

Fall 2018

## Emancipating the Passive Muse: A Call for a Feminist Approach to Writing Biographies on Historical Women

Ina C. Seethaler  
*Coastal Carolina University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/jfs>

 Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Law and Gender Commons](#), and the [Women's History Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

---

### Recommended Citation

Seethaler, Ina C.. 2018. "Emancipating the Passive Muse: A Call for a Feminist Approach to Writing Biographies on Historical Women." *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 15 (Fall): 37-48. <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/jfs/vol15/iss15/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Feminist Scholarship by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu).

# Emancipating the Passive Muse: A Call for a Feminist Approach to Writing Biographies on Historical Women

Ina C. Seethaler, Coastal Carolina University

**Abstract:** This essay analyzes two popular biographies on historical women to interrogate how a focus on gender has shaped the genre: Nancy Ruben Stuart's *The Muse of the Revolution: The Secret Pen of Mercy Otis Warren and the Founding of a Nation* (2008) and Jung Chang's *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China* (2013). I argue that biographers who perpetuate gender stereotypes miss a momentous opportunity during the current life writing boom in the United States to educate readers on women's social, cultural, and political contributions worldwide. In proposing that feminist-informed biographies are more accurate, complete, and make social and cultural interventions, I discuss how these texts celebrate women's abilities and successes and, thus, counter patriarchal interpretations of history.

**Keywords:** biography, gender studies, historical women, feminism, life writing

Copyright by Ina C. Seethaler

The 1990s saw a boom in literary criticism about feminist biography. At that time, research had begun to suggest that "biography, once a 'men's club,' has been radically changed by the flood of attention now paid to women's lives" (Alpern et al. 1992, 5). Today, books about women's lives seem to be a staple of every bookstore. But what if some of these texts perpetuate gender stereotypes instead of challenging them? How far has biography progressed in offering feminist, gender-centered analysis? More discussion about whether shifts in gender consciousness have been consistently applied to the writing of biography is needed, especially since women's lives often do not meet the standards and approaches established by male-centered life writing (see, for example, Jelinek 1980). Biographers do not need to write inherently feminist life accounts, but they should not perpetuate sexist understandings of women's history. I propose that feminist-informed biographies are more accurate, complete, and can make social and cultural interventions because they celebrate women's abilities and successes. Such life writing destabilizes the normalization of male experiences as well as the trivialization and distortion of women's lives; it reclaims women's history. Many readers consume biographies to gain a deeper understanding of the world and, possibly, their own lives, and it is essential that these works challenge patriarchal ideology and represent their subjects' full agency and humanity.

Nancy Ruben Stuart's *The Muse of the Revolution: The Secret Pen of Mercy Otis Warren and the Founding of a Nation* (2008) and Jung Chang's *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China* (2013) share characteristics that make them fruitful case studies for a comparative reading of how sexist stereotypes have persisted or have been challenged in biographies. Both are commercial biographies written by award-winning female authors and published by non-academic presses that aim to recover for a mass audience the experiences of two female historical figures who have not received wide-spread attention despite their political and cultural influence. Both lives depicted are set in highly

patriarchal societies and times. However, the biographers' methodologies that contextualize and analyze these lives differ vastly. While Stuart roots the portrayal of her subject in assumptions about the overly emotional and dependent nature of nineteenth-century American women, Chang sets the tone of female empowerment and agency from the beginning of her book. In this essay, I examine both biographers' approaches and contrast them with earlier works on the same subjects to demonstrate how biographies on women can benefit from a feminist perspective. I choose commercial biographies because I am interested in the gendered messages they send to an audience that might not necessarily be well-versed in feminist and/or gender theory although I recognize that the distinction between these subgenres is not clear-cut.

A focus on a mass, non-academic readership might explain why a biographer chooses to cater toward "society's much-publicized emphasis on the need for a return to stable, traditional morality" (Wagner-Martin 1980, 44). The popular biographer is undeniably caught in the dilemma of balancing the gap between sales and nuanced, feminist biographical writing. Wholesomeness and traditional values appeal to the general public as they promise notions of security and steadiness—often at the expense of accuracy and comprehensiveness. According to a large-scale Goodreads survey, men are more likely to read biographies than women, but they are less likely than women to read works by female authors (Morrison 2017). In a declining market for (print) books, even non-profit book publishers like Beacon Press, which published *The Muse*, must woo readers any way possible.

