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Tomas Hägg, *The Art of Biography in Antiquity*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xv, 496. ISBN 9781107016699. \$110.00.

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[Preview](#)

The great Swedish scholar Tomas Hägg died in August 2011. The various tributes to him after his death would no doubt have gladdened him, but not only that: their literary form would surely have fascinated him too, with the modern obituary's inevitable balancing act between curriculum vitae, telling anecdote, and personal testament.¹ Certainly this book, which was completed before his final illness and which was seen through the press by his friend and colleague Stephen Harrison, provides ample evidence of his capacious interests, combined with a talent for careful, thorough and generous consideration of all aspects of a phenomenon and the observations made of it by others. More than once throughout the text we are reminded that biographies are often self-portraits, and perhaps it is permissible to read something of Hägg into his version of Plutarch in particular: "his obsession with human nature" matched by "a keen historical curiosity" and "that marvellous gift of becoming interested in almost anything he wrote about" (243). We might also read a certain amount of approval into the later characterisation of Plutarch's attitude to the biographical tradition as "unpolemical as well as relaxedly inconsistent" (279). The author of the *Parallel Lives* is naturally granted a chapter to himself, but in this regard he might seem also to emerge as the work's presiding spirit. The result is an endlessly interesting volume that is as enjoyable to read as it evidently was to write.

The jacket design puts the emphasis on the last three words of the title, and Hägg does indeed give a notably full and inclusive account of "biography in antiquity". What stands out is the range of authors and forms discussed; in seven chapters we move from Xenophon through Hellenistic authors and anonymous Lives,² via the Christian gospels and Roman biography, through to Plutarch and a final chapter on the lives of philosophers and holy men written under the Roman empire. Christian biography in late antiquity then features in a brief epilogue. This arrangement means that Suetonius's Lives of grammarians and of Caesars are granted only eighteen pages in the chapter on Rome – only a little more than is devoted in a previous chapter to the fragmentary Hellenistic biographers Satyrus, Hermippus and Antigonus. But that is part of the real virtue of the book, that it chooses to focus not merely on the most prominent examples but on the "latitude and diversity" (xi) of biographical writing as it seems to have been practised and understood in the ancient world as a whole.

With this in mind, then, equal note should be taken of the title's reference to the *art* of biography. An allusion to the work of Paul Murray Kendall,³ this is an indication

both of Hägg's determination to keep in mind modern as well as ancient biography, and also of his desire to keep the focus of his study on the biographical (as opposed to the strictly literary or historiographical) character of each individual work. His prolegomena, despite explicitly engaging with the study of modern biography, therefore reject any "systematic treatment of biographic theory and practice" in favour of "a series of statements or comments under various catchwords" (1). In effect, the approach we are offered relies on the close reading of individual texts, supplemented now and then by a broadly narratological analysis intended to reveal the areas to which a biographer devotes his greatest attention. The texts analysed in detail in this way are not confined to the most extensive or most obvious examples: they include Tacitus's *Agricola*; Isocrates's *Evagoras*; the apocryphal *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* as well as the "sayings gospel" attributed to the same apostle; the anonymous *Contest of Homer and Hesiod*; and Lucian's satirical *Alexander*. In this company, even partial or fragmentary biographies, such as Plato's *Phaedo* or Aristoxenus's *Life of Pythagoras*, begin to look staid and conventional, and together these writings provide a far-reaching context in which to place the more familiar biographical narratives of (among others) Suetonius, Plutarch, and Diogenes Laertius. At the same time, Hägg is sceptical of providing any account of a developing tradition with its own insistent conventions. Plutarch's practice may again be considered emblematic in this respect. His Lives, argues Hägg, maintain no fixed form but reflect only a consistent set of interests; we encounter "habits, but no rules" (281).

Nor should we assume even that a biographer always applied the same techniques in every work. Hägg focuses his chapter 1 on three biographical works by Xenophon – his *Memorabilia* of Socrates, his *Agesilaus* and his *Cyropedia* – and resists any suggestion that these represent a progression on Xenophon's part towards a developed idea of what a biography should be. Instead he prefers to emphasise the distinctive aims and interests on show in each work, and the purposes for which each was written. Although we may identify common strategies and effects across these works, and in other biographical writings from antiquity, this is as far as Hägg is willing to go. Here as throughout, then, the intense focus on individual texts tends to throw into stark relief the choices open to and made by each biographer when it came to organising and presenting a Life. The use of anecdotes to illustrate character; the inclusion of a proleptic (but otherwise unindividuated) childhood, and an extended and exemplary death-scene; and even the choice of a broadly chronological ordering of events – all of these can be found across multiple biographies, but none can be said to be definitive or even compulsory. The remaining chapters reveal many of these same techniques at work, but in the end the accumulation of examples provides not an argument but rather a set of variations on a theme.

