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The Gossips' Choice: Extending the Possibilities for Biofiction

with Creative Uses of Sources

Sara Read

Abstract

Historical fiction based on historical figures with just their names changed was common in the distant past but fell out of favor in the last century. One reason for this was the additional transparency that biofiction with the protagonist as a named figure can offer. This chapter makes the case that using the practices of older historical fiction combined with the transparency of biofiction in a hybrid fashion, blending the real and the imaginary, offers great scope for bringing women's lived experiences to life. In this essay, I discuss my own praxis while writing *The Gossips' Choice* to illustrate my argument.

Keywords

midwifery, childbirth, case histories, gossips, Sarah Stone, Jane Sharp

Michael Lackey has explained that “in the past, writers frequently based their novels on actual historical figures, but they changed the name in order to give themselves more creative freedom,” and that this practice fell out of favor from the mid-twentieth century (Lackey and Donoghue, p. 81). Here we might think of Hester Prynne,

protagonist of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), who some believe to have been inspired by several historical women alive at the time and place of the novel's setting. For Lackey, the matter is straightforward: biofiction and historical fiction are distinct in that the former is "literature that names its protagonist after an actual biographical figure" (Lackey, p. 3). However, this concluding chapter will make the case that in certain circumstances using the practices of older historical fiction, combined with the transparency of biofiction in a hybrid fashion, blending the real and the imaginary, offers great scope for bringing women's lived experiences to life in extended and significant ways.

My own attempt at achieving this in the novel that was published as *The Gossips' Choice* began life as a "practice-as-research" creative writing project in which I produced a full-length 90,000-word novel about a seventeenth-century midwife. As Bethany Layne has commented, "people have written novels based on actual people for centuries, but biofiction offers greater explicitness" (Layne and Lodge, p. 120). My novel offers transparency by making clear which sources I drew upon in the paratextual notes. The narrative is anchored in the published writings of midwives Jane Sharp (*fl.* 1671) and Sarah Stone (*fl.* 1737), whose accounts I have drawn on frequently in my research into early modern women's reproductive health.¹ It uses some of the cures and practices described by Jane Sharp, the first named English woman to publish a midwifery guide, *The Midwives Book*, 1671, in the fictionalization of episodes documented in Stone's case notes, published in *A Complete Practice of Midwifery*, 1737. The first source is a standard midwifery textbook with six sections ranging from an anatomical description of male and female genitalia to diseases "incident to women after conception [...] with

¹ See, for example, Read, 2013.

proper cures for all diseases Incident to young children” (Sharp, p. 1). In large part it is a compilation drawing on many English and continental texts, but, throughout, the reader is left with a sense of Sharp as a person and practitioner, in the way she amends her sources to fit her views.

[Place Figure 20.1 near here]. Caption: Figure 20.1. The frontispiece of Jane Sharp’s *The Compleat Midwife’s Companion*, 1724. Credit: Wellcome Library, London.]

Nothing is yet known about the biography of Jane Sharp, other than her claim to have been a midwife about 30 years, and a tantalizing clue in the dedication of the book to a “Lady Ellenour Talbutt,” sister of the tenth earl of Shrewsbury (Sharp, p. 3). Sharp refers to Lady Eleanor as “her much esteemed, and ever honoured friend” and herself as “An Admirer of Your Vertue and Piety, Jane Sharp.” If it was the case that Sharp, like the Talbot family, was of the Catholic faith, then this would explain her absence from the records as she would have been ineligible for formal licensing, which was authorized by officials of the Church of England. However, the text seems to be almost certainly written from a standard Anglican perspective; she quotes the King James Bible at length and accurately. It might be, then, that details of her life – like those of Lady Eleanor, who herself is almost absent from the record – remain extant and ready to be found in time.

The second text consists of a preface and 42 “observations” of challenging cases, covering nearly 50 births in all, at which Sarah Stone was present. Just over half the infants failed to survive; but only three of 47 mothers died, either in or just after childbirth (Grundy). Stone did not hold herself responsible for these deaths, claiming she was often called in too late. Average maternal mortality rates have been calculated at 17

per 1000 in 1650–1674 and 12.3 in 1725–1749, but the cumulative risk over several births would be higher, of course (Galley and Reid, p. 71). Stone’s maternal mortality rate in this text at around six percent is therefore a high for the era, but her actual rate would likely be lower than average since none of dozens of unremarkable births she attended are recorded. You would not realize from Stone’s text, then, that trouble-free births were the norm, and this is something that I needed to take into consideration when I was planning the novel. More is known about Stone than Sharp because of the locations given in the case histories but also because she includes biographical details in her text, some of which are verifiable from historical records. Stone was originally from Somerset where she trained under her own mother, a well-reputed midwife, “the famous” Mistress Holmes, who was “the best Midwife that I ever knew” according to Dr. John Allen, in a commendatory letter attesting to Stone’s skills (Stone, p. xiii). Sarah Holmes married apothecary Samuel Stone on 29 November 1700 in Bridgewater, and the protagonist of *The Gossips’ Choice*, Lucie Smith, too, is married to an apothecary. The novel centers on their home at the shop at the sign of the three doves, which offers the novel a deep sense of place. In keeping with my practice of blending historical and biographical fact with fiction, the sign was one which a sixteenth-century apothecary, William Normevyll of Bucklersbury Street, in the City of London, used to mark his shop (Raynalde, 108r–v). The Stones had a daughter, Sarah, who was baptized on 17 October 1702; they may, of course, have had more children (Woods and Galley, pp. 67–68). Given the date of her wedding and the time of publication of her case notes, Stone probably would have been in her late fifties around the time of publication. Taking commonalities such as that both women practiced for above 30 years, were likely of a similar age, and were literate and

