GENDER OPEN REPOSITORIUM

Persona and the Performance of Identity : Parallel Developments in the Biographical Historiography of Science and Gender, and the Related Uses of Self Narrative

Bosch, Mineke

2013

https://doi.org/10.25595/1048

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Bosch, Mineke: *Persona and the Performance of Identity : Parallel Developments in the Biographical Historiography of Science and Gender, and the Related Uses of Self Narrative*, in: L' homme : Zeitschrift für feministische Geschichtswissenschaft, Jg. 24 (2013) Nr: 2, 11-22. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25595/1048.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here: https://doi.org/10.7767/lhomme.2013.24.2.11

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY 4.0 Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY 4.0 License (Attribution). For more information see:

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.en

GenderOpen – Repositorium für die Geschlechterforschung: www.genderopen.de

FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN

HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN

Persona and the Performance of Identity
Parallel Developments in the Biographical Historiography of Science and Gender, and the Related Uses of Self Narrative

Mineke Bosch*

When in 2005 Harvard president and White House economic advisor Larry Summers gave a speech at a conference on Harvard's diversity policy for its academic staff, it was so badly received by the esteemed members of the audience that it was partly the reason why he was forced to resign. In this keynote lecture he claimed that women's under-representation in his university's top jobs was a matter of "genes". In one of his answers during the discussion after the speech, he cited developmental psychologist Judith Harris as an authority for his assertion that socialisation was an overrated factor.[1] With her huge 1998 bestseller, "The Nurture Assumption", she managed to convince not only academia but also the general public that it is not so much the parents (mothers) that exert the greatest influence on their children, but first and foremost the peers, i.e. the children's friends both male and female.[2] But that was not of much help for Summers. Shortly afterwards his speech was discussed in "The Boston Globe", where it was characterised as being both sexist and discriminatory. A day later, the presidents of the Massachussetts Institute of Technology, and the Universities of Stanford and Princeton distanced themselves from Summers's claims. Under pressure, he handed over his speech and repeatedly offered his apologies. But to no avail. His resignation, and Obama's decision less than a year later not to appoint him as Secretary of the Treasury, were perhaps not entirely due to this single *faux pas*. Yet according to general assumption it was largely to blame. Ironically, a year

* This article is a translated and adapted version of the Dutch publication: Persona en de performance van identiteit. Parallelle ontwikkelingen in de nieuwe biografische geschiedschrijving van gender en van wetenschap, in: Tijdschrift voor Biografie, 1, 3 (2012), 10–21. I am grateful to Annie Wright for the translation.

1 Cf. Lawrence H. Summers, Remarks at the National Board of Economic Research (NBER) Conference on Diversifying the Science & Engineering Workforce, Cambridge, MA, January 14, 2005, at: http://www.harvard.edu/president/speeches/summers_2005/nber.php, access: July 3, 2013.

2 Judith R. Harris, The Nurture Assumption. Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do, New York 1998. The book was picked up by not only the mass media but also development psychologists writing for numerous academic magazines. It was therefore taken seriously.

Online gestellt mit finanzieller Unterstützung der Universität Basel (Lehrstuhl Prof. Dr. Claudia Opitz-Belakhal).

later, Summers was succeeded by Drew Gilpin Faust, a woman and a historian, who had won her spurs for research including the field of women's and gender history.

In rhetorical terms Summers's vague reference to Judith Harris was a smart move. With "The Nurture Assumption", she had succeeded in changing an essential paradigm in developmental psychology with the result that, as an independent scientist from outside the academic world, she went from being a virtually unknown to a star scientist in one fell swoop. Lies Wesseling's analysis of how Judith Harris pulled that off motivated me to have a closer look at the concept of the 'scientific persona', the public role that scientists play to come across as trustworthy as possible.[3]

