

Introduction: Reading Silence in the Long Nineteenth-Century Women's Life Writing Archive

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Torn out pages, missing documents, or even instances of complete erasure of historical subjects are simultaneously frustrating and intriguing for scholars, offering hints and clues to the unspeakable and the unacceptable.¹ My own research in the archives of Irish writers Martha and Katherine Wilmot (1775–1873; 1773–1824) has frequently brought me into contact with such instances of silence. The Wilmot sisters were prolific travellers and writers of the early nineteenth century. Their life writing captures their own view of key historical moments of the Romantic period, as well as their intimate relationships with prominent literary women including Princess Ekaterina Dashkova (1743–1810), with whom they lived between 1803 and 1808 assisting in the composition of her *Memoirs*.² The Wilmot manuscripts were often created with a varied readership in mind, their journals, letters, and travelogues copied, read aloud, and circulated both within and beyond their familial and social circle.³ A variety of manipulations are evident across their manuscripts, using several different techniques and to multiple ends. Minor manipulations are apparent by comparing fair copy manuscripts of the Wilmots' travel writing with omissions introduced during transcription by the sisters and their female relatives, using dashes and ellipses. These absent details may have been seen as too personal, or perhaps too trivial,

¹ A special debt of thanks is owed to Lyndsey Jenkins whose creative feminist scholarship lent inspiration to this issue of *19*. Thank you to the Oxford Centre for Life Writing, the Oxford Centre for Research in the Humanities, and the Birkbeck Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies for providing conference funding. I would like to thank the Royal Irish Academy Library for permission to reproduce the images in this introduction. I am grateful to Kate Newey and Carolyn Burdett who provided support as well as to the *19* editorial team for bringing this project into being. I am also thankful to the anonymous peer reviewers for helping to ensure the quality of this issue.

² Martha eventually edited and published Dashkova's memoirs years after the noblewoman's death, including travel writing by both sisters as supplements. Ekaterina Dashkova, *Memoirs of the Princess Dashkova, Lady of Honour to Catherine II: Empress of all the Russias Written by Herself: Comprising Letters of the Empress, and Other Correspondence*, ed. by Mrs W. Bradford [née Martha Wilmot], 2 vols (London: Colburn, 1840).

³ Wilmot-Dashkova Collection, Dublin, Royal Irish Academy (RIA).

to be included in the fair copy, given the writing's intended sociable purpose. More aggressive modes of censorship are also apparent: prominent dark black lines cut through the pages sporadically, inking out passages beyond recovery. Elsewhere, sections of the manuscript volumes seem to be rubbed away. Here, the paper is rough and crinkled, leaving a light but unreadable trace of the obscured words, paragraphs, and sentences. While some of these scoured down bits of text indicate a name or a private detail omitted, other lengthy blank spaces introduce mysterious gaps in the travel letters (Fig. 1).

Other heavy-handed acts of censorship are evident in the archive. This can be seen, for instance, in the manuscript volume of Katherine's letters copied out by her sister Alicia Wilmot. Writing to a friend on the eve of her departure from Russia, Katherine emphasizes her low appraisal of the literary quality of Dashkova's manuscript which she carries back to Ireland with her:

I don't think I am bringing home anything [rare or surprising] As for [word omitted] I will bring it about my own person — [...] has been finished these several weeks, but you need not expect to find it intelligible, 'till it has undergone a complete dislocation from beginning [*sic*] to End — the Princess is perfectly content with it, because it is according to her own desire, [...] but in my opinion, it is not fit to read.⁴

Katherine's statement that she is not bringing home anything of value has been altered, the words 'rare and surprising' written over a patch of

