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# IN LIEU OF PROLOGUE<sup>1</sup>

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*There is a history in all men's lives,  
Figuring the nature of the times deceased;  
The which observed, a man may prophesy,  
With a near aim, of the main chance of things  
As yet not come to life, which in their seeds  
And weak beginnings lie intresured.  
Shakespeare, Henry IV*

Biography is, simply speaking, a genre of historiography concerned with representing the lives of individual people.<sup>2</sup> In very plain terms, a biography is expected to be *written, factual and about a real person*. Not all works assigned to the genre adhered strictly to these principles: many fictionalized substantial portions of *vitae*, sometimes to the extent of the whole text.<sup>3</sup> This observation leads to a familiar but persistent question: is biography a legitimate academic enterprise or is it bordering fiction? Critics have long questioned its scholarly value, perhaps most famously Geoffrey Elton, who argued that “even at its best, biography is a poor way of writing history.”<sup>4</sup> From this perspective, biography fares poorly in comparison to “history

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Kind, “Biography,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. David Herman et al. (London, New York: Routledge, 2008), 42–44.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., the so-called “secondary biographies” in the *Historia Augusta*, a late Roman collection of imperial *vitae*.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (New York, 1967), 169.

proper”); isn’t it the case that while history is concerned with large-scale political, social, economic, and intellectual processes far surpassing individual lives, biography does little more than sing praise of illustrious men doomed to be forgotten and dismissed by later generations? While *ideally* history is not only a history of realia, but also a history of concepts and problems, in biography, the central problem concerns experience itself: *whose* experience is narrated, and under what conditions. Yet such objections rest on assumptions that are themselves historically conditioned.

In the time spanning the period between the 4th century BC when biography began to take shape as a distinct genre and the 18th century when the three core criteria listed above were carved into stone, the principles governing the selection and transmission of texts underwent significant change. Classical antiquity had already defined what was to be considered representative and exemplary. The transmission of texts in the intervening period was therefore far from neutral: it was shaped by changing cultural priorities, contingent interests, and the often-uncoordinated interaction of numerous voices.

To recognize exemplarity in an individual required a particular intellectual disposition. Such a disposition emerges clearly, when the Athenian historian Xenophon (ca. 430–354 BC) composed at least three monographic biographies, each of them with a very distinct purpose. The *Memorabilia* offers a partial and non-linear defence of Socrates; the *Cyropaedia*, a partly fictional account of Cyrus the Great, functions as a mirror for princes (and as a source of inspiration for Machiavelli’s *Il Principe*); and the *Agesilaus* portrays a physically unimpressive Spartan king whose influence far exceeded his appearance. In each case, biography aspires to some transcendent and paradigmatic function.

Among ancient models, Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* (Bioi paralleloi) stands out as the most influential example of biographical writing. Their careful preservation of factual detail, interpretive ambition, explicit moral and philosophical framing, and literary refinement ensured their canonical status for later generations; it may well be that one of the many rediscoveries we owe to the Renaissance scholarship is the appreciation for (Plutarch’s) model of writing biography.<sup>5</sup> A comparable role in the Renaissance was played by Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists*, the most significant achievement of early

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<sup>5</sup> Ruth Morse, “Medieval Biography: History as a Branch of Literature,” *The Modern Language Review* 80, no. 2 (1985): 9.

modern biography. Although Plutarch is best known for pairing his subjects, he also devoted individual works to single figures, thereby expanding the genre's formal possibilities. The internal coherence of his corpus, in which biographies illuminate one another through implicit comparison, addresses problems that remain relevant in contemporary situations far beyond dry academic scholarship.

Roman republican culture, by contrast, largely resisted the glorification of individuals in favour of collective ideals: deeds, not persons, were intended to inspire (yet this position developed alongside a flourishing Hellenistic tradition of Alexander biographies, which would later generate the medieval Alexander romances). A revealing instance of a socially meaningful and exemplary *vita* is preserved by Aulus Gellius in his *Noctes Atticae*, drawing on Cato the Elder's *Origines*, now known only in fragments. One such fragment (frgm. 83, book 4) recounts an episode from the First Punic War involving a Roman tribune (whether Quintus Caedicius or Quintus Laberius remains uncertain): when a Roman army finds itself strategically compromised, the tribune proposes sacrificing a single cohort of soldiers to draw the Carthaginian forces away, thereby allowing the main army to escape. The plan succeeds: the cohort is annihilated, but the army survives.

The uncertainty surrounding the tribune's name is telling. The individual, however heroic, was secondary to the function he fulfilled within the collective, yet it is unmistakably true that *collective virtue* is exemplified through an *individual's achievement*. Another point is equally telling, namely the evident shift in narrative emphasis that evolved, quite naturally, in the period spanning Cato and Gellius. While the literary circumstances of the 2nd century BC still favoured the exemplification of collectively recognized cardinal virtues by means of an anonymized individual, the question of *who it actually was* mattered to Gellius in the 2nd century AD.