Before exploring this concept in depth, I will firstly point out how Harris orchestrated her scholarly success. Wesseling's (rhetorical rather than historical) analysis shows that, in "The Nurture Assumption", Judith Harris tapped the ancient repertoire of the selfless and self-absorbed scientist by portraying herself between the lines as a sick old woman, who is long past the age when one can still aspire to social success. Therefore, she describes herself as a scientist, who no longer cherished the desire for fame or recognition, but who could not resist the urge to publish her revolutionary insights in development psychology.[4] This went down well with reviewers. There was talk of her "brilliant stroke", which was also described as a "revelation". Moreover, the fact that she was a grandmother was mentioned frequently, for instance: "An Elfin-like Grandmother Lobbing Molotov Cocktails."[5] Taken together, all these remarks evoked the familiar image of an ascetic scientist, who had been imbued with a 'divine spark'.

1. Steven Shapin and Boyle's Biography

Describing lives of all shapes and sizes has been an integral part of 'scientific lore' since the French began writing their *éloges* for the members of the Pantheon.[6] Although these early panegyrics were a cross between a eulogy and an obituary, all necessary research had been conducted for the *éloge* so as to be able to appraise the significance of the terrestrial existence of the person in question. Partly because of this, the early history of science consisted of *either* a succession of biographical portraits – which were about demonstrating how science should be practised rather than about how it actually oc-

3 Cf. Elisabeth Wesseling, Judith Rich Harris: The Miss Marple of Developmental Psychology, in: Science in Context, 17, 3 (2004), 294–314.

4 Unlike most historians, Wesseling bases her analysis of the persona on a rhetorical analysis of, in Harris's case, The Nurture Assumption and makes a convincing argument that ancient repertoires of scholarly ethos can continue to exist through, for instance, popular culture where she cites the example of the detective. This is why she describes Harris as the Miss Marple of development psychology.

5 Cited by Wesseling, Harris, see note 3, 305.

6 Cf. Peter France, From Eulogy to Biography: The French Academic Éloge, in: Peter France and William St Clair eds., Mapping Lives. The Uses of Biography, Oxford 2002, 83–102.

curred – *or*, paradoxically, as a series of inventions and discoveries with an inner logic that people apparently only contributed to by chance.

The scholarly biography of scientists has only really been taken seriously since 1980. That was the moment of Thomas Hankins's passionate plea for writing biographies of scientists in which science is considered through the prism of the scientist without ignoring one aspect in favour of the other.[7] His plea was programmatic because, for him, it was also a matter of linking the internal (Whiggish) history of science with the professional history of science.[8] But although everyone more or less understood what he meant, it remained unclear how to comprehend the relationship between the scientist as a person and science as a process of knowledge development. Interpreting the importance of how scientists lived their lives for their discoveries remained nebulous.

The real breakthrough came in 1991 with Steven Shapin's book "The Social History of Truth". Based on the person of Robert Boyle, an early modern British natural philosopher, Shapin explores this issue as a question concerning the relation between "the identity of individuals making assertions" and "the credibility of those assertions".[9] In the chapter about Boyle, he substantiates his argument that the "scientific identity", or the "scientific self", is always in a state of formation, and deploys cultural vocabularies and repertoires that are mixed and assembled through cutting and pasting (*bricolage*). He supports this view of the scientific identity by referring to a definition formulated by George Herbert Mead, who was one of the founders of symbolic interactionism.[10] According to Mead, identity is a relational category that can be elucidated through the metaphor of a sports team where all members develop their roles in the team in relation to each other and to the game's strategy. From this Shapin concludes that an individual's identity is always a social and socio-historical phenomenon, and that biography should therefore refrain from deploying a psychological or psychoanalytical idiom where personality or character is formed in early childhood.

Shapin extracts a second theoretical approach to identity from the influential sociological study "The Everyday Presentation of Self", which was written by Mead's student Erving Goffman. Here, Goffman shows that individuals will always select a public self-presentation that is consistent with their expectation of the perception of the relevant public and which, in a certain sense, they are also able to command through the

7 Cf. Thomas Hankins, In Defence of Biography: The Use of Biography in the History of Science, in: History of Science, 17 (1979), 1–16.

