

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**BIOGRAPHY AND THE WRITING SUBJECT**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English  
at Massey University

Michelle Dawson  
1993

## CONTENTS

Preface		iii
Chapter One	The Subject of Biography	1
Chapter Two	Samuel Cron Cronwright-Schreiner: The Subject as Other	27
Chapter Three	Johannes Meintjes: The Anxiety of Castration	48
Chapter Four	Johannes Székely: Life and Work	70
Chapter Five	Helmut Fritz: The Female Subject	96
Conclusion		120
Works Consulted		125

## PREFACE

This thesis examines four biographers' methods of representing the lives of two women: Olive Schreiner (1855-1920), who spent her life in South Africa and England, and Franziska zu Reventlow (1871-1918), who lived in Germany and Switzerland. The subjects of these biographies never met and it is unlikely that they ever read each other's work. Olive Schreiner's father was German, but her knowledge of the German language was limited. Although Franziska zu Reventlow translated many novels from French and Norwegian into German she never learnt English. Yet, living in Western cultures during the same period, their lives display a remarkable number of similarities. Both women were writers of fiction who made considerable sacrifices in order to pursue their chosen profession. In comparison to most of their female contemporaries they insisted on living unconventional lives which manifested their subversive views, particularly with regard to women's sexuality and women's rights. Unable to accept traditional definitions of women, they were forced to live unsettled lives, frequently changing their places of residence. Because neither was able or willing to accept permanent positions, each had to rely periodically on friends and relations for financial support, despite repeated attempts to attain independence. Both women suffered from physical disorders which many of their biographers consider to have been psychosomatic (neither illness had been definitively diagnosed in modern medical terms). In an assertion of their independence, Olive Schreiner and Franziska zu Reventlow chose to retain their unmarried names after their marriage (or in the latter's case, marriages).

In the last two decades German and English speaking communities have witnessed an increasing interest in the lives and works of fin de siècle women writers. Franziska zu Reventlow's and Olive Schreiner's writing, which had been neglected for a large part of this century, has been republished in recent years, and each writer has consequently become the subject of several biographies and biographical essays.

Since Olive Schreiner's death five full-length biographies and many biographical essays have been written in English alone. Franziska zu Reventlow's life and work has been discussed in two full-length German language biographies and several biographical essays. Three of Olive Schreiner's biographies were written by women and two by men: The Life of Olive Schreiner (1924), by S.C. Cronwright-Schreiner; Not Without Honour. The Life and Writings of Olive Schreiner (1948), by Vera Buchanan-Gould; Olive Schreiner. Her Friends and Times (1955), by Daisy L. Hobman; Olive Schreiner. Portrait of a South African Woman (1965), by Johannes Meintjes; and Olive Schreiner (1980), by Ruth First and Ann Scott. Franziska zu Reventlow's biographies were both written by men: Franziska Gräfin zu Reventlow. Leben und Werk (1979), by Johannes Székely; and Die erotische Rebellion. Das Leben der Franziska Gräfin zu Reventlow (1980), by Helmut Fritz. I shall discuss the four biographies written by men.

Although the contents of the biographies are comparable, their forms are discrete. Cronwright-Schreiner's Life, which is over 400 pages long, is paradigmatic of a late Victorian historical narrative. This biographer presents his material in the form of a comprehensive realist text, accumulating facts and data, and reproducing extensive quotations from Olive Schreiner's own writing and from eyewitness reports. Meintjes's text is less than half as long as Cronwright-Schreiner's, and it adopts more obviously the conventions of a novel. Meintjes uses few direct quotations, paraphrasing extracts from Cronwright-Schreiner's biography in colloquial language.

Székely's biography comprises a detailed literary analysis of his subject's texts. He classifies her work as autobiographical, and as a manifestation of her "real" life. Székely's work aligns itself to academic dissertations, complete with a sixty-page long bibliography and an extensive index. In contrast to Székely's biography Fritz's is aimed at a general, non-academic audience, which Fritz implicitly assumes reads in order to be entertained. Approximately half of his biography consists of quotations, loosely linked together by the biographer's comments in order to

give the reader the impression of immediacy and of active participation in the subject's life. The language Fritz uses is highly idiomatic and overall his biography is consistent with his professional training as a journalist.

This thesis deals with each biography independently, examining the ways the writers deal with their female subjects and how, in the process of writing, they reproduce dominant patriarchal ideology. Attempting to create meaningful and cohesive accounts from an amorphous accumulation of facts, biographers, like all other writers, construct narratives. In so doing these life-writers become the representatives and producers of the prevailing discourse of liberal humanism.

In this thesis "biography" is understood to mean "literary biography," that is, a narrative based on the life and works of a writer. In a post-Saussurean age, "facts" can never be deemed essentially true, finite or fixed, although biographers tend to agree that their biographies represent a true and accurate portrait of their subject. Facts are products of discourse, which in turn determines their interpretation. The "subject" (or "biographee") is the person whose life is interpreted through that discourse, but, as will be shown, by appropriating an authorial role and constructing their own subject-positions in their biographies, the biographers inevitably redefine their subjects as objects of their narratives.

The term "author" (used as a verb and a noun) is understood in a literal and figurative sense. Literally it means the person writing the text--either the biographee producing her texts or the biographer producing his biography. In its figurative sense "to author" signifies the act of appropriating a subject-position which in traditional ideological discourse is also a position of power. The subject "writes" his object, taking possession of her through language, and defining her as his subordinate other. The "reader" subsequently reads meaning into the text, constructing her own version of the narrative through her discourse(s). In writing an autobiographical text, the subject reads her past life, producing in her text but one possible

subject-position (or several possible subject positions) of many. In writing a biography, the biographer must read his subject's life and writing. In reproducing his reading in the text through language, he necessarily writes himself into his biography. It is with the biographers' subject-positions produced by their discourse that this thesis is concerned. As the biographers discussed here are male and their subjects female, I shall use the corresponding gender-specific pronouns when discussing biographers and subjects in general.

I am indebted to Dr Patricia Lopdell and Dr Russell Poole for their valuable assistance and advice in the preparation of this thesis, and to James Norgate for his support.