

ACTORS' BIOGRAPHIES:
HISTORICAL SOURCE OR LITERATURE?

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In his novel *La Nausée*, Jean-Paul Sartre, speaking as always of the unbearable of life and the futility of existence, argues that only the story of life is of interest, not life itself, while he asserts categorically that biography can be nothing but the product of fiction: “Nothing happens while you live. The scenery changes, people come in and go out, that’s all. There are no beginnings. Days are tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, an interminable, monotonous addition [...] But everything changes when you tell about life; it’s a change no one notices: the proof is that people talk about ‘true stories’. As if there could possibly be true stories; things happen one way and we tell about them in the opposite sense”.¹

This paper forms part of the research project “Biography as a Source of Theatre History: Biographies of Greek and foreign actors in the periodical press of Greece and Greek communities abroad from the 19th century to the Asia Minor Catastrophe. Contribution to History of acting (THISBE)” and aims to examine whether biography can operate as a historical source and fill in the research gaps in the history of 19th-century performance, details of the actors’ personal lives, the repertoire and the historical-cultural milieu of the time, or whether it belongs exclusively to the field of literature.

What exactly do we mean, however, by the term ‘biography’, and what is its relationship to history and literature? At the end of the 17th century

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¹ Sartre (2000 [1938]: 43).

John Dryden neatly defined biography as ‘the history of particular men’s lives’, intended to present character, temperament and social milieu, as well as the subject’s activities and experiences.² Biography, the most important of the so-called biographical genres including diaries, memoirs, autobiography, the biographical novel, etc., leads to arguments among theorists over whether it can function as a historical source or whether it belongs exclusively to the literary field.³ This dispute is based on the fact that the hybrid genre of biography mixes historiography with fiction and information with anecdote, combining different and conflicting narrative techniques.

Pierre Bourdieu talks about ‘the biographical illusion’, as the reader is convinced that by reading the biography of the figure one admires, one can better approach their art or work, whereas in fact it is a literary construct.⁴ In *The Idea of History* (1989), R.G. Collingwood characteristically says of biography, “history it can never be”.⁵ This observation had already been made, many centuries earlier, by Plutarch in his *Parallel Lives*, where, at the opening of the *Life of Alexander* comparing Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, he notes: “[1.1] It is the life of Alexander the king, and of Caesar, who overthrew Pompey, that I am writing in this book, and the multitude of the deeds to be treated is so great that I shall make no other preface than to entreat my readers, in case I do not tell of all the famous actions of these men, nor even speak exhaustively at all in each particular case, but in epitome for the most part, not to complain. [1.2] For it is not Histories that I am writing, but Lives”.⁶

Arguing a different point of view, Ray Monk writes that “the task of a biography, is to enrich understanding in these two ways: by attending, so to speak, to the tone of voice in which a writer expresses himself or herself and by accumulating personal facts that will allow us to see what is said in a different light”.⁷ In other words, the important thing in biography is the ability to discern connections between events, allowing one to draw

2 Abrams (2010: 64-65).

3 Renders and de Haan (a) (2014: 1).

4 Bourdieu (2000: 301).

5 Kindi (2012: 44).

6 Plutarch (trans. 1919: 225).

7 Monk (2001: 4).

conclusions or gain information on the subject of the biography or their society, time and place generally. Usually, though not always, readers of biographies are 'passive recipients' and ignorant of the fact that they are called upon to be alert. In her *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form*, Ira Nadel writes that readers of biographies must be in a position to be aware of multiple perspectives, in the same way that viewers feel when seeing Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, where reality and illusion are confused and the viewer is caught in a constant challenge to discover what lies behind the complex composition.⁸

In the same way, scholars are called upon to seek reality through the elements they draw from biographies. In any case, biography, like history, is based on research, follows a specific methodology, reflects contemporary sociopolitical affairs and attempts to bring to the fore real and proven events of the subjects' lives.⁹ It is not, therefore, a method or an artform that is completely cut off from history. Robert I. Rotberg argues that "Biography is history, depends on history, and strengthens and enriches history".¹⁰

