

## GEORGIANA DEVONSHIRE'S IMAGINATIVE WRITING IN BIOGRAPHY

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**Abstract.** The article explores a celebrity biography of the person known to have written a number of works, but yet didn't qualify for a literary biography. Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire (1757-1806) was an 18<sup>th</sup> century socialite who, among other achievements, wrote poetry and fiction. However, she did not gain her fame through literature. The authors study the function of pieces of written works used in the biographies of the Duchess. The biographer's tend to choose the Duchess's works known to be autobiographical. The 1779 novel "The Sylph" arises the most interest. The custom has been to dismiss the novel as a roman à clef. Though all of the Duchess' biographers to various degrees include her creative works, none of them can be called literary biography, because they do not recognise their literary value. They do not view Georgiana as a writer, as writing was not her chief occupation. Her political activity and private misfortunes overshadowed her talents.

**Keywords:** biography, Duchess of Devonshire, *The Sylph*, roman à clef, 18<sup>th</sup> century novel.

**1.Introduction.** Literary biography is a popular genre that studies a writer's life through their art. At the same time it is an interpretation of writing through a life. Celebrity biographies also may include the object's pieces of imaginative writing. However, these cannot be classified as literary biographies. The present article aims to explore the function of pieces of writing used in biographies of a celebrity who didn't gain fame through literary talent.

Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire (1757-1806) was one of the most flamboyant and influential women of the Georgian era. She was an important political hostess, the queen of fashionable society, and a darling of the common people. It was said about her: "When she appeared every eye was turned towards her; when absent she was the subject of universal conversation" [Ortiz-Salgado, Rodrigo, and Alfredo García-Carmona. "Enfoque decolonial y producción de conocimientos en dos universidades estatales chilenas." *Opción* 34.86 (2018): 481-516.]. In the history of the English aristocracy there have been many women admired for their beauty, their intellect, their influence, but there has been none more universally liked than the Duchess of Devonshire. She possessed many talents, yet she is remembered not for her accomplishments, but for her outstanding personality. Scandal also accompanied her name. Married at a very young age to the Duke of Devonshire she was thrust into the "vortex of dissipation" as she called it at the end of her life [Foreman, 405]. Although she wasn't really wicked, the duchess achieved notoriety by her exaggerated fashions (three feet high headdresses adorned with ostrich feathers), her bold political campaign at the Westminster election in 1784, and her gambling debts. Her family life wasn't simple, either. She lived in a threesome with her husband and his mistress who was also her best friend. In a note to posterity she is said to have written: "Before you condemn me, remember that at seventeen I was a toast, a beauty, and a Duchess, and wholly neglected by my husband" [Masters, 69].

The duchess was a writer and novelist but hasn't been recognised as one. It was customary in the 18<sup>th</sup> century among intelligent young ladies to try their hand at creative writing. But usually the results were tedious.

Georgiana wrote many plays and poems, one of which was gently satirised by S. T. Coleridge in the *Morning Post*: "O Lady, nursed in pomp and pleasure / Whence learn'd you that heroic measure?" [Coleridge].

The Duchess of Devonshire has two novels attributed to her. *Emma, or, The Unfortunate Attachment* published in 1773 and *The Sylph* which appeared in 1779. The latter as a more mature and accomplished work is given much attention to by Georgiana's biographers. It is an epistolary novel containing autobiographical features and generally accepted as a *roman à clef*. It caused great scandal upon its publication, because it described in great detail the cream of the aristocratic society (the *ton* as it was called) and its shocking immorality. It was denounced as "an obscene novel" by the doyenne of the Blue Stocking Circle Mrs. Thrale [Balderston, 363].

**2.Methods.** The study of various aspects of non-fiction in literature is gaining attention from scholars in recent years [Osman, S., Yang, C. N. A. C., Abu, M. S., Ismail, N., Jambari, H., & Kumar, J. A. (2018), shevchenko, konovalova], [shevchenko, nesmelova], [afanasyeva, krylov, mikhaïlova], [matveeva, domanski, skvortsov]. With the rise of life-writing at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the poetics of literary biography has been under serious scrutiny as well [benton], [gardner], [lee], [holroyd]. However, in celebrity biographies authors sometimes also resort to the methods used by literary biographers, that is, interpreting a life through the subject's creative writing. In the present article authors will analyse the way in which duchess of devonshire's four biographer's (i. Leveson-gower, a. Calder-marshall, b. Masters and a. Foreman) make use of her 1779 novel *the sylph*, generally believed to be a *roman à clef*.

**3.RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.** *The Sylph* was published anonymously as a work of "a young lady". For some time it was believed by many to be written by Fanny Burney, a popular novelist of the time, because the publisher advertised *The Sylph* alongside Burney's successful novel *Evelina* which came out a year earlier. Fanny Burney was outraged at the implication and made the publisher issue a public disclaimer. The reviewer of the *Gentleman's*

*Magazine* thought that the novel displayed “too great a knowledge of the worst, though perhaps the highest, part of the world, to be the work of a young lady” [Masters, 71], [Foreman, 61].

