

Christina Liddell, the Forgotten Fraser Tytler Sister: Censorship and Suppression in Mary Watts's Life Writing

Lucy Ella Rose

Introduction: the Fraser Tytler sisters

Novelist, short story writer, and poet Christina Liddell (née Fraser Tytler) (1848–1927) is one of the many neglected non-canonical women writers of the nineteenth century. Despite her fame during her day and her familial and professional connections to Victorian celebrities, including photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, she is now relatively unknown and no study of her life or oeuvre currently exists. She is herself a silence in the archive. She was the elder sister of Mary Seton Watts (1849–1938) — a symbolist artist-craftswoman and celebrated designer for Liberty & Co. — and was greatly admired by ‘England’s Michelangelo’ George Frederic Watts (1817–1904), who married Mary in 1886.¹ Yet on his deathbed, the world-famous artist called for Christina. It was Christina who introduced the couple, facilitating and participating in one of the most prominent and respected Victorian marriages of arts and crafts. Christina was not peripheral, as her marginalization in existing biographical, scholarly, and institutional narratives on the Wattses suggests, but rather central and influential in their partnership. Christina both promoted and complicated the hegemony of marriage. The intense, ambiguous intimacy between the three — and Christina’s significance in the Wattses’ life and circle — is examined here for the first time through a reading of Mary’s private diaries (1887–1908), which highlight through contrast the curious absence of Christina from Mary’s published biography of her husband, *The Annals of an Artist’s Life*.² The striking disparity between the centrality and erasure of Christina in Mary’s private and published life writing (respectively) implies an authorial self-censorship

¹ Contrary to conventional practice, for the sake of clarity and to avoid confusion between figures with the same surnames, these figures will be referred to by their first names, except where it is necessary to distinguish them also by surname. See Wilfrid Blunt, *England’s Michelangelo: A Biography of George Frederic Watts* (London: Columbus Books, 1989).

² M. S. Watts, *George Frederic Watts*, 3 vols (London: Macmillan, 1912), 1, 11: *The Annals of an Artist’s Life*.

and suppression in the latter that demands further interrogation of the former — as well as of the silence that enshrouds her in the archive.

Mary's neglected diaries offer a more nuanced and accurate narrative of the Wattses' life than her sanitized three-volume biography, or rather quasi-hagiography, of her husband, and yet this conjugal auto/biography remains a principal reference source for research on the Wattses. While it portrays George as an artistic genius and Mary as his dutiful helpmeet, shaping and perpetuating traditional perceptions of the couple, Mary's diaries reveal their relationship to be far more complex and unconventional. An unprecedented focus on Christina's integral role in the Wattses' life, work, and relationship, as recorded by Mary's private diaries, further problematizes their public grand narrative presented by the biography, in which Christina is all but effaced. Her first name is never mentioned and she is only fleetingly referred to by either her married name or as Mary's sister. Indeed, the variations and instability of Christina's name undoubtedly contributed to her obscurity: in the press and published works she is referred to as 'Christina Liddell', 'C. C. Fraser-Tytler', and Christiana, or Christina Catherine Liddell; while Mary refers to her formally in her biography as 'Mrs Edward Liddell' and affectionately in her diaries by the nickname 'Choons'.

Mary meticulously managed her husband's legacy and their marital narrative, suppressing any details that might complicate, or undermine, their public profile and her own privileged status in his life. Indeed, details of George's marriage to his first wife, actress Ellen Terry, are notably absent from Mary's biography, as they are in institutional narratives at the gallery she founded on the site of their Surrey studio-home. It is clear from Mary's diaries that she became increasingly aware of her older husband's mortality and, simultaneously, her heavy responsibility as the sole guardian of his legacy and recorder of their life together; she tactically selected sections from her diaries for publication and wrote her husband's biography with respectable reserve and feminine propriety. In contrast, pages torn out or stuck together, words or lines crossed out, and scribbled fragments of verse — as well as stream of consciousness, fragmentation, open endings, aposiopesis, and ellipses — are characteristic of Mary's private writings, offering insight into her authorial and psychological processes of expression, self-censorship, and suppression. Mary's diaries — life writing spaces safe from public scrutiny and her husband's gaze — inscribe a deeper and more nuanced dynamic between Christina and the Wattses in the privacy of their domestic sphere. A reading of Mary's biography alongside her diaries shows that 'reticence was paradoxically characteristic of Victorian lifewriting, which was as defined by the drive to conceal life stories as it was indicative of a compulsion to transmit them'.³

³ Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 34.

Through a reading of Mary's largely unexplored life writing, this article investigates censorship, suppression, and silence — and tensions between presence and absence — in the form of textual subtexts, ambiguous intimacy, dying words and hallucinations, secret parentage, missing diary pages, and posthumous interventions. Combining literary, art historical, and theoretical perspectives, it analyses a range of archival sources including diaries, auto/biography, and letters alongside poetry, paintings, and photographs, in order to offer insight into the untold complexities of Victorian familial relationships — particularly marriage and sisterhood — and the multifariousness of Victorian sexualities. It aims to go some way towards addressing archival silences and rectifying the scarcity of available biographical and critical material on Mary's and Christina's life and work. This article asserts that the boundaries of what forms the 'archive' for these neglected Victorian women writers are fluid. Christina's published poetry remains obscure and inaccessible to the public; Mary's three-volume biography published in 1912 has only recently become available online at Internet Archive; and while excerpts from Mary's eight extant diaries (1887, 1891, 1893, 1896, 1898, 1902, 1904, and 1906–08, exceeding 300,000 words) have recently been published over a century after they were written, the majority of the diaries, including years discussed here, reside unpublished and unread in the Watts Gallery Archive.⁴ While the rationale of Desna Greenhow's published collection is to reveal Mary's creative role in her marital years, it largely perpetuates long-standing perceptions of the Wattses' marriage, omits more controversial entries, and relegates Christina to footnotes. This article aims to highlight and address these issues and gaps.

Photographs of the Fraser Tytler family give a distinctive face to the long-forgotten figure of Christina. Her voluminous dresses, decorative trimmings, confident poses, and often direct gazes give her a glamour and assertiveness that command the viewer's focus. One photograph shows Christina wearing an elaborately patterned garment with a frilled collar and accessories, posing self-consciously over an open book with her face turned towards the viewer; it reflects her self-fashioning as an aesthetically aware, cultured, and literary woman (*Fig. 1*). This is comparable with Mary's oil portrait *Mrs Edward Liddell* (1870), where Christina is apparently engaged in the act of writing short stories, for which Mary provided illustrations in an early example of their filial collaboration (*Fig. 2*). While Mary painted numerous oil portraits of female relatives for personal interest, a delicate pencil drawing of Christina's profile can be found in Mary's diary of 1871 amid written character sketches and records of their relationship.

