



Biographical Television Drama

Hannah Andrews

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Introduction

1.1 BIOGRAPHY AND TELEVISION: TRUTH, VALUE, PUBLIC/PRIVATE, LEGACY

Biography, literally defined, refers to the writing of lives. It is an ancient cultural practice, adopted at least since the sixth century BCE to commemorate, to mythologise or to immortalise influential members of a society. Biography illustrates how a society understands what it means to live a life; conceptions of selfhood, of the life course and of personality development are implicated in biographical practice. Its functions and meaning shift over time and according to the prevailing cultural climate, so it provides a useful demonstration of what kinds of lives are valued at a given moment. The writing of lives is inevitably influenced by dominant ideologies, hermeneutics, philosophies or theories. Like any text, biography is also shaped by format, by generic or modal convention and, crucially, by medium. Whereas the bulk of biography theory and criticism has concentrated on its written variant, biographical representation and storytelling has also taken place in audiovisual media. This book aims to examine how one of these—television—can reconstruct, represent and restructure human lives, in the process becoming a moving-image biographer.

There are numerous ways in which the practice of biography and the medium of television intersect. Especially for biographees¹ who lived in the age of mass mediation, television provides a huge archival resource for biographers to draw on. Each new appearance by the biographee on the medium offers fresh, if ambivalent, audiovisual evidence of the progression of their life story. Television has created new ways of ‘knowing’ about individual lives. These can be troublingly superficial or misleading but are often complex and self-conscious. Television also routinely creates or consolidates famous personalities, about whom enough public curiosity is aroused to justify the writing of new biographical texts. Across a range of genres, from magazine programmes to chat shows, from documentary to live performance, television utilises discourses of biography to communicate the meaning and value of the people who appear on it. And television also tells biographical stories; from the truncated format of advertisements to the expansive exploration of the life course in series, fiction and non-fiction. Indeed, biography scholar Nigel Hamilton argues that since the late twentieth century:

Television, especially, gloried in the biographical—spawning countless programs about notorious figures on the one hand, and Everyman or Everywoman on the other. It was as if Western society was undergoing a mass search for self, in which the life stories of real people were now felt to be more vital, more authentic, more accessible, and more revealing than the fictional lives that artists and writers had produced for several thousand years as models of good behaviour, and warnings of bad behaviour. (2007: 238–239)

Hamilton’s recognition of television as a significant medium of biography is noteworthy, opening discussion of how and why the form, aesthetics and institutions of television work with those of biography. This book will explore how the tools of the televisual medium are employed to the ends of biography: the exploration of the personality, psychology and events in the life of significant individuals. It will analyse the range of ways that biographical stories are told across diverse television formats and genres. It will do so by attending to conceptual convergences between

¹ Biographee is a noun frequently used in biography studies to refer to the person about whom a biography is written. It is preferred to ‘subject’ because of the complexity of this term and because multiple subjectivities are relevant to the production and reception of biography. The term ‘biographee’ will thus be used throughout this book.

television as a medium and biography as a form: both imply dichotomies of intimacy and distance, of fact and fiction, and of the public and the private.

In short, this book examines the relation between the biographical and the televisual, and how it plays out in biographical dramatisation made for television. It does so in relation to four core themes which will be explored throughout: that of the complex role of truth in the construction of biographical representations; of the multiple and conflicting value systems at play in the production, broadcast and reception of these dramas; the publicisation of the private life and the personalisation of the public figure that takes place when biographies are dramatised for television; and the role of the biographical television drama in constructing and consolidating the legacy of the biographee. These themes are drawn from the intersections between the fields of television studies and biography studies. The following discussion outlines how the ideas of truth, value (in terms of both ethics and cultural hierarchies), the public/private dichotomy and legacy have been discussed in biography studies and indicates how they will be approached in the book.