8 Hankins, Defence, see note 7, 5 and 12.

9 Steven Shapin, Who Was Robert Boyle? The Creation and Presentation of an Experimental Identity, in: Steven Shapin, A Social History of Truth. Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England, Chicago/London 1994, 126–192.

10 Here, Shapin is referring to George Herbert Mead, The Social Self, in: The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods, 10 (1913), 374–380. Available online at: http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/mead3.htm, access: July 3, 2013.

self-presentation in question.[11] Shapin emphasises that in his book Goffman also demonstrates that the development of identity is a collective process. We are who we are through the help of others and in the eyes of others.

Following this theoretical introduction, Shapin makes a plausible case that, so as to be able to break new ground as an experimental scientist, Boyle deployed both old and new repertoires of conduct in order to construct a scientific identity and convince his fellow scientists of his reliability and credibility. By analysing early autobiographical and other writings, Shapin shows how Boyle absorbed various aspects of identity or, to put it another way, how he 'did' identity. Hence, the rich and independent aristocratic scholar, the disciplined and modest Christian and the experimental scientist were all scrutinised. When combined, these various roles resulted in a new type of 'gentleman scholar' or Christian virtuoso, who managed to maintain a good balance between an active, worldly life and a contemplative life in seclusion. His emphasis on knowledge sharing as a new technology of knowledge production was underlined by his aristocratic origins that compelled him to throw open the doors of his 'houses of experiment' and to receive a stream of visitors. His reliability was mainly due to the freedom of movement that was made possible by his fortune. His financial independence gave him a head start on Oxbridge academic scholars, who developed their scientific activities in salaried employment and therefore could not clear up doubts on the independence of their opinions.

To my mind, Shapin has altered the landscape of scientific biography through his work on Boyle. He showed that the study of relational, collective and contextual 'scientific identity' contributes to the understanding of the scientist as a person and also to the way in which that scientist – who cannot be separated from the person – will present himself to his colleagues and to the public at large as a reliable informant on the subject of science, who can therefore play an important role in the process of knowledge development. Hence, Shapin bridged the gap between the person and the content of scientific knowledge, and that is why he appealed for the biographical study of scientists as a form of "practical epistemology".

2. The Scientific Persona

That appeal may have contributed to the research project at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin (1996), where a year-long study was conducted on 'the scientific persona'.[12] This concept, which refers to the interdependence of the scientist as a person and the personality that he or she assumes in the public, scientific context, was inspired by a similar desire to connect 'science as knowledge' with 'science as

11 Cf. Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, New York et al. 1959.

12 Cf. Science in Context, 16, 1–2 (2003): special issue Scientific Persona, ed. by Lorraine Daston and H. Otto Sibum.

social process', although its theoretical basis was different. In their introduction to the thematic issue of "Science in Context", where the findings of this project were presented, the science historians Lorraine Daston and Otto Sibum borrow their concept of the persona from anthropologist Marcel Mauss and his attempts to historicise categories of the mind.[13] Based on anthropological and historical research, Mauss observed a development from the tribal *personnage* (where the private person was eliminated for the public role that was handed down from generation to generation) via the *persona* (where the public role and private person coincide) towards the Enlightened invention of the 'I' or the 'self' or the individualised person (who is different from the public self). Mauss argued that putting on a mask during an initiation rite into a primitive tribe was always a transformative act connected with adopting a public role.

It seems to me that Daston and Sibum's 'persona' concept has taken this transformation as its point of departure. They view the 'persona' as an intermediary between the individual and the institution, and stress the deeper and more permanent aspects of developing a 'persona': "Intermediate between the individual biography and the social institution lies the persona: a cultural identity that simultaneously shapes the individual in body and mind and creates a collective with a shared and recognizable physiognomy."[14] With some emphasis they state that 'personae' are neither individuals, nor stereotypes, nor simply social roles: They are more like "categories of people, of collective ways of thinking, feeling, judging, perceiving, working."[15] In Daston's and Sibum's opinion, not every profession requires a 'persona', and adopting a 'persona' is not simply a matter of playing a role or putting on a mask that can be swapped the next day.

