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Modern and Contemporary Literature - Roundtable

Voices from the Past: Creating and Recreating Historical Worlds

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Since Walter Scott's early nineteenth-century novels, which recreated the past of his Scottish homeland or presented a nostalgic and mythical view of the Middle Ages, historical narratives have enjoyed significant popularity and prestige in English-language literature. In recent decades, critics have observed a "historical turn" in contemporary fiction, reflecting a burgeoning interest in history among many canonical and mainstream novelists (Keen 2006). With this in mind, this round table aims to discuss the interim results of a research project currently under way, examining the contexts, forms, functions, themes and features prevailing in the diverse and hybridized nature of historical texts published in Britain and Ireland in the 21st century.

The fields of study of all those involved in the research project are diverse and include the recent historical novel set in the Spanish Civil War, historical narratives written by Irish women and alternate histories or uchronias. However, for this round table, we aim to focus on just three fundamental aspects, two of which are related in terms of the approach or perspective from which these narratives are analysed. On the one hand, the ethical aspects of biographical fiction, also called "biofiction", will be examined, as well as the degree of historical verisimilitude that these narratives possess. The second contribution will focus on the analysis of the rewriting of historical accounts written by women who challenge the traditional views, a topic that is also addressed in the third presentation, although this time the context is classical Antiquity.

Fernando Galván: Some of the challenges of biofiction

Both the so-called "historical turn" and "ethical turn" have proven to be fundamental critical trends in the recent development of historical and biographical novels in English. Historical revisionism of major and minor characters and events has opened up new approaches to the discourses of history and biography, providing alternate views of the past and highlighting ideologically motivated themes and personages that had been hidden or ignored by traditional historiography. The development of biographical fiction, referred to as *biofiction* by Michael Lackey, problematises writing about some historical figures for which we lack biographical and historical accuracy, especially when only a few or scarcely reliable documents have survived. It also puts into question the "real" identity and voices of those historical characters, to the extent that some scholars talk about an unethical "identity theft" by the authors of such fictions. For Lackey those views are wrong because they confuse history and fiction, since "biographical novelists forgo the desire to get the biographical subject's life 'right' and, rather, use the biographical subject in order to project their own vision of life and the world" (2016, 7).

This contribution to the round table is an attempt to address some of the techniques and strategies used by a few contemporary English-speaking writers to fictionalise the lives

of historical characters from a wide range of times and social milieus. Allusions will be made to David Lodge's reflections about the writing of Henry James's life in his novel *Author, Author!* and in Colm Tóibín's *The Master*, both published in 2004, as presented in his *The Year of Henry James* (2006), connecting this with Tóibín's more recent attempt at biofiction in his novel *The Magician* (2021) about Thomas Mann. These examples will help in elucidating the difference between the real-life biographical figure and the biographical subject of biofictions, as a response to the authors' respective ideological and aesthetic agendas. Likewise, the political recreation of art and the plight of the artist under Stalinism will be addressed as regards Julian Barnes's portrait of Dmitri Shostakovich in *The Noise of Time* (2016). Particularly intriguing is also the influence of female agency on this new form of historical or biographical discourse, as women's voices, values, actions, feelings and roles in shaping history have often gone unnoticed in traditional historical novels. Some recent biofictions by Maggie O'Farrell, set in the early modern period, are excellent examples of the aesthetic and ethical dimension of this form, as her novels *Hamnet* (2020) and *The Marriage Portrait* (2022) prove. Through this comprehensive exploration of a diversity of authors and works published in the last two decades, this contribution aims to shed light on the complexities inherent in the intersection of history, biography, fiction, and ethical considerations within the realm of contemporary literature.

Silvia García-Hernández: Deconstructing history, writing *herstory*.

Historical fiction written by British women has experienced an important development since the last decades of the twentieth century. This significant increase, which emerged in the 70s and 80s, expanded in the 90s and continues to this day, may be attributed to two different factors. One of them is the historical turn in literary creation that took place in Britain from the second half of the twentieth century onwards. The other lies in the second wave of feminism, during which not only did experimentation in women's literature reemerge, but women writers also began to experiment with historical fiction, seeking to root the history of women in a time when historical literature written by women had been neglected. Consequently, women began to craft radical reimaginings of past periods featuring women as protagonists, which resulted in a revolution in the genre of historical fiction itself. During this time, British women historical novelists endeavoured to reinsert women in history by giving them a voice of their own through rewriting traditional, male-centred historical narratives. As opposed to historical fiction written by men, female historical writings had been marginalised for being considered, using Diana Wallace's term, as "escapist" (2005, 2), and "dismissed as 'unhistorical', 'factually inaccurate' or merely 'irrelevant' according to a male-defined model" (15). Thus, in an attempt to give voice and introduce the women's perspective into the patriarchal writings of the past, from which they were erased and silenced, acclaimed women writers such as A.S. Byatt, Jeanette Winterson, Philippa Gregory, Sarah Waters, and Pat Barker, among many others, revisited different historical periods and rewrote them from a feminine perspective. In fact, they not only reinvented such stories but, as Mary Eagleton and Emma Parker argue, they also "challenge the authority of historical discourse and question the validity of 'historical truth'" by presenting history as "selective and incomplete" (2015, 8).