Scholars of biography are fond of using metaphors to explain this mercurial object of study. The autopsy and the portrait are frequent tropes (Lee 2009). Autopsy conjures images of dispassionate forensic investigation, a violation of the biographee's self able to posthumously change the public's view of the subject. Autopsies are unable to say much of the subject's character, thoughts, beliefs or emotions. Portraits do enliven their subjects in this way though there are drawbacks here too, especially in the potential for flattery, idealisation or distortion. Portraiture is regularly contrasted with chronicle. Hamilton (2007) proposes that the chronicle/portrait dichotomy is broadly one of discipline: chronicles are the province of historians, dependent on research and scholarship, whereas portraits suggest artistry, the capture of 'essences', subsuming fact into interpretation. If biographies are portraits, then we must accept that the biographer is 'far from anonymous' and is 'as present in his work as the portrait painter is in his' (Edel 1984: 31). This means that the biography is 'inescapably subjective' (Seymour 2002: 264), that there are two subjectivities involved (Long 1999: 101) and that we must accept that there are infinite variations on the representation of subjects (Lee 2009). Although biography as a genre is predicated on strong truth claims, the agency of the biographer in shaping the biographee means that they are always filtered through their perspective. The collaborative nature of television production means

that the ‘authorship’ of televisual biographical subjects is less straightforward than the relationship between a biographer and their biographee. Nevertheless, it is still worthwhile to consider the power dynamics and ethical positioning of television ‘biographers’—an umbrella term incorporating the various agencies at play in constructing the biographee in television drama.

Biographical storytelling relies on the imposition of order to the chaos and contingency of the human experience. Biography scholars have noted the risk that such structuration can simplify or distort, since human beings exist in a state of perpetual evolution; self and memory are constantly emerging and grounded in the body. Pierre Bourdieu (2000) argues that the existence of a singular self is a ‘biographical illusion’, the convenient but imaginary inscription of individuality into a body with a combination of social functions. For biography as a cultural genre to have any meaning, this fragmentary identity must be aligned in some way, and narrative is both familiar and congenial to knowledge production. For some feminist critics, this makes biography an inherently ‘totalizing’ genre, the effects of which should be resisted (Backscheider 1999: 155). However, as Christian Klein argues, this is a natural human instinct: ‘we cannot help but to create a narrative structure from particular fragments of a life in a way that follows specific patterns and formulae’ (2017: 85). Fitting life stories into established cultural structures is one of the primary ways in which biography communicates the meaning of lives. One pre-existing framework onto which biographical stories can be shaped is the convention associated with genre. Biography itself has been claimed by some critics as a genre with its own rules, mores and conventions, or as William H. Epstein (1987) describes them ‘generic frames’ that are crucial to processes of ‘biographical recognition’. However, when biographical stories are told across media, representations of real people will inevitably be influenced by other generic formulae outside of biography. Biographical dramatisation for television has taken place across a range of genre formats. Chapter 2 will explore the relationship between biographical television drama and four other genres: biopic, docudrama, melodrama and costume drama. It analyses the various ways in which the generic inflections of these cross-media formats affect the telling of life stories for the television medium.

Television and biography share an ambivalent placement between fact and fiction. As numerous television scholars have argued, the medium is highly adept at producing the illusion of reality and encouraging its viewer to ‘ignore all those determinations standing between the event and our

perception of it- technology and institutions' (Feuer 1983: 14). While Feuer is here describing live television, there is a broader suspicion of television's effects, particularly its ability to lull its viewers into a state of uncritical acceptance of the reality of its images (Carroll 2002). For this reason, television genres that combine or confuse the boundaries of fact and fiction have historically risked accusations of dangerously misleading the audience, especially from a tabloid press with little faith in the critical faculties of the viewing public (Petley 1996). A similar critical and ethical concern around biography is that in selecting, arranging and interpreting the facts of a life, biographers take liberties that spill over into the realm of fiction (Nadel 1984). There is a sense that, while a biographer requires an empathetic imagination to be able to tell the story of a life, allowing this to morph into speculation or invention is a breach of the genre's delicate moral code. Objections to the replacement of fact by fiction are predicated on a strong and intuitive sense of the distinction between them, but substantial definitions of these terms have proved elusive:

At a textual level, within segments of a text, it may be hard to draw a clear line, and even though the context, the communicative situation and the act of reference are different in most cases, it is also important to note that we use our real life categories and our basic experiences and schemas when we relate to both fictional and factual forms. (Bondebjerg 1996: 28)

