

Romancing the Self in Early Modern Englishwomen's Life Writing. Julie A. Eckerle.

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As Julia Eckerle notes, while early modern women's autobiography has been intensively investigated in recent years, scholarly attention has focused primarily on spiritual writings. Her illuminating new book argues persuasively for a rebalancing of the discussion, insisting on the generic complexity and variety of early modern autobiography, and, indeed, self-formations: "literate women were exposed to a variety of texts and, thus, a variety of models for living" (18), and their life narratives reflected this. Romance in particular provides "an imaginative and narrative landscape within which to explore and represent personal experience" (19–20). If this is perhaps not as untrodden a path as she occasionally suggests, nonetheless the book offers compelling new insight into the importance of romantic themes in women's writing in this period.

Eckerle opens by investigating the romance genre and its readership, exploring its cultural place, its transmission, and the arguments over its effects. (Mothers apparently do not give romances to their daughters; there's a lot to think about in

this simple point.) She highlights the specific tropes and narrative techniques of romance that make it particularly appealing to women life writers, arguing that its embedded and intertwining stories offered a model of first-person female narrative on which women could draw in their own self-representation. The virtuous heroine, unwillingly in conflict with her parents about marriage, abandoned by her false lover, or misunderstood and cruelly misjudged, is a sympathetic figure for many.

The central part of the book explores how these narrative and thematic features are recapitulated and reimagined in women's accounts of their lives. The turbulence of the Civil War made romance a particularly apt model, and Eckerle identifies its traces (the formulaic introduction of birth and breeding, the marriage plot, heroism, persecution) in secular narratives such as those by Lucy Hutchinson, Ann Fanshawe, and Anne Halkett. Romance language supports and articulates ambivalence about marriage choices and outcomes, in the context of a wider social transition from arranged to companionate marriage structures among the gentry; it offers a "passive yet conflicted rhetoric" (113) through which women tell stories of filial and wifely obedience, self-sacrifice, and constancy. Even those who reject romance as a sign of youthful folly and immorality, like Mary Rich and Elizabeth Delaval, "script themselves as romance heroines of independent spirit who unfortunately find themselves the victims of others' dishonesty and machinations" (158).

Central to Eckerle's argument is her insistence that we need to question the distinction between "spiritual" and "secular" writers: for both, "romance's *psychological* resonances were powerful" (85). Thus Anne Wentworth echoes the language of romance in describing her struggle to be united with her heavenly bridegroom (rather than her unsatisfactory earthly one), and the Baptist Agnes Beaumont, like a romance heroine, "insists that her motives were good and her decision to disobey her father painful and difficult" (119). While Eckerle's emphasis on the intertwining of spiritual and secular sources in these texts is convincing, the question of how far romance specifically is the origin of such scripts becomes more problematic in relation to a figure such as Beaumont. The story of the good girl in conflict with her parents is not confined to the literary romance; plays, folk and fairy tale, and ballad all complicate the primacy of romance. Delaval blames the fairy tales told her by a servant for leading her astray and giving her a taste for romance; there is a class dynamic here that Eckerle touches on, but that could have been further explored.

The final chapter, exploring autobiographical themes in women's writing of romance, focuses on two almost unknown texts: Dorothy Calthorpe's roman à clef account of the lives of her father and grandfather, and Anna Weamys's rewriting of the story of a silenced servant girl from Sidney's *Arcadia*. Eckerle's analysis here is perceptive and illuminating as always, but in comparison to her earlier case studies, firmly embedded in a culture of similar writings, these two examples seem more fragmentary. Both the chapter and the book end abruptly in a single paragraph, and the lack of a more extensive concluding discussion leaves the argument at this point perhaps less fully developed than it could be.

For Eckerle, women's use of romance demonstrates not only the fundamental point that subjects are not constructed within a single discourse, but also the possibility of creative agency in self-construction. Women used romance, she argues, in "creative and useful ways" (4); romance allowed them to create sympathetic heroines with justifications for their behavior, and helped them to make sense of their own choices. This insistence on the positive and productive character of romance echoes an argument that continues up to the present day, and it may at times be in tension with some of the meanings available in these texts. Like spiritual discourses, secular romance is often used by women to represent themselves as chaste, silent, and obedient, if also heroic; adventurousness is not the only lesson. But she is surely right to remind us of how many other stories shape our own, and our understanding of the historical complexity of self-narrative is enriched by this fascinating study.

KATHARINE HODGKIN, *University of East London*