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Review of Amy Culley, *British Women's Life Writing, 1760-1840*

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Keywords

women's life writing, relational selfhood, writing networks, self-narration

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Amy Culley. *British Women's Life Writing, 1760-1840. British Women's Life Writing, 1760-1840: Friendship, Community, and Collaboration*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014. 204pp. Index. ISBN: 978-1-137-27421-2.

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The eighteenth-century courtesan occupied an ambiguous position in society, wherein she was often idolized and aligned with aristocratic women of fashion while at the same time “on the margins of society” (78). Mary Robinson (1757-1800), perhaps best known as a courtesan and actress, exemplifies this liminal identity, striving to reinvent herself as an author and intellectual later in life. Excluded from intellectual circles like the Bluestockings because of their emphasis on a goodly reputation and virtue, Robinson knew well the importance of personal relationships and social networks to the formation of one's identity. Thus, her *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson* (1801) highlights her female networks, from actresses and woman patrons to her later friendships with aristocratic women of fashion like Marie Antoinette and the Duchess of Devonshire. Her daughter, Maria Elizabeth, had a hand in editing the memoir after her mother's death and worked to shape her mother's reputation posthumously; as a result, Maria Elizabeth has been criticized for editorial changes to her mother's manuscript, including “overemphasizing Robinson's maternal role” (105). The construction of Robinson's life in her *Memoirs* illustrates one of the foundational arguments of Amy Culley's *British Women's Life Writing, 1760-1840*: the importance of relationships to the formation of personal identity and how the relational self, as developed with others, impacts the construction of one's auto/biography.

Culley's scholarship builds upon Felicity Nussbaum's groundbreaking *The Autobiographical Subject* (1989) and more recent scholarship such as Eugene Stelzig's *Romantic Autobiography in England* (2009) that explores the important contributions women have made to the autobiographical genre. Focusing on the collaborative, relational life writing of women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Culley advances the study of this relatively unexamined period of women's life writing. Specifically, Culley argues that focusing on “life writing as an expression of personal feeling by a single author has tended to obscure its importance as an articulation of relationships and communal identities or as a contribution to the history of a family, community, or nation” (2). Given the vast number of genres collected under the term life writing, Culley works to give a more complete representation of women's self-narration by examining “spiritual autobiographies, family memoirs, scandalous memoirs, diaries, journals, biographies, correspondence, travelogues, *romans à clef*, and eye-witness accounts in both print and manuscript sources” (2). Furthermore, examining noncanonical works by authors like Elizabeth Fox and Grace Dalrymple Elliott alongside authors like Mary Robinson and Mary Wollstonecraft introduces new voices while tracing how these authors and works are in conversation with each other.

The notion of multifaceted genres within life writing and the importance that personal, intergenerational relationships have on women's representation of themselves and others are highlighted on the cover of the book. The 1784 drawing depicts two girls in flowing dresses sitting on an elegant carved bench; one looks off into the distance while the other is occupied with writing in her notebook. A large tasseled curtain hangs above, framing the scene. A drawing of

two young girls at leisure, with one writing in a nondescript manner, seems a loose connection to the content of the book, but a note on the back cover reveals that the girls' mother, Lady Diana Beauclerk, drew the picture, capturing the moment with her daughters for posterity. Depicted through her gaze, the artist, the drawing of the girls highlights the collaborative ways in which familial and personal relationships influence the representations of women's lives.

To that end the book is organized into three main groups of women autobiographers whose lives and texts intersect as they write themselves and each other through relational modes of self-representation: the spiritual writing of the Fletcher circle, a group of early Methodist women preachers; the journals and memoirs of late eighteenth-century and Regency courtesans; and British women's travel narratives written during the French Revolution. Each section begins with an overview chapter describing the relationship and collaborative nature of each group of women, and then each author is given her own chapter, with twelve case studies in total. In grouping these authors by personal relationships and imagined communities, Culley examines the ways in which "personal relationships and communal identities are influenced by their distinctly gendered roles within the family and society, while gender also shapes their relationships to autobiographical traditions" (4). Culley's research constructs the complex ways in which these disparate groups of women located within various religious, social, and political groups narrated themselves and others through their writing, challenging the notion of the "self-made subject."