As Ib Bondebjerg notes, when it comes to the textual formats of fact and fiction, we are obliged to rely on contextual and tonal cues. When these are compromised, the schemas become confused. Moreover, as Thomas Leitch notes, the distinction between fact and fiction is as much performative as it is ontological, and fictionality or non-fictionality are 'dependent on the ways they are framed by both producers and audiences' (2018: 77). There is an overriding suspicion that the value of fact is undermined when we use schemas related to fiction to comprehend it. Fiction is treated in this analysis as by definition untrue, with its attendant assumptions of dishonesty and untrustworthiness. Though the underlying assumption that factual accuracy is the pre-eminent truth claim of the biography persists, many creative theorists see *fiction* as essentially truthful. As part of a broader defence of the adoption of the tools of fiction in the biographer's work, Leon Edel quotes Coleridge: 'how mean a thing a mere fact is except as seen in the light of some comprehensive truth?' (1984: 110).

Fiction trades in the presentation of rounded, human characters whose motivations, desires, fears and emotions are legible and credible. The ambition to write lives like this is usually shared by biographers. This led Laura Marcus to note that ‘the paradox that we “know” characters in fiction far more fully than we do “real life” figures, that they are imbued with far richer personalities and interiorities than we have access to in other contexts, increasingly became a rationale for the appropriation of novelistic strategies in biographical writing’ (2002: 202). Biographers must judge how much they can imagine the thoughts and feelings of their subjects, especially if their goal is to prompt empathy with their subject. Here, fiction tends to have the upper hand, as Bondebjerg argues: ‘in fiction we can identify more freely, because there is a distance; we know that what we see is just a metaphor for what might be reality’ (1996: 38). In biography, this is inverted: facts often acquire a metaphorical or metonymical flavour, as they are taken to stand in for the author’s sense of their biographee’s character, personality or circumstances. Ira Bruce Nadel argues that despite a tendency towards ‘objectivism’ as a social and moral force that has strongly influenced literal readings of biography, the texts themselves often have a ‘tropological character’ (1984: 157). As Chap. 3 examines, dramatised biography must take this metonymy one stage further through *mise-en-scène* and performance. If metaphor is a ‘verbal and rhetorical intermediary between the life of the subject, its presentation in language, and its understanding by the reader’ (Nadel 1984: 166), then there are further levels of intervention between life and its representation in the application of television style and aesthetics to biographical representation.

It is not only the combination of fictional devices with factual material in biography that is a cause of critical concern. The structural process of narrativisation, of transforming the biographee into a character and the events of their life course into a story, has also been critiqued. Hermione Lee (2005) argues that biographers ‘appropriate’ their subjects, creating a new or special version of them, in much the same way a novelist does with their characters. The comparison between biography and novel is as prominent in scholarship as that with portraiture (Backscheider 1999; Bourdieu 2000; Edel 1984; Marcus 2002; Nadel 1984; Parke 2002; St Clair 2002; Woolf 2008). Much of the discussion is centred on the appropriateness of the novelist’s skills of composition, imagination and narrative construction to the process of writing biography. The tools of narrative, such as patterns of cause and effect, plotting in a tripartite story structure or the desire for closure, do not necessarily align with life

experience, which is cyclical and repetitive. Paula Backscheider, for example, describes narrative as a ‘powerful and dangerous’ part of the biographer’s art, and therefore:

The best biographers know that they are inventing and psychologizing through their selection and arrangement of materials, they are establishing cause-effect and other relationships, and they are determining what was most formative and important for someone else, someone they do not know. They must choose what to include, leave out, emphasize and subordinate, and when they do, they have constructed a narrative that, whether they are aware of it or not, partakes of cultural stories with expectations for resolutions and interpretations built in. (1999: 119)

The practice of biography, then, entails creative decisions about inclusions, exclusions and order, shaped by conventions of storytelling that pre-exist the writing of lives. In addition to broader structural features of narrative, television biographical dramatisation must also attend to medium specific principles and formats. Chapter 4 thus adopts a narratological approach to biographical television drama, exploring how life stories are shaped according to the narrative traditions of television single dramas, serials and series.

