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Speaking the Silences: Writing, advocacy and enabling voice.

Abstract:

Writing the silences of the past through the lives of others brings with it important ethical considerations. What draws historical fiction writers to the lives silenced and therefore erased by history? What are the ethical considerations faced by the historical writer enabling the voice of the silenced? Of what worth is it to speak the silences of the past? How do these silences connect with present times? In this paper these questions will be addressed via a discussion on the practice of historical fiction writers, as well as drawing from my own writing practice that continues to give advocacy to Anne Boleyn.

Biographical note:

Author and playwright, Wendy J. Dunn is obsessed with Tudor history. Her first published novel, the award-winning *Dear Heart, How Like You This?* is described as “one of the best novels ever written about Anne Boleyn’s life”. After completing her Masters in Writing at Swinburne University in 2009, Wendy took up a position as a tutor in Writing. She became a PhD candidate in August, 2010. Her own writing journey continues.

Keywords:

Ethics – silence – enabling – voice – herstory.

Ethical considerations faced by the historical writer enabling the voice of the silenced.

Passion and advocacy are my reasons for writing in the genre of historical fiction. During the construction of my historical work, I have agonised over important ethical considerations concerned with writing the silences of the past. Sorting out where I position myself as a writer involves searching heart and soul to reach a place where writing is possible. The struggle is ongoing, my ethical dilemmas growing in number the more I deepen my understanding of the writing process. Too many to discuss exhaustively in the space of this paper, my questions include: What gives me the right to fill the silences with my fictional imaginings? Is it more ethical to go the way of Kon-yu, recognising ‘the existence of these gaps and silences, thereby reminding the reader of the epistemological problems encountered in the process of researching and writing women’s stories’ (Kon-yu 2011). By filling these gaps, am I thereby trespassing where I do not belong by enabling voices of the past? Does my narrative show respect for and understanding of history? Have I done enough research to know my characters so their voices speak true? What is truth? Is the narrative rooted in enough historical research to make my construction of history sound, believable, real? This involves, for the kind of historical fiction novel I write, also understanding human action set against historical context (Eco 1980: 534). Do I also enable voices of *herstory* because I lack courage to tell *mystory*, preferring to filter my life experience through the distancing and separation provided by history. But surely the question is superfluous, for I agree with Naipaul: ‘Fiction never lies; it reveals the writer totally’ (cited by Ray 2010: 7).

This brings us to the paradox of fiction. While I speak of my desire to write with truth, all fiction is make-believe, a lie. I want to hoodwink my reader into believing my construction of the past (de Groot 2009: 6). No matter how much I research the Tudor period, I can only hope to interpret, recreate the past and construct my make-believe through the prism of a writer who belongs to and is constructed by the present. Through fiction, I enable the voices of the past. How then do I remain ethical? While I may argue that I write to advocate for my historical people, I am also aware that my desire to enable their voices is compounded with a selfish need to write and understand myself.

Sandra Worth (2011), author of four novels set in the period of the War of the Roses and a fifth that bridges into the Tudor period, says historical fiction writers should be: ‘As true as they can to the character of the historical figure they are bringing back from the silence’. She also believes historical writers should ‘try to understand their motives in doing what they did, and to respect them’. I agree. While historical fiction writers enable the voices of the past, I never forget that these voices were once of the living. I take ethical responsibility as a writer to ensure I give my historical characters fair hearing.

Historical fiction is my chosen medium to explore and articulate life. I see historical fiction as acknowledging the past, acknowledging our humanity, affirming life; writing it has become my best means to look back for the candle in the dark that illuminates my way forward. For me, that means never enabling voices unless I can

believe them. Like author Ron Hansen, my writerly creeds are ‘*Do no harm and Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*’ (Cited by Schulman, 2006). I contend it is important narratives have the essence of truth because they become part of us. As Carolyn Heilbrun writes:

We live our lives through texts. They may be read, or chanted, or experienced electronically, or come to us, like the murmurings of our mothers, telling us what conventions demand. Whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives (Heilbrun 1987: 37).

Historical Fiction and Advocacy.

Historical fiction is a multifaceted and demanding genre with complex ethical considerations for the writer to surmount. As Jonathan Nield writes in his 1902 *Guide to the Best Historical Novels and Tales*,

The spirit of a period is like the selfhood of a human being – something that cannot be handed on; try as we may, it is impossible for us to breathe the atmosphere of a bygone time, since all those thousand-and-one details which went to the building up of both individual and general experience, can never be reproduced’ (Nield 1902: 41).

