who dwell almost at his door, and who can give him inspiration, described as ‘new things’ (649-660). Writing a few decades later, Hoccleve describes his split, agonized self in detail (in his *Complaint*), imagining his wit and himself as separate entities (59), and telling us about his anxiety as he stays in his room, leaping in front of the mirror to try to comprehend how others see him (155 ff).⁸ Hoccleve’s understanding of selfhood is, however, relational: he sees himself as subjected to God, and as dependent on others. Most importantly, his healing process is bound up precisely with opening his door to his Friend figure, who enters into a dialogue with him (in the opening lines of *Dialogue with a Friend*). Both Chaucer and Hoccleve depict the doorway, and reaching across it to other human beings, as fundamental to productive selfhood. This understanding of selfhood as something that traverses thresholds and boundaries is the subject of Newman’s *Permeable Self*. She writes about the idea of ‘co-inherence’ as a way of ‘forming the self through the other.’ Relationships are privileged over bounded subjects, and the self is fundamentally ‘socially embedded.’⁹

If we accept that the boundaries between persons are fluid, that selfhood is constructed through relationships and ‘indwelling,’ what of the boundaries between a biological person and a fictional one? It is now over a decade since A.C. Spearing’s influential book, *Medieval Autographies*, made a compelling case against thinking of the narratorial ‘I’ of medieval poems as a purely fictional speaker.¹⁰ For Spearing, the first-person speaker of

⁸ Thomas Hoccleve, *My Complainte and Other Poems*, ed. Roger Ellis (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001). For further discussion see Matthew Boyd Goldie, “Psychosomatic Illness and Identity in London 1416-21: Hoccleve’s *Complaint* and *Dialogue With a Friend*,” *Exemplaria* 11 (1999): 23-52; Ethan Knapp, *The Bureaucratic Muse: Thomas Hoccleve and the Literature of Late Medieval England* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), Lee Patterson, ““What is Me?”: Self and Society in the Poetry of Thomas Hoccleve,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 23 (2001): 437-70.

⁹ Newman, *Permeable Self*, 7, 13, 264.

¹⁰ A.C. Spearing, *Medieval Autographies: The ‘I’ of the Text* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 2012).

medieval texts is not predominantly fictional, nor is that speaker identical with the biological person who created the text. Recently, Sebastian Sobceki has built on Spearing's work to argue for the idea that the authorial persona in medieval texts is 'indexical,' created for a specific audience who had direct access to the author. He writes that, 'Hoccleve's Thomas, Langland's Will, and Chaucer's Geoffrey are extensions of their writers' biological selves, animate simulacra that may depart in the mode of representation but not in the identity of the self they represent.'¹¹

When Newman tackles the issue of how the self is depicted in medieval texts, she focuses on the interplay between a universal self and an individual self, suggesting that in medieval autobiographical writing, the individual is an instance of the universal.¹² Medieval autobiography therefore 'thwarts readers who approach it with anachronistic genre expectations.'¹³ The self is always understood as co-inhering with others, and with a more universal idea of the self. This sounds surprisingly similar to a recent defence of autofiction by Nina Bouraoui: 'The power of autofiction comes from its universality. When she tells her own story, the writer describes an expanded world, one that unites us all.'¹⁴ Newman's description of Augustine's *Confessions* focuses first on the text as seeming to be 'the engaging life of an extraordinary character' but that proves to be something different as 'the author persistently hints at a more generic self [...] the individual was meant all along to be an instance of the universal.'¹⁵ In medieval writing, seemingly fictional inventions (personae) turn out to be almost identical with the author; conversely, avowedly autobiographical depictions of the self turn out to be gesturing towards the universal and beyond the individual.¹⁶

In thinking biographically, then, we can find crucial evidence for authors' lives in their self-portrayals in seemingly fictional texts, but it is not always clear what to do with

¹¹ Sebastian Sobceki, *Last Words: The Public Self and the Social Order in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 13.