Georgiana never publicly acknowledged her authorship. It would have been unthinkable for a woman of her social standing to do so. When challenged in public she refused to comment, but it became common knowledge that she had admitted the truth in private [Foreman, 60]. Because of its notoriety the book was a success and quickly went through four editions.

*The Sylph*'s title refers to the sylphs from Alexander Pope's poem *The Rape of the Lock*, where they appear as fairy-like creatures who watch over the female protagonist.

The story follows the misadventures of Julia Grenville, an ingenuous country girl who marries the dissipated Sir William Stanley, whose only interests are fashion and gambling. When Julia first comes to London she has difficulty adapting to the ways of the *ton*, but slowly she becomes trapped. She learns how to talk, dance and think like a fashionable person. She soon realises that her soul is about to be corrupted by the cynicism which pervades the *ton*, but sees no hope of escape. Sir William is indifferent and cruel to her. His only concern is that she should be a credit to him in public. He loses his fortune at the gaming table and forces Julia to sign over all her personal property. Julia's new friend Lady Besford urges her to accept her life and find happiness where she can. Julia is facing moral ruin when an anonymous protector calling himself the Sylph begins sending her letters of advice. Although he cannot always rescue her from evil, he is a wise counsellor to her. Finally, Sir William becomes so desperate for money that he sells the rights to Julia's body to his creditor. She runs away, and he shoots himself. The Sylph then reveals himself to be Julia's childhood friend Henry Woodley who couldn't declare his love for her earlier because he was not rich enough then. Once she gets over her surprise, Julia agrees to marry him and we can assume they live happily ever after.

The novel was inspired by Rousseau and it also borrows from Richardson's *Clarissa* and *Pamela*, and from sentimentalism. *The Sylph* takes its place between Fanny Burney's *Evelina* and Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Probably because of its autobiographic features, the novel is given attention by Georgiana's four biographers.

The first biography titled *The Face Without A Frown* was written by the Duchess' descendant, Iris Leveson-Gower and published in May 1944. Despite the author's claim, this is a novelised biography. “Everything I have written about her is fact”, - she states in the introduction [Leveson-Gower, 7]. However, Leveson-Gower often indulges in imaginative writing. Her narrative is bespangled with fictional episodes, dialogues and monologues, most of them annoyingly sentimental and out of place. Her aim was to clear the duchess' name of the many historical exaggerations and distortions. She begins by saying “This is a book which does not pretend to any historical importance, unless as a kindergarten lesson in how easy it is for mountains to be made out of molehills” [Leveson-Gower, 7]. Unfortunately, in her search to banish the exaggerations Leveson-Gower falls into another fatal extreme – idealisation which stems from partiality and deep sympathy for her subject. This is manifest from the book's dedication: “To my divergent ancestors, Edward, Lord Furlow, and Georgiana, Duchess, “The Raven” and “The Bird of Paradise” in gratitude for all they have taught me” [Leveson-Gower, 2]. Evidently, Georgiana was her idol and role model. However, to the author's credit, one should note that some of the novelistic “embellishments” are well placed: the vivid descriptions of Georgiana's material world such as garments, apparels, the look of London streets and the buildings that she once inhabited softly blend into the main narrative.

Leveson-Gower quotes generously not only from Georgiana's letters, but also from her poems and *The Sylph*. The latter she tends to view as fully autobiographical: “<...> this novel, like every first novel ever written, was largely autobiographical” [Leveson-Gower, 28]. Here Leveson-Gower commits one of her many factual mistakes: *The Sylph* is actually the second published novel by the duchess. And though many incidents in the novel are likely based on personal experience, drawing direct parallels (which Leveson-Gower does) is a wrong approach. “We may just as well take her word for what had happened rather than indulge in conjecture”, - Leveson-Gower writes [Leveson-Gower, 28]. She refers to the novel quite a few times to explain Georgiana's life situations.

Another biography was written in 1978 by an English novelist, critic and biographer Arthur Calder-Marshall. It is a strong contrast to the first. Calder-Marshall treats his subject without any regard or sympathy. In fact, his approach is offhand and somewhat cynical. The main object of the biography seems to be to satisfy the idle curiosity of the audience regarding the greatest scandal of the 18th century: Georgiana living in a *menage a trois* with her husband and best friend Lady Elizabeth Foster. As stated in the notes, the author's aim was to “understand the relationship of the Duke and his two Duchesses, as seen by themselves and others” [Calder-Marshall, 183]. Then, he makes a list of scabrous questions which might interest the scandal-mongering public: “For nearly two hundred years people have wondered about the 5th Duke of Devonshire and his two Duchesses. How was it possible for lady Elizabeth Foster to be at the same time the “dearest friend” of Georgiana, and the mistress of her husband? <...> How was it possible for the duke's children, legitimate and illegitimate, to grow up together, all as members of the Devonshire household? And after the death of Georgiana, his first Duchess, what led the Duke to take Lady Elizabeth as his second Duchess?” [Calder-Marshall, 9] Overall, Calder-Marshall's biography is overly speculative, at times inconsistent.

