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Introduction: Portraits of the Artist: Plays by Canadian Women.

Voici l'introduction à «Portraits of the Artists» [Portraits d'artistes], cinq articles sur des pièces écrites par cinq dramaturges canadiennes. Les chercheuses ayant participé à ce collectif examinent des pièces qui ont voulu tracer le portrait de cinq femmes artistes. L'introduction est le lieu d'une réflexion sur les questions qui se posent lorsque l'on dramatise le vécu d'autrui, et surtout, de femmes artistes pour qui les règles sont dictées par le sexe.

> To counterpoint the sweeping narratives of mainstream history, women writers have, both before and since [Virginia] Woolf, shown a particular interest in the creation of biographies [...]. (Bennett 25)

"Feminist life-writing," usually appearing in the form of prose autobiographies or biographies, serves as a recovery project, says Susan Bennett, which "acts out what history has tried to ignore" (Bennett 25). In this collection of essays, revised from papers presented for the Association for Canadian Theatre in Toronto, May 2002, each writer engages the persistent questions posed by the lives of women artists. Women academics scrutinize the plays by women playwrights who have created portraits of women artists. In each dramatized auto/biography identity is at least a two-fold proposition. Since the subjects are women, gender necessarily has a shaping role, one that is especially powerful in the case of historical protagonists: "[W]hen the subject is female, gender moves to the center of the analysis" (Alpern qtd. in Bennett 25). However, these protagonists are also artists. Their sense of themselves is explicitly tied to their creative self-expression and to their lives as artists. Moreover, in a situation where gender sets the rules, they are often forced to deal with the obstacles in their path by concealment, disguise, or dissembling, a situation that can produce, even in an apparently assured woman, a sense of impotence. The plays in which they feature, consistently situated in drawing rooms or kitchens rather than board rooms or public places, extend to the larger social and historical trends that blocked or

enabled their creativity. The figure of the artist becomes a political and poetic symbol of the difficulties the female artist faces. Each private life becomes "emblematic of a cultural moment" (Gilmore 2).

The plays discussed dramatize the lives of unique, unconventional women, women who seek fulfilment through individualistic self-expression and thereby separate themselves, often at considerable personal cost, from the life expectations for women of their culture. Politically they demand the right to speak, to be present, and this demand complicates their private, domestic, and social circumstances. Each protagonist is set firmly in her own material context. Unable or unwilling to conform to what is expected of her, she becomes a woman with a purpose, a driving ambition. Historically the quest motif has been reserved for men, but these women artists—from Artemisia Gentileschi to Zelda Fitzgerald and Emily Carr—have, at least in these plays, taken centre stage. Of particular significance, in every timeframe portrayed, at the heart of each protagonist's struggle to realize herself as a woman and as an artist, lies personal relationship. So often the foundation of a woman's life, so often the wellspring of her creativity, personal relationship also can prove a serious obstacle to self-realization and productive creativity.

Relationship is a central topic for feminist inquiry. It is also key to the writing of biography, whether the biography be prose literature or drama. Writing a biography is not simply a matter of collecting the documentary material, however easy or difficult that research might be. The more difficult part is the act of imagination necessary to bring the subject to life. To do that requires a fictional relationship, emotional empathy, even identification with the subject. How else can one imagine the thoughts and invent dialogue? According to biographer Richard Holmes,

> [T]he creation of a fictional or imaginary relationship between the biographer and the subject [necessitates] a continuous living dialogue [...] there is between them a ceaseless discussion, a reviewing and questioning of motives and actions and consequences, a steady if subliminal exchange of attitudes, judgments, and conclusions. It is fictional, imaginary because the subject cannot really, literally, talk back; but the biographer must come to act and think of his subject as if he can. (qtd. in Gould & Staley viii)

In this collection of essays, the imaginary relationships have all been constructed by contemporary Canadian women writers, writers who share a particular time and space with each other but

not (with the exception of the autobiographies) with their artist protagonists. As in all biographical writing, their biographical dramas exist at a shifting boundary between fact and fiction and between the creator and the created. The issue at the heart of each play, compelling for each protagonist, is also an issue of critical importance to the person who writes the play. It is this dynamic engagement that will, as Urjo Kareda would have said, make the play 'hot.' For the play to be 'hot,' the feelings must be real. When one woman artist depicts the life of another, a particularly intense dyadic relationship can emerge, as is strikingly evident in, for instance, Joy Coghill's play *Song of This Place*.