Perhaps, based on the above-mentioned reading preferences and prevailing assumptions about what kinds of stories women enjoy hearing, publishers hope to render biographies more attractive to a female readership by making them sensational, romantic, and fiction-like. But maybe it is because women seldom find realistic, non-stereotypical, empowering biographies that they are more hesitant of the genre. In what follows, I examine Stuart and Chang's texts together to demonstrate that when biographers of women echo, in methodology and content, current scholarship focused on gender and patriarchal social pressures, they offer a more precise and detailed picture of the political, cultural, and religious elements that shaped their subjects' experiences.

### **The Life of the Passive Muse**

Biography has reached an immensely popular status in the United States. Janet Gray suggests that the genre is so widely read now that it exerts a more tangible "potential social impact than other modes of critical writing" (1993, 35). In light of biography's influence over its readers' belief systems, it is noteworthy how Nancy Ruben Stuart, a journalist and author of multiple popular biographies on women, reproduces nineteenth century gender roles in her biography on Mercy Otis Warren (1728-1814), who tested gender norms during the American Revolution as a poet, playwright, and outspoken political writer and critic. Stuart promises an alternative history but does not expose and analyze gender norms on which traditionalist histories rely. *The Muse* portrays Warren as a conventional woman, which diminishes her social and political work and feeds a patriarchal narrative of women's invisibility and insignificance.

In her preface, Stuart emphasizes that she does not intend to elaborate on the "theoretical aspects" of her subject's life because, according to her, that is what "college seminars, academic biographies, and . . . rare book rooms" do; rather, she aims to paint an "intimate picture of [Warren's] life for the general reader" (2008, xi). Stuart does not further explain which theoretical aspects she has chosen to disregard. While her assessment not only misrepresents many scholarly biographies, it also serves Stuart as a justification for ignoring feminist perspectives that enable readers to see beyond the cultural surface and understand

women's lives in the past better. As a result, as Kate Davies points out in her review essay on *The Muse*, "Warren's outspoken personality, her deeply held political views, and her exceptionally strong and distinctive literary style" vanish in Stuart's account (2009, 375). Instead of portraying Warren as distinctive, gender generalizations and stereotypes dominate the narrative.

Beginning with the title of her biography, Stuart implies passivity. A muse is known for inspiring artists, especially men, but agency is not one of her primary characteristics. Usually, little is known of a muse's life beyond her artistic encouragement. Similarly, the reader learns little about Warren's childhood and youth in *The Muse*. A rare glimpse into Warren's early years simply points out that she was always longing "for a man to appreciate" her needlework (2008, 16). Instead of helping readers understand patriarchal ideology, the biography re-creates it by focusing narrowly on the roles Warren was expected to play. Throughout the text, the emphasis lies on Warren's performance of patriarchal duties and rarely on her desires, thoughts, or decisions.

As a result, Stuart insufficiently investigates her subject's complexity and individuality. The reader learns that, for Warren, women's oppression equaled "Parliament's suppression of the Americans' natural rights" (2008, 68). Yet, in the remainder of the book, Stuart does not develop Warren's indictment of the colonial disregard for women. Instead, she describes Warren's functions after her marriage as a hostess, witness, and confidante. In the biography, Warren's identity is comprised as a wife who is emotionally, financially, and morally dependent on her husband. From these rather passive positions, Warren supposedly admired the men that surrounded her. At one point, Stuart comments that most of Warren's forty-six years "had been spent raising sons, spinning, sewing garments, and stocking her larder, pantry, and root cellar for the arrival of unexpected guests" (6). Even though this statement could open up a critique on gender ideologies and reveal further insight into Warren's life apart from stereotypical instances—which is an important revision of male-centered histories—Stuart merely mentions that Warren was completely happy. While Warren might have been happy, Stuart's conclusion is mostly based on patriarchal assumptions. In her 1988 seminal work *Writing a Woman's Life*, Carolyn Heilbrun explains biographers usually judge marriage, "using only the indications of happy marriage that romance and the patriarchy have taught us," and she urges us to look for equality in marriage (95). Stuart's characterization of Warren follows such simplistic and submerged preconceived gender norms of happiness in spite of available accounts and period sources that include Warren's own writing.