⁴ See *The Diary of Mary Watts 1887–1904: Victorian Progressive and Artistic Visionary*, ed. by Desna Greenhow (London: Lund Humphries, 2016). The full text of Mary's unedited diaries is available at Watts Gallery Library and Archive, Compton, Surrey.



Fig. 1: Christina Liddell, date unknown, photograph. Iain Cameron.

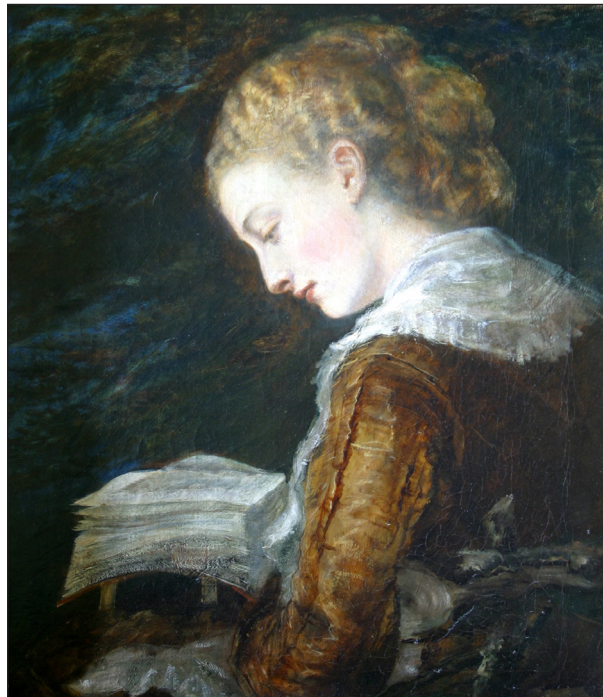


Fig. 2: Mary Fraser Tytler, *Mrs Edward Liddell*, 1870, oil portrait. Aldourie Castle Collection.

Its privileged and unique location in her private diary shows its personal significance, illustrating Mary's admiration for, and attachment to, her elder sister, and suggesting the sisters' special and even eroticized bond.

Visual works highlight Christina's equivocal omnipresence in the Watts's world. Apparently recognizing the captivating Pre-Raphaelite female beauty of, and especially close connection between, the Fraser Tytler sisters, Julia Margaret Cameron photographed them for the group tableau *The Rosebud Garden of Girls* (1868), reproduced as a *carte de visite* (Fig. 3). It was inspired by Tennyson's poem 'Maud' (1855) and taken in his garden on the Isle of Wight – visited by the likes of Lewis Carroll, Charles Dickens, and George Watts, who was friends with Cameron from at least 1851.⁵ It was through Christina that Mary became acquainted with this prestigious creative circle. The two lower, central faces of Mary and Christina, framed



Fig. 3: Julia Margaret Cameron, *The Rosebud Garden of Girls*, 1868, albumen print. Royal Photographic Society.

⁵ Cameron also photographed George Watts (c. 1865–69), whom she greatly admired, and he painted her portrait for posterity (1850–52).

by masses of cascading hair, mirror each other in shape, tilt, and wistful expression. In another, lesser-known version of this photograph (*Fig. 4*), the central faces of Mary and Christina (this time swapped around) are more directly turned towards one another in profile, creating a highly charged composition which emphasizes the sisters' physical resemblance and tender, sensual closeness. Viewed together, the two scenarios focusing on (the connection between) Christina and Mary create an intriguing elliptical narrative that one is left to contemplate here as in their writings. Cameron's numerous photographic portraits of Christina alone as well as in groups suggest a recognition of her as the singular enigmatic beauty of the family. In a little-known three-quarter profile portrait of Christina by Cameron (*Fig. 5*) — held in a private Fraser Tytler family archive in Scotland and shown here for the first time — Christina gazes down elegantly, wearing large exotic earrings. It reworks traditional gender dynamics and demonstrates one woman's pleasure in looking at, and being looked at by, another woman. Christina is an ethereal, mysterious, faded figure in this



Fig. 4: Julia Margaret Cameron, *The Rosebud Garden of Girls*, 1868, albumen print. Royal Photographic Society.



Fig. 5: Julia Margaret Cameron, Christina Liddell from Life, date unknown, probably late 1860s, photograph. Iain Cameron.

photograph, reflecting her spectrality in scholarship and history. These images and forms of scopophilia speak to the concept of silence in the archive and point to unspoken eroticized relationships between women. This article explores suppressed or censored aspects of female relationships, analysing erotically charged scenarios and subtexts; it illuminates the subtler manifestations of desire that dwell in an archival hinterland.

A family affair: triple singleness and triangulated desire

Christina and Mary's close bond in adult life can be traced back to childhood. Their widowed father Charles Edward Fraser Tytler, a civil servant and himself a writer of esoteric dissertations, encouraged them to

pursue their creative interests.⁶ Christina's literary career, Mary's artistic practice, and the sisters' enlightened ideas were cultivated by their liberal upbringing in the Scottish Highlands at the romantic Aldourie Castle on the shores of Loch Ness. In adult life, the Fraser Tytler sisters shared a deep nostalgia for, and almost spiritual connection to, their 'darling hills'.⁷ For Mary, Christina came to embody the restorative power of her lost childhood home, and their shared reminiscences helped to sustain a strong familial identity and filial bond. In adulthood, Mary sent Christina floral and photographic tokens of their rural roots (27 July 1898; 14 February 1891), and in Christina's poem 'The Highland Glen' the female narrator's 'heart cries' for the 'bonny glen' of her youth.⁸ The sisters spent a 'happy' childhood 'knowing nothing beyond [their] little world of half a dozen' (14 February 1891) before entering George Watts's famous circle, and a persistent longing for a bygone time pervades their writings.

By helping her sister marry, Christina expressed her love for Mary in a world that deemed marriage of paramount importance for women. In 1872 Christina herself married Reverend Edward Thomas Liddell (1845–1914, honorary canon of Durham), a man with 'strong intellect' and a mind 'like an Encyclopaedia' (16 September 1891), who wrote papers on religion and society. Mary celebrates their conjugal union: 'My heart's desire seems to be given to me now, they and [George] are to be much to each other' (17 September 1891). Christina and Edward often visited the Wattses' Surrey studio-home 'Limnerslease', a meeting ground for leading writers, artists, and activists, such as Josephine Butler and George Meredith. Rather than distancing them, the sisters' relatively late marriages to men of like minds with long-term issues of ill health (George was much older than Mary and Edward suffered from mental illness) made them one another's comforts and closest confidants in later life.