Making use of contemporary life writing theory that considers relational selfhood, Culley examines the ways each writer represents herself relationally within each group's respective historical contexts and networks. The first section focuses on the Fletcher circle, a group of Methodist women preachers around Mary Fletcher that included Sarah Ryan, Sarah Lawrence, and Mary Tooth. In addition to their role within the Methodist faith community, the women form a familial bond with each other, placing more importance on homosocial relationships than heterosexual ones. Culley's examination of the Fletcher circle's intergenerational network of writers demonstrates how eighteenth-century spiritual autobiography's connection with the rise of individualism and Puritan narratives of self-examination and the individual religious experience obscures "relationships . . . central to these women's self-representations" as well as "the collaborations that often underpin these works" (19). Perhaps most illustrative of the intertextual, collective nature of the Fletcher circle's life writing is that the way the women write themselves and each other over the generations creates a seamless narrative of autobiographies that easily could have been written as a single chapter, as evidenced by the fact that the chapter breaks seem disruptive to the flow of their interconnected life stories.

The second part of the book centers on the life writing of late eighteenth-century and Regency courtesans Sophia Baddeley and Elizabeth Steele, Mary Robinson, Elizabeth Fox, and Harriette Wilson and Julia Johnston, an interesting juxtaposition from the Methodist preachers. Culley interrogates how the authors utilize oral narrative modes and epistolary forms to create an illusion of intimacy with readers and how genres like the scandalous memoir as well as unpublished memoirs were used to relive and reposition the women's past celebrity. Formed through less collective means than the Fletcher circle, the courtesans' autobiographies include more instances of competition and jealousy, such as the rivalry between Harriette Wilson and Julia Johnston, and were most often written with more commercial interests in mind. Interestingly, the courtesans' rejection of the patriarchal family structure in favor of appropriating its discourse to describe their

relationships to other women in familial terms and metaphors, exemplified by the ambiguously defined relationship of Elizabeth Steele and Sophia Baddeley, echoes the practice of the Methodist women preachers.

The third section brings together the writings of Helen Maria Williams, Mary Wollstonecraft, Grace Dalrymple Elliott, and Charlotte West during the French Revolution. Each British woman's writing contributes to the communal history and collective memories of the revolution, suggesting "that life writing was a powerful means of social and historical engagement (rather than a form of solitary introspection)" (158). Examining the life writings of both radicals and counterrevolutionaries, Culley brings a fresh perspective to the French Revolution's impact on women's life writing. Most likely because of this emphasis on the revolution and the varied positions of the authors, there are no examples of collaboration or collective authorship of texts between the individual authors; rather, each author and her life writing are examined within their connection to the discourse of the revolution and contribution to a larger communal history.

The range of the texts and authors Culley examines is one of the biggest strengths of the book. Placing authors like Charlotte West, who has been given little scholarly attention, into conversation with well-known authors like Mary Wollstonecraft while examining both print and manuscript works alike opens up areas of inquiry that have gone unexamined for too long. Unfortunately, the project's scope necessitates that Culley take broader strokes in her analyses of the life-writing texts. Well researched and situated among current scholarly conversations, the individual case studies often ended sooner than I would have liked, and as a result I was left wanting a more detailed analysis of the texts. More specifically, I would have liked to read more of the authors' own words about their lives, especially from those like Elizabeth Fox, whose thirty-one volume journal has existed in relative scholarly anonymity. As such, readers who are familiar with each author or who have read all of the texts examined will benefit more from the study. Furthermore, the addition of a more formal conclusion would have created a space to bring together these three rather disparate groups of women in conversation together, stepping back to see each network of women life-writers in context with the others. While Culley does make connections across each section of the book, I wondered if and how each network was connected to each other through larger social networks or how the networks continued to evolve beyond the case studies given. Of course, wanting more is a symptom of Culley's methodical research and enjoyable prose. *British Women's Life Writing, 1760-1840* is an important contribution to the study of British women's life writing and the role of collaboration and personal relationships to the individual and their modes of self-representation.