Published in 2008, one might assume that *The Muse* would reflect a critically gendered outlook on women's lives during the American Revolutionary War. Despite the current understanding that "gender ideals have molded behavior and defined the standard against which deviance is measured" (Pleck 1991, 1), Stuart assesses Warren with the same patriarchal standards of Warren's lifetime. I argue that biographies on women—and especially those that target a mass audience who might not be immersed in the histories and theories of gender—should create analyses that aim to discuss underlying gendered inequities and unspoken points of social critique. Yet, *The Muse* perpetuates gender hierarchies and rarely attempts to criticize stereotypical descriptions of Warren as a prototypical "Angel in the House," who relishes in confinement as a feminine and pious trait. Stuart valorizes Warren as passive and fragile despite historical sources—such as Warren's own diaries, letters, and fictional writing—suggesting that Warren was neither of these. While Warren did not petition for women's rights in an official capacity, her writings, public discontent with politics, and influential relationships with other women contradicted assumptions about women being too overcome by their emotions to participate in public life.

Even when Stuart acknowledges her subject's strong convictions, she reduces Warren's agency by describing her as "the docile matron was transformed" in a passive voice that indicates she does not see the source of change in Warren herself (2008, 6). While Stuart acknowledges that Warren defines herself in her own correspondence as a "perceptive, strong, and deeply caring individual, sometimes foolishly driven by emotions, at other times guided by cool rationality, alternately witty and vitriolic, but ultimately human in her flaws and virtues" (xii), she does not further engage with the strong and smart political convictions that these letters expressed among a strong-willed group of women. Instead, Stuart reproduces a gendered narrative focused on women's overly emotional minds.

In *An Historic Overview of American Gender Roles and Relations from Precolonial Times to the Present* (1991), Elizabeth Pleck demonstrates that social, cultural, political, and sexual subordination were a part of every woman's experiences in eighteenth-century America. Stuart does not direct the reader's conscious focus toward manifestations of patriarchal oppression in Warren's life; instead, she solidifies the division of society into a male public and female private sphere when she comments at length on Warren's brother and husband's political accomplishments and then turns to Warren by mentioning that she "tended more domestic fires" (2008, 26). In contrast to Pleck, Stuart's writing consolidates gendered clichés. Stuart's one mention of Warren as not a widely celebrated "founding mother" because of the "eighteenth century bias against learned women" (xii) is not enough to suggest that she makes gender a focus in her writing.

Using a gendered lens in biography has the potential to give a platform for women's everyday experiences in their own right. As Kathleen Barry argues, if the focus of women's biography is primarily on their social positions as wives and mothers, "women's lives are not treated as if they are multidimensional at all" (1992, 34). For readers of *The Muse*, it is hard to see beyond Warren's supposed one-dimensional fixation on domesticity because Stuart presents her life as being predominantly shaped by men and does not elaborate on her agency in her writing and beyond it. Accordingly, Angelo Angelis laments in his review of *The Muse* that the book lacks "connections to Warren's efforts as a historian" and that it "misses a number of opportunities to explore . . . Warren's effect on her husband's political decisions" (2009, 195). Stuart constructs two spheres for Warren. In the realm of her literary work, Warren can express herself freely. Apart from this sphere, in Stuart's narrative, Warren is completely dependent on the men in her life instead of actively affecting and informing them.

The depiction of the separation of private and public spheres captures historical fact, but instead of offering readers a critical, gender-focused context for these conditions, Stuart leaves them unquestioned. She does not analyze gender as a social construct, which affects how women shape their lives. A lack of this understanding of gender "distorts, if not falsifies, any account of a woman's life. This is true even when a woman is unaware of or inarticulate about the effects of gender on her life" (Alpern et al. 1992, 7). I would like to add that a disregard for critical gender analysis certainly also leads to incomplete narratives of men's and gender non-conforming people's lives.

Throughout the book, Stuart excessively uses emotional vocabulary to describe, oftentimes seemingly imagined, interactions between Warren and her husband and sons, her worries about them, and her diligence toward her household chores.<sup>1</sup> Scenes that describe Warren as constantly "tend[ing] to her ailing father and needy sons, [and] worr[y]ing about her overworked husband" foreground her role as wife and mother (2008, 93). *The Muse* could have been written in the nineteenth-century, when, as Susan Bell and Marilyn Yalom elaborate, most biographers "assumed an essentialist division between a masculine and a feminine 'nature,' observing how the biographical subject did or did not deviate from so-called feminine virtues, such as modesty and intuitiveness, or so-called masculine qualities, such as courage and rationality"

(1990, 7-8). Stuart's gender essentialist approach upholds patriarchal oppression, neglects to question how women's experiences are shaped by the social construction of gender, and misses important observations about and re-interpretations of women's agency and power.