Christina, Mary, and George spent much time together and enjoyed a close emotional, intellectual, and creative relationship that intensified over the years. For the Wattses, marriage brought new familial and working relationships that realigned traditional roles, and Mary's diaries trace their formation of an artistic partnership with Christina. Although this exemplifies the proliferation of such configurations in the late-Victorian period (along with the more famous Morris, De Morgans, and Rossetti), the formation of mixed-sex partnerships involving multiple figures, and both filial and marital relations, remained atypical. While it was not uncommon

⁶ Veronica Franklin Gould, *Mary Seton Watts (1849–1938): Unsung Heroine of the Art Nouveau* (London: Lund Humphries, 1998), p. 20.

⁷ *The Diaries of Mary Seton Watts (1870–86, 1887, 1891, 1893, 1896, 1898, 1902, 1904, 1906–08)*, 27 April 1898. Compton, Watts Gallery Archives, COMWG2008.4, MSW/1–10, Box A25. Further references to Mary Watts's diaries are given parenthetically by date after quotations in the text.

⁸ C. C. Fraser-Tytler, *Songs in Minor Keys*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1884), pp. 177–83 (p. 182). All references to Christina's poems are taken from this edition.

for siblings to participate in the progress of each other's marriages, as Christina did by introducing Mary and George, the nature of the family dynamic that subsequently developed was unconventional. Discussing anomalous sibling relations in adulthood, Leonore Davidoff notes that 'on occasion a sister would become a permanent fixture in the home of the married [...] sister', as Christina did (symbolically if not always physically) in the Wattses' married life and studio-home.⁹ The alternative domestic model constituted in their eroticized interfamilial creative partnership raises questions about transgressive sexuality, unspoken love, and gender normativity. Their triangular relationship reconfigured hegemonic patriarchal family structures and represented a progressive if not radical approach to gender and marital politics. If siblings Charles and Mary Lamb 'lived as one, in double singleness together', Mary's diaries show that Christina and the Wattses lived in a kind of 'triple singleness' — a familial, creative, emotional, and 'erotic[ized] triangle' — which has been censored in biographical and institutional narratives for the sake of binary simplicity and heteronormative palatability.¹⁰

Mary's diary entries such as 'Signor well [...] — Christina and I together!' (26 December 1887) express a jubilant togetherness.¹¹ One entry describes 'another happy day' with Mary 'at work upon the preparation of the canvases of the hall ceiling [...] [while] Choons brought out her work' and George painted in his studio (17 September 1891). Mary recognized in her husband and sister a shared open-mindedness that was superior in the latter: 'they are so liberal, & so large — especially Christina' (18 September 1891). Christina similarly 'used to delight in [Mary's] advance under [George], laugh & say "Watts is making Moll a radical"' (12 October 1887). This reveals their mutual pleasure in witnessing the mind-broadening effect they had on one another and, moreover, suggests Christina's enlightening influence on the couple. Mary's diary can be read as an '*acta diurna amoris*', a daily act of love kept with a constancy that reflects her dual devotion to her husband and sister, attesting to 'a fondness for triangulated relationships' (Marcus, pp. 45, 47). Exemplifying Christina's creative vision and facilitation of familial collaboration, Mary records in her diary that 'Christina writes to know if I will help Edward with something. A painted reredos, she suggests, for the workhouse chapel [...]. I shall

⁹ Leonore Davidoff, *Thicker Than Water: Siblings and Their Relations, 1780–1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 154.

¹⁰ Jane Aaron, *A Double Singleness: Gender and the Writings of Charles and Mary Lamb* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 2; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 21.

¹¹ George Watts was known as 'Signor', meaning 'Master', originally given because of his courteous manner and the time he spent in Italy. Mary sometimes refers to George as 'Signor' in her diaries.

propose doing it in gesso' (30 March 1891) — which became her favoured craft medium. Recording the sisters' attendance at the public opening of the 'Lady Chapel' at St Alban's Abbey — on which Edward Liddell wrote an illustrated book in 1897, and for which 'the hangings [were] worked by Christina' — Mary writes 'I am to plant my first bit of "national work" in the chancel there' (9 December, 4 August 1893). Significantly, this was Mary's first piece of work for a public space which prefigured her masterpiece, the Watts Chapel at Compton, and yet Christina's influence on her work is otherwise invariably omitted.

Mary's diary also reveals that it was in fact Christina who conceived the idea for George's famous Memorial to Heroic Self-Sacrifice in Postman's Park near St Paul's in Central London (the subject of recent press attention for being upgraded to Grade II*¹²). Mary writes, 'Christina came — we all sat together in the Gallery — talked of the letter suggesting the national memorial to all acts of heroism — she had amazed us by writing that' (25 August 1887). This entry radically challenges the long-standing popular view of this unique project as '[George] Watts's idea' and 'Signor's monument' (8 February 1891), as well as of George himself as a solitary male artistic genius (Greenhow, p. 41). While Mary's biography credits George as the monument's sole creator, suppressing details about its conception that might complicate this narrative and his public image, her diary reveals his creative collaboration with Christina: she was the secret mastermind behind his masterpiece. The project was executed by George in collaboration with the celebrated ceramicist William De Morgan who produced the memorial tiles, and it was continued by Mary after his death. Christina was thus part of a prestigious creative team and project that united her own vision, her sister's passion, and male artists' skill. This memorial, of great importance to the Wattses, is itself remarkable in that, unlike most male-dedicated war memorials, it recognizes heroic acts of women who gave their lives to save others. It reflects Christina's awareness of the important social role of women and of the need to address their historical marginalization, which likely influenced the Wattses' well-known philanthropic endeavours and aesthetic interest in social realism. A reading of Mary's diaries shows how her biography rewrites certain aspects of the Wattses' life and simultaneously writes her own sister out of history. It is curious and ironic that Mary should speak so passionately and publicly on the sociopolitical censorship and suppression of women — announcing that 'a vote meant a voice' at a women's suffrage meeting held by her invitation at Limnerslease in 1913 — after effectively erasing her sister from her biography of George published

¹² Maev Kennedy, 'Hundreds of England's Local Heroes to Achieve Wider Fame', *Guardian*, 30 July 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/jul/30/historic-england-exhibition-celebrating-local-heroes-memorials>> [accessed 16 October 2018].

just the previous year.¹³ Mary's painstaking public preservation of George's reputation as a solitary male artistic genius diminished Christina's contribution, and Mary's biographical censorship of Christina's role in their conjugal creative partnership raises questions about the ambiguous nature of the sisters' professional and personal relationship.