Margaret Atwood compares writing fiction to the creation of a "double," for, "the mere act of writing splits the self into two" (Atwood 32):

> The act of writing takes place at the moment when *Alice* [*Through the Looking Glass*] passes through the mirror. At this one instant, the glass barrier between the doubles dissolves, and Alice is neither here nor there, neither art nor life, neither the one thing nor the other, though at the same time she is all of these at once. At that moment time itself stops, and also stretches out, and both writer and reader have all the time not in the world. (Atwood 57)

Linda Griffiths, speaking of her biographical drama on the poet Gwendolyn MacEwen, *Alien Creature*, writes, "She and I are doing this play. And only both of us can speak" (Playwrights Notes 8). As Griffiths's comment indicates, the playwright is reconstructing a life, not documenting one. In doing so, she is bringing to the fore certain material, finding (even imposing) patterns, deliberately selecting, omitting, and highlighting. She is dealing with the facts that can be known, inventing others, rearranging still others, and forging links. The play is "inspired by the life and works of [the artist]," to use Griffiths's phrase, not totally determined by that life or those works. The imagination of the playwright will travel beyond what is verifiable. Given the problems with establishing accuracy and with what may even be contradictory evidence, the writer may refuse to be handcuffed by history. At issue is not only the selection process, the transforming of particular anecdotes or events into significant scenes, and the staging of all of this with the full self-consciousness of theatre as an art form. A more difficult issue is that the playwright has to take a position on her subject; she will knowingly display her interpretation of the artist's character and critical life events. Perhaps this is why Peter Ackroyd writes

that "the most important thing about any biography is the biographer" (qtd. in Haffenden 24).

Ultimately, plays using autobiography and biography are fascinating hybrid forms. Staging biography means eschewing the fullness and myriad details of the real life to privilege coherence, to facilitate a narrative, to render it powerfully dramatic. The playwright gives shape to the material she claims critically influenced her subject. Autobiography even more clearly hovers between the real and the imagined. It offers the wonderful opportunity to reinvent the self, to revision one's life story. The boundaries are deliberately blurred. Since the writer creates (and often performs) the dramatic fiction of her own life, it can prove very difficult to separate the protagonist from the author. The mingling of the two is often the point. In this complicated reworking of reality, what is invented? Do the "facts" matter? The life the playwright is writing could be as much her life as the life she is living. Which is the "real" life? The writing itself can be a transformative act. In such situations, traditional notions of biographical evidence are simply not sufficient.

What these articles share is an interest in the connection between the art and the artist, between the creator and the created. Since the plays discussed are explorations in feminist life-writing as well as examples of staged auto/biography, the essays interrogate issues and concerns relevant to both genres. Including examples of biography and autobiography, contemporary protagonists as well as historical ones, the essays address the problems such subject choices entail. As the playwrights raise the dead, the academics examine the process. In "*Life Without Instruction*: Artemisia, and the Lessons of Perspective," Sherrill Grace writes of a playwright trained as a painter, Sally Clark, who portrays a late-Renaissance woman artist, Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-c.1653). Although Gentileschi was a successful painter in her time, she remained virtually unknown until feminist scholars rediscovered her. Her most important paintings, Grace writes, have all been interpreted in terms of her traumatic biography. The central, lurid event of her life story was her rape by her artist teacher—her father's friend—and the subsequent rape trial of 1612. This has been read as the defining moment in her career and in her life. However, the retellings of this event and interpretations of its significance, Grace argues, reveal the biases of the interpreters and the interpreters' cultural moment. Recast as a hero in *Life Without Instruction*,

Clark's Artemisia enjoys a glorious revenge. Artemisia reconfigures the unspeakable event and in her paintings finds the satisfactions life denied her. Granted the afterlife which art affords, her revenge is permanent.

According to the historical records, Artemisia Gentileschi prospered professionally. The play's contemporary ideology of rape is, no doubt, out of sync with what would have been the interpretation taken by a young woman of the Italian baroque period. Sherrill Grace's essay presents a fascinating example of the uses made of biographical material and the issue of creative historical revisionism. Grace not only delivers multiple lessons on perspective, she also applies the critical questions of auto/biographics to the painter-playwright, Sally Clark.

Anne Nothof's article, "Appropriated Voice in Sharon Pollock's *Angel's Trumpet*," focuses on a particular incident in the marriage of two well-known literary figures, Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald. Both Fitzgeralds wrote novels based on their marriage. In Sharon Pollock's play the critical incident is their fight over ownership of the source material, the lived experience they share. According to Nothof, Pollock herself is interested in the question of "ownership [...] and whether one individual's urge to self-expression can be justifiably sacrificed if it's deemed necessary for the expression of a genius." The voice to be sacrificed in this case is Zelda's. The ethical questions surrounding the writing of biographical portraits—the right to use and exploit another's life as material—is obviously not limited to the intimate knowing of a married couple. Even Sharon Pollock, according to Nothof, will use Zelda's words to make her own points about appropriation of voice. Problems of artistic integrity move into the areas of moral responsibility and the intersection of art with power. As well as the topic of appropriation, Nothof's essay raises another interesting issue: when the artist, who is known by her works, becomes better known for her life, her biography swamps her creative output. Is this a fate more common for female than male artists? Ultimately, the subtext for Zelda is "Is the struggle to be an artist worth it?" This question is one that can be found in the text and subtext of many other Pollock plays.