The thematic issue focuses on the 'scientific persona' as based on a wide variety of institutional contexts: from the nineteenth century German *Naturforscher* association, whose members, at the very least, had to know the "*Liedertafel* songs" of their profession, to the ladies of letters in seventeenth century Italy, for whom a repertoire or literary model had to exist before they could be recognised as *femmes savantes*.[16] The multiplicity and malleability of the various 'masks' imply that the creation of scientific personae may not be as unequivocal and linear as their chronological structure suggests. Nonetheless, what is amply demonstrated is the concept's fecundity for revealing the intersections between the individual person, the cultural, scientific institution and the work that is conducted by the residents of this very institution for shaping a suitable identity.

Janet Browne's contribution, "Charles Darwin as a Celebrity", can serve as an example. She mainly examines the final phase of his life when he had effectively become a

13 Cf. Lorraine Daston and H. Otto Sibum, Introduction. Scientific Personae and Their Histories, in: idem eds., Persona, see note 12, 1–8.

14 Daston/Sibum, Introduction, see note 13, 2.

15 Daston/Sibum, Introduction, see note 13, 3.

16 Cf. Myles W. Jackson, Harmonious Investigators of Nature: Music and the Persona of the German *Naturforscher* in the Nineteenth Century, in: Daston/Sibum, Persona, see note 12, 121–145; Paula Findlan, Becoming a Scientist: Gender and Knowledge in Eighteenth-Century Italy, in: ibid., 59–87.

superstar.[17] Through her analysis in "Science in Context", Browne argues that the fame that gradually turned Darwin into a 'celebrity' did not just fall into his lap. Instead, during his last twenty years, he and his friends worked hard on constructing his public identity as a top scientist. Hence, he had a great many expressive photos made of himself to hand out and send to correspondents. He also signed and gave away cheap copies of his book, and collected poems and songs that had been written about him. Moreover, he was presented to the Prince of Wales, which was and still is an integral part of the celebrity's repertoire. His status as a scientific star was reflected not only by an increasing number of visitors who wanted to see him in the flesh but also by cartoons depicting him. It was particularly these visits – that Browne views as a Victorian counterpart to the contemporary interview while also duplicating Boyle opening the doors of the aristocratic, scholarly house – which Darwin deployed in order to create the image of a retired, impartial scientist who was completely devoted to nature. He acted like a lord and engineered these visits right down to the last minute so that the visitor was only granted a split-second glimpse of the man himself.

In Darwin's case, a sophisticated construction of the self in no way detracts from "The Origin of Species" as an achievement. His fame was and is based on that although, in Browne's opinion, the autobiographical elements in the book, which have been so frequently overlooked, may well have played an important role. Browne's perspective on the masterpiece immediately brings to mind Harris's bestseller "The Nurture Assumption" that is larded with personal details:

> The *Origin* was highly personalised, one long invitation to believe, to trust in its author, and to accept his findings however contentious or counter-intuitive they might seem. This personalised style allowed Darwin to demonstrate his respectability, his responsible investigation of the facts, his commitment to verification.[18]

3. Theatre Language or Gender Identity as Performance

With Goffman, Shapin secured a concept which considers identity a state of permanent formation and derives from the language of the theatre. Human behaviour is described in terms of a front and a back stage, of interactions between actors, and between actors and audience that depend on a specific historical context.

Although this view may have been a novelty in the history of science, there had already been a number of examples of historical studies exploring this interdependence. For instance, in his 1980 work, "Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare", the literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt used the concept of 'self-fashioning' to

17 Janet Browne, Charles Darwin as a Celebrity, in: Daston/Sibum, Persona, see note 12, 175–194.

18 Browne, Darwin, see note 17, 182.

understand how Renaissance nobles, courtiers and even the king himself modelled their public identities on the ideas and arts that surrounded them.[19] Members of the nobility were expected to wear the finest fabrics, to be well versed in the arts and to be proficient in all kinds of aristocratic pursuits. Above all, they were expected to possess *sprezzatura*, the art of unobtrusive pliancy. Castiglione's "Book of the Courtier" reveals in detail the extent to which rules of conduct and precepts could regulate identities and bring them into accordance with gender and position in the class hierarchy.