The reasons writers use this genre for their fictional expression are also complex and position works within an ethical framework. Writers like Flaubert and Tolstoy used their historical novels as ‘experiments and crucial inventions in important cultural debates’ (de Groot 2009: 2).

Other writers beside myself write historical fiction because of passion and advocacy. Worth (2011) writes historical fiction because ‘a historical figure will leap off the page into my heart. I feel compelled to give them voice, to tell their story, to let them speak and live again in the hope that others will come to care, and they won't be forgotten’.

Historical fiction became my means to combine my two lifelong passions: writing and learning about the Tudors. The artefact for my PhD is my third Tudor novel after the 2002 publication of *Dear Heart, How Like You This?* – my first major Tudor work. This time, I have chosen to convey the metaphysical period of the Tudors by experimenting with magic realism.

I use Tudor England as the setting for my novels and explore the lives of Tudor women, in particular, six women who lived their lives close to one Tudor monarch. Many popular authors serve this popular genre and also write about these women: authors like Philippa Gregory (*The Constant Princess*, 2006; *The Other Boleyn Girl*, 2004; *The Boleyn Inheritance*, 2008), Hilary Mantel (*Wolf Hall*, 2010), Robin Maxwell (*The Secret Diary of Anne Boleyn*, 1998; *Mademoiselle Boleyn*, 2007).

It is clear the six wives of Henry VIII continue to mesmerize the imagination of female writers. That is not surprising. The marital exploits of Henry VIII provide great, multilayered story fodder for writers and readers. Adultery, murder, lust, love, passion, tragedy, sorrow, triumph, ambition and pride – it is all there and speaks to our shared humanity and lives as women.

I as a fiction writer wish to advocate for my female main characters, characters who were also people in their own right. I feel ethically compelled to take up the cry for justice I hear in the poem believed written by Anne Boleyn waiting for death in the Tower:

*Defiled is my name full sore
Through cruel spite and false report,
That I may say for evermore,
Farewell to joy, adieu comfort.
For wrongfully you judge of me
Unto my fame a mortal wound,
Say what ye list, it may not be,
Ye seek for that shall not be found* (Bailey-Kempling 1908).

I started my PhD artefact, *Light in the Labyrinth*, because, similar to other writers, I see writing fiction as a way to gain knowledge (Tremain cited by de Groot 2010: 100–1) – about the Tudors, about life, and about myself.

Writing *Dear Heart, How Like You This?* created more questions for me, especially about the events leading up to Anne’s death in 1536. Why did Henry turn against Anne Boleyn? Believing by writing I would illuminate a possible answer, I decided to take up the challenge of another Tudor novel focusing on the fall of Anne Boleyn, but this time target my work to the Young Adult reader. I especially want to be fair and just to Henry VIII in my new work. After writing two novels about his first two queens, I recognised that my point of view was biased towards his wives.

My artefact enables the voice of Catherine Carey, the niece of Anne Boleyn. History only provides a few bones of her story added to a number of paintings identified as or believed to be Catherine Carey. She is one of those obscure lives described by Woolf as ‘fitfully perceived’ ‘in those almost unlit corridors of history’ (Hale 2006: 580). By reconstructing her life in fiction I return *herstory* (Kon-yu 2011).

Enabling Catherine’s voice has brought with it particular ethical challenges. With all historical fiction, research is the key to the reconstruction of a period and understanding how character is shaped in a time not our own. Recreating historical characters not only entails the necessary research that enables the writer to ‘construct a world’ (Eco 2005: 311), but also to appreciate that ‘(y)our characters are who they are because they enter that *herstory* (*my italics*) stream when and where they do’ (Thom 2010: 52).

The Silence of Tudor Women.

The patriarchal society of the Tudors told women silence was a virtue, and the only form of eloquence appropriate to women (Jordan 1990: 173). From high to low, women who did try to make their voices heard put themselves into the dangerous

position of nonconformity. They risked physical punishment, if not their lives. Women, like Anne Boleyn, could even be accused of witchcraft if they refused silence. Indeed, there are English pubs that once served to remind women about what could happen if they forgot to bridle their tongues. Named as Quiet Woman or Silent Woman, the pubs often brandish a couplet, a couplet that seems related to Anne Boleyn:

Here is a woman who has lost her head

She's quiet now—you see she's dead (Rothwell 2006: 354).