Scholars tend to agree that, unlike a novelist, a biographer’s creativity is ‘fettered by the very nature of his enterprise’ (Edel 1984: 23). That nature is, in the words of Virginia Woolf, that it ‘imposes conditions, and those conditions are that it must be based upon fact’ (2008: 120). She advocated the use of the ‘creative fact’ in biography, the emphasis on a limited range of fundamental truths about the biographee that help illuminate more clearly their personality and its broader cultural meaning or influence. This is one way for the biographer to control the ‘anarchy of the archive’ (Edel 1984: 105), to construct a coherent and convincing protagonist from the mess of human life and the detritus it leaves behind. Paradoxically, without such selectivity, the complete picture of a subject presumed by biography cannot be achieved (Nadel 1984). Processes of research, analysis and selection of biographical materials are also undertaken by television biographers. Because in many cases these materials also include pre-existing biographical texts—including written biographies and, in some cases, precursor biographical dramatisations—this can fruitfully be compared to the practice of cross-media adaptation. Chapter 5 explores the biographical drama as adaptation, asking the important

questions of *what* is being adapted, and *how* does the process work. If the truth claims of biography are predicated on its factual scaffolding (Wagner-Martin 1994), from where do these facts derive?

Some of the suspicion of narrative in biography studies is centred on the anxiety that its readers are insufficiently critical. Edel (1984) suggests that readers take the facts given them for granted, assuming that biographies are documentary and not noticing marks of composition. Nadel (1984) accuses readers of passivity, of being unaware of their interpretative position. Phyllis Rose, by contrast, acknowledges readers' critical faculties, but argues that this can break out into outright scepticism: 'the public... distrusts artfulness in non-fiction and sees little difference between arranging and condensing and outright lying' (1996: 131–2). The sense that a reader might be misled through the construction of biographical narrative is central to the ethical question mark many commentators place over the genre. Indeed, as Jerome G. Manis (1994) argues, the 'dictum of truth' is the most significant element of biographical ethics. We are thus obliged to judge the biography's truthfulness on our trust in the biographer, or, as William St Clair proposes, their success in convincing us, the rhetorical merit of the text or our own skill as critical readers (2002: 226). Trust is intertwined with truth and underpinned by fact. This formula holds not only for the reader-biographer dynamic but for the assumed relationship between broadcaster and public. Public service broadcasters require public trust to maintain their credibility as a source of information, education and entertainment, as well as to justify their position of cultural prominence. Programmes which challenge the boundaries between fact and fiction, like biographical dramatisations, often reveal the fragility of the trust pact between broadcaster and public. As Chap. 6 will discuss, public perceptions of a breach of biographical ethics on the part of programme makers can result in considerable controversy and damage to the reputation of the broadcaster as well as the biographee.

The relationship between biographer and biographee animates much discussion of the genre. Backscheider suggests that 'the affinity of biographer with subject colours the tone and enriches the book' (1999: 34). With affinity, though, comes the danger of over-identification with the subject or, in psychoanalytic parlance, 'transference... a destructive emotional involvement' (Edel 1984: 66). Working biographers have described how, during the research process, regard spills over into infatuation and the relationship with the biographee becomes 'uxorious on a Grand Scale' (Wilson 2004: 38). Also unavoidable is the spectre of narcissism

(Robb 2004; Hughes 2004), the fear that the ‘true’ subject of the book becomes the biographer, or, as Woolf suggested, our versions of others are mere ‘emanations of ourselves’ (in Parke 2002: 28). Considering this problem from a feminist position, Liz Stanley notes that ‘*any* biographer’s view is a socially located and necessarily partial one’ (1992: 7), arguing that feminist praxis should embrace self-reflexivity and prioritise the voice of the subject (see also Backscheider 1999; Long 1999). Chapter 3 examines the ways in which some television biographical dramatisations have adopted a self-conscious approach that foregrounds the voice of the biographee and encourages awareness of the constructedness of biographical representations. This approach mitigates the obvious power imbalance between the biographee who cannot speak for herself, and the biographer, whose ‘version’ of the subject will, however temporarily, be pre-eminent in the mind of the public. For biographical television drama, the impact of such representations is many times exaggerated because television’s position as ‘cultural forum’ (Newcomb and Hirsch 1983) lends it a much larger impact and audience than the average published biography.