Suetonius' scrutiny of the lives of twelve emperors (*De vita Caesarum*) and of famous men (*De viris illustribus*) exhibits this fully executed shift, shedding light on the individual not as a (nameless) exemplar of a socially accoladed virtue, but as an individuum interesting *in* and *as* him- or herself. This fundamental shift does not originate in the imperial period; Sallust's narratives, constructed around exemplary individuals and diagnosing the moral decline of the Republic, already show the emergence of new concepts

of individuality in the late Republic. Anyhow, this heightened sense of the importance of the individual *per se* sharpened (literary) interest in personal idiosyncrasies and recurrent traits: Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* at times evoke distinctly Theophrastean reminiscences,<sup>6</sup> enabling a multifaceted reading experience. A paradigm of biographical writing, as it were, they may be read at face value, appreciated for their piquancies, or as exercises in character analysis, and even as a form of micro-history; from this perspective, the loss of Suetonius' *Lives of Famous Whores* – if such a work ever existed – can only be regretted.

The adaptability of this form explains its enduring appeal. In periods of crisis, Renaissance humanists such as Jean Bodin returned to Roman historians in search of interpretive models. Sallust, in particular, approaches the insight later captured by Shakespeare: that there is (a) history in all men's lives.<sup>7</sup> His analysis of the Republic's collapse in the *Bellum Iugurthinum* demonstrates how biographical and prosopographical approaches can illuminate structural transformation.

The narrative appeal of chronological and biographical narrative contributed to the popularity of authors such as Plutarch and Suetonius. Suetonius' imperial biographies, though lacking philosophical depth, offered vivid and often unsettling portraits grounded in reliable chronology. Over time, however, the genre gravitated toward increasingly simplified forms, culminating in works such as the *Historia Augusta*, where biography was reduced to a sequence governed primarily by succession; consequently, biography lost much of its earlier complexity. The classical model of Roman historiography remained influential long after it ceased to be synonymous with expansion and conquest. History may have lost much of its philosophical ambition, but it did not relinquish its pragmatism. Though the tradition was clearly destined for gradual decline, enough of it endured to keep the chronologically ordered, text-based model alive – at least for a time. One need only think of Ammianus Marcellinus, capable of producing an almost Tacitean masterpiece mere decades before the collapse of the Western Empire.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Oliver O'Sullivan, *Drawn from the Life: Literary Techniques and the Representation of Complex Characters in Suetonius' De vita Caesarum*, PhD diss. (National University of Ireland Maynooth, 2019): 42ss.

<sup>7</sup> The title of this book – *There's History in All Men's Lives* – was suggested by ddr. Igor Grdina.

Biography, however, followed a different path. The nuanced and intertwined narratives of individual lives and events became increasingly difficult to sustain and simpler forms naturally prevailed. In this sense, the development of biography as a genre completed an almost full circle. If historiography had begun with chronicles of kings and queens, biblical patriarchs, and their descendants – largely indifferent to intricate chains of cause and effect – the same can be said of late Roman and early medieval biography; in large measure hagiographical, they returned to highly schematic paradigms. A striking example is Prudentius' *Peristephanon*, a collection of martyr narratives combining lyrical sophistication with graphic violence. Written in a post-Constantinian environment, these texts sought to reconstruct martyrdom for audiences no longer shaped by persecution. The humble martyr was transformed into a heroic figure capable of replacing the exemplars of classical antiquity. Moral education is significantly more pronounced than in classical texts,<sup>8</sup> which is observable in numerous medieval hagiographies and biographies, some of which even depart from the “usual literary form,” memorializing the life of the individual in verse.

This development highlights a fundamental tension within biography: the relationship between lived experience and exemplary construction – a tension that has accompanied the genre since its beginnings and has invited criticism of the kind mentioned above. The ever-present source of protest against biography's standing “shoulder-to-shoulder” with history – namely, that it is far too open to the narrative fictionalization of lives<sup>9</sup> – was further compounded by the critical recognition of an ever-shifting understanding of the individual and their role in society. Surely, a vehicle designed for narrating an individual life in the 4th century BC would be entirely obsolete in, say, the 19th century, when European nation-states were abandoning *chanson de geste*-styled narratives about kings and queens and replacing them with role models intended to serve and validate emerging national identities. Furthermore, isn't the 19th-century-styled biography, however academic, itself hopelessly out of date at the beginning of the 21st century, with its radical redefinitions of the individual and national identities? Most recent advances in the genre, which went beyond the benefits of the 19th

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<sup>8</sup> Kind, “Biography,” 43.

<sup>9</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, “Why Biography?” *The American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (2009): 625.

century biography, welcome *any* human value that would make a woman or a man stand out, inviting narrative portrayal.