The fragmentary Hellenistic biographers of chapter 2 are thus securely established as biographers, with their own habits and idiosyncrasies – Hermippus, for example, emerges as a specialist in death-scenes – but perhaps inevitably offer evidence above all for the persistence of anecdotes as a means of characterisation. Texts such as these, which survive through excerption, must of course give this impression; but so too do the Lives studied in Hägg's chapter 3, which he follows David Konstan in designating as "open texts". Such works as the *Life of Aesop*, the *Life of Alexander* of pseudo-Callisthenes, and various ancient *Lives of Homer* seem at times to be little more than compilations of anecdotes arranged in an order roughly resembling a life. It may be, however, that these Lives, which very rarely admit of an individual author, reveal the forces at work in shaping a biography more than their more literary counterparts do. Certainly the Christian gospels, apocryphal and canonical, which form the subject of chapter 4, imply that a Life could be built up from anecdotes and sayings until it forms a coherent and recognisable story. Hägg here offers a very interesting model of these authors identifying gaps in the gospel stories and filling them with whatever informative or imaginative material was

available.

But how were there known to be gaps? Evidently authors and readers in antiquity had firm ideas of what a Life ought to look like. Indeed, the same is true today; I have never yet met anyone except a scholar of biography who was troubled by how it ought to be defined. Even Hägg, in carefully resisting any explicit comment on the boundaries of biographical writing, shows by the texts he has chosen to include that, like the rest of us, he knew a biography when he saw one. Clearly any account of a literary genre needs to be supplemented by an awareness of the cultural context. The fundamental claim made for biography is that it represents (a) life, much as a portrait represents a person. But a portrait need not always be judged by its success in presenting a facial likeness; in medieval Christian icons, and perhaps even in Renaissance court portraiture, a person might best be represented in terms of attributes and appurtenances. Similarly, the governing principle of biographical writing is that it should conform to (our idea of) the shape of a life – which could perhaps bear closer examination. When Arnaldo Momigliano was deliberately reductive in calling a biography “[a]n account of the life of a man from birth to death”,⁵ he was simplifying not only biographical writing but life itself, as it is lived and experienced. Quite how a text can come to stand in for something we know from the world is, to some extent, still mysterious. Certainly an account of generic conventions and expectations goes some way towards bridging the gap. But if life is lived forwards and understood backwards – or if, as many experiments in (auto)biography would appear to suggest, it is experienced and relived in defiance of chronology – then we may need to adjust accordingly our own understanding of what kind of shapes may be given to a Life.

These comments are mine and not Hägg’s, whose conclusions are kept deliberately modest and brief. For the most part he offers a review and collocation of previous scholarship on major issues; hence Suetonius in chapter 5 is granted his now customary recognition as an artful arranger of facts and anecdotes, and chapter 6, on Plutarch, acknowledges its particular debt to the work of Timothy Duff. Finally, chapter 7 notes the proliferation of ethical biographies under the empire, with Pythagoras as their exemplar and even the efforts of Lucian conforming, rather surprisingly, to the prevailing model: “philosophical, spiritual, and ethical Lives” (387), told primarily through anecdotes rather than precepts. The brief epilogue notes both that this description could be extended all the way back to Xenophon, and that it can be seen to have continued in late antiquity in the Lives of Christian saints. In all of this, Hägg’s reliance on the work of others is fully and generously admitted, and can hardly be cause for complaint; it will be a rare reader to whom everything covered here is already familiar. For many of us, indeed, the most useful part of the book may be its appendix on further reading, which gives full details of texts, translations, commentaries and studies of the major texts discussed throughout.

In an age of multi-authored handbooks and conference proceedings – which of course must have their place – Hägg’s book is a reminder of the value of a comprehensive overview of a broad topic by a single individual. The consistency and inclusiveness of his approach allows the varying choices made by each ancient biographer to stand out against those made by others engaged on the same (or a similar) task. Without attempting to be systematic, or to put forward any general or definitive theory, Hägg enables us to grasp the individual interests and habits of a rich assortment of ancient biographers; he brings within our grasp the best and most recent scholarship (not always the same thing); and thus vastly improves and clarifies our understanding of each author in particular and of the scope of biographical writing in general. The pre-eminent value of Hägg’s book, then, is that it is a cogent and reliable guide to the whole field of biographical writing in antiquity – a parting gift to students and scholars alike, who now have this excellent volume

as a place to start.

Notes:

1. Three eloquent tributes may be found, for example, at the site of the [Nordic Byzantine Network](#).

2. Hägg uses “life” to refer to a life as it was lived, and “Life” as it was written up as biography. I follow his practice in this review.

3. Paul Murray Kendall, *The Art of Biography*, (New York: Norton, 1985).

4. Plutarch, *Cimon* 2.3, quoted by Hägg on p. 271.

5. Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography: Expanded Edition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) 56.

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