Edel suggests that a justification for the ‘indecent curiosity’ that biography entails is that it ‘illuminate[s] the mysterious and magical process of creation’ (1984: 35). Though this applies largely to literary biography, the ethical equation he proposes is a common one. The invasion into the privacy of the biographee is legitimised by the social and cultural benefit that knowledge about their life might provide. As Klein argues, we engage with stories about real people because we assume they have something to tell us, such as the means and consequences of special human achievement, or what it means to have a ‘good’ life (2017: 79). As early as the first century, Plutarch suggested that the primary purpose for biography should be didactic. Biographies provided models of virtue which were ideal for moral edification (Parke 2002). By the early eighteenth century, this had developed into Roger North’s concept that the history of private lives might ‘instruct a private economy... tend[] to make a man wiser or more cautious [cautious] in his own proper concerns’ (q. in Parke 2002: 18). More recent scholars of biography have deemphasised moral instruction as the main function of biographies but have retained the sense that they can usefully model lives, providing templates for understanding the self (Klein 2017). Hamilton suggests that biographies can offer insight into the ‘very nature of individuality at any one moment in culture’s history’ (2007: 11). Carolyn Heilbrun cautions that to understand biography in this way requires us to remember that ‘lives do not serve as models, only stories do

that' (1989: 37). Feminist scholars have argued that biography has historically omitted female lives, because the achievements that render a subject 'worthy' of biography occur in the public sphere, from which women have been excluded. This means that when women's stories are told, they are exceptional in some way—in circumstance, in personality, in class status and so on. This weakens their ability to model identity to other women. The feminist response has been to expand the acceptable subjects for biography, and to ensure that their achievements in both public and private realms are fully accounted for. As Heilbrun points out: 'there will be narratives of female lives only when women no longer live their lives isolated in the houses and the stories of men' (1989: 47). Chapter 7 explores how biography is handled in non-fiction television formats, and focuses especially on the ways in which both modes are predicated on understandings of identity and the performance of self.

Not only does biography provide models of selfhood, it also reveals much of how the complex relationship between individual and society works at a given moment in history. Biography may provide microcosmic insight into society and culture during the life of the protagonist. In the process of explaining the choices of the subject and interpreting the meaning of the events in their life, the biographer becomes a cultural historian (Wagner-Martin 1994). Furthermore, scholars suggest that at a further level of abstraction, studying the biographies published at a given moment can also be revelatory, for their selection of subjects and the ways in which they are written about. Hermione Lee suggests they help us to question 'what does that society value, what does it care about, who are its visible—and invisible—men and women?' (2009: 14). This book is infused with considerations of the relationship between television and biographical legacy, examining how biographical drama acts as an affirmation of cultural status and importance for the biographee, as well as a representation of their life story.

1.2 APPROACH

As I have highlighted so far, the concerns and conceptual frameworks biography studies has developed to discuss issues of truth, ethical and cultural value, the public/private dichotomy, and biographical legacy can be fruitfully applied to televisual biography. To date, though, there have been few studies that explicitly explore the relationship between biography and television. Biography studies is dominated by analyses of written

biography and of biographical methodologies as used in the social sciences. Within film studies, the biopic has enjoyed a recent surge in scholarly engagement, and some critical attention has also fallen on what Marta Minier describes as the ‘bio-docudrama’ (2014). Compared to the wide range and scope of biographical dramatisation on television, though, the paucity of writing on the subject is surprising. It may be explained by the relative value placed on both forms within the academy. Television and biography, Gary Edgerton argues, have ‘shared company as second-class citizens in academic life’ (2001: 7). In the twenty years since he made this observation, though, television studies has matured into a complex and varied field (though one that perhaps still does not enjoy the broader legitimacy of familial disciplines in the arts and humanities or social sciences). Biography has similarly enjoyed a resurgence in the academy, such that scholars have described a recent ‘biographical turn’ (Caine 2010; Renders et al. 2017; Posing 2017). Yet, before now there has not been a substantial project which explores the ways in which television tells biographical stories. This book aims to address this gap.