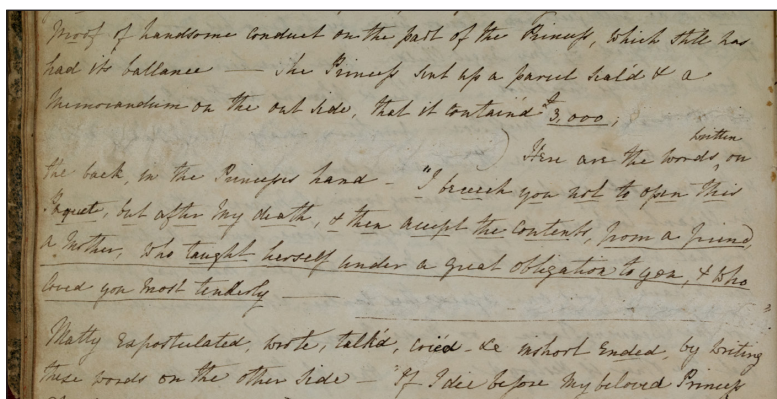


Fig. 1: Ms in English, 1805–07, Copies of Katherine Wilmot's letters from Russia, p. 40, Dublin, Royal Irish Academy MS 12 L 30. By permission of the Royal Irish Academy © RIA.

⁴ Letter to Anna Chetwood, Moscow, 2 February 1807, Ms in English, 1805–07, Copies of Katherine Wilmot's letters from Russia, p. 148, RIA MS 12 L 30.

paper rubbed out, likely replacing a more derogatory comment thought to demean the quality of the manuscript. An entire section of the passage appears to have been previously hidden by another sheet of paper glued over the top, now removed (Fig. 2).

The covering paper was affixed over Katherine's most inflammatory comments: that the work itself was unintelligible, that it required a complete 'dislocation' to make it fit for reading, and, importantly, that despite its inherent deficiencies and lack of fluidity, Dashkova was nonetheless 'perfectly content with it'. The reason for this omission is clear, given that Katherine's bold statements reflect negatively on the women's collective labour, both destabilizing Dashkova as an author, as well as the efforts of the Wilmot sisters to assist her in her writing. Martha, the eventual editor of Dashkova's published memoirs, is the most likely initiator of this temporary act of censorship.⁵ What is most fascinating about this example, perhaps, is the impermanence of this particular redaction. Rather than being rubbed away or blackened out, Katherine's opinions have subsequently been revealed by the removal of the covering paper in the intervening centuries. This reversal, then, indicates that not everything which is excised must remain so forever.

Such silences are commonplace in the long nineteenth-century women's archive, a space rife with gendered interventions. Yet these symbols of absence may also be signs of presence: just as the Wilmot sisters' manipulated manuscripts allowed specific narratives to be consecrated, the articles

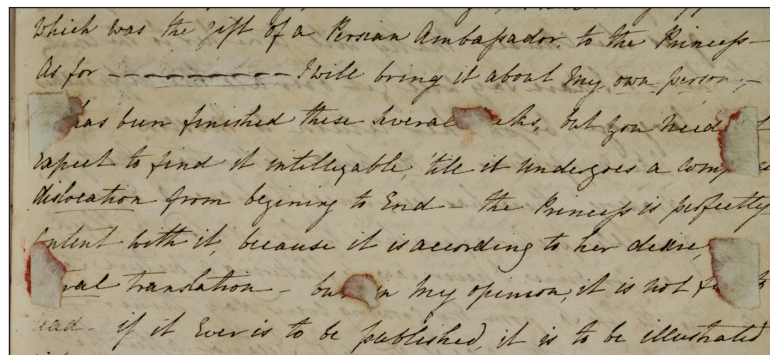


Fig. 2: Ms in English, 1805–07, Copies of Katherine Wilmot's letters from Russia, p. 148, Dublin, Royal Irish Academy MS 12 L 30. By permission of the Royal Irish Academy © RIA.

