

Genre and Women's Life Writing in Early Modern England and Lives of Spirit: English Carmelite Self-Writing of the Early Modern Period make important contributions to the study of early modern culture and women's life-writing practices. In one of the first critical collections to focus solely on English women's works, Dowd and Eckerle reframe what we might consider life writing. The collection attends to memoirs and personal letters but also looks for the autobiographical in defense narratives, discourses of the new science, mother's legacies, prefaces, poems, and receipt books. Interdisciplinary in nature, each of the articles identifies intersections between literary and autobiographical texts and fiction and nonfiction. As Helen Wilcox argues in the essay that models the collection's methodology, the confluence of literature with life-writing practices produces a generic hybridity that informs the versions of selfhood a writer can construct. In an analysis of letters and poems by Dorothy Osborne, Arbella Stuart, Martha Moulsworth, Mary Wroth, and Margaret Cavendish, Wilcox demonstrates how generic conventions both proscribe and limit possibilities for self-expression.

Like Wilcox, Mary Ellen Lamb and Michelle Dowd also explore the impact of literature on autobiography. In an engaging study of Lady Anne Halkett's memoir, Lamb argues that Halkett crafts a version of self in which she appears a heroine in her own Tragicomedy or Romance. But when her politics as a royalist, fighting for a religious cause, are considered in tandem with her self-revelatory practices and contradictory religious scruples, what results is a complex representation of self located in both literary and personal forms of expression. Dowd's study of Elizabeth Richardson's Legacie focuses on connections that structurally and stylistically link the Legacie to the Catholic Books of Hours and the Protestant
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Book of Common Prayer. Unlike best-selling advice books by Dorothy Leigh and Elizabeth Jocelin, which focus on practical domestic and general spiritual matters, Richardson’s text reads more as hybrid prayer book than life writing; however, Dowd argues convincingly that it is indeed a Legacies—one that expresses maternal authority and also participates in the production and circulation of Protestant ideology.

Genre and Women’s Life Writing also engages in several important manuscript studies. Margaret Ezell’s exceptional essay on domestic papers argues that because these documents were not intended for publication, they can complicate our understanding of life-writing practices. She explores the mechanics of production, demonstrating how shorthand, spatial arrangement of a page, and written marginal asides to an expected reader suggest the public nature of what would be regarded simply as private materials. Interestingly, because the papers were designed to transmit knowledge often inter-generationally and feature repeated self-analyses, they continually (re)construct history and, thus, may be more life-like than edited, published autobiographical texts. Catherine Field’s archival study of receipt books complements Ezell’s work. She describes the genre as elastic, for it includes recipes for both food and medicine. The hybridity of the genre is underscored by the polyvocal dialogue in the texts: these too were passed from generation to generation and include handwritten comments and proofs confirming the efficacy of formulae from multiple author-owners. In an analysis of Anne Clifford’s diaries and life writings, Megan Matchinske argues that Clifford produces a new kind of history—one that relies upon the past but is future-oriented. This effect is a result of Clifford’s compulsive need to record and rerecord her family legacy and document her occupation and movement between her properties once she inherits them. Matchinske’s study implies that more work needs to be done on Clifford’s formal manuscript compilation of her diaries, which include family histories and an under-studied autobiography.

The collection also explores how literary forms might serve autobiographical functions. Julie Eckerle identifies the preface as a space of self-authorization that can be put to autobiographical uses. Like Wilcox, Eckerle is interested in generic conventions and reveals how the formulaic nature of the preface can construct a version of early modern woman in
which she embodies both humility and intelligence. In one of two articles on Margaret Cavendish, Elspeth Graham addresses Cavendish’s compulsive turn to the autobiographical in generic forms not usually associated with life writing. She argues that Cavendish’s repeated assertions of her own singularity and her interrelations and connections with others are influenced by the new science and natural philosophy. Lara Dodds, too, notes the influence of science on Cavendish’s self-conscious representation as poet. She associates the figure of the housewife and equates domestic work with that of the poet and, thus, expresses domestic experience and experiments as knowledge-making devices and intellectual enterprises. In the final essay, Josephine Donovan explores the women’s “defense narrative.” The genre, she explains, defends the female voice in ways similar to the prologue but in this instance protects personal reputation despite its public nature. Even so, Donovan demonstrates that this subgenre of life writing exceeds its socio-civil function and nonfiction status and influences the novel.