Biographical Television Drama focuses largely on one iteration of televisual biography: the fictionalisation of real lives in televisual dramatic forms. Biographical television drama has been rarely discussed *as biography*, certainly in comparison to the broadening field of biopics studies (Cartmell and Polasek 2019). Where it has been analysed, there has been relatively little attention paid to the televisual specificity of these dramas, in terms of aesthetics, structure and institutional origins, with the notable exception of Jonathan Bignell’s 2019 discussion. I am not attempting to stake out new territory for the biographical television drama, to claim for it a unified televisual form with consistent or dominant characteristics. I am less interested in coining the term ‘biographical television drama’ as a unique and specific genre, and dogmatically insisting on its application to certain programmes, than I am in exploring how biographical themes, ideas and stories are presented across a diverse range of television fiction. In delineating the kinds of television programme in which I am interested, I take a cue from the nearest familial relation of the television biographical drama, the cinematic biopic. George Custen defines the biopic as a film whose story ‘is minimally composed of the life, or the portion of a life, of a real person whose real name is used’ (1992: 6). Dennis Bingham refines this definition by adding an assessment of the genre’s cultural value, which, he argues:

narrates, exhibits, and celebrates the life of a subject in order to demonstrate, investigate, or question his or her importance in the world; to illuminate the fine points of a personality; and for both artist and spectator to discover what it would be like to be this person, or to be a certain type of person, or... to be that person's audience. (2011: 10)

This book draws on these two explications of the biopic when exploring the biographical television drama. When I am describing, analysing, assessing and contextualising biographical drama in this book, I am discussing a television fiction that focuses predominantly on the life or part of a life of a named real individual, though in some cases, as in written biography, there may be multiple biographees represented in a single text.

Biographical dramas represent the public activities or roles of the biographee that render them unique and interesting as a subject to merit a drama about their life. They will also usually emphasise subjectivity, memory and the intersections or conflict between private experience and public persona. Much as in Bingham's biopic, then, the televisual biographical drama will 'illuminate the fine points of personality' and will implicitly make a case for the cultural importance of the biographee. The differences in television's apparatus—its aesthetic regimes, narrative structure, institutional organisation—mean that the process of representing personalities and of 'making a case' for the biographee will be subtly specific to the medium. The machinery of television, including not only stylistic and structural techniques of programming but also interstitial materials, scheduling tactics, supplementary materials and positioning/promotion, is a crucial part of the meaning-making process and contribute significantly to the case for the biographee and his/her personality that the programmes make. For this reason, paratextual analysis will complement the textual analyses of programmes this book offers. I employ a mixed methods approach that combines textual analysis, archival research, interviews with industry professionals and discourse analysis.

Archival material from the BBC's Written Archives Centre has been used to research the television work of Ken Russell featured in Chap. 6, providing valuable insights into the relationships he cultivated at the BBC, and the institution's internal attitudes towards his work. The intention here was to discover first-hand television professionals' working understanding of the ethical, practical and legal issues raised by biographical representation by using archived communications. Another way I have researched the working practices and attitudes of industry practitioners in