Mary's diaries reveal the close relationship between George and Christina. While 'a husband might feel excluded' where 'a vibrant relationship existed between a wife and her own sister' (Davidoff, p. 155), George was always 'very pleased to see [Christina] [and] quite interrupted his work that he might talk to her' (24 June 1887). Mary notes in her diary that he was often 'engaged talking to Christina' and was able to 'clear dark care from Choons's face by his bright & delightful talk' (2 June, 28 July 1891). In an entry that perhaps best illuminates the intimacy between the three, Mary details Christina's privileged position beside George in the 'niche' (*Fig. 6*). This was the Wattses' private reading alcove at the heart of their Surrey studio-home, where Mary would habitually read to her reclining husband every evening after visitors had left (14 September 1891). It was designed by Mary as a private conjugal space that had 'just room for us two' where they could 'lie back talking [...] before going to bed' (13 January 1891). Mary paints a vivid and memorable picture of the trio lounging entwined in the narrow niche, George flanked by his wife and sister-in-law:

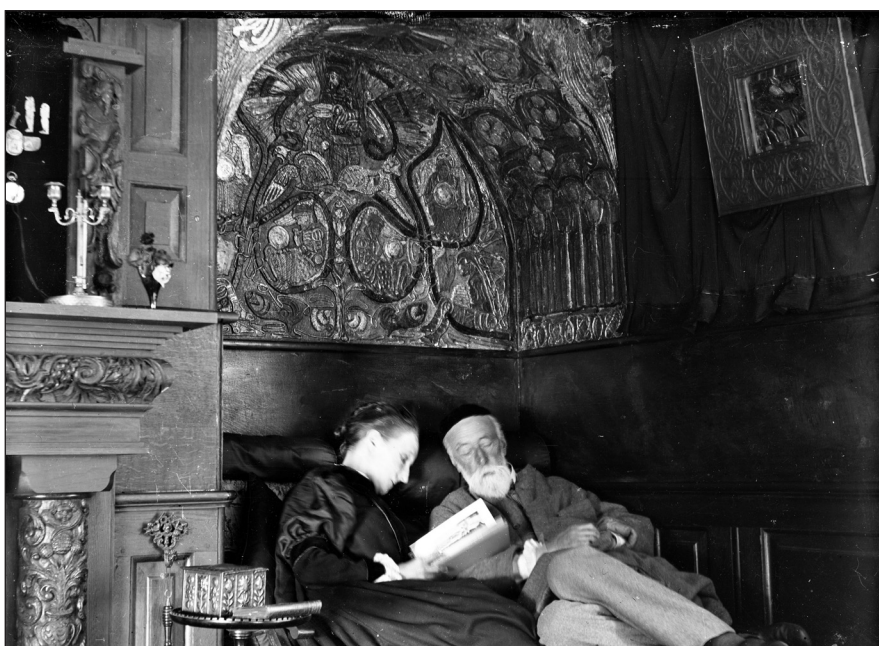


Fig. 6: Mary and George Watts reading in the niche at Limnerslease, c. 1894–95, photograph. Watts Gallery Trust.

¹³ 'Women and the Vote: Last Night's Meeting', *Surrey Advertiser*, 29 November 1913.

We sat together yesterday making wings for Signor, his arm round us each, I like to see he has a really strong facial resemblance to us — Christina particularly — we must have been born somewhere together once where no man knows. (19 September 1891)

George assumes a dominant, protective, patriarchal position, while the sisters assume a more submissive yet supportive role as his ‘wings’, representing a symbiotic familial creative partnership and an eroticized triangle of husband, wife, and sister. This scene is permeated by an intense connection and ambiguous intimacy apparently devoid of tension or sibling rivalry. The passage is imbued with a spiritually and erotically charged subtext: in the yonic symbolism of the ‘niche’, the close physical proximity and entwinement of the trio, and the apparently predestined connection between Mary’s husband and sister. Mary’s love for George seems bound up with her love for Christina in a triangle of transferred desire; as with the Wordsworth siblings’ earlier relationship with Coleridge, their ‘three-way emotional landscape [is] difficult to disentangle’ (Davidoff, p. 208), and it is this complexity that challenges existing biographical and institutional narratives.

Christina’s privileged place in the niche also reflects her influence on the Wattses’ readings, which in turn shaped their liberal ideas. The books she sent or recommended to the couple included those by progressive and even radical thinkers, social reformers, political activists, and revolutionaries. Among these was the writer, socialist, and sexologist Edward Carpenter, a Surrey-based friend of the Wattses and early advocate of sexual freedoms who enjoyed an unorthodox same-sex partnership. In his work, Carpenter recognized an ‘Intermediate sex’ and celebrated the ‘subtleties and complexities of Nature’; for him, homosexuality and emotional (not just sexual) love, eros, and democracy, were inextricably linked. The Fraser Tytler sisters can be seen as ‘intermediate’ or ‘transitional types’ as New Women and active members of a professional, emotional, and erotically charged triangle.¹⁴ It was perhaps no coincidence that Christina gifted the Wattses a work by Carpenter on their sixth wedding anniversary, which they read together; acknowledging their like minds, Mary writes, ‘much that [Carpenter] says [George] has said to me over & over again’ (20 November 1891). Christina also read the Wattses poems by William Watson, a Yellow Book contributor famed for the controversial political content of his verse (17 January 1893), and Edward Liddell read them extracts from Olive Schreiner’s *Dreams* (16 September 1891); these were admired by Mary Watts, New Women, and Edward Carpenter alike for their poetical and political power as well as their progressive ideas about sex and gender.

¹⁴ Edward Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1908), p. 10.