### **A Different Story**

Playwright Alice Brown utilized a substantially different approach to writing Warren's life in *Mercy Warren* (1896), which counter-balances Stuart's patriarchal narrative in interesting ways. Brown emphasizes Warren's agency and shows how she manipulated and overcame existing gender ideologies to display her patriotism. By giving details on Warren's political engagement beyond her writing, Brown highlights the paradox that permeated Warren's life, namely being proud of her agency and yet depending on men. Brown focuses emphatically on Warren's liberating achievements in a male-dominated society. In contrast to *The Muse*, Brown begins her biography of Warren by depicting Warren's childhood in great detail. This effort on Brown's part gives Warren a story of her own and individualizes her by setting her apart from the men in her life. Brown also devotes a separate chapter on "The Woman's Part," in which she depicts the life of women during the Revolutionary War and describes how women's connectedness brought about comfort and political change.

While Stuart does not use Warren's writing as a primary object of analysis but concentrates on her social environment, Brown evaluates Warren's three-volume *The History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* (1805) and her writings about her husband and brother. Brown thereby acknowledges, in Bell and Yalom's words, that "women in the past, who were limited in their access to the public sphere, often seized the opportunity of writing their lives 'obliquely' through the biographies of their husbands, fathers, brothers" (1990, 4). Because their lives were not considered worth writing about, some women subversively inserted their own experiences into biographies about men who 'deserved' public attention.

Brown's portrayal of Warren serves as an early example of gender awareness in biography. At its publication, it contributed to an increased demand for biographies about "illustrious and learned women" in the eighteenth and nineteenth century (Batchelor 2012, 181). Jennie Batchelor elaborates that the authors of many of these works sought to provide role models for and instill inspiration and "ambition . . . in female readers" to change this particular audience's inundation with romance and stereotypical femininity (182). While she may not have called her methodology feminist, Brown's approach of telling Stuart's life can certainly be credited with a feminist sensibility focused on the politics of gender and empowerment.

Very different from Stuart, Brown's analysis of Warren's life is based on the assumption that she "considers herself the equal, mental and moral, of the more fortunate sex" (24), which remained a bold attitude even at the time of Brown's publication. Brown and Stuart's respective descriptions of the falling out between Warren and President John Adams—her literary godfather, who protested his representation in Warren's *The History*—emphasizes their different approaches to writing a woman's life. In a long account, Stuart shows how beleaguered and helplessly dependent Warren was on her male patrons. Brown, on the other hand, keeps her depiction of this incident short and affirms Warren's self-defensive position when she points out, "though, even under attack, she would not have withdrawn a syllable from what she had written" (1896, 211). Brown represents Warren as resilient and standing up for herself and her own work even when faced with criticism.

Unlike Brown, Stuart implies that women in colonial America did not have any concrete influence on the world outside their households. Yet, Linda Kerber's *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (1980) uses Warren as an example to display "women's [emancipatory] efforts to accomplish for themselves what the Revolution had failed to do" (12). Stuart could have discussed women's authority in the Revolutionary Era by portraying Warren's relationships with other women not so much "from an exclusively individual psychosexual perspective" but within a "cultural and social setting" (Smith-Rosenberg 1975, 2). This approach illustrates how mutual support among women at the time did generate power. For instance, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg explains that shared biological experiences throughout women's lives such as pregnancy, childcare, and menopause brought women together and created a space of "physical and emotional intimacy" (1975, 9 and 14), which gave rise to consciousness-raising opportunities and empowered women to demand that their voices be heard. Unfortunately, Stuart's work aligns more with that of traditional male biographers of women's lives who have "the tendency to chart a woman's life in terms of her friendship and liaisons with men rather than equally through her associations with other women" (Wagner-Martin 1980, 112). Other biographers of Warren have attributed substantially more significance to the correspondence between Warren and her female acquaintances and referred less to general, patriarchal versions of American history in their depiction of Warren's life.