the production of biographical dramas is to conduct a series of interviews with screenwriters. I spoke with the writers Amanda Coe (*Elizabeth David: A Life in Recipes* [BBC Two, 2006], *Filth: The Mary Whitehouse Story* [BBC Two, 2008], *Margot* [BBC Four, 2009], *Life in Squares* [BBC Two, 2015], *The Trial of Christine Keeler* [BBC One, 2020]), Richard Cottan (*Love Again* [BBC Two, 2003], *Hancock and Joan* [BBC Four, 2009], *Margaret* [BBC Two, 2009]), Brian Fillis (*Fear of Fanny* [BBC Four, 2006], *The Curse of Steptoe* [BBC Four, 2008], *An Englishman in New York* [ITV, 2009], *Against the Law* [BBC Two, 2017]), Daisy Goodwin (*Victoria* [ITV, 2016–]) and Gwyneth Hughes (*Miss Austen Regrets* [BBC One, 2008], *The Girl* [BBC Two, 2012], *Dark Angel* [ITV, 2016]) about the pragmatics of shaping lives into television form, the process of adapting disparate materials and constructing order from the anarchy of the human life, and the ethics of constructing *their* version of the biographee. I am grateful to them for generously giving their time to answer my questions. Their insights are drawn on throughout the book, but especially in Chaps. 4 and 5, which explore the role of the screenwriter in researching biography and adapting it to television-specific narrative form.

This book's analyses, interpretations and contextualisations are drawn from a survey of UK programming that includes production and broadcast information for 260 biographical dramatisations broadcast on UK television from 1936 to 2019. This was constructed using archival tools such as the BBC *Radio Times* Genome Project, the British Universities Film and Video Council's (BUFVC) *TV Times* archive, BFI Screenonline, digital newspaper archives of *The Times* and *The Guardian/The Observer*, broadcaster websites and the Internet Movie Database. The survey is extensive but not comprehensive. It was compiled with the intention of providing as clear a picture as possible of the scope and scale of biographical drama on British television. My observations about biographical drama are therefore drawn from as wide a viewing programme as was possible given the availability of programme texts on DVD, on-demand services or via the BUFVC's excellent Learning on Screen service, which also provides invaluable access to broadcast paratexts such as interstitial materials and continuity announcements. Where viewing has not been possible, contextual cues drawn from archival research have been used to make judgements about these texts.

A striking limitation of the British biographical drama noticeable from this survey is the lack of diversity of the biographees portrayed. Put simply,

the subjects of British biographical drama are overwhelmingly white, usually middle- or upper-class, most often male, heterosexual and cisgendered. Feminist critics of biography as a literary genre have long decried its overwhelming focus on white, powerful men, to the exclusion of other social groups whose stories are less frequently told (Wagner-Martin 1994; Long 1999). This is replicated in the findings of this project. Seventy percent of the biographical dramatisations surveyed feature male protagonists, with 25 percent focusing on female biographees and 5 percent centred on mixed gender pairings or groups. The picture is considerably worse in terms of ethnic and cultural diversity. Only 6 of the 260 dramas surveyed feature protagonists that are not white, and just two focus on black *British* biographees. One of these, *Shirley* (BBC Two, 2011) about the life of Welsh singer Shirley Bassey was broadcast as the flagship drama of BBC Two's *Mixed Race* season. The drama's placement within specific season of programming dedicated to people of mixed heritage implies a sequestration of the stories of black, Asian and people of other cultural minorities within television schedules. This speaks not only to the historical under-representation of people of colour as fully realised protagonists in drama, but also to the lack of recognition of the contributions of people of diverse identities to British social, cultural and political life. Class status is more difficult to quantify since it evidently involves a level of subjective interpretation. An indicative figure here though is that 17 percent of the surveyed programmes dramatise the lives of royal or aristocratic biographees, with seven different portrayals of Queen Victoria alone. Sexuality and gender identity are also tricky variables to measure since they are common arenas of biographical dispute. Seventeen of the dramas of the survey feature biographees generally understood to have been LGBTQ. The extent to which sexual identity is explored varies depending on broadcast context and storytelling approach. Though there have been some shifts in attention to diverse subjects over time, these findings illustrate the prioritisation of lives from dominant social groups for biographical television drama.