¹² On the relationship between the individual and the common voice, see especially the influential work of Anne Middleton, especially 'The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II,' *Speculum* 53, no. 1 (1978): 94-114.

¹³ Newman, *Permeable Self*, 268.

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/sep/16/top-10-books-of-autofiction-all-men-want-to-know-by-nina-bouraoui>

¹⁵ Newman, *Permeable Self*, 268. See also Eva von Contzen, 'Why Medieval Literature Does Not Need the Concept of Social Minds: Exemplarity and Collective Experience,' *Narrative* 23 no. 2 (2015): 140-153.

¹⁶ The fourteenth century was a moment of particular literary self-consciousness and an autobiographical turn of sorts; see for example, Lawrence de Looze, *Pseudo-Autobiography in the Fourteenth Century: Juan Ruiz, Guillaume de Machaut, Jean Froissart, and Geoffrey Chaucer* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997).

that evidence. If we read the *Prologue to the Legend of Good Women*, for instance, the Chaucer of the poem is said to have written a long list of poems, which Chaucer certainly wrote, and is told to give the poem to the real queen, at one of the actual palaces of Eltham or Sheen. At the other end of the spectrum, we can be confident that Chaucer was not actually berated by the God of Love and Alceste. In between these obvious facts and fictions, is something much more complex: the idea of a poet condemned for antifeminism and judged by authority figures who impose a penance of writing a different kind of poem, closely echoes what happens to Machaut in the *Judgement of the King of Navarre*. That does not mean, however, that nothing happened to Chaucer; indeed, it seems vanishingly unlikely that there was no debate about the gender politics of *Troilus and Criseyde* amongst his audience.¹⁷

The problem of antifeminism in literature links directly to the subject of biography. The examples that have been given so far in this essay are of male authors: Chaucer, Hoccleve, Langland, and Gower all create personae that are closely connected to their biological selves. While we know little about Langland, there are very many documents about the other three, especially Chaucer, that can help us to reconstruct their lives in detail. They lived bureaucratic lives that were carefully recorded: we know how long Chaucer spent in Italy because he was paid by the day; we know what clothes he was bought by Elizabeth, countess of Ulster; we know what ransom was paid for him; we know how many men and horses he had within him in Navarre.¹⁸ We do not have the same density of material about medieval women – so what might be productive ways of thinking about the female subject of biography?

It is profoundly important to keep in mind the fundamental connection between books and female bodies. The Wife of Bath forcefully reminds us that she was ‘beten for a book’ (‘Wife of Bath’s Prologue,’ 712). Christine de Pizan tells us an analogous story of a woman who was beaten by her husband after he read the *Romance of the Rose*.¹⁹ As Georges Duby writes, ‘human beings do not orient their behaviour toward real events and circumstances, but rather to their image of them.’²⁰ Men treat women in certain ways partly because of what they have read in books. Women’s experiences are shaped by, as Woolf

¹⁷ For further discussion of the politics and positioning of the PLGW see Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life*, 342-362.

¹⁸ For the life-records, see Martin Crow and Clair Olson (eds.), *Chaucer Life Records* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966); for discussion see Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life*.

¹⁹ See Turner, *The Wife of Bath: A Biography*, 18.

writes, the spectre of Professor von X, 'writing his monumental work entitled *The Mental, Moral and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex*.'²¹ Women's historical experience is shaped by textuality.

Furthermore, when we try to recover historical experience, we are always working through fictions:²² all the more so as women's experiences are being filtered through forms and genres that have, for the most part, been invented by men. When we read a medieval will or petition 'by' a woman, it has almost always been penned by a man and has usually been phrased according to pre-existing, male-authored forms. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, a famous and rich example of early female life-writing, was dictated by Kempe to male scribes. It bears the traces of multiple voices and the character of Margery within the Book is clearly both individual and general, reflecting specific experiences and also representing templates of experiences (such as the 'saint's' experience). She understood her selfhood as particular and universal, experiential and rooted in books. In reading this book and thinking about Margery Kempe's life, we must think about the interactions between lived experience and authority, bodies and books, individuals and communities. The example of the publication of her book is also a typical illustration of the falsification of women's experience in history: not only was her text radically cut, but the printer Henry Pepwell asserted that Margery was an anchoress.²³ Similarly, in the fifteenth-century, William Worcester adapted one of Christine de Pizan's texts, framing it with the story that Christine had been a patron, not a writer, and a life-long nun, not a wife, widow, and mother.²⁴ Women's experiences have often been forced into patterns that they do not really fit.