It is no coincidence that, at the same time, similar concepts of identity were developed in gender studies which also used theatre metaphors. In the 1970s, gender identity was summarised in a somewhat functionalist, sociological jargon as the acquiring and playing of roles, which in turn led to terms such as 'role models' and 'role behaviour'. Even today, the term 'sex role' is used continuously and particularly whenever sexual identity is discussed. During the 1980s, these metaphors were replaced by opinions that considered gender identity in terms of construction and technology, thus signifying the malleability of gender identity that was not anymore grounded in a fixed natural, biological sex.[20] After the certainty of two empirically determined sexes was undermined (and consequently the sex/gender distinction had dissolved) the dramaturgic vocabulary returned. As an example West and Zimmerman's formulation of 'doing gender' can be mentioned that was inspired by symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology as practiced by sociologists like Goffman.[21] Especially influential (or even paradigmatic) in gender studies was Judith Butler's conception gender as 'performance'.[22] In "Gender Trouble", Butler argues that what men and women are is in no way fixed; men and women interpret or "do" their gender identity through constant repetition and imitation (rehearsing) of traditional norms in relation to the context in which they find themselves. In her work, Butler embroiders on Simone de Beauvoir's view on sex/gender, as is crystallised in the quotation that decorated many a student's room in the 1970s: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." ("On ne naît pas femme, on le devient."). This statement locates 'becoming a woman' as a physical and mental process in a web of cultural and social practices.[23]

19 Stephen Greenblatt, Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare, Chicago/London 2005.

20 Consider, for instance, the way in which constructions of femininity and masculinity or 'technology and gender' were discussed.

21 Candace West and Don Zimmerman, Doing Gender, in: Gender & Society 1, 2 (1987), 125–151.

22 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, London 1990. For Butler, 'performance' is not really a theatre metaphor. Instead 'performance' specifically refers to the 'performative verbs' that complete a speech act. 'Interpretation' is therefore somewhat too pallid when compared to the noun 'performance', which implies a continual imbuing of form. But 'do' also resonates here along with repetition, which is important when interpreting existing repertoires.

23 This is the first sentence of the second volume of de Beauvoir's The Second Sex. A New Translation by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevalier, New York 2010. The long-outdated English translation of this sentence is: "One does not come into the world as a woman, one becomes one."

Just as in the historical study of science, the genre of biography was not initially popular in the academic practice of women's and gender history. This was partly due to the biography's role in hagiographic remembrance practices but was also caused by what Birgitte Possing has described as "the robust tradition of gender asymmetry".[24] This gender asymmetry was the expression and result of ideas on the 'autonomous individual' and of the unequivocal linking of public and historical interest. In this tradition, historical importance was a self-evident, ontological fact instead of being a social and cultural category that was associated with notions of masculinity and femininity. In this discourse, writing a biography about an 'important woman' would almost inevitably lead to emphasising her status as an exception to the rule of female insignificance.[25]

But here, changing ideas of the shaping of gender identity – as being both historically and contextually dependent – also launched a flourishing biographical practice in the 1980s, when reflecting on the biographical genre ran parallel to writing biographies themselves.[26] An important theme raised by this reflection was the desire to understand how gender is constructed or 'done' on a personal level, and how the biography can play a role in that quest. The new views on gender and identity (as being relational, collective and contextual) undermined the old division between the individual and society, and in so doing transformed the biography into an attractive genre for questioning the nature of gender in personal and specific situations.

These developments were reflected in, for instance, an article by Kali Israel about the Victorian feminist and art historian Lady Dilke, in which she discusses the kaleidoscopic character of self-representation and representations by others.[27] Dilke not only modelled herself on historical figures and their representation in French art but also made public appearances as such, which she then recorded in fictional memoirs and stories. In turn, she herself was the subject of many paintings and was identified with literary characters including Dorothea Brook, the heroine of George Eliot's famous novel "Middlemarch". Developing an identity and interpreting it had become an inextricable whole in this nineteenth century mirror palace of literary and other representations and identities. It is precisely this 'identity performance' as a relational and representational process that Israel in her biography of Dilke tries to understand.