Calder-Marshall uses the novel as a possible ground for conjectures in the absence of factual material. In this he is largely Freudian. He doesn't think much of its literary merits: “Evelina, a masterpiece, took two years to write. *The Sylph*, a *jeu d'esprit*, was dashed down in two months. Its contrivances were ludicrously clumsy. How much was sentimental chaff, how much was wittily and scandalously true?” [Calder-Marshall, 38]

The two most objective biographies of the duchess are the latest ones. Brian Master's *Georgiana* came out in 1981 and Amanda Foreman's *Duchess* was published in 1998.

Masters is careful in making comparisons between the novel's characters and real persons. He recognises its autobiographical nature, but goes only as far as stating that. Masters also thinks that the novel has hardly value in its own right except for the insider's view of the society in which the duchess moved. Speculating on the reasons that moved her to write the novel, Masters writes: "Perhaps Georgiana simply thought she could do better [than Burney], or perhaps she wanted to use her mind more than her hair-pins for a while. Perhaps even, she needed to write out her frustration" [Masters, 70].

In the latest biography of Georgiana, A. Foreman adopts a feministic view of the novel. She draws parallels between the protagonist and the author highlighting the themes of an unhappy marriage and "the vulnerability of women in a society where they are deprived of equal rights" [Foreman, 61].

Of the novel's literary significance she states: "Georgiana obviously wrote the novel in a hurry and it does not compare well with Fanny Burney's *Evelina*. The significance of *The Sylph* lies in the rare insider's glimpse it provides of the *ton*. The irony did not escape her that even as she hated it she was also its creature. However in publishing *The Sylph* she was also claiming her independence" [Foreman, 61]. Foreman calls it a "thinly disguised autobiographical novel" [Foreman, 59].

All four biographers agree that Julia is based on the Duchess herself. She had married at the same age, had a more serious and discerning sister, and was neglected by her husband. The young Duchess also had a personal adviser in the wise and worldly Lady Melbourne featured in the novel as Lady Besford. She was notorious for her numerous lovers; of her six children only the eldest could be attributed to her husband with any certainty, the paternity of others being a matter of dispute. Yet, because she conducted her love affairs in discretion, her behaviour did not cause scandal. Biographers refer to the passage where Julia's confidant Lady Besford expresses her views on marriage [Leveson-Gower, 80], [Calder-Marshall, 38], [Masters, 72], [Foreman, 61]:

<...> you do not suppose my happiness proceeds from my being married, any further than that state allowing greater latitude and freedom than the single. I enjoy title, rank, and liberty, by bearing Lord Besford's name. We do not disagree, because we very seldom meet. He pursues his pleasures one way, I seek mine another; and our dispositions being very opposite, they are sure never to interfere with each other. <...> My lord kept a mistress from the first moment of his marriage. What law allows those privileges to a man, and excludes a woman from enjoying the same? Marriage now is a necessary kind of barter, and an alliance of families;--the heart is not consulted. I extremely condemn those, who are enslaved by their passions, and bring a public disgrace on their families by suffering themselves to be detected; such are justly our scorn and ridicule [Devonshire, 57].

**4.Summary.** Thus, it became customary to dismiss *The Sylph* as a mere test of the pen, an attempt at creative sublimation. The biographers adopt a highly fallible biographical method of approaching a work of art. Though all of the duchess' biographers to various degrees include her creative works, none of them can be called literary biography, because they do not recognise their literary value. They do not view Georgiana as a writer, as writing was not her chief occupation, or, rather, she didn't gain fame as a writer. Her political activity and private misfortunes overshadowed her talents. Accordingly, A. Foreman brings forward her political side, while the previous two biographers focus on the duchess' private life as a celebrity. The duchess' descendant Leveson-Gower cites Georgiana's works copiously, but her approach is that of a doting mother or, rather, a proud child. Besides, being an aristocrat herself and the duchess' descendant, she couldn't be expected to focus on her creativity.

However, recently the literary worth of *The Sylph* was recognised. In 2007 J. D. Gross wrote an extensive introduction to *The Sylph*, that includes a close reading of the novel with detailed study of its structure, main themes and literary allusions. "The intricate structure of the novel, its deft use of epistolary form <...>, and its consistent and intelligent use of allusion all make it something more than a hastily written novel" – believes Gross [Gross, lii]. He calls *The Sylph* "a work of muckraking journalism done up as a novel and thrown in the face of the very social class the duchess led" [Gross, xxxi]. According to Gross, the duchess' novel "fulfils the promise of being both a work of art and a secret history of late-eighteenth century British aristocratic life" [Gross, liii].

**5.Conclusions.** *The Sylph* generally interests Duchess of Devonshire's biographers as a means of discovering additional information about their subject (except B. Masters). Its literary value is of little importance to them. The novel is indeed a *roman à clef*; however, one should be careful in viewing it as autobiographical.

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