In light of the contemporary legal perception of a man and his sister-in-law as (non-genetically related) brother and sister (Davidoff, p. 217), the relationship between George, Mary, and Christina can be seen as a purely platonic, extended sibling attachment. Indeed, Mary and Christina were deeply devoted and emotionally interdependent adult sisters to whom the concept of sharing was common. Yet the affection displayed between George and Christina (herself a married woman) — and their shared horizontal reading practice in a confined, intimate space — can be understood as a form of sublimation. George (who notoriously had many female admirers and whose companionate marriage to Mary was supposedly unconsummated) perhaps enjoyed the domestic attentions of his wife and sister-in-law in accordance with contemporary tastes: Victorian art (including some of his own work) displayed a growing fascination with sibling interaction and attraction, and a Victorian man might choose between two sisters as a suitable marriage partner. For George, the two female figures who ‘crystallized together through the ties of sisterhood’ perhaps ‘provided a delicious interchangeability and variety’. Moreover, the creative partnership with his wife and her sister demonstrates how ‘men’s creativity grew out of the specific emotional dynamics of such [sibling] pairings mired in the erotic atmosphere of the bourgeois family’ (Davidoff, pp. 215, 204). This three-way partnership was the inspiration and driving force behind some of his greatest creative outputs.

In this case, the triangular dynamic also fostered female creativity in a reciprocal familial partnership, and ‘female intimacy [was] the friend of conjugal happiness, not its foe’ (Marcus, p. 254). The close bond between George, Mary, and Christina anticipated the radically looser, freer lives of the Bloomsbury Group members who famously lived in squares, painted in circles, and loved in triangles. Incidentally, artist Vanessa Bell (then Vanessa Stephen) — sister of Virginia Woolf and later a lover of Vita Sackville-West — was among the Wattses’ guests at Limnerslease in 1901.¹⁵ That Oscar Wilde sent George a copy of his own poem in the 1880s further demonstrates George’s connection and appeal to (in)famous figures pushing aesthetic and heteronormative boundaries.¹⁶ Mary’s diaries record a creative, intellectual, and more ambiguous intimacy between herself, her sister, and her husband, offering a radical review of the Wattses’ ostensibly conventional dyadic marriage. The three embody the ‘intriguing but shocking’ idea of a ‘triangular relationship made by *marriage* to one sister but having an intimate relation with another’, which not only carried

¹⁵ Mark Bills, ‘Limnerslease: “Only a great artist can make a house look like this”’, in *An Artists’ Village: G. F. Watts and Mary Watts at Compton*, ed. by Mark Bills (London: Wilson, 2011), pp. 25–45 (p. 29).

¹⁶ Mark Bills, “Two artists who are of just the same mind concerning their ideals of art”, in *An Artists’ Village*, ed. by Bills, pp. 9–24 (p. 11).

the titillating suggestion of an illicit, quasi-incestuous affair but also represented a ‘profound threat to the moral, social and sexual status quo’ of Victorian England (Davidoff, p. 215, emphasis in original). As Davidoff acknowledges, ‘deep emotional or erotic attraction between husband or wife and a [...] sibling was a particularly sensitive area’ (p. 155) — and, moreover, a potentially scandalous revelation, perhaps a retrospectively unpalatable truth, and certainly a complex unconventional dynamic — which may account for Mary’s biographical suppression and censorship of Christina’s role in her marriage as well as the resulting silence surrounding her in the archive.

Mary’s correspondence with George during their engagement further illuminates her liberal approach to (mixed-sex and same-sex) relationships and pleasure in forms of *ménage à trois*. She struck up a ‘delightful companion[ship]’ with Christina’s sister-in-law Miss Geraldine ‘Gerry’ Liddell, who affectionately and mischievously ‘played to [George] Watts whom she called “Lamb”’;¹⁷ she stayed with the couple on the Isle of Wight, took care of George in Mary’s absence and was present at his bedside along with Mary when he died (Watts, *Annals*, II, 161, 252, 323). Mary playfully writes in her early letters to George,

My dear Signor, I have just heard of you from Gerry, who seems to have been making great love to you, without asking for leave... [...]. I am very glad to think Gerry’s having been to you again. That you understood her, and she understands you is one of my greatest joys. (1886, quoted in Chapman, pp. 119–20)

She encourages intimacy between her future husband and another unmarried woman, with whom she herself enjoyed a close bond. In this case too, it seems ‘eroticized friendship between women [was] a necessary lubricant for facilitating marriage between a woman and a man’ (Marcus, p. 254). While Mary uses the familiar female language of passionate friendship, her letter to George contains a more cryptic confession relating to her minor reservations about (monogamous, heterosexual) marriage: ‘I have no doubts except some very tiny little occasional ones, about what I can be to you, and they must by the nature of things continue to exist’ (1886, quoted in Chapman, p. 119). Her use of ellipses, romantically suggestive turns of phrase (‘making great love’), and veiled discourse (‘what [she] can be to [him]’ and ‘the nature of things’) in her letters carry subtexts about sex and sexuality that required censorship even in Victorian women’s life writing. Her close bond with women — especially her sister, with whom she found an unparalleled intimacy — continued to exist and arguably intensified

¹⁷ Ronald Chapman, *The Laurel and the Thorn: A Study of G. F. Watts* (London: Faber and Faber, 1945), p. 119.

after her marriage. The sisters were ‘still not able to overcome [...] the leaning after all of their life-attachment’, and they can be seen to demonstrate Carpenter’s notion of the characteristic silent suffering of ‘intermediate types’ who disrupted heteronormativity (Carpenter, pp. 23–24). A semi-suppressed ambiguous longing pervades Mary’s marital diaries, which can be read as sites of private struggle articulating inner turmoil: ‘There is still in me, perhaps something my nature drew in as a child, that now my more restrained nature wants to feed on’ (27 April 1898). This unnamed ‘something’ that her ‘more restrained nature wants to feed on’ is perhaps (to echo Alfred Douglas’s infamous poem ‘Two Loves’) a ‘love that dare not speak its name’: a polyamorous, extramarital, homoerotic, ‘intermediate’, bisexual, or perhaps incestuous love left unspoken in the archive.¹⁸

Ambiguous adult intimacy: sisters, subtexts, and silence

Recording filial intimacy and fascination, if not infatuation, Mary’s diary entries revere and revel in Christina’s Pre-Raphaelite beauty and the spectacle of femininity: ‘as she sits there, the lamp light falling softly on her sweet face, & the pretty artistic tea gown she is wearing, much of the old beauty shines there still’ (16 September 1891). Mary’s look is ostensibly the aesthetically appreciative female artist’s gaze, and the filial female–female dynamic subverts the masculinist hierarchy traditionally governing the gaze. Yet the lover-like romantic language and roaming look from face to figure is comparable with the Wattses’ friend Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s more explicit idealization and eroticization of the female body ‘all golden in the lamplight’s gleam’ in his poem ‘Jenny’ (1869–70), where the male gaze travels from ‘loosened hair’ to ‘waist’.¹⁹ Just a few days later Mary writes, ‘my darling Choons, I feasting on her dear face last night! She looked like an angel in the golden niche — what pleasure it is to see her beauty again’ (19 September 1891). Christina Rossetti’s strikingly similar description of a male artist (believed to be her brother) ‘feed[ing] upon’ the face of ‘an angel’ in her poem ‘In an Artist’s Studio’ (1856) critiques the patriarchal imagination and objectification of women.²⁰ The active, voyeuristic female gaze ‘feasting’ on the passive female body and fetishized face (reimagined after the moment in a retrospective private fantasy) in Mary’s life writing hints at a similar sexual-aesthetic appetite that recalls the unnamed thing which her ‘more restrained nature wants to *feed* on’.