---

24 Birgitte Possing, Portraiture and Re-Portraiture of the Political Individual in Europe: Biography as a Genre and as a Deconstructive Technique, in: Karen Gram-Skjoldager and Ann-Christina Lauring-Knudsen eds., Living Political Biography. Narrating 20th Century European Lives, Aarhus 2012, 22–43.

25 This is reflected by my reluctance when writing the biography of Aletta Jacobs: Mineke Bosch, Een onwrikbaar geloof in rechtvaardigheid: Aletta Jacobs 1854–1929, Amsterdam 2005, 21.

26 Cf. Mieke Aerts et al. eds., Naar het leven. Feminisme & biografisch onderzoek, Amsterdam 1988; the 1990 special issue of Gender and History which is mentioned in note 27.

27 Cf. Kali K. A. Israel, Writing Inside the Kaleidoscope: Re-Representing Victorian Women Public Figures, in: Gender and History 2, 1 (1990): special issue on (Auto)Biography, 40–48.

Another example is "The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France", an intriguing volume edited by Jo Burr Margadant.[28] In her theoretical introduction to the six portraits of women from the social elite, who are included in this book, Margadant explains the rise of what she refers to as "the new biography". She demonstrates how, over the last thirty to forty years, as a result of the linguistic, cultural or post-structural turn all kinds of fundamental categories were subverted. The category of class, for instance, that in classical Marxism was a fundamental category of historical reality gradually came to be seen by social historians such as Edward P. Thompson, Gareth Stedman Jones and Joan Scott as being not so much the result of inevitable social and economic processes but rather as an effect of language and the ingenious use of classification and categorisation. At the same time, feminist historians confronted the ontological character of sex (and gender) by insisting on the role of representation and language, and therefore also on the historical character of sex/gender divisions. Moreover, they began to emphasise the multiplicity of the categories of 'women' and 'men' that were intersected by categories such as class, sexuality and ethnicity, all of which could lead to diverse identities in diverse contexts. This work contributed to a changing view on identity as being made in relational and collective systems of meaning, and as something that has to be 'done' rather than something that individuals 'are'. Margadant argues that, in line with this amended concept of identity, new biographers have also become more aware of their own role as creators of biographies they write: "A narrative strategy designed to project a unified persona has become for the new biographer nearly as suspect as claims to a 'definite' biography."[29] It is for biographers no longer a matter of pursuing coherence by revealing the 'guiding principle' of a person's life, but rather of documenting the pursuit of coherence by the biographical subject in question or, to be more precise, of documenting the many diverse identities that the biographical subject has adopted in accordance with changing historical circumstances. Given the existence of social norms and power claims that were and are compelling for women of ambition, the new biography also takes into account the disputed character of the identities that these 'public' women interpret.

In my opinion, these starting points have produced six enthralling biographical articles, which – like Shapin's biography of Boyle – signify a 'coming of age' in the way that biography and gender are considered. I will single out one example here: Mary Louise Roberts' portrait of the late nineteenth century feminist Marguerite Durand, who cannot be understood without considering her background in the world of theatre.[30] Durand has astonished a good few historians with her reputation as a hyper-feminine man-

28 Jo Burr Margadant ed., The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France, Los Angeles/London 2000. I realise that the new biography has been proclaimed on a number of occasions, but I still believe that there has been a real break that justifies speaking in terms of innovation.

29 Jo Burr Margadant, Introduction: Constructing Selves in Historical Perspective, in: idem ed., Biography, see note 28, 1–32, 7.