From the 1980s onwards, modern research has focused ever more frequently on the study of biography, connecting the genre to history and accepting its contribution to the enrichment of the latter.¹¹ Particularly from 2000 onwards, besides the large number of publications placing bibliography in a scientific framework,¹² a notable number of research centres have been established in universities, treating biography as an academic research subject. These centres include the Biography Institute of the University of Groningen, the Netherlands; the Ludwig Boltzmann Institut für Geschichte und Theorie der Biographie at Universität Wien, the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek and the ThomasBernhardArchiv in Gmunden, Austria; the European Network on Theory and Practice of Biography (2009–2011) at

8 Nadel (1984: 2).

9 Banner (2009: 580).

10 Rotberg (2010: 305).

11 Ambrosius (2004) · France & Clair (2002) · Renders and de Haan (a) (2014: 2).

12 Christian Klein (ed.), *Grundlagen der Biographik. Theorie und Praxis biographischen Schreibens*, 2002 · Christian Klein (ed.), *Handbuch Biographie. Methoden, Traditionen, Theorien*, 2009 · Wilhelm Hemecker (ed.), *Die Biographie. Beiträge zu ihrer Geschichte*, 2009 · Bernhard Fetz and Hannes Schweiger (eds.), *Die Biographie. Zur Grundlegung ihrer Theorie*, 2009 · Bernhard Fetz and Wilhelm Hemecker (eds.), *Theorie der Biographie. Grundlagentexte und Kommentar*, 2011.

the Universitat de València, Spain; the National Centre of Biography of the Australian National University, Australia; the Consortium for the Study of Biography στο University of Southern California in the US; and the Oxford Centre for LifeWriting (OCLW), Wolfson College, University of Oxford and the AHRC Research Network ‘Challenges to Biography’ of the University of Southampton in the UK.¹³ Their research is supported by many major international organisations, such as the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals (RSVP), the Research Society for American Periodicals (RSAP) and the European Society for Periodical Research (ESPRit), and a plethora of smaller ones,¹⁴ as well as many journals, the best-known being the *Victorian Periodicals Review*, now in its 51st year.¹⁵

In 19th-century Greece, the field of biography did not flourish particularly, from either a publishing or an academic standpoint. At the turn of the 19th century, authors’ biographies, otherwise known as ‘literary portraits’, made a dynamic entrance into the French press, an example followed by Greek literary journals.¹⁶ It is worth noting that the findings of the research project “Cultural intermediations and the shaping of the ‘national character’ in the 19th-century periodical press” (Chrysallis) and other studies of family literary journals and almanacs bring to light, as Athini notes, “247 articles of a biographical nature, on 124 foreign authors and playwrights”.¹⁷ The large number of articles is due to the popularity of the periodical press; compared to individual publications, journals in Greece appealed to a larger section of the reading public, of varying levels of education and drawn from a wider social range, not only the upper classes.

Around the mid-19th century, the focus of interest shifted from authors to stage performers, and journals became the most important source of information on the actors of the era; Sarah Bernhardt was a typical case, occupying the press for at least two decades.¹⁸ In *Asty*, the *Hemerologion tou*

13 Renders and de Haan (b) (2014: 17-18).

14 Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Periodical Studies (SEEEPS), French interdisciplinary Texte et Image Groupe de Recherche à l’École (TIGRE), History in Popular Cultures of Knowledge group at the University of Freiburg και Network of Research: Movies, Magazines, Audiences (NoRMMA).

15 Remoortel et al. (2016: 1-3).

16 Athini (2016: 125).

17 Athini (2016: 128).

18 Altouva (2013: 181).

Skokou [*Skokos's Almanac*] and *Apollon*, people read the character sketch of Aristeidēs Damalās; in *Hestia* they found the biographies of Evangelos Pantopoulos and Evangelia Paraskevopoulou, while there were also the obituaries of Theodoros Orphanides in the *Hemerologion tes Hestias* [*Hestia Almanac*] and *Asty*, of Spyros Tavoularis in the *Hemerologion tou Skokou*, and others. Biographies of Greek and foreign actors continued to be published into the 20th century, for instance that of Cybele in the *Poikile Stoa* and the *Anatolikon Hemerologion* [*Eastern Almanac*], Coquelin and Adelaide Ristori in the *Pinakothekē* [*Art Gallery*], David Garrick and Henry Irving in *Panathenaea*, etc. Thus, through this hybrid genre of biography we discover unknown facets of the actors' lives and art, drawing conclusions on acting in Greece and a wealth of other information on the era. Moreover, biography has many functions and 'uses' both in its own time and later,¹⁹ since it may serve informational, didactic or celebratory purposes or be written in order to commemorate a person in the case of the obituary.