Close textual analysis of selected biographical dramas will form the basis of the case studies that supplement the chapters in this book. Chapter 2's exploration of genre hybridity and the biographical drama illustrates generic overlaps with the biopic and docudrama via comparative analysis of representations of the mathematician and code-breaker Alan Turing in two television programmes, *Breaking the Code* (BBC Two, 1996) and *Britain's Greatest Codebreaker* (Channel 4, 2011) and a feature film, *The*

Imitation Game (Morten Tyldum, 2014). I examine the influence of melodramatic modes and the conventions of period drama in relation to two contrasting programmes about the Brontë family, *The Brontës of Haworth* (Yorkshire Television, 1973) and *To Walk Invisible* (BBC One, 2016). In Chap. 3, alongside a discussion of the *mise-en-scène* and performance styles in biographical dramatisation, I examine how some biographical dramas have adopted a self-conscious mode of presentation that reflects on the practice and meaning of biography while constructing a biographical representation. I compare two dramas which take this meta-biographical approach: ‘Daisy’, a single drama from the anthology series *The Edwardians* (BBC Two, 1972–1973) about the scandal-driven life of a Countess-turned-socialist, and *Babs* (BBC One, 2017), about the actor and entertainer Barbara Windsor, which uses the metonymic conceit of the protagonist watching as scenes from her life are performed before her on stage. Chapter 4’s discussion of the translation of life stories into various narrative formats is illustrated by a discussion of two dramas about Anne Lister, a nineteenth-century businesswoman and traveller best known for her extensive coded diaries which detail her romantic and sexual relationships with women. Whereas *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister* (BBC Two, 2010) uses the ninety-minute running time of the single drama to dramatisé several years of Lister’s life, *Gentleman Jack* (BBC One/HBO 2019) concentrates the more generous screen time of an eight-part serial on only a few turbulent months. Chapter 5 considers the process of adaptation, concentrating first on the theoretical position of the biographical adaptation, and secondly on the various sources that are used as rhetorical guarantors of the authenticity or truth of biographical dramatisations. In the case study, I focus on the adaptation of diaries as biographical ‘evidence’ in the six-part dramatisation of the political life of Conservative minister Alan Clark, *The Alan Clark Diaries* (BBC Four, 2004). Chapter 6’s discussion of the ethics of biographical drama and its impact on various reputations (the biographee, the biographer, the broadcaster) first explores the influential figure of Ken Russell, whose controversial BBC profiles of composers and artists created tension between the filmmaker and the institution throughout the 1960s. The second case study examines *The Curse of Comedy* season, a collection of dramas about comedians broadcast on BBC Four in 2008 which prompted a media backlash. I trace the progress of one of these, *The Curse of Steptoe*, through the BBC’s institutional procedure for dealing with complaints, considering how ethical issues in the telling of biographical stories are handled by

television's regulatory organs. The book's final chapter considers how television manages biography in non-fiction genres. I analyse the longitudinal documentary series that began with *Seven Up!* (Granada, 1964), considering how its examination of 'ordinary' lives has, over time, adopted the themes and methods of biography. The last case study explores how the popular factual genealogical series *Who Do You Think You Are?* (BBC, 2004–) dramatises biographical processes and aligns the life stories of their ancestors with the identity and biography of the celebrity.

I have selected these case studies based on their fit with the themes and concepts explored in the chapters, and therefore they are diverse in their style, structure, theme and subject matter. As will be evident from the above outline, case studies are also varied in their era of broadcast. This book is not a history, but an exploration of the conceptual intersections between television and biography, and how these play out when biographical stories are mediated through the form of television drama. To make these connections and to give an expansive account of the range of approaches there have been to the process of dramatising biography, however, I have chosen to analyse texts from across the span of British television history. For this reason, below I provide a sketch of British television drama history and the place of the biographical dramatisation therein. This overview is designed to help locate biographical drama within broad trends in British drama production over time.

1.3 A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF BRITISH BIOGRAPHICAL TV DRAMA

Drama formed a significant part of British television programming from the beginnings of the broadcast service. In the pre-war experimental television period (1936–1939), dramatic materials were largely adapted from pre-existing theatrical entertainments. The earliest example of *biographical* dramatised material on British television came within weeks of the inception of the BBC's television service, in the form of scenes from a play called *The Tiger* about French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau broadcast on 23 November 1936. The play had been performed at the Embassy Theatre in the West End of London in September 1936, and the transmitted scenes were introduced by its producer, Ronald Adam. This was typical for drama broadcasts in this era, a replication of a night out at the West End to suit the tastes of an assumed middle-class audience for television in