30 Cf. Mary Louise Roberts, Acting Up. The Feminist Theatrics of Marguerite Durand, in: Margadant, Biography, see note 28, 171–217.

eater and initial opponent of female suffrage; nonetheless, she founded the feminist newspaper "La Fronde" in 1896 and also acted as its editor-in-chief for many years. Her earlier career as a successful actress had taught her the strength and power of external appearance. Roberts states that her feminism constituted a "politics of aesthetics", which Durand herself aptly expressed as follows: "Feminism will never know what it owes to my blonde hair."

Playing a role, acting and 'acting up' (i.e. by using all her feminine charms) gave her access to the public and political domain. The editorial office of "La Fronde" was a lady's boudoir that was populated by stylishly dressed, 'feminine' women with inky fingers and that was frequently described in the press. When Durand embarked on a campaign, she drew packed houses where she seduced her audience with not only her eloquence but also her dramatically theatrical personality, her blonde hair, her ornate dresses, her ringed fingers and her extremely elegant appearance. Although Durand deployed journalism and the theatre to promote her feminist politics, she also played to the gallery with her 'spectacular' performance. For instance, during election campaigns in 1910, she accepted a lioness that was given to her by a West African governor. She immediately named the creature Tiger and posed with her domesticated beast for an illustrated magazine.

All in all, the example of Durand demonstrates that theatricality and the "re-enactment" of existing, conventional gender scripts (i.e. of female seduction in feminist politics) granted agency to women such as Durand, which neutralised the supposed contradiction between her feminism and "her hyper-feminine behaviour". Hence, a biographical representation should not show 'who' Durand was, according to Roberts, but how she played 'herself' as an intrinsic part of feminist ways of being.

4. Self Narrative and Biography

The new type of biography that developed in the history of science as the quest for the scientific persona or the performance of scientific identity has its counterpart in gender history where it stimulated the understanding of historical ways of constructing femininity and masculinity on a personal level in a specific context. In both areas of biographical historiography, this focus on the 'doing' of identity (scientific or gender identity) as a relational (dialogical) and as social process signifies a shift away from the quest for the crux of an autonomous life or the guiding principle in terms of childhood traumas and secrets, as influenced by the twentieth century psychoanalytical complex.[31] This insight has also permeated other social domains, as is evidenced by the recent publications of studies on the political, the legal and the philosophical persona.

The development of the new biography went hand in hand with new ways of 'reading autobiography', namely as textual emplotments rather than as transparent sources

31 For the failure of the psychologically based biography or psychobiography, see Hermione Lee, Biography: A Very Short Introduction, Oxford 2009, 87.

for a true self. The shift from understanding an autobiography as the historical record of the experiences of a unique person towards reading autobiography as an act of identity formation in the face of a particular audience and in relation to a specific context is crucial for the new biography. Indeed, autobiographies are now central in understanding how biographical subjects wanted to present themselves to a reading public, or, for that matter, publicly, and what this means for the subject's identity construction.

Parallel to the critique of the autobiography as the record of an auto/biographical subject as a coherent and unified individual that was mostly a man with a public life, criticism was directed at the historiographical subject at large. In favour of 'other historiographical subjects' a search for egodocuments, personal narrative, life writing or *Selbstzeugnisse* from the non-elite, everyday life was launched that resulted in special collections or inventories of autobiography and life writing from the archives.[32] The study of these widely varying products of life narrative revealed the contextuality of identity or the situatedness of historical subjects, while this again stimulated the discovery of narrative plots such as 'the secular hero', 'the romantic heroine', or the 'imperial' or 'feminist plot' in 'classical' autobiography that assessed these findings. Instead of recording the 'hyper-individual', autobiographical writing showed to be receptive of external intertextual elements that testify of the historical context in which it is conceived.

On the other hand, the realization that personal documents often bear the marks of the historical setting and the collective beliefs thereof, made visible the reverse, too. Indeed, so-called 'alter documents', which form the basic stuff of the historical source base, ever so often bear marks of the personal, of the one(s) who forged the documents, even if this is not expressed in terms of first person narrative. Are not even the most 'impartial' and 'objective' documents such as statistics stamped by specific, and often personal perspectives? Not only a wide range of historical sources began to be seen as marked by the personal, also a much wider range of sources began to be categorised as examples of self writing, such as travel reports or household account books in which material objects record the identities that are expressed in their possession of things.