One way to respond to the problems of evidence and representation is to innovate, to try to think of different ways of accessing and retelling women's stories. That was, in part, what I wanted to do in *The Wife of Bath: A Biography*. The first half of the book weaves

²⁰ Georges Duby, 'Histoire sociale et idéologie des sociétés,' in Jacques Le Goff and P. Nora (eds.), *Faire de l'histoire* (Paris: Guillard, 1974), 1: 147-168, 148. Sebastian Sobceki has suggested that this kind of relationship between text and reality can be intentional, commenting that, 'vernacular autobiographical texts are not disinterested recordings of reality; instead, these narratives construct hypernaturalistic models of reality which they hope to see translated into life. That is so because the adjustment of reality is a fundamental medieval literary convention.' Sebastian Sobceki, 'Authorized Realities: The *Gesta Romanorum* and Thomas Hoccleve's Poetics of Autobiography,' *Speculum* 98:2 (2023): 536-558.

²¹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 39.

²² See Natalie Zemon Davis's seminal account of the literary qualities of documentary texts, *Fiction in the Archives* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987). See also Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 1987).

²³ For discussion see Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 220-225.

²⁴ William Worcester, *The Boke of Noblesse*, ed. J. G. Nichols (London: Roxburghe Club, 1860), 54, n. 151.

together the traces of historical women's lives, with the ideas about women that circulated in texts, painting a composite picture of what it was like to be a woman in the later Middle Ages and how women were perceived and imagined. That approach foregrounds the idea of the self as socially inflected, and also as shaped by the imaginative structures that surround individuals. It moves away from the idea of a forensic examination of the depths of one person's consciousness. Such an approach is particularly appropriate for thinking about female subjectivity. As Holly Crocker has noted, the model of subjectivity that is 'rooted in the body, connected to others and involved in fostering, not governing intimate relationships that cross all boundaries of individual selfhood' is historically associated with women.²⁵

My 'biography' of the Wife of Bath is also an interrogation of what literary character is. In suggesting that a character can be a subject of biography, the book moves into highly experimental terrain, crossing many centuries to explore this character's afterlife in all kinds of texts and contexts. Biography becomes a generative genre that allows for a wide range of cultural, historical, and literary analysis, a genre that explores communities, horizons of expectation and interpretation, and diachronic change. This aspect of my biography eschews the subject as an individual, suggesting that biography can be stretched to think about lives and life-writing in myriad ways, a different angle on 'the common life.' Woolf's revolutionary idea of the biography as 'truthful; but fantastic' remains an inspiration.

In his biography of Margery Kempe, Anthony Bale describes a visit to Mintlyn, a village that Margery Kempe visited in about 1418-1420. He compares the ruins there to *The Book of Margery Kempe*; they are 'partial memorials' that 'allow us to glimpse something unique in the past but also to fill the gaps with our projections and desires.'²⁶ He thus emphasises the role of the desire and imagination of the reader, or biographer. In a gesture, perhaps, to some of the ways in which we might approach a life in formally appropriate and innovative ways, his biography is punctuated by segments called 'interloges' or interludes, short deep dives into particular moments in Kempe's life. The very idea of the 'interloge' (a play, an entertainment, a performance) also foregrounds for us the performativity and unreliability of the evidence of a medieval – or perhaps any – life. We all imagine our

²⁵ Holly Crocker, *The Matter of Virtue: Women's Ethical Action from Chaucer to Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 24.

²⁶ Anthony Bale, *Margery Kempe: A Mixed Life* (London: Reaktion, 2021), 209.

experiences as parts of a narrative, so anyone's memories or versions of their lives are inevitably fictionalised.