⁵ Marginalia shows that Martha collated and revised both sisters' life writing until at least 1870, raising interesting questions regarding changes made from a late rather than early nineteenth-century point of view. For evidence of Martha's continuing archival manipulation and amendment, see Letters of Katherine Wilmot from France-Italy, 1801–03, copied by Martha Bradford (née Wilmot), Moscow, 1805 (backboard), 'My Sisters Journal', 1870, RIA MS 12 L 32.

in this issue suggest that archives provided a venue through which nineteenth-century women practised agency. Women safeguarded, invented, or occluded identities in their life writing as well as in their self-conscious or inadvertent records, practices which function in dialogue with subsequent familial or institutional mediations that censored, altered, or preserved these formations.

This issue of *19* probes the form and meaning of silences in the long nineteenth-century women's life writing archive. A 2015 conference hosted by the Oxford Centre for Life Writing at Wolfson College provided the starting point for the themes confronted in this issue. My co-convenor Lyndsey Jenkins and I hoped to investigate the silences that we had encountered in our individual archival research within a wider range of experiences, having been intrigued by the similar instances of censorship and absence between our disparate interests, in suffrage writing and women's Romantic travel writing respectively. The conference highlighted a sense of urgency shared by scholars across diverse fields of study in grappling with lacunae in our work on women's lives and life writing in the nineteenth century. The vibrant discussions which took place on the day suggested that our individual research, when read and compared across geographical and disciplinary boundaries, could provide new models and methodologies for interpretation. This issue takes up key questions from the conference by asking: is the long nineteenth-century women's life writing archive a unique entity that stands apart from the wider archive? If so, how do we interpret its borders? How can we read silences, omissions, and tactical interventions for new signs of agency within an ethical framework? What possibilities and limitations arise from the growing mediation of technology between researchers and the archive?

Within this issue, a manuscript lost at sea haunts the memory of its author as if it is her ghost. A chaotic assemblage in an archival box reimagines a gentler youth. A daughter's diary conjures holes to contain a father's secret. An inflammatory private letter made calamitously public disappears, leaving only a ring of gossip. A sister's presence recedes into the annals of a great family like a fading photograph. The contributors unravel the illuminating potential of paradoxical absence and presence in the archive and suggest new methodologies for interpreting primary materials as a means of reconstructing women's lives in the nineteenth century. They attend to questions of both silence and its noisier counterparts, wading through archival infiltration, manipulation, and revision. Rather than lamenting the unknowable, the articles in this issue continue the dialogue by utilizing and reading silence in the archives as a potentially fruitful space able to lend insight into the constraints and possibilities inherent in nineteenth-century women's lives, even in instances where recovery is no longer possible.⁶

⁶ This interdisciplinary examination of archival silence illuminating nineteenth-

The archive as a concept as well as a space of recovery invites theoretical and structural investigation. The archive is not ‘an endlessly’ ‘amorphous mass’, but a system that groups things ‘together in distinct figures’ while differentiating them within their specific time and place.⁷ Derrida’s assertion that ‘nothing is less reliable, nothing is less clear [...] than the word “archive”’, that the uncertainty of its very nature leads the researcher to ‘compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire’, suggests a metaphorical location, a site that can never be fully gathered or contained.⁸ Carolyn Steedman both compresses and extends the limits of the archive as ‘the many places in which the past (which does not now exist, but which once did actually happen; which cannot be retrieved, but which may be represented) has deposited some traces and fragments’.⁹ An examination of the form which such remains take has particular relevance when investigating records of women’s lives, given their notably ‘vexed relationship’ with often institutionalized sites of knowledge across temporal and geographical categories.¹⁰ When researching women’s lives in the archives, it is not always possible to experience a ‘tactile and direct approach to the material’, or to physically touch paper ‘traces of the past’.¹¹ The shape of the archive is the product of countless interventions, a site of intergenerational reconceptualization and sometimes systematic reorganization, where the marginalized or problematic presence of a diverse range of women must be eked out from highly subjective records, unhidden, made visible.¹² As such,

century women’s life writing builds on recent discussions concerning absence in the construction and use of institutional archives. In *The Silence of the Archive*, David Thomas writes that ‘the existence of forgotten, falsified or imagined archives provides researchers with insights into the motives and wishes of their creators’. See David Thomas, ‘Imagining Archives’, in David Thomas, Simon Fowler, and Valerie Johnson, *The Silence of the Archive* (London: Facet, 2017), pp. 117–39 (p. 136).

⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. by A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 1969), pp. 145, 146.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 90, 91.

⁹ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 69.

¹⁰ Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 4. For a foundational discussion of the epistemological tension between feminist historiography and archival resources, see Judith Allen, ‘Evidence and Silence: Feminism and the Limits of History’, in *Feminist Challenges: Social and Political Theory*, ed. by Carole Pateman and Elizabeth Goss (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986), pp. 173–89.

¹¹ Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, trans. by Thomas Scott-Railton (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 15.

¹² Simon Fowler writes that ‘sources and archives are neither neutral nor natural. They are created. It is this that is the reason for so many silences’; Simon Fowler, ‘Enforced Silences’, in Thomas, Fowler, and Johnson, pp. 1–39 (p. 1). See also Marisa J. Fuentes’s study of enslaved women’s presence in the archive, which ‘stretch[es] archival fragments by reading along the bias grain to eke out extinguished and in-

encounters with silences in the archive must be met with sensitivity and raise fundamental questions about ethical methods of scholarly interpretation.¹³ Locating women's experiences in the existing archive habitually requires 'a deeper process of searching and also, the need for delicacy and reflexivity when researching'.¹⁴ Archives consequently maintain a 'gravitational pull' for researchers, who experience them 'as sites of promise and desire, even as we recognize they are also sites of power and privilege'.¹⁵

'Silence in the Archives: Censorship and Suppression in Women's Life Writing' engages with many forms of archival spaces between the institutional, the familial, and the imaginary. The articles that follow examine preservation, construction, and censorship of nineteenth-century women's life writing using a wide range of sources. Definitions of what constitutes the archive necessarily differ across the subjects discussed in these pieces, with each articulating disparate remnant forms of nineteenth-century women's life writing. The interdisciplinary nature of these pieces reflects their diversity of approach, revealing tensions between the public and private archive, the literary and civic. Whether excavating traditional archival collections, constructing a sense of the archive from unstable sources including memory, or shaping new and immaterial archival spaces through digitization, these articles query the very nature of the archive while suggesting new directions for archival studies through their generative specificity. They examine evidence both incorporated within and peripheral to traditional institutional archives, suggesting that researchers' materials and methods of interpretation must be both creative and critical, and that the concept of the 'archive' must be stretched beyond its traditional limitations in order to grapple with the many dimensions and remnants of nineteenth-century women's life writing. They query women's role in society

visible but no less historically important lives'; Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p. 4.

¹³ Natalie Zemon Davies describes the necessity of carefully identifying fictional aspects of the archive and placing those elements at the centre of analysis; see Natalie Zemon Davies, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987). Lisa Jardine notes the need for caution when dealing with uncertainty in the archive, acknowledging that researchers must be self-reflexive regarding 'how badly we want each precious piece of evidence to add to the historical picture'; see Lisa Jardine, *Temptation in the Archives: Essays in Golden Age Dutch Culture* (London: UCL Press, 2015), p. 1. Valerie Johnson similarly highlights how 'longing can sometimes lead to assumptions about the existence of evidence which does not in fact exist'; Valerie Johnson, 'Dealing with Silence', in Thomas, Fowler, and Johnson, pp. 101–13 (p. 101).

¹⁴ Francesca P. L. Moore, 'Tales from the Archive: Methodological and Ethical Issues in Historical Geography Research', *Area*, 42 (2010), 262–70 (p. 265).