Yet, if even this most recent – and most democratic, one would argue – criterion is abandoned, wouldn't that mean that biography is done for? It was famously quipped – even in popular culture – that when everyone is special, no one really is. Is therefore biography a thing of the past? Is biography still worth academic pursuit?

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This is precisely the question this book seeks to address. We are, admittedly, far removed from the criteria by which *virii illustres* – men of merit – once earned their place in a biographical hall of fame, whatever that merit was. Perhaps it is now, more than ever, worth asking quite directly: if biography is to be advocated *as* history,<sup>10</sup> does it not follow that its worth lies not in the establishment of merit or the attribution of human value, but rather in the narrative vehicle itself, the tools it brings and techniques it applies? Is it not, perhaps, the case that its appeal lies in its capacity to “jumpstart” an entirely new area of historical studies?<sup>11</sup> Isn't that what makes biography worth a try – even when there's every good reason *not* to write biography?<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps it is not too bold to say that it is undeniably so, which is what the selection of papers in this book aims to show. By asserting that “a new way of writing and thinking about biography was implied by the creation of the State” Jérôme Roudier's essay *Is Biography an Appropriate Tool for Studying the History of Political Ideas?* implies that any new form of social organisation inevitably changes the way relationships between societies and individuals are perceived. The idea, however, doesn't combat the notion of the “elite” which makes the biographical cut; elites operate across many domains. In this respect, Jukka Kortti's paper *Between Private and Public. Biographies about and by the Elite* teaches an important lesson that the

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<sup>10</sup> Robert I. Rotberg, “Biography and Historiography: Mutual Evidentiary and Interdisciplinary Considerations,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 40, no. 3 (2010): 305.

<sup>11</sup> Susan Ware, “Writing Women's Lives: One Historian's Perspective,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 40, no. 3 (2010): 414–416.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Prestwich, “Medieval Biography,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 40, no. 3 (2010): 327.

composition of “the elite” is not fixed: who counts as elite, and why, shifts over time in response to changing historical contexts.

Three papers by Anja Grebe (*Literary Traditions, Genre Conventions and Author Authority in Early Modern Artists’ Biographies – The Case of Albrecht Dürer*), Ane Ohrvik (*Biography and the History of Knowledge: The Formation of Knowledge Communities through the Life and Work of Peter Christen Asbjørnsen (1812–1885)*) and Neža Zajc (*The Biographical Phenomenon of St Maximus the Greek (ca. 1469–1555/6)*) are essentially about biography as a tool for the production of (new) knowledge. Biographical framework makes it possible to update and rectify heavily slanted (as in the case of Albrecht Dürer – “one of the best documented artists”) or previously obscured knowledge (as in the case of Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and his correspondence); the case-study of Maximus the Greek showcases the painstaking work of digging for new data, however delicate and hard to find, that ultimately contributes to a more complete understanding – not of a biography but a wider historical context.

In 2007 a noteworthy project took off i.e., the *Journal of Historical Biography*, the publishing of which was regrettably discontinued in 2014. The project which saw the publishing of two volumes per year showed that the field of biography – however confused it may be<sup>13</sup> – shows what we hope is also shown in the papers authored by Filip Hameršak and Nataša Jermen (*Biographical Research and Presentation in the Miroslav Krleža Institute of Lexicography: Achievements and Challenges*) and Petra Testen Koren, Barbara Šterbenc Svetina and Martin Grum (*The Path to The New Slovenian Biographical Lexicon: The Slovenian Biographical/Lexicographical Tradition*): that this is still a vibrant and energetic academic field.

Or should we say “again a vibrant and energetic academic field”? In their paper *Project InTaVia – Or How to Digitally and Visually Reframe the History of All (Wo)Men’s Life and Work* Eva Mayr and Florian Windhager observe that national biographies – essentially 18th and 19th century projects of compiling, curating and printing large corpora of lives – underwent a major transition with the arrival of computing technology in the late 20th century, which “further enhanced the scope and benefits of national biographical

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<sup>13</sup> Lucy Riall, “The Shallow End of History? The Substance and Future of Political Biography,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 40, no. 3 (2010): 375.

databases.” Their concluding remarks perfectly and succinctly summarize the gist of this introduction:

*Digital collections, together with digital methods and tools offer new ways for accessing cultural data, for linking and curation and for scalable analysis and communication, but they cannot substitute the traditional, non-digital research on cultural information. They can complement and augment traditional research, but non-digital methods are at least equally important as digital ones. In a postdigital society, digital humanists with their data and tools have to work hand in glove with non-digital cultural heritage experts and the research methods from both sides immensely benefit from productive joint ventures. [...] We consider digital methods to provide a unique opportunity to strengthen the historiographic perspective in modern times, to link those lives to further (re)sources, widen our analysis, and expand our understanding, as well as our communication activities on the biographies of actors we care about.<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>14</sup> Mayr, Windhager, “Project InTaVia – Or How to Digitally and Visually Reframe the History of All (Wo)Men’s Life and Work,” 218–219.

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