¹⁸ Lord Alfred Bruce Douglas, ‘Two Loves’, in *The Chameleon* (London: Oxford University Press, 1894), pp. 26–28 (p. 28).

¹⁹ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘Jenny’, in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Jerome McGann (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 60–69 (p. 61).

²⁰ ‘In an Artist’s Studio’, in *The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti*, ed. by William Michael Rossetti (London: Macmillan, 1911), p. 330.

It was common for female friends of the period to ‘write gushingly’ about their love for one another (Marcus, p. 46), and an intensified ‘lover-like language was exchanged between sisters as well as [...] their in-laws’ (Davidoff, p. 214). Mary’s diary entries thus need not imply unconscious (homo)sexual desire or incestuous behaviour but rather characteristics of deep and intense filial attachment: ‘intimacy when they were together [...] physical expressions of fondness [...] an open-hearted frankness’ (Davidoff, p. 201). Yet the intensification of this sisterly bond arguably engendered its eroticization. Offering a new case study of subtextual same-sex desire in Victorian women’s life writing, Mary creates an ‘erotic aura’ around Christina ‘through the very act of writing about her, through a liberal use of adverbs and adjectives’ and a ‘dwell[ing] on the details’ of her beauty (Marcus, pp. 135, 47). Her diary entries record a passionate intimacy and profound affection between siblings involving warm feelings that perhaps approached the erotic on either or both sides. The controversial possibility of erotic charge or desire between sisters — involving the threatening destruction of both gender and familial distinctions — tends to be suppressed or censored in scholarship, life writing, and the archive alike. Yet this article raises it in order to point to ‘the powerful passionate triangular feelings within the cauldron of familial relationships’ (Davidoff, p. 221) that show the various ‘shapes of sexuality’ and reconfigure the ‘historical power relationships’ governing archival narratives (Sedgwick, p. 2).²¹

Mary’s diary entries can be seen to dialogize with Christina’s poems, in which autobiographical elements can be detected. Having mastered the short story, Christina published a collection of poetry titled *Songs in Minor Keys* (1881), her one little-known published volume of poetic work consisting of poems admired for their ‘dramatic interest and power’.²² George ‘love[d]’ Christina’s poetry, which Mary read to him (23 January 1887). That Christina may have written it with this in mind demands a reading of it in light of their relationship, illuminating its indirect, subtextual, or sublimated messages and expressions, possibly intended for the Wattses’ gaze and vocalization. George admired Christina’s poetic faculty and encouraged her to fulfil her professional literary potential: Mary records in her diary that ‘Signor urges Christina much to take to writing again — he says she has got work to do yet — she says “If ever I do it will be under the influence of this Harris” meaning Signor’ (18 September 1891). In a rare biographical reference to Christina, Mary recalls George telling her, ‘the

²¹ See also Terry Castle’s work on the unconscious homoeroticism of Jane Austen’s letters in ‘Sister-Sister’, *London Review of Books*, 3 August 1995, pp. 3–6.

²² Alfred H. Miles, ‘Christina Catherine Fraser-Tytler (Mrs. Edward Liddell) (1848–)’, in *Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by A. H. Miles, 2 vols (London: Routledge; New York: Dutton, 1907), pp. 1–4 <<http://www.bartleby.com/293/303.html>> [accessed 9 October 2018], p. 2.

poet turns everything to poetry. Why do you never write? you to whom the gift of words has been given; a gift I envy more than I can say. Words won't come to me!' (*Annals*, 11, 211). Hélène Cixous offers an explanation for her — and other Victorian women's — reluctance to write: 'I know why you haven't written. [...] Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it's reserved for [...] "great men".'²³ Christina's reluctance to write not only suggests her problematic relationship with writing and authorship — despite the literary success she had already achieved by this time — but also with the Wattses. Her collection title itself strikes an elegiac tone, connoting loss or longing, and recalling Mary's lament of an unnamed 'something still in her' that her 'more restrained nature wants to feed on'.

The intense emotional sibling attachment harking back to a shared childhood in the Scottish Highlands haunts Mary's diaries and is echoed by natural imagery in Christina's poetry. The sexual subtext of growing children's discovery and enjoyment of nature, strongly reminiscent of Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' (1862) in theme and language as well as the erotically charged filial bond, is present in a climactic central stanza of Christina Liddell's poem 'Spring' (pp. 156–59):

Hold the flowers in your dimpled fingers,
Velvet toys for a velvet touch —
Cry for joy at your troven treasures,
Drink full deep of your cup of pleasures;
Drink, for you cannot drink too much! (p. 158)

A sensual pleasure and female–female connection is suggested by the floral symbols of female genitalia (also suggested by 'cup'); the soft texture and mirroring in the alliteration of 'velvet toys' and 'velvet touch'; and the repeated imperative 'drink' evoking the famous line in 'Goblin Market' when Lizzie urges her sister Laura to 'Eat me, drink me, love me' before Laura 'kissed and kissed her with a hungry mouth' (*Poetical Works*, pp. 1–8 (p. 7)). A 1907 review recognizes in Christina Liddell's poems an 'ascetic passion' and 'power that recall Christina Rossetti' (Miles, p. 4) — whom the Wattses greatly admired.²⁴ Christina Liddell's poetry, or rather its subtext, can be seen to reflect the Fraser Tytler sisters' entwined emotional lives, ambiguous intimacy, and eroticized bond. Indeed, for Cixous, the 'poetic text is the privileged place of inscription of the "feminine" imaginary and unconscious'; she argues that 'poetry [...] is very near the pulsions' marked by feminine libidinal energies, and that poetry is 'never very far removed from desire, from sexuality'.²⁵ Christina's 'writing of the body' can be read

²³ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1 (1976), 875–93 (p. 876).