Kate Davies's (2005) *Catharine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren: The Revolutionary Atlantic and the Politics of Gender* constitutes a rich example of female-centric historical writing.<sup>2</sup> In her book, Davies uses gender as a theoretical lens to discuss Macaulay and Warren's writings and how they affected political cultures during their time. A key focal point in Davies's analysis is these women's close friendship and their relationships with other influential women. According to Davies, in addition to serving as settings for mutual emotional support, these female relationships were essential spaces for women to debate and assert power and critique patriarchy. Warren was engaged in intense epistolary exchanges with Catherine Macaulay, Hannah Lincoln, Penny Winslow, Ellen Lothrop, and Abigail Adams. Stuart only elaborates on these relationships in passing. Davies, on the other hand, emphasizes how these women's letters demonstrate "energetic engagement with public affairs and a real sense of themselves as participants in a sentimental-political network" (2005, 200).

Incorporating these friendships into Warren's life narrative renders visible how elite women during the Revolutionary Era turned domesticity into a political tool to express their opinions and patriotism (Davies 2005, 187). In fact, Gerda Lerner calls Warren one of the women who were "central architects of the new female ideology," one that was patriotic, domestic, and decidedly political (1975, 11). According to Lerner, Warren constructed "a rationale for women's interest in politics that was justified in terms of their right to free speech and self-expression" (83) and contended that "women's duty to their own families required them to sort out public information accurately and to take a political position" (84). Warren did not reject domesticity; she politicized it, and Stuart's portrayal of her life fails to reflect this political significance. A deeper understanding of Warren's political calculations contradicts *The Muse's* emphasis on her passivity; it follows Heilbrun's (1988) demand that biographers of women must complicate the notion of the domestic sphere and the assumed maleness of power in order to depict women's social, political, and cultural influence correctly.

Readers learn from Davies that Warren urged her nieces and granddaughters to study history and politics and to disregard prejudices that told them otherwise (2005, 16). Encouraged by the support she received from other privileged women, she forcefully participated in political debate, a sphere dominated by men. Warren openly opposed the U.S. Constitution and heavily criticized the first two American presidents (250). She

claimed her gender made her a better political writer due to her objectivity and “moral incontrovertibility” (295). Importantly, her social and political negotiations created the conditions for early women’s feminist writings, like Mary Wollstonecraft’s, during the suffrage movement (304). However, *The Muse* does little to help readers understand these elements of Warren’s historical, political, and feminist legacy.

Stuart could have given the reader a nuanced understanding of patriotism from the perspective of a woman in the Revolutionary era. While women were shown off publicly and symbolically used as emblems of virtue, they were otherwise socially excluded and without rights during the Revolutionary era. Stereotypes of women being overcome by passion served as tools to curtail women’s citizenship. By connecting Warren’s life with the birth of the American nation, Stuart, at first glance, seems to subvert these ideas and offer a different reading of the Revolutionary era. As Kathleen Canning explains “studies of . . . gender may overlap or rely analytically on the study of the nation” (2005, 15). For example, Carol Berkin and Clara Lovett demonstrate the “forms, the significance, and the consequences” of women’s participation in revolutionary movements, among them the American War of Independence, and discuss the influence of war on women’s emancipation (1980, 79). Stuart misses the opportunity to discuss Warren’s agency and the connections between gender and the public sphere. Instead of questioning rigid gender norms and describing how Warren might have tried to break out of them, Stuart loses herself in sentimentality and melodrama that buttresses sexist understandings of women’s lives. This narrative approach is not unique to *The Muse*. In *Defiant Brides* (2013)—her biography of Margaret (Peggy) Shippen Arnold and Lucy Flucker Knox—Stuart embraces many of the same techniques that I find troubling in *The Muse*. For example, Stuart asserts that while the subjects of her book are normally depicted as a traitor and a patriot respectively, she is determined to make them “human beings, . . . vulnerable, fallible, and praiseworthy” (xvi). This goal is laudable, but the vocabulary used for the section titles of the book, which focus on these women’s roles as “brides,” “wives,” and “sisters,” again establish a fixation on patriarchal gender norms.

Comparing *The Muse* and *Mercy Warren* suggests that historical realities and social developments might influence biographers less than their own personal agendas. Brown experienced the same political and social restraints as Warren during a time when the Women’s Rights Movement was gaining strength, and so it is likely that Brown intended to make a political statement in accentuating Warren’s emancipatory attitudes. Stuart’s reasoning for her portrayal is also shaped by ideologies and market concerns of her own time, perhaps to expand the appeal of her biography on the general readership. Stuart may have hoped to reach a large audience with her conservative, emotional tone. Using sentimental vocabulary, Stuart creates an idealized world, which may please a particular kind of reader, but will create a skewed image of Warren’s lived reality. For example, Davies corrects Stuart in her interpretation of “Warren’s use of the word ‘piddle’” as a “lapse into unladylike vulgarity” in clarifying that the term was a code word in her circle of friends for a disliked politician (2009, 375). Davies also reveals that when Warren notes in a letter to her husband that he considers state affairs “too deep for the female ear or too intricate for her consideration” (*Ibid*), she is not admitting her submissiveness—like Stuart stresses—but rather uses sarcasm to ridicule her husband’s condescension.