It should be clarified here that the actors' biographies found in 19th- and early-20th-century popular journals, known as family literary journals, are completely different from individual published biographies, which are lengthy and based on extensive authorial research on the subject. On the contrary, the biographical notes under study here are brief (10 pages at most – although this is quite extensive for a journal article) and provide only limited information on the actors' lives compared to full individual biographies. Their study, however, is particularly interesting because it reveals unknown facets of the actors' lives and examples of their acting talent, while the descriptions contained in the biographies include titillating or anecdotal details of the subject's life and work. The main aim of these journals, as we read in *Euterpe*, is 'to provide the educated with entertainment not unworthy of them, and benefit, accompanied by entertainment, to all the rest', while the journal *Zakynthios Anthon* [*Flower-Garden of Zante*] states that "we believe that including biographies from time to time is both entertaining and educational". We must not forget the photographic material which often accompanies the biographical notes and faithfully depicts the actor in question, complementing the written description. These

19 Depkat (2014: 47).

are usually highly theatrical snapshots of the actors in costume playing their roles and often assuming the appropriate facial expression.

However, when studying biographies the researcher must examine the material carefully, bearing certain factors in mind. One important issue, as mentioned above, is the relationship between history and narrative, since the author of the biography, although primarily seeking archival material in order to record the truth, often resorts to literature.²⁰ This, of course, does not mean that all the author writes is fictional, and still less that he or she is transmitting false information. The narrative style is often found in biographies;²¹ indeed, it is one of the characteristics of the genre, depending on the type of writing produced by the author, who may record events with a journalist's pen or in a more literary way. In *Hestia* in 1894, Th. S. Xenophanis, in high literary style, compares the art of Eleonora Duse to the sound of a violin: "but the art of Duse is more like the monophonic harmony of a violin, which, emanating softly and sweetly, expires in the dark of night".²² In 1901 Cleon Ragavis published a brief presentation of the life of Adelaide Ristori in *Pinakotheke*, stressing her youthful adventures. This biographical note is a fictionalised narrative of the tragedienne's life. The conclusion is representative of its kind: "acting on stage with other actors, she seemed to belong to a higher species, for she no longer had anything human about her. A statue by Phidias, or rather a statue created by God, she encloses a fiery heart, and, expressing in her melodious voice its innermost manifestations, she lifts up the audience to the spheres of immortal art".²³ In 1905, Nikolaos I. Laskaris recounts the life of Pantelis Soutsas in the *Hemerologion tou Skokou* in anecdotal vein, mentioning, among other things, his laziness and carefree attitude before he entered the theatre and devoted himself to it, even exhibiting workaholic tendencies. Laskaris characteristically states that even when Soutsas opened a printing shop, "his unfortunate customers often found the printing shop closed... as he was out amusing himself" (*Hemerologion tou Skokou*, 1905, 20:346) and that "the late Orphanides [...] was obliged to chalk upon the shut door the following six-line verse, hitherto unpublished, the final words of which are

20 Levi (2014: 62).

21 Levi (2014: 62).

22 Xenophanis (1894: 104).

23 Ragavis (1901: 128-129).

too Aristophanic to be quoted here: ‘Damn you, evil sloth,| Which drives from work both| My friend Soutsas, alas| And his companion Ktenas,| Of idlers the pick| With the big ...’²⁴

At times the author of the biography is also affected by his personal judgement when commenting on the virtues or vices of his subject. In this case the true events mentioned must be distinguished from the exaggerations due to the author’s subjective view. Hermione Lee aptly notes: “biography may, indeed, be a kind of marriage. If the biographer knows or has met their subject, their own feelings about them will color the picture in some way”.²⁵ In 1893, Theodoros Vellianitis admits in his article in *Hestia* to being moved on learning details of the life of Evangelia Paraskevopoulou: “in the few moments I was with her, I learned so much about her life and about her travails, which moved me to the utmost”.²⁶ He concludes that the actor “is a woman familiar with all the demands of life, feeling that although she pleases and exhilarates the multitude, she is ground down, only just able to win her bread and that of her child”.²⁷ In the same year, Grigorios Xenopoulos, at the beginning of his article on Evangelos Pantopoulos in *Hestia*, confesses to admiring him: “I will express my unreserved and unapologetic admiration for a true artist of the stage”.²⁸ He later declares that “Pantopoulos is a particular favourite of mine”,²⁹ and does not hesitate to admit that “I am the first to acknowledge Evangelos Pantopoulos’s shortcomings. But I am also the first to excuse them”.³⁰