It is through these developments that autobiographical sources, which were always seen as rather marginal to the biography of a public person, began to be read and deployed not to reveal the true private person, but to understand the process of context related identity formation. Hence, information about the scientist Darwin that is pro-

32 'Egodocuments' is a term that the Dutch historian of the Holocaust Jacques Presser introduced, and (ambiguously) promoted. The collection of egodocuments of women in the Netherlands that is in the Atria, Institute on Gender Equality and Women's History (formerly IAV, IIAV and Aletta) in Amsterdam was started at the end of 1982. Cf. Mineke Bosch, A Woman's Life in a Soapbox, in: History Workshop Journal, 24 (1987), 166–170. Currently the terms 'personal narrative' and 'life writing' are in use rather than 'egodocuments'. For *Selbstzeugnisforschung* that is preoccupied with early modern writings of the self, see introduction in: Gabriele Jancke and Claudia Ulbrich eds., Vom Individuum zur Person. Neue Konzepte im Spannungsfeld von Autobiographietheorie und Selbstzeugnisforschung, Göttingen 2005, 7–27.

vided by so-called 'personal documents' such as his private and professional correspondence, travelogues and diaries, is now considered crucial for understanding Darwin's 'scientific self' as a constant negotiation between public and private person. On the other hand, also the 'impersonal text' that "The Origin of Species" always seemed to be, is now read with an eye to self presentation and self revelation as part of his scientific process. Something similar applies to feminists such as Aletta Jacobs, as I have shown for instance in my analysis of her "Reisbrieven uit Afrika en Azië" ("Travel Letters from Africa and Asia", 1913) that were always mentioned but have never been examined in depth as a meaningful source.[33] While Jacobs's self-presentation as a well-travelled lady with a sense of humour and a touch of rebelliousness is certainly informative in terms of the private Aletta, it provides even more information about the aim of the published letters and her public persona as a leading Dutch feminist. In the same vein I analysed her autobiography that was previously perceived with some suspicion about its 'historical value'. Reading her autobiography differently, I could show it to be a rich source of information about the way in which the biographical subject, Aletta Jacobs, had wanted to present herself or even 'be' at particular moments and in relation to a particular audience. I think we can hardly underestimate the power that Aletta Jacobs's "Memories" have (had) on the formation of a collective memory of the first wave of feminism in the Netherlands.

Given these developments it is now possible to clarify the extent to which biographies and autobiographies in various contexts have contributed to the writing and shaping of (desired) identities that are marked by and have had an impact on social relations. As was previously stated, biographies have always been part and parcel of scientific lore. However, there is virtually no reflection on this stream of biographical meanings, which – in the view of the Danish science historian Thomas Söderqvist – could well be the most important source of knowledge about science for all scientists and especially for those to come.[34] The same holds for 'national biographies' in national historical canon or national identity formation or for any other genre of biography in any collective memory context. For me, the challenge of the 'new biography' lies in its potential to comprehend how women and men in a variety of situations were able to keep on going, survive and flourish, yet without resorting to such notions as their individual freedom of choice (for men) or structural limitations to their agency (for women). The idea that people base their actions on new and existing plots, repertoires and scripts that are communicated through an endless variety of self narrative – which can be combined in all kinds of different ways – creates an abundance of opportunities for living a life. And for the biographer interpreting and writing that life.

33 Mineke Bosch, Colonial Dimensions of Dutch Women's Suffrage: Aletta Jacobs's "Travel letters from Africa and Asia, 1911–1912", in: Journal of Women's History, 11, 2 (1998), 8–34. For a more sophisticated reflection, see Bosch, Aletta Jacobs, see note 25, 496–518.

34 Cf. Thomas Söderqvist, A New Look at the Genre of Scientific Biography, in: idem, The History and Poetics of Scientific Biography, Aldershot 2007, 1–15.