## An Alternative Approach

Vastly differing in its methods of capturing a historically important woman's life in a popular biography, Jung Chang's *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China* (2013) establishes a gender emphasis on Cixi's life from the very beginning. This biography stands out as a powerful feminist approach to Chinese history. Chang's approach to telling Cixi's life is unique because many biographical accounts represent the empress as a ruthless ruler whose governance style mostly consisted of killing off her enemies. These sensationalized narratives rely on the hypersexualization of Cixi, which further discredits her power. Most of these works are based on information from male sources skeptical of women's influence on government. One of the most dominant biographies, J.O.P. Bland and E. Backhouse's *China under the Empress Dowager: Being the History of the Life and Times of Tzu Hsi, Compiled from State Papers and the Private Diary of the Comptroller of her Household* (1910), depicts Cixi as cruel and incompetent and was discredited for using fictitious materials. Sterling Seagrave revises these portrayals in his 1992 *Dragon Lady: The Life and Legend of the Last Empress of China* but in doing so, represents her as merely a tool of male political agents, scarcely holding on to any power at all. With the help of extensive new materials and the reinterpretation of old sources, Chang offers a more complex version of Cixi that restores her power and agency and pushes back against the empress's rendering as a caricature.

Chang writes that from a young age, being "consulted and her views acted on, [Cixi] acquired self-confidence and never accepted the common assumption that women's brains were inferior to men's" (7). Her subject's individuality and strength are the prime focus of Chang's analysis. She elaborates extensively on female friendships in Cixi's life, such as between Cixi and the emperor's first wife after the emperor's death. While the relationship between a wife and her deceased husband's concubine might stereotypically function as a set-up for stories of jealousy and fighting, this biography gives insight into female shared governance and intelligence as both women "rejected the prescribed life of imperial widows . . . as virtual prisoners in the harem" and "worked in perfect harmony" (42, 56).

The anecdotes Chang chooses to highlight continuously support her subject's power and ambition. For example, even though Cixi's influence emerged primarily through giving birth to a son, Chang does not exploit her role as mother. She certainly writes about motherhood and emphasizes that she "really loved her son" (110), but the reader gets the impression that Chang appreciates all of her subject's responsibilities in life equally. She pays special attention to avoid painting Cixi as passive by recounting episodes in which she disagreed with her husband and other powerful men's policies (for example, isolating China from the West) (35). Chang describes in detail patriarchal obstacles which should have stifled Cixi, such as being a woman meant she had to be physically separated by a screen from men during consultations, yet she was able to overcome by means of her "authority" and "commanding presence" (56). Cixi was never given access to all parts of the Forbidden City, the Chinese imperial palace, but she was, nevertheless, an effective ruler who modernized China (52), dealt with "enemies fairly and reasonably" (92), and negotiated a long period of peace for her country. In an attempt to offer a nuanced picture of Cixi, Chang refrains from glorifying her and attests that she "was a giant but not a saint . . . [due to her] immense ruthlessness" (371).

In addition to Cixi's political savviness, Chang stresses her physical strength. For example, she recounts Cixi's stamina during her journey into temporary exile, which thoroughly exhausted her young adoptive son (290), or how she did not abandon her duties when she contracted a severe case of diarrhea (362). Chang contextualizes her subject's decisions within her patriarchal culture in a way that enables her audience to value Cixi's accomplishments. She does not sensationalize or dramatize her gender nor does she merely focus on the norms Cixi was supposed to fulfill. Indeed, Cixi's determination is at the center of her life story,

and the complexity of Cixi's character emerges throughout the biography. "Cixi detested age-old prejudices against women" (179), and she passed a decree to abolish foot-binding and laws against intermarriage (325); but she was also influenced by the sexist norms which she was fighting, especially the demand that women need to obsess about their bodies. Chang elaborates that she adhered to a strict body-regimen to look young (168) and was thrilled to learn that photos could be altered to rejuvenate her appearance (333).