¹⁵ Maryanne Dever, 'Archives and New Modes of Feminist Research', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 32 (2017), 1–4 (p. 1).

throughout the long nineteenth century across Romantic, Victorian, and Modern temporalities and contribute to understandings of women's evolving domestic, societal, and self-reflexive identities. By drawing on a broad chronological range, this issue highlights disciplinary slippages implicit to archival work on women, whose lifespans necessarily defy tidy periodization. It examines how the changing prerogatives of propriety as well as women's evolving role in society throughout the nineteenth century led to acts of archival manipulation, often at a later stage in life or posthumously. These articles read such complexities across both physical and digital spaces and break down boundaries which might otherwise preclude interdisciplinary cross-referencing.

Even the most perplexing archival space can represent a site of agency in nineteenth-century women's life writing, as Elizabeth Denlinger's article shows. Deciphering a long-misunderstood manuscript assemblage describing the youthful flight of Claire Clairmont as a companion to Mary Godwin and Percy Shelley, Denlinger unravels the Gothically inclined 'Horrid Mysteries' of Clairmont's archival constructions. Rather than disregarding Clairmont's letters as a falsification, Denlinger interprets them as 'a short one-sided epistolary novel' that represent the author's 'most fully realized work of fiction'. Clairmont frees herself from incrimination and decades of self-censorship by inventing a maternally protected past which will endure in the archives, resulting in a literary artefact that is as valuable for its originality as for its unverifiable nature.

The haunting spectre of the unknowable text also raises itself in Sonia Di Loreto's article on the evolving transnational archive of Margaret Fuller. Tracing the key moments of absence, erasure, and the attempts at recovery connected with Fuller's life writing, Di Loreto argues that 'the archive's generative force resides' in her tragic death. She evaluates the tension between Fuller's silent 'ghost manuscript' — a history of the Roman Republic which was never recovered following her death at sea — and the heavily edited posthumous *Memoirs*, which offered a dominant representation of her life and work that occluded her cosmopolitanism and personal experiences. Di Loreto details how the evolving Margaret Fuller Transnational Archive addresses the dilemmas inherent in archives and their origins by valuing the absence and presence of Fuller's literary remains as a means for realigning and reconceptualizing her cultural, sexual, and political identity.

Life writing assemblages that consecrate identities also hold implications for shared and familial archives, as shown by Kathryn Gleadle's article on the juvenile diaries of Eva Knatchbull-Hugessen. Gleadle explores the range of practices taken up by Knatchbull-Hugessen to frame familial narratives in opposition to corresponding archival records created by her father. Working at the crossroads of their life writing, Gleadle illustrates how diaries 'provide glimpses into the negotiation of queer relations within

a Victorian family' while untangling the 'layers of silences and self-censorship within the family archive'. The nature of diary writing as a shared project among kin placed life writing at the centre of familial narratives of literary lineage. Yet the erasure of her father's homosocial relationships from Knatchbull-Hugessen's juvenile diaries demonstrates how such collective archival sites could also be claimed to negotiate individual subjectivities. 'Young people', Gleadle writes, 'could be subversive curators of the family memory', an assertion which complicates gendered and familial hierarchies of power and importance in the archive.

Lucy Ella Rose's article also examines representational tensions and omissions in the family archive in her study of the forgotten author, Christina Liddell. Liddell's erasure from her rightful place at the centre of the renowned creative marriage shared by her sister, Mary Seton Watts, and George Frederic Watts has endured in subsequent biographical, scholarly, and institutional narratives. Rose's article examines moments of revision and self-censorship across diverse visual and textual archival materials as a means of reconstructing the triangular creative dynamic shared by Liddell and the Wattses, as well as the heteronormative and gendered constraints that motivate Mary Seton Watts to write her sister out of familial records. Rose's article challenges the popular view of the Wattses' creative processes. At the same time, Rose confronts suppressed sexualities and unconventional filial and conjugal relationships to reclaim Liddell 'as a pioneering professional woman writer and influential cultural producer' by bringing her accomplishments and contributions to light.