Authors not infrequently compare actors to other, very famous thespians, in order to reinforce their argument in favour of the great acting abilities of their subjects. In 1896, Xenopoulos writes in the *Hemerologion tou Skokou*: “Aikaterini Veroni was judged – judged now without prejudice – an artist worthy of her fame, at least as an artist who could bear comparison even to Paraskevopoulou herself. This last, of course, was not admitted by the fanatical admirers of the Greek Sarah Bernhardt, ‘the one

24 Laskaris (1905: 346).

25 Lee (2009: 129).

26 Vellianitis (1893: 185).

27 Vellianitis (1893: 185).

28 Xenopoulos (1893: 376).

29 Xenopoulos (1893: 377).

30 Xenopoulos (1893: 376).

and only’, but even they did not hesitate to admit from the first evening that Veroni was one of the most beautiful actresses of the Greek stage and that, in spite of the chasm separating her from the first – wider according to some, narrower according to others – she was the immediate second”.³¹

Biographers who are very familiar with their subject describe their life in a different way to those who know less about them. Moreover, the result with regard to the same subject varies depending on the personal style of each biographer and their subjective view. Shakespeare is the obvious example, with widely differing approaches to his biography.³² It is also common not to find the same information in reports on the same actor, regardless of their extent, due to authorial omission (deliberate or otherwise). In his four-page biographical sketch of Aristeides Damalas (Jacques Damala), published in the *Hemerologion tou Skokou* in 1890, P. K. Apostolides focuses on analysing the actor’s acting prowess.³³ In the obituary of Damalas published in the journal *Apollon* in 1889, there is extensive reference to the actor’s life and work, and also to his relationship with Sarah Bernhardt, their marriage, their theatrical successes and his morphine addiction, in a space of just over three columns.³⁴ In the much shorter obituary – just half a column – in *Asty* the same year, the author refers briefly to the actor’s life, stating that due to lack of space he will limit himself to only a short sketch. However, in contrast to the two longer articles mentioned above, he does not omit Damalas’s divorce and the reaction of his famous wife: “it was not long before Parisians learned that a divorce had been issued between Damalas and Sarah, which reduced the famous artiste to a wreck, unable to resist his charming figure”.³⁵ There are many such examples when we compare biographies of the same person, necessitating careful study by the scholar. Reinforcing the argument that this is a narrative, it is obvious that the author constructs a different story when speaking of the same person, making his own choices and combining different elements of the subject’s life and work.³⁶

31 Xenopoulos (1896: 66).

32 Lee (2009: 130).

33 Apostolides (1890: 268-272).

34 [Anonymous] (1889: 911-912).

35 [Anonymous] (1889: 2).

36 Nadel (1984: 119).

Useful information is provided not only on the actors' lives but also on the roles they play and descriptions of their acting style, which could provide a timely contribution to the periodisation of the history of acting methods in Greece. In 1893, Theodoros Vellianitis writes in *Hestia* about Paraskevopoulou playing Marguerite Gautier in Alexandre Dumas's *La Dame aux Camélias*: "in the theatrical picture presented by Paraskevopoulou lies the highest human truth: the ecstasies of passion, the pains of parting, the sickness of the soul, the sickness that devours the flesh and annihilates the body, all are drawn true to life".³⁷ The author continues his account in a similar vein, devoting a whole column to this role and a second to other parts played by the Greek actor. We should not, however, overlook the influence on domestic acting exercised by visits to Athens by European leading actors.³⁸ Thus, yet another contribution of the press is to domestic acting via the creation of models and the imposition of new acting trends,³⁹ as the reports in circulation describe the acting prowess of the foreign stars of the European stage.