The essays of Louise Forsyth and Moira Day both engage autobiography. In Forsyth's "Self-Portrait of the Artist as Militant Feminist in Experimental Theatre," the autobiographical play is a one-person show by Pol Pelletier. *Joie* is a dramatic monologue in which the protagonist is the playwright herself, a well-known professional theatre artist and writer. Recreating her own career in

Quebec theatre since 1976, Pelletier's script documents, enacts, enlarges, and speculates. According to Forsyth, the play is not conventional autobiography. Rather than simply an account of Pelletier's personal life from her own perspective, *Joie* recounts the history of women's theatre in Quebec as well as her place in it. History and fiction intertwine. While stridently feminist in its anger over gender politics in the theatre community and its insistence on women's independent voice, her *persona* celebrates women's spirit and creativity. With Joie as the questor and radical woman of the theatre, Pol Pelletier creates an inventive challenge to traditional expectations of the genre of autobiography.

Autobiography is submerged and carefully encoded in Gwen Pharis Ringwood's *The Lodge*. Moira Day's essay, "The Portrait of the Artist in Old Age," argues that in *The Lodge*, a late comedy, the playwright pits her own younger self and the spectre of her lost possibilities as an artist against herself as an old woman. From Ringwood's personal letters, Day unearths the multiple correspondences between the playwright and her protagonist, the family matriarch Jasmine. The letters reveal that even in her old age Ringwood was still trying to yoke together those hard-to-reconcile identities: the inner life of the artist and the public self attached to a demanding domestic life. In *The Lodge*, on the birthday that will be her last, Jasmine confronts the question of her real value: human, artistic, and economic. Jasmine's sense of being a fractured personality, of having multiple selves constructed over a lifetime, resonates with many women—including, Day convincingly argues, Ringwood herself. It also connects to a problem familiar to autobiography. The genre, says Leigh Gilmore, is one that is, itself, fractured and unstable (Gilmore 41-2).

The last essay in the collection is offered by award-winning actor and director, Joy Coghill. In "Creating *Song of This Place*," Coghill describes the tremendous struggle she experienced while striving to resurrect the formidable West Coast artist, Emily Carr. The record of that struggle becomes the play itself. Like Ringwood's *The Lodge*, the result is veiled autobiography. In *Song of This Place* the writer/director protagonist, Frieda, is experiencing a creative crisis, a loss of vision, just like her creator Joy Coghill. Wanting to capture Emily Carr and to somehow dramatize Carr's approach to painting, both Frieda and Coghill see no way other than direct dialogue, direct encounter with the woman who inspires such admiration and fear. As Margaret Atwood puts it in *Negotiating With the Dead*, "[...] the dead have some very precious and desirable things under their control, down there in their perilous realm,

and among these are some things you yourself may want or need" (167). The journey of negotiation is risky, but the daring artist knows that the guarded treasure is useless "unless it can be brought back into the land of the living" (Atwood 178). The summoning of Emily Carr and the overcoming of the barriers Carr constructs finally release Frieda into creativity, just as the struggle with Carr's ghost released Coghill. Joy Coghill is not Frieda, and the journey they take is not exactly the same. However, the tension of the space between Frieda and Emily Carr and between the actor-playwright Frieda and the actor-playwright Joy Coghill is never far from the surface.

In summary, this collection of articles is testimony to the range and variety of women's auto/biographical writing for the stage. Auto/biography has been called an impossible hybrid genre partly because all creative output includes at least some autobiography, some indication of the insertion of self. As feminist works, the plays studied embrace women's themes and the feminist focus on gender politics. As examples of theatrical auto/biography, they demonstrate some of the creative uses made of biography and some of the genre's theoretical issues. For instance, even the more traditional biographies, as those by Sally Clark and Sharon Pollock, dramatize concerns important to the playwright. *Angel's Trumpet* examines one form of appropriation; *Life Without Instruction* could be said to demonstrate another, as Sally Clark pulls her biographical figure out of her historical moment to render the crisis more in sync with contemporary readings. In the autobiographies as well, whether veiled or explicit, historical accuracy and creative revisionism are evident. One expects in art that material will be transformed, not merely recalled and recorded. However, I am struck not only by the variety possible when staging portraits of the artist, but also by the popularity of auto/biographical drama as a genre. At the same time as one branch of literary theory is calling for the death of the author, attacking intentional fallacies, and moving towards decontextualization, the interest in biography persists. ❁

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