Taking this as a point of departure, this contribution will explore how British women historical novelists in the 21st century are approaching the interrogation of the male-centred account of history and, consequently, revitalising the genre. To achieve this,

concepts such as the construction of memory and history in their search for women's identities will be used to interpret these historical novels, and references to the works of Michèle Roberts (*Cut Out*, 2021), Elizabeth Macneal (*The Doll Factory*, 2019) and Margaret Forster (*Disobedient*, 2023), among others, will be made to reassess how the past has been portrayed in these women's historical discourses. In addition, further attention will be given to the ways in which these authors employ intertextuality and intermediality in the writing of biographical fiction and other historical narratives to deconstruct the official male vision of history, and reimagine and reinsert the female experience in what has been termed as *herstory*.

Marta Martín Amor: Historical revisionism through myth retelling

Greek and Roman mythological texts and accounts, which have remained at the forefront of Western society and culture, undeniably carry a heavy patriarchal approach to the depiction of women. From the role they have in the stories to the manner in which their bodies and sexuality have been depicted, female characters have been relegated to secondary positions, their purpose and identity often dependent on their male counterparts, who surround and eclipse them. This is why, in the last few decades, myth retellings and the use of Antiquity as a setting have become an indisputably prominent feature in historical novels. One of the primary goals of revisiting ancient events and stories, whether fictional or not, is to challenge the bias and representation of women within them. This is achieved by exploring these historical accounts from female perspectives, which were previously overlooked and underrepresented in traditional mythology and historiography. Scholars like Katherine Cooper and Emma Short consider this rewriting of historical female characters as part of "the ongoing project of feminism" that seeks "not only to recover and reclaim, but also to rescue the female from the monolithic framework within which she has been inscribed" (2012, 14-15). Thus, these new retellings propose and provide new avenues through which women can fight that imposed identity, gain autonomy, and reclaim their role in both the literary canon and history.

This process of re-appropriation and revisionism has been carried out by a great number of mainly –although not exclusively– female writers who have managed to "read, know, interpret, and repossess the past" (Heilmann and Lewellyn 2004, 139). In particular, this section of the round table will study the works of two British writers: Pat Barker's rewriting of the *Iliad* through the eyes of Briseis in *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) and *The Women of Troy* (2021), and Elodie Harper's account of 74-81 AD Pompeii in *The Wolf Den* (2021), *The House with the Golden Door* (2022) and *The Temple of Fortuna* (2023), centred around one of the city's infamous brothels and the slaves trapped inside. By focusing on the analysis of these two series, this contribution aims to explore the way in which modern reinterpretations of classical mythology and ancient times can question the disenfranchised position of women in the traditional tales and in history itself. Moreover, it seeks to elucidate why Antiquity has become such a fascinating and popular setting within historical fiction –particularly concerning gender issues– and the reasons for the commercial and critical demand for these narratives.

Open questions to engage with the audience

- What is the degree of historicity portrayed in recent historical novels? How effectively do these novels convey the period and the historical events with accuracy? How do

authors navigate the tension between adhering to historical facts and crafting compelling narratives that captivate readers?

- In the context of biofiction, how does the protagonist's portrayal relate to the real-life biographical figure? To what extent does the narrative challenge the officially accepted historical account?
- How do discussions surrounding the balance between historical accuracy and creative license in historical fiction lead to ethical considerations introduced or raised within the text?
- In terms of the revisionism of the female figure, how does historical fiction reveal or reimagine marginalised or silenced women from the past? To what extent do these novels challenge traditional accounts by offering alternative readings of history?
- Why does Antiquity serve as such an alluring setting for recent historical novels, given the scarcity of verifiable accounts or factual evidence of the events and characters depicted in these texts?
- In what ways do contemporary historical novels reflect and respond to current social, political, and cultural issues? How do authors utilize historical settings or figures to comment on contemporary concerns and provoke thought about the present?

(1.806) words excluding title, references and keywords)

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Keywords: historical novel, British, Irish, biofiction, feminism

In the event that the panel receives more proposals than there are available slots in the conference schedule, I am open to having my paper transferred to panel:

Critical Theory