Karen Hunt's article on life writing connected to the scandalous Belt Case offers both a continuation of and a departure from the theme of archival silence by investigating the impact of gossip, censure, and surveillance on the preservation and dissemination of women's life writing. Through unravelling the experience of Dora Montefiore, Hunt shows the potential damage posed by intercepted letters and explores the modes of external and self-censorship engaged in through the circulation of supposedly private correspondence passed from hand to hand. Drawing in remnants preserved in institutional archives as a weapon alongside Montefiore's own self-censored autobiography, Hunt's article reconstructs the ways in which women in the political sphere at the close of the century 'had to fight for public rights to combat private injustices', often at great cost to personal and political ambitions.

The Forum section of this issue focuses on innovative ideas for mediating and negotiating archival absences in nineteenth-century women's life writing. These pieces stake a digital claim for the nineteenth-century women's life writing archive, suggesting that evolving notions of the archive must extend to encompass emerging immaterial formations alongside traditional archival collections valued for their material qualities. Lisa C.

Robertson and Flore Janssen discuss the effective potential of open access digital platforms by detailing recovery efforts relating to the life and prolific writing of late nineteenth-century novelist, journalist, activist, and traveller, Margaret Harkness. Their evolving project, the Harkives, offers a model for ‘assembling an archive that is formally coherent’, one that contends with the difficulty of embodying ‘the complexity of Harkness’s identity and the diversity of written work over the course of her career’, while considering her use of pseudonyms as a mode of presence. The functionality and success of the Harkives project raises an opportunity to question the theoretical limits of historicism while simultaneously demonstrating a new international and collaborative model for reconstructing nineteenth-century women’s literary and political biographies. Also drawing on digital collation of archival material as a method of broad reappraisal, Samantha de Vera’s piece details the major gains in knowledge of nineteenth-century Black women’s activism uncovered by the Colored Conventions Project. The project’s diverse, open access assemblage of primary sources produced by African American activists sheds new light on Black women’s previously occluded role as ‘antebellum feminists who were pushing forth progressive — and for the time — radical ideas about gender’. New insights produced by digital gathering, de Vera argues, are ‘not negligible’; rather, models emerge to ‘centre Black women using records that relegate their voices to the periphery’, thereby recovering their important and previously marginalized presence. These projects epitomize Anne J. Gilliland’s assertion that through the power of digital compilation ‘today more than ever, absences and voids in the archive may not be absolute or forever’ by offering exciting new methodologies for excavating and collating disparate or hidden fragments of women’s lives.¹⁶

This issue of *19* does not seek to solve the problem of archival silence. Instead, it grapples with the origins, uses, and consequences of such silences as well as their lasting implications for scholars of nineteenth-century women’s life writing. It suggests that archives, while frequently identified as sites of displacement or obfuscation for nineteenth-century women, should also be read as potential sites of authority.¹⁷ It does so at a crucial contemporary moment for considering presence and absence, as the voices of women as well as other marginalized groups are simultaneously under siege and amplified by resurgent and ongoing shifts in political, ideological, and institutional practice across international public discourse. Now,

¹⁶ Anne J. Gilliland, ‘Foreword’, in Thomas, Fowler, and Johnson, pp. xv–xvii (p. xvi).

¹⁷ Contemporary practices of personal archival creation as a tactic for empowering oppressed, traumatized, or marginalized groups of people have been the subject of recent investigation, as documented by Hariz Halilovich in ‘Reclaiming Erased Lives: Archives, Records and Memories in Post-War Bosnia and the Bosnian Diaspora’, *Archival Science*, 14 (2014), 231–47.

more than ever, it is vital to examine the ways in which the past has been mediated and inscribed. The articles presented here create dialogues and suggest ideas for negotiating silences surrounding those who have historically been censored or suppressed well beyond the scope of the nineteenth century, leading to new strategies for recovery and interpretation.