²⁴ George Watts planned to paint the portrait of Christina Rossetti but her illness prevented it.

²⁵ Sarah Cornell, 'Hélène Cixous and les Etudes Féminines', in *The Body and the*

as a kind of proto-*écriture féminine* and an early example of *jouissance* that transcends phallogocentric discourse. Mary's diary similarly describes her excited 'trembling from head to foot' at the prospect of a liberating 'female nakedness' (that has both sociopolitical and sexual connotations) during a discussion with writer George Meredith, before she retreats into the discipline of self-censorship about the source of her 'intense enjoyment' and 'pleasure [...] so great': 'I can't say why' (4 April 1893). Despite her silence ostensibly signifying her shame or confusion, the context clearly suggests that her excitement lay not only in Meredith's promotion of a 'perfect equality of man & woman' but more so in his insistence that women should 'be more naked [...] circumstances have so moulded them they are seldom themselves. The male mind has so dominated them [...] woman is sometimes herself for just ten minutes, about midnight!' (4 April 1893). The idea that Victorian women could and should reject patriarchal ideology, gender conformity, and performativity in favour of self-discovery and authenticity of identity would have had emancipating and empowering implications for Mary, encouraging female agency and exploration of sexuality.

Parallels can be drawn between the archival silence and the theme of silence in Christina's published poetry, where the latter sheds light on the former. Silence is paradoxically the keynote of Christina's *Songs*, suggesting authorial suppression and self-censorship. Terms and phrases such as 'sublimest silence' and 'speechless language' pervade her poems, yet the line 'I sometimes keep silence, yet not for lack of thoughts' suggests a rich inner landscape behind a feminine exterior of purity and propriety. Her poem 'The Singers' draws parallels between the stifled existence yet passionate voice of woman and cage bird — often used in the period to reference conjugal bondage.²⁶ An internal dialogue and a tension between expression and suppression, or speech and silence, pervades her ostensibly devotional poems. Lines include 'Words fail me', 'I found no speech to frame my soul', and 'Words none had I.'²⁷ Her poems, like those of her female contemporaries, including Christina Rossetti, arguably express 'female linguistic and emotional suppression by a patriarchal authority' that governed both gender and sexuality.²⁸ Drawing on established strate-

Text: Hélène Cixous, Reading and Teaching, ed. by Helen Wilcox and others (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), pp. 31–40 (p. 40); Hélène Cixous, 'Difficult Joys', in *The Body and the Text*, pp. 5–30 (p. 27); Anu Aneja, 'The Medusa's Slip: Hélène Cixous and the Underpinnings of *Écriture Féminine*', in *Hélène Cixous: Critical Impressions*, ed. by Lee A. Jacobus and Regina Barreca (Amsterdam: Overseas Publishers Association, 1999), pp. 58–75 (p. 59).

²⁶ 'In the Night Season', pp. 7–9 (p. 8); 'Felicita', pp. 53–86 (p. 80); 'Between God and Me', pp. 160–61 (p. 161); 'The Singers', pp. 113–15.

²⁷ 'Felicita', p. 54; 'Message and Answer', pp. 87–91 (pp. 90, 91).

²⁸ Shirley Foster, 'Speaking beyond Patriarchy', in *The Body and the Text*, ed. by Wilcox and others, pp. 66–77 (p. 73).

gies of Victorian women writers, Christina ‘express[es] and efface[s] herself at the same time’ in her poems and short stories, reconciling ‘her conflicting desires for self-assertion and social acceptance’ and perhaps inscribing a tension between expression and repression of sexuality.²⁹ This conflict may have contributed to her troubled psychological state recorded in Mary’s diaries: ‘Choons stayed here [...]. I think she is in a nervous state, she talks to herself as I used to do, so badly, not a good sign, I know now’ (29 April 1891). Mary’s similarly problematic relationship with writing — her struggle to assert a female voice within the male Logos, to navigate the depth and complexity of her emotional and psychological interiority, or to articulate non-normative desires — is expressed in her diaries, where she frequently censures herself: ‘we seem to need better & more expression’ (18 June 1891); ‘I write write write, each morning increasing the errors’ (15 June 1893); ‘My day to write! I sometimes wish pens were at the bottom of the sea!’ (22 December 1896). The final entry in particular expresses an explicit and conscious desire for suppression and concealment, perhaps in order to avoid the confrontation and documentation of difficult or subversive thoughts, feelings, or relationships in life writing.

The Fraser Tytler sisters’ strong filial and familial bond recorded by their respective narratives must be understood in the context of the long nineteenth century, when the ‘pantheon of artists and writers [...] seems particularly sibling-rich in life as well as in creative expression’; this fuelled the increasing fascination with ‘sibling intimacy and incest’ (Davidoff, p. 203). To define the sisters’ relationship as ‘incestuous’ would be to diminish its complexity and the subtlety of its erotic charge. As Carpenter then acknowledged,

It would be a great mistake to suppose that the attachments [of Intermediate types] are necessarily sexual, or connected with sexual acts [...]. They are often purely emotional [...] [though] their special temperament may sometimes cause them difficulty in regard to their sexual relations. (p. 26)

Certainly, both Mary’s life writing and Christina’s autobiographically inflected poetry register a passionate sibling intimacy and demonstrate middle-class sisters’ intense emotional investment in each other at this time. As Marcus perceives, ‘we can best understand what kinds of relationships women had with each other not by hunting for evidence of sex [...] but rather by anchoring women’s own statements about their relationships in a larger context’ (p. 44). The nature of the Fraser Tytler sisters’ relationship can be seen to combine elements of sibling attachment, life partnership,

²⁹ Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 131.

close friendship, aesthetic appreciation, and romantic or erotic connection without any necessary contradiction, resisting traditional paradigms, categories, definitions, and borders that bring order to the archive.