There is, indeed, a fascinating case to be made for embracing the imagination in biographical thinking. A radical recent biographical genre is the fictionalised biography / the biographical novel. Quite different from much historical fiction, such books are based on meticulous historical research into specific people, and often seek to tell truths about their lives through a reimagining of their subjectivities. This is dangerous and difficult territory: popular culture is full of examples where this approach has proved controversial or misleading (most famously the Netflix series, *The Crown*). Such work might even seem to deny that there is a crucial distinction between things that happened, and things that are made up, a distinction that most thinkers are acutely aware of preserving in our world of Holocaust denial, fake news, and 'alternative facts'.

When the fictionalised biography is acknowledged as fiction, however, it can often yield biographical truths. There is a scene, for example, in *A Place of Greater Safety* (Hilary Mantel's novel about the French Revolution), in which the teenage Lucille Duplessis walks in on the revolutionary, Camille Desmoulins, kissing her mother, Annette.²⁷ This scene is fiction. It is factually true, however, that Desmoulins was ten years older than Lucille, was a friend of her mother's for years, and that she had a secret crush on him for a long time (her journal survives) before they married. The imagined scene conveys that Lucille was going through adolescence when her mother was young, sociable, and attractive; that the man that she herself was in love with and was to marry was older and much more worldly; that his interests in her household were not, initially, about her; that the power dynamic in their relationship was complex. The scene makes us think about not only the fact of their age gap, but about how entering into a relationship with a man who was far more experienced and who was associated with her parents created a particular kind of tension and vulnerability – which seems particularly important to understand when we know that this relationship led to her early death at the guillotine.

Similarly, the densely-imagined scenes in Colm Tóibín's biographical fictions reveal truths. In *The Magician*, he imagines Thomas Mann's feelings shortly after fleeing Nazi Germany for the U.S. As Mann is driven through the night, he looks at the suburbs and houses, and cannot understand them. He thinks:

²⁷ Mantel, *Place of Greater Safety*, 90-91.

If this were Germany, there would be a church and a square, some narrow streets and other streets that had been widened. Houses with attic windows. There would be old stoves in the kitchens and tiled stoves in the living rooms. [...] The past would be evoked by the names of the streets, or by the names of families, and continuity by the bells that rang softly, as they had for centuries, to make the passing of each quarter-hour. He would give anything if the car could turn and enter noiselessly into one of those squares, a space enriched by the work of Gutenberg or the writings of Luther or the images made by Dürer. Enriched by a thousand years of trade, a stability broken at times by plagues or wars, by the clattering of cavalry horses and the boom of cannon, until a time of treaties when peace was restored.²⁸

We do not know if Mann had these thoughts. But this scene powerfully conjures up for us the fact that Mann was an exile, an immigrant, and a man whose sense of self was deeply rooted in German culture. It evokes the fact that he was steeped in the history and culture of one part of the world, and knew very little of the history and culture of his new world. It reminds us of the minute details of topography and architecture that are so striking when one travels between a European country and the US, and what those differences signify. It does not matter whether Mann actually thought about cavalry horses or Dürer: the scene shows us, with lyrical intensity, the experience of exile, an experience that was central to Mann's life. The scene *feels* true.²⁹

Authors such as Mantel and Tóibín have taken the genres of the novel and biography and created something new. We need robustly to maintain the importance of acknowledging the differences between lived events and imagined ones. But there are also times when we can access truths – particularly the truths of subjectivity – through our imaginations. Biography is today making claims to be an agile and changing genre, a genre that can be generative of new ways of comprehending the past – and the subject.

²⁸ Tóibín, *The Magician*, 228.

²⁹ There is a risk of seeming here to endorse 'truthiness' – using one's intuition or opinion to assert truth itself without regard to facts or logic. That is certainly not my intent: I am gesturing to episodes that are avowedly *not* factually true but that tell us something truthful about, for example, structures of feeling.