forthright as the point of departure, I invented a fictional world that allows readers to “see” anew the world of professional women and the families they attended in the early modern era. Telling a story with a mature female protagonist was also important to me in the modern era when the voices of post-menopausal women are seldom heard, and giving voice to an older woman in this way also helps normalize mature women in historical fiction. By publishing, Jane Sharp and Sarah Stone demonstrate that in the past some older women strove to be heard against the paradigms of their age too. I use the language and expression of both women in the creation of a fictional midwife, Lucie Smith, who is in some ways an amalgam of both women. The character produced as a sum of the information available, is, I believe, a more rounded one than I would have written had I ventured down a more typical biofictional route.

The hybrid approach taken in *The Gossips’ Choice* means that it does contain many of the more traditional elements of biofiction. Lucie Smith has an apprentice called Mary Thorne who takes her name from a historical figure, a provincial midwife who was licensed in 1724. Other characters are given the same identity as the patient in the entry I adapt for their story, since Stone tends to refer to her patients through the lens of their husbands’ occupations. For example, in “Observation XXI” Stone was called to “a Soap-boiler’s wife” (Stone, p. 69). On other occasions I took the name of the location of the episode for a family name, so in “Observation II,” Stone describes how she was called to “*Bromfield* to a Farmer’s wife” who in the novel became Jenny Bromfield (Stone, p. 3).

While not illustrative of typical births, Sarah Stone’s case notes or case histories are ripe for dramatizing in a work of fiction because she presents herself as a heroic figure, swooping into desperate scenarios and saving the day. As Isobel Grundy has

noted, this text was clearly “shaped by techniques borrowed from heroic romance and scriptural narrative. Stone fashions herself as a hero, whose labours [...] involve a non-climactic series of patient, resolute cooperations” (Grundy, p. 131). She is also evasive about her methods, especially her unique method of stopping bleeding where others have failed:

It is a secret I would willingly have made known, for the benefit of my Sisters in the Profession: But having a Daughter that has practised the same Art these ten years, with as good success as my self, I shall leave it in her power to make it known (Stone, p. 148).

This at the same time she claims to want to instruct her fellow midwives. In a work of fiction this obfuscation would be unsatisfying to a reader following the experiences of early modern women’s childbirth. These two factors are the main reasons I decided against making the protagonist Sarah Stone; I wanted a character with flaws and self-doubt, and one who was open to the reader about her techniques.

Emma Donoghue explains that, “At its best, I find the biographical novel makes people uncomfortable. They will easily and strongly identify with the main character for some things, and then they will suddenly have [...] the opposite response” (Lackey and Donoghue, p. 86). There are several moments in *The Gossips’ Choice* when readers will find their identification with a character shaken. Lucie Smith is the authority in the birth chamber, a strong, capable, articulate mature woman, yet because she is a good wife in the seventeenth century, she defers to her husband over matters which a modern woman

might find alienating. This sense of defamiliarization is also a factor in the methods and cures drawn from Jane Sharp, which Lucie Smith employs for some treatments. As Elaine Hobby explains, “Sharp’s matter-of-fact recommendation of the application of a hot iron to the vagina might cause the modern reader to flinch, but also to reflect: inhabiting a seventeenth-century body seems to have been a more brutal experience than living in a modern one is thought to be” (Hobby, p. 30). From treating a pregnant woman’s bleeding by satisfying her *pica*, or pregnancy craving for a plump peasecod, giving birth on a straw mattress, to washing a newborn in diluted wine, not all the treatments in *The Gossips’ Choice* are brutal but they are very far removed from modern day experiences.

Ultimately, the novel imagines a world in which midwives Sharp and Stone could have existed, matching what Michael Lackey describes when he comments that “what we get in a biographical novel, then, is the novelist’s vision of life and the world and not an accurate representation of an actual person’s life” (p. 7). It is more than a historical fiction because of the way it draws on the two female practitioners for the protagonist; and by using Stone’s case notes to tell the stories of the mostly ordinary, unremarkable women she attends, this project offered a rare opportunity to share some of the attitudes and practices of those women and of early modern midwifery with readers of historical fiction and to bring the very often different experiences of childbirth in the past to a wide audience. It necessarily offers up a picture of everyday seventeenth-century women’s lives in a way which is biofiction, but it is not just one woman’s story – it is many women’s stories. Details of labor and childbirth are often skimmed over in historical fiction or based on long-standing stereotypes, and I wanted to use my skills as a researcher of early modern reproductive health to show that the picture was more varied,

and to tell the story of early modern women. While some treatments these women receive might seem alarming to a modern reader, they were based on the best practices of the time, the inherent logic of which in the proper context will hopefully become apparent to a reader. In the course of doing this, *The Gossips' Choice* also gives voice and recognition to those “nobodies,” to borrow Donoghue’s term, the everyday women attended to by Sharp, Stone, and Thorne, whose names and scant biographical details only exist through their husbands’ names or occupations, if at all.

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About the Author

Sara Read is a lecturer in English at Loughborough University. She researches literary and cultural representations of women, bodies, and health in the early modern era. Her first monograph was *Menstruation and the Female Body in Early Modern England* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). *The Gossips' Choice* is her debut novel.