Despite its overall feminist approach to telling Cixi's life, Chang's biography is not without its problems. Whenever the author attempts to capture Cixi's romantic or sexual experiences, she tends to use gender normative language. The chapter "Love Doomed," for example, describes Cixi falling in love with a young eunuch. Not only does the title create a melodramatic setting, but Cixi also becomes a much more emotional and less rational being who has trouble controlling herself as her lover "turned her head" (84). It seems that when analyzing a woman's personal life, it is much harder for Chang to portray her agency. It, thus, comes as no surprise that when her lover is executed, Cixi's "world was collapsing" and she, supposedly, had a nervous breakdown (85). While Chang refrains from calling Cixi "hysterical," an adjective Stuart does use, she falls into clichéd depictions of female emotional instability. According to Chang, "[o]nly love could wreak such havoc" (87). She also critiques Cixi for not considering her adoptive son's feelings when she picks a wife for him (153). I question whether Chang would make this point when commenting on a man's life. Chang's portrait of her subject's public life effectively captures how she defied gender norms; yet, her attempt to bring her private life to a broader readership is, at times, troubled by sexist undertones about women's emotions. A feminist biography should be able to stress its female subject's romantic desires and acceptance of her devastation about personal loss in a non-conventional, non-overly dramatic manner.

Another factor that might lessen *Empress Dowager Cixi's* feminist impact is that the biography falls into the biographical subgenre of "women worthies." These texts have rightfully been criticized as portraying noble women as uniquely capable of avoiding patriarchal demands, usually by embracing stereotypically male attributes, such as political fierceness. Such narratives tend to portray their subjects as abnormal and lack the insights into common women's experiences. Lerner elaborates that life writing about prominent women can portray them as "deviant" and "not describe the experience and history of the masses" (1975, 5). And, indeed, Chang offers little information about non-noble women during Cixi's time and exhibits few moments of class-consciousness, which limits the biography's intersectional analysis.

Lerner also criticizes that biography of women worthies "deals with women in male-defined society and tries to fit them into the categories and value systems which consider *man* the measure of significance" (1975, 7; original emphasis). She claims that women's authentic experiences cannot be told using male norms; instead the "true history of women is the history of their ongoing functioning in that male-defined world, *on their own terms*" (6; original emphasis). Despite its shortcomings, *Empress Dowager Cixi* accomplishes this goal. Chang makes clear that Cixi was trained in a patriarchal system, but is careful to point out how the Empress pushed back against the system's confines, refused to be submissive, and did not rule "like a man." In consulting new materials and reinterpreting old documents, Chang meets Lerner's demand to break through the patriarchal approach of telling women's lives by analyzing how women challenged male-centered ideology. By highlighting gendered social and political structures, *Empress Dowager Cixi* intervenes in people's understanding of women's complexities. Such life writing successfully rectifies the accounts of Cixi that judge her as "tyrannical and vicious or hopelessly incompetent" and that credit her achievements to men (373)—an accomplishment that I attribute to Chang's feminist approach to telling Cixi's life.

## Conclusion

Alpern, et al. (1992) argue that when “the subject is female, gender moves to the center of analysis” (1992, 7). While this might, initially, seem like a positive trend, I suggest that it is the pervasive assumption that only women have a gender and that they are not the norm which makes some biographers fall prey to gender stereotyping. I acknowledge that patriarchy always poses a difficulty “in writing biography of women around the stereotypes of what is appropriate behavior for women” (Wagner-Martin 1980, 18). However, an approach to telling a woman’s life that pushes beyond her accepted social roles and emphasizes her relationships with other women can offer the opportunity to break through ideological conditioning.

It is commendable that Stuart wrote about Warren despite the fact that she was not married to a U.S. president or another high dignitary. I strongly advocate for bringing women’s experiences to a broader readership through biographies that are accessible in language and imagery. Yet, while Chang approaches her subject’s life through a more critical lens on gender and women’s oppression, Stuart’s portrayal presents a less complex depiction of a woman’s life. I am sympathetic to biographers having to make choices based on the sources they can access as crucial information often does not survive and previous biographical narratives need to be questioned for pushing a personal agenda. But, like Heilbrun did in 1988, I want to challenge biographers to make visible “events, decisions, and relationships” to tell women’s stories instead of merely re-telling conventions (18). Women’s experiences matter, and a feminist methodology that brings gender to the forefront and questions patriarchal stereotypes can be applied to any materials.