Genre and Women’s Life Writing is an important collection. Those articles that expand the boundaries of life writing by identifying it in underrepresented sources or genres are particularly generative. For this reason, one wishes that the two and a half chapters devoted to Margaret Cavendish, whose proclivity for self-revelation was and remains notorious, might have been limited. Also, because the collection suggests so many compelling venues and methodologies through which English women expressed their lives, it would have been beneficial if the articles spoke to some extent about what distinguished English women’s life writing practices from or echoed those of their international sisters. This is a fine collection of essays that will appeal to those interested in material culture, science, law, property, and religion and encourage further creative inquiry into early modern life writing practices.

Hallett’s Lives of Spirit is part of the Ashgate Early Modern English Woman Contemporary Editions series. This intriguing anthology of manuscript excerpts (most of them previously unpublished) represents the life writing of approximately sixty catholic nuns and lay sisters from 1619–1794. Most of these women fled England as a result of religious persecution, journeyed through Paris and Mons, and ended in Antwerp.
There, a Carmel was created specifically for Englishwomen in 1619. A second was established in Lierre in 1648. The materials included in Hallet’s edition are derived from the annals of both convents.

In a very useful introduction, Hallett discusses the historical and cultural context of the papers and their contents and organization. She also includes manuscript material that explains the origins of the Antwerp annals and the editorial methodology their compiler used: a result of both religious mystery and socio-political need within the Carmel, the Lives of the religious were commissioned by Prioress Mary Frances of St. Teresa after the body of Mary Margaret of the Angels was found in a crypt (1716), dead some thirty-eight years and still physically incorrupt. Frances then sought to preserve the memory of the women at the Carmel. In addition to the Lives, the edition includes three appendices: the Rule of St. Albert (the constitution that governed a nun’s daily practice), a Superior’s notes on obedience, and a selection of letters to and from Anne of the Ascension, the Prioress at Antwerp. What will also interest readers of Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal is the documentation of gender relations in the accounts. Some entries record struggles between friars and nuns in the order. Several others attribute to the nuns a political and divine authority by charting a genealogy in which those living appear to be spiritual successors to Saint Teresa de Jesus, who had fought for gendered reform through devotional change.

Each of the Lives in the anthology is introduced by an individual preface that includes birth names, dates, and familial and historical context. The prefaces also suggest interpretive readings, relate entries one to another, and supply important biographical information not included in the manuscripts themselves. For example, several of the Lives appear in both the Antwerp and Lierre annals, and Hallett helpfully discusses similarities and differences between the two representations.

We learn a tremendous amount about the nuns and the Carmels from the Lives: the religious activities and spiritual responses of the nuns, sometimes among members of same families. We also discover the nuns’ fears and joys experienced in religious encounters or spiritual interventions, events that encouraged them to pursue their vocation, and the responses of their families, both positive and negative, to those choices.
The selections provide insight into bodily rituals, conversions, and the range of religious commitments and observations available to nuns. And they include financial information about the nuns’ dowries, other personal sources of monetary support, and their social station and life before entering the convent. They further reveal the budgetary struggles of the orders and provide information about benefactors.

In contrast to assumptions about worldly withdrawal within the convent, the Lives evidence the cultural mobility of the nuns, who interacted with business affiliates outside the convent and assisted with fundraising. The Lives testify, too, to the nuns’ awareness of the political and religious upheaval on the continent and abroad. Indeed, they often “represent themselves as the true patriots” and at times sheltered displaced cavaliers (2, 5). As a result, the collection represents the convent not as insular but as existing dialogically with the secular and political world.

Because the selections highlight spectacular events in the nuns’ lives or seem chosen to counter conservative assumptions about life as a religious, and because the selections are excerpted, the anthology has the effect of making all the women sound so remarkable. Perhaps this is part of the point: the Lives reveal that these were women with lives. This anthology is a rich resource and starting point for further scholarship (original spelling is preserved and manuscripts are clearly and consistently identified by number). It is also an absorbing read, demonstrating the complex interrelations and challenges that the Carmelites experienced in Antwerp and Lierre.

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