With silence a matter of life or death, it is not surprising the Tudor period left women historically voiceless. Their stories often erased, their portraits identified as *unknown*, the lives of women were also left little more than a footnote to, if not just only filtered, through the lives of men (Kon-yu 2011).

I argue that while *history* does provide documentary evidence for the voices of Tudor women, especially those in the foreground of history, these voices, in most instances, are of the silenced. But women found ways of empowerment, and ‘the possibility of a voice’ (Heale 1995: 305). Writing was an uncommon skill of noble women and men (Harris 2002: 35), yet three or more of the women I am using as characters in my work historically came together to write in what is now known as the Devonshire Manuscript. In this small manuscript, the women copied poems or songs, or sometimes wrote their own works. Adding their voices alongside men, they did not lack courage to speak up to them (Heale 1995: 303).

Nevertheless, Tudor women were not brought up to see themselves as equal to men (Sim 1996: 33). Elizabeth I, the intelligent and gifted daughter of the intelligent and gifted Anne Boleyn, apologised for her femaleness, referring to herself as ‘Prince’ on many occasions during her long reign as Queen. Thus, historical record makes it apparent that women’s voices were, more often than not, couched and constrained in a manner that reflected back their prescribed role in their society (Heale 1995: 297).

Another example comes from the life of Katherine of Aragon (Mattingly 1942; Luke 1967; Fraser 1993; Paul 1966; Weir 2002; Starkey 2003). For almost twenty years of her long marriage to Henry VIII we hear little from her, other than as an obedient and gently speaking King’s consort who knew her place and purpose. She did not hide her distress about his unfaithfulness in the early years of their marriage or when he made a duke of his bastard son, but the distress was soon put aside in compliance to his wishes and desires. Katherine lived up to her motto: Humble and Loyal, and spent many years of her marriage being so.

Anne Boleyn was less humble. When she protested about Henry VIII’s unfaithfulness during their marriage, he told her bluntly, ‘(s)he must shut her eyes and endure just like others who were worthier than she’ (Ives 2004: 192). It is obvious Henry VIII was referring to Katherine, a woman trained to be queen from early childhood. However, when Katherine of Aragon’s marriage was threatened we hear the real Katherine, a woman no longer willing to endure but determined to fight:

This twenty years or more I have been your true wife, and by me ye had had divers children, although it hath pleased God to call them from this world...And when you

had me at the first, I take God to be my judge, I was a true maid, without touch of man (Sylvester, Harding et al. 1962: 149–150).

Whilst Katherine's words ring true, researching the period, there have been countless other times when the documented words of Tudor women spoke to me of silence. Through similar, but more liberated life experience, I recognised women carefully weighing up their words, making them palpable and acceptable to men. What is hidden in the voices of Tudor women is revealed to the astute reader by the eluded and alluded (Arnold 2011). Contradictions and erasures also provide evidence of disjointed or incomplete narratives (McNay 2009). Enabling these voices is what I see as my duty as a historical fiction writer. The silence imposed on Tudor women is one of the reasons why I want to write their stories and to act as their advocate.

Anne Boleyn, the Anomaly.

My PhD artefact enables the voice of Anne Boleyn and her niece, Catherine Carey. I shall let my imagined Anne begin this section:

Much of this is my own fault; I lack a woman's proper humility and have a temper difficult to rein in at times.' The queen smiled bitterly. 'I speak my mind, niece. For years, the king valued and sought for my counsel, but no more. He desires my silence, but how I can be so when I have spent years being otherwise? Once abandoned, silence is a difficult art to relearn (xxxx 2011).

Anne Boleyn, the second wife of Henry VIII, provides us with an anomaly when it comes to the lives of Tudor women. Perhaps this explains why I and at least fifteen other writers have been drawn to her story (de Groot 2009: 75). Anne Boleyn was a woman who rejected silence, and paid the ultimate price for doing so. By rejecting silence she gave to the period an authentic voice of a woman who was heard; a voice that now transcends time. My research has never given me cause to doubt her innocence, or changed my view about the injustice of her death. Research has only increased my respect for Anne Boleyn and cemented my desire to act as her advocate. But, as a writer, to fulfil my ethical position of advocacy and enable Anne Boleyn's voice, I must first take ownership of my subject through thorough study.

History shows Anne's death came about not simply because she failed to provide Henry VIII with a son but because of a heady mix of politics and religion (Ives 2004: VI) one and the same in the Tudor period.