The current life writing boom that the U.S. literary market is experiencing offers a momentous opportunity to educate a large readership on women’s contributions to societies worldwide. Biographies on historical women have the power to rectify biased understandings of world histories, inspire their readership, and influence discussions about women’s social, cultural, and political positions. Perhaps the critical reactions *The Muse* has received on the hand of reviewers suggests that we might be at the start of a paradigm shift which will, eventually, also modify general readers’ expectations of how a woman’s life should be told.

---

## Notes

1. Angelis offers two examples that seem particularly lacking in factual support in Stuart’s “discussion of Warren’s education and references to a dinner she hosted for members of the Sons of Liberty” (2009, 195).

2. In addition to expanding on Warren’s female friendships, Davies (2005) also offers a detailed literary analysis of Warren’s letters and book.

---

## References

Alpern, Sara, Joyce Antler, Elisabeth Israels Perry, and Ingrid Winther Scobie 1992. “Introduction.” In *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing the Lives of Modern American Women*, edited by Sara Alpern, Joyce Antler, Elisabeth Israels Perry, and Ingrid Winther Scobie, 1-15. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

- Angelis, Angelo. 2009. "Review of *The Muse of the Revolution: The Secret Pen of Mercy Otis Warren and the Founding of a Nation*, written by Nancy Ruben Stuart." *The Journal of American History* 96 (1): 195. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27694762>.
- Barry, Kathleen. 1992. "Toward a Theory of Women's Biography: From the Life of Susan B. Anthony." In *All Sides of the Subject: Women and Biography*, edited by Teresa Iles, 23-35. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Batchelor, Jennie. 2012. "Jane Austen and Charlotte Smith: Biography, Autobiography and the Writing of Women's Literary History." In *Women's Life Writing, 1700-1850: Gender, Genre and Authorship*, edited by D. Cook and A. Culley, 181-196. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bell, Susan Groag, and Marilyn Yalom. 1990. "Introduction." In *Revealing Lives: Autobiography, Biography, and Gender*, edited by Susan Groag Bell and Marilyn Yalom, 1-11. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Berkin, Carol, and Clara Lovett. 1980. *Women, War, and Revolution*. New York: Holmes and Meyer.
- Bland, J.O.P., and E. Backhouse. 1910. *China under the Empress Dowager: Being the History of the Life and Times of Tzu Hsi, Compiled from State Papers and the Private Diary of the Comptroller of her Household*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Brown, Alice. 1896. *Mercy Warren*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Canning, Kathleen. 2005. *Gender History in Practice: Historical Perspectives on Bodies, Class and Citizenship*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Chang, Jung. 2013. *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Davies, Kate. 2005. *Catharine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren: The Revolutionary Atlantic and the Politics of Gender*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2009. "Review of *The Muse of the Revolution: The Secret Pen of Mercy Otis Warren and the Founding of a Nation*, written by Nancy Ruben Stuart." *The New England Quarterly* 82 (2): 374-376. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25652022>.
- Gray, Janet. 1993. "The Sewing Contest: Christina Rossetti and the Other Women." *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 8 (2): 233-257. doi: 10.1080/08989575.1993.10846721.
- Heilbrun, Carolyn. 1988. *Writing a Woman's Life*. New York: Bellantine Books.
- Jelinek, Estelle C. 1980. *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Kerber, Linda. 1980. *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Lerner, Gerda. 1975. "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges." *Feminist Studies* 3 (1/2): 5-14. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3518951>.
- Morrison, Fleur. 2017. "Do Men and Women Read Differently?" *Readability* (blog), April 29, <http://readability.com.au/2017/04/29/do-men-and-women-read-differently/>.
- Pleck, Elizabeth H. 1991. *An Historic Overview of American Gender Roles and Relations from Precolonial Times to the Present*. Wellesley: Center for Research on Women.
- Seagrave, Sterling. 1992. *Dragon Lady: The Life and Legend of the Last Empress of China*. New York: Vintage.
- Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll. 1975. "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America." *Signs* 1 (1): 1-29.

- Stuart, Nancy Ruben. 2008. *The Muse of the Revolution: The Secret Pen of Mercy Otis Warren and the Founding of a Nation*. Boston: Beacon.
- . 2013. *Defiant Brides: The Untold Story of Two Revolutionary-Era Women and the Radical Men They Married*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Wagner-Martin, Linda. 1980. *Telling Women's Lives: The New Biography*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Warren, Mercy Otis. 1805. *The History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution*. Boston: Manning and Loring.