A person's life cannot be studied independently of the environment in which they live and create their art. So, besides the information we gain about the actors' life and acting prowess, the biographies also provide material on the contemporary social background and attitudes. In 1905, in the *Hemerologion tou Skokou*, Laskaris writes of Pantelis Soutsas and his relationship with the theatre that, "he felt no inclination towards it whatsoever [...]. This may have been largely due to the then-prevalent prejudices of all kinds against the theatre, instilled in him by his god-fearing parents".⁴⁰ Such references obviously reflect social reality and are historical sources, as they help us to draw certain conclusions on the religious and other convictions of the time, particularly in relation to the theatre.

By studying biographies we can also collect various types of information, for instance on the repertoire and audience preferences, or even on the theatre facilities. In his 1893 biographical note on Evangelia Paraskevopoulou, Georgios V. Tsokopoulos devotes a whole page of the *Hemerologion tou Skokou* to the shifting attitudes of the Athens public, which now

37 Vellianitis (1893: 186).

38 Glytzouris (2004: 207-221)· Demetriadis (2004: 189-196)· Hatzipantazis (2012: 49-54).

39 Altouva (2014).

40 Laskaris (1905: 345).

preferred a kind of musical comedy called ‘komeidyllion’, since “it has been transformed over the course of just two years into a crowd of titters, taking pleasure only in the Andros dialect of the ‘komeidyllion’ heroes and the banter of the breeches-wearing peasants parading on stage”.⁴¹ Of course, the author then declares that the arrival of Paraskevopoulou brought about a change in audience attitudes. It is also worth noting the example of the dressing-rooms of the time, mentioned in *Hestia* in 1893: “the actors usually change their costumes behind a sheet, as makeshift as possible. The architects of theatres of this kind are never concerned with meeting the backstage requirements of the actors. They are not interested in this in the slightest”.⁴²

In conclusion, there is every indication that actors’ biographies published in the periodical press and combining narrative and history can function as a historical source, and that their study can both provide significant information on unexplored facets of the actors’ life and art, and enrich the history of acting in Greece.

41 Tsokopoulos (1893: 97).

42 Vellianitis (1893: 185).

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Περίληψη

Η παρούσα εισήγηση αποτελεί μέρος του ερευνητικού προγράμματος με τίτλο: «Η βιογραφία ως πηγή της θεατρικής ιστορίας: βιογραφίες ελλήνων και ξένων ηθοποιών στον ελληνικό και παρoικιακό περιοδικό Τύπο από τον 19ο αιώνα ως τη Μικρασιατική Καταστροφή. Συμβολή στην ιστορία της υποκριτικής (Θ.ΙΣ.Β.Υ.)». Η Βιογραφία, το σημαντικότερο από τα λεγόμενα βιογραφικά είδη, τα οποία περιλαμβάνουν τα ημερολόγια, τα απομνημονεύματα, την αυτοβιογραφία, τη μυθιστορηματική βιογραφία κ.λ.π., εγείρει διαφωνίες ανάμεσα στους θεωρητικούς σχετικά με το αν μπορεί να λειτουργήσει ως ιστορική πηγή ή αν ανήκει αποκλειστικά στον χώρο της λογοτεχνίας. Από τις δυο τελευταίες δεκαετίες του εικοστού αιώνα και μετά, η σύγχρονη έρευνα ασχολείται όλο και πιο συχνά με τη μελέτη της βιογραφίας, συνδέει το είδος με την ιστορία και αποδέχεται τη συνεισφορά της βιογραφίας στον εμπλουτισμό της. Μπορεί, λοιπόν, η βιογραφία να μας επιτρέψει να οδηγηθούμε σε κάποια συμπεράσματα σχετικά με τον βιογραφούμενο ή γενικότερα την κοινωνία, την εποχή και τον τόπο του; Οι βιογραφίες των ελλήνων και ξένων ηθοποιών που συναντάμε στον περιοδικό Τύπο της εποχής μπορούν να συμπληρώσουν τα κενά της έρευνας που υπάρχουν σε ό,τι αφορά την ιστορία της υποκριτικής του 19^{ου} αιώνα, τα προσωπικά στοιχεία των ηθοποιών, καθώς και το δραματολόγιο της εποχής;

Key Words: Actors' Biographies, Periodical Press, history