Early in 1536 Henry VIII and the then pregnant Anne Boleyn celebrated the death of Katherine of Aragon. Part of the festivities was a joust in which the king took part. He almost lost his life when his horse threw him. Unconscious for three hours, he appears a different man on his revival. The jousting accident was followed not long afterwards by the loss of his son sixteen-weeks into Anne Boleyn's pregnancy. From that time to not long before her arrest, a period of about ninety days, as recounted by historian Alison Weir in *The Lady in the Tower*, history shows Henry VIII swinging one way to another in his relationship with his wife (Weir 2010).

Henry VIII is believed to have said, not long after Anne's last abortive pregnancy, 'seduced and forced into his second marriage by means of sortileges and charms' (Warnicke 1987: 256). Anne Boleyn was no witch; rather a proud and intelligent

woman who chose to disregard what was expected of her time. Determination to have her voice heard for the political and religious direction of England brought her to the time when Henry VIII chose to erase her from his life, persuaded that her lack of silence and self-effacement provided evidence of treason and lack of chastity. As Heale (1995) writes:

The dangerous tightrope courtly women had to tread between wit and scandal, pastime and offence is suggested by the daunting advice of Giuliano, in the Courtier: 'And therefore muste she keep a certaine meane verie hard, and (in a manner) derived of contrary matters, and come just to certain limittes, but not to passe them' (Heale 1995: 298).

I contend Anne's drive to move towards a doctrine that saw no need for God and man to have a *go-between* challenged the crown, and Henry, manipulated by Cromwell, convinced himself of the need to silence her voice and therefore erasing her from his life. No wise person dared to speak directly of Anne Boleyn to the king after her execution. The subject seemed 'to have remained taboo' (Weir 2010: 319). Only when Anne's daughter Elizabeth was crowned queen, even if simply to rehabilitate the reputation of the queen's mother (Freeman 1995: 798), were memories of Anne Boleyn given free voice again. My way to rehabilitate and give justice to Anne Boleyn's memory is to enable her voice by fiction.

What worth is it to speak the silences of the past and the connection with present times?

Natalie Kon-yu speaks of experimenting 'with ways to write around the silences' (Kon-yu 2011). Rather than *write around the silences*, it is the silences that draw me in as fiction writer. Silences are why I am a historical fiction writer – I want the past to speak and I want to speak through the silences of the past; I do this through writing. Other writers are also drawn to the silences – even if they do not see it as silences, but rather as gaps or spaces in historical record 'for the fiction writer to fill' (Pulman, Gregory too 2010).

Joan Wallach Scott contends 'the "her-story" approach has had important effects on historical scholarship...By piling up the evidence about women in the past it refutes the claims of those who insist women had no history, no significant place in stories of the past' (Scott cited by Kon-yu 2011). Heilmann and Llewellyn claim that 'historical fiction offers (women) and their female characters a means of reclamation, a narrative empowerment to write women back into the historical record' (Heilmann and Llewellyn cited by Kon-yo, 2011). Historical fiction also acknowledges gaps in our knowledge. As Barbara Harris writes, 'there is need for a feminist history of aristocratic marriage that employs gender as a major tool of analysis and listens carefully to the voices of women' (1989) – all valid, ethical reasons to enable voices of the past.

Through writing about female characters I cannot help reflecting about my own life as a woman and the lives of women in my own times. Women in Western society are in a privileged position of inheriting and building on hard-won liberties that came about only since the beginning of the twentieth century. Other women are not so fortunate. They are still members of male dominated cultures, in which oppression is

a way of life and death for not toeing the line not only a possibility, but also a reality. Education is the key to make a difference. If the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world, then how important is it for that hand to be of someone who has learnt to read and appreciate books as a way to understand empathy. Educating women educates society.

Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it,' George Santayana wrote in *The Life of Reason* (1905). I believe this, too. I also think remembering the past also means to explore and make sense of the silences. Silences speak loudly of those without voice on the margins of history.

Margaret McNay (2009) describes 'absent memories' as disrupting the formation of identity by virtue of being withheld and thus imposing an inherited injury on the self. I contend that absent memories – the silences – are an injury not only to the self, but also to the selfhood of society. As the 2011 London Riots remind us, anarchy lies in wait if we do not listen to the oppressed, the disconnected and dispossessed. To speak the silences is to examine, bring out in the open and, most importantly, begin the healing process.

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