Life writing after death: final words and posthumous censorship

During George's 'days of sorrow' and grave illness, Mary noticed that he 'seem[ed] better' the minute 'Darling Choons walked in': "This means a wonderful change, dear Christina" he said, kissing her — (19 May 1891). On such occasions, Christina alone had the power to lift his low spirits. In his final moments on his deathbed in 1904, and in the presence of his wife, George called out for Christina in a hallucinatory, semi-conscious 'state of vision [...] neither sleeping nor waking' (*Annals*, II, 323). Mary records that he 'opened his eyes & said "Christina has come now to take me away" — I said "no darling she is not here" — "How strange" he said "I thought she said she had come to take me away"' (27 June 1904). This shows the depth of his attachment to Christina, and perhaps his psychological conflation of wife and sister-in-law. George envisions Christina in the form of a benevolent Angel of Death, almost obsessively depicted in his famous symbolist paintings such as *Death Crowning Innocence* (1886–87) and *The Messenger* (1884–85). The female figure touching the arm of the elderly man in the latter work uncannily foreshadows George's dying vision of Christina, and Mary admits in her *Annals* that 'he became glad to go' (II, 323). His hallucination of Christina is conspicuously omitted from the *Annals*, which instead ends by recording his dying artistic vision of the 'Book of Creation'. This reflects Mary's deliberate decision to censor certain details from public record and perhaps repress them in her own mind, instead portraying herself as the doting wife of the world-famous artist and sole witness of his solemn final moments.

Christina became a crucial resource in the Wattses' final moments together as she had been in their first meeting, and Mary's diaries document their experiences as a threesome. They record how, as George lay dying, she ran crying from his room to kiss Christina on the stairs in a shared moment of grief and heightened sensation; this kiss encapsulates the sisters' love for each other as well as their shared love for George. Christina became Mary's greatest comfort in George's dying hours and a soothing presence in the Wattses' household in the wake of his death when 'the silence [was] terrible' (3 July 1904). Christina 'begged [Mary] to stay in bed' (30 December 1904) even when 'she herself was tired with anxiety & care' (undated, 1905), and a newly widowed Mary sought sanctuary in her sister. About a month after George's death, Mary records, 'Choons read me Signor's favourite Ulysses & I seemed to hear his voice [...] — he never quoted those [lines] without emotion' (7 August 1904). Here Christina functions as a kind of medium through which Mary can reconnect with her late husband, and her

presence physically, and symbolically, replaces his. The sisters spent their birthdays together that year, as they did before Mary's marriage — 'not once before since 1871 has this happened' (25 November 1904) — and they grew closer than ever in the absence of a dominant male presence. That Christina now lays buried beside the couple at their Compton cemetery, designed by Mary, testifies to and immortalizes the strength and depth of their lifelong bond. Just as Evelyn and William De Morgans' burial in the same Surrey plot as Jane Hales — Evelyn's sister's nursemaid and her own (often nude) Pre-Raphaelite muse — has led to speculation about the female figures' relationship, so the burial of Christina with the Wattses highlights their ambiguous familial intimacy.

A prime example of the unconventional familial dynamic that existed between Christina and the Wattses has long been censored in both published and unpublished narratives on, and by, them. The Wattses' teenage ward Lilian (Lily) Mackintosh (1879–1972) — whom they painted together in *Lilian* (1904) (*Fig. 7*) — was an illegitimate orphan who had previously lived with the Liddells before it was decided she would live permanently at Limnerslease with the Wattses in 1898 (Greenhow, p. 175). Her origins and the circumstances under which she was (unofficially) adopted remain shrouded in mystery, inviting speculation. In a revealing diary entry, Mary records going to collect Lily: '[George] took a gloomy view of our being in touch with our child [...] only a cut flower here — it depressed me very much [...]. I think Choons must have suggested this to him yesterday' (15 January 1898). Edward and Christina stayed at Limnerslease seemingly in order to ease Lily's transition into her new home. Despite Mary's possessive reference to 'our child', the Wattses and the Liddells — related couples with no biological children — seemed content to co-parent in an unconventional family arrangement. Christina and Mary assumed alternating maternal roles while George paid Lily's school fees, and after his death the sisters shared parental responsibilities in a kind of same-sex partnership: 'My Choons came & took Lily [...] to St Peters [...]. I stayed quietly & read the service thinking of the darling child now taking on her the fulfilment of life' (28 November 1904). Strong, protective mother figures pervade the Wattses' works and the themes of maternity and adoption resurface in Christina's short stories such as 'Sweet Violet': a story of marginalization, marriage, and motherhood.³⁰ At Lily's wedding to Michael Chapman in 1906, Edward Liddell was the officiating minister while Mary gave the bride away in a bold usurpation of a traditionally male role.³¹

³⁰ *Sweet Violet, and Other Stories* (London: Hatchards, 1869). Contemporary newspaper articles testify to the prominence and cultural importance of Christina's writing: they advertised Christina's short stories alongside famous works by 'the most popular authors' including Shakespeare, Tennyson, Hans Christian Andersen, and Mary Howitt. See, for example, *West Somerset Free Press*, 14 December 1878, p. 4.

³¹ Harvey Pitcher, 'The Flower-Girl's Story' (2013), pp. 1–16 (p. 13), Watts Gallery Archive.



Fig. 7: George and Mary Watts, *Lilian*, 1904, oil portrait. Watts Gallery Trust.

Many pages from Mary's diaries are missing, having been edited or rather crudely cut out, allegedly by Lily, to whom they were passed after Mary's death. She is assumed to have mutilated some and destroyed the missing diaries of 1888–90 and 1894–97 in an attempt to conceal her partage, or to censor secrets and intimate content so as to preserve the family's reputation. This 'selective cull' suggests her 'desire to enhance her role in the eyes of posterity by making her involvement with [the Wattses] appear longer and closer than it actually was', tearing out months where her name is not mentioned and keeping those where it is; it has been suggested that she destroyed the 1894–97 diaries because these revealed she was spending more time in those years with the Liddells than the Wattses. Yet 'in striving to create her own varnished version of the past, she was taking cue from Mary Watts', whose biography of her husband censors details that complicate and undermine the Wattses' grand narrative and their almost monarchical public image (Pitcher, pp. 13–14). This family tradition of censorship and suppression has led to institutional and archival silence at Watts Gallery: aspects of the Wattses' life with Christina, and parts of the body of life writing that record it, are disregarded as a way of framing their narrative, which has long been simplified and idealized for public consumption.

Conclusion

An analysis of Mary's diaries — alongside the biography of her husband and Christina's autobiographically inflected poetry — radically redefines the Wattses' relationship (specifically, their ostensibly conventional gender dynamic) and reveals Christina's location at the heart of one of Victorian Britain's most famous marriages. Mary's diaries and biography juxtapose private and public, expression and repression, presence and absence, alternative and normative. This article has addressed subtexts, excisions, and omissions, in auto/biography and in the archive, bringing previously unseen or understudied material to light, in order to offer new readings of Victorian women, their lives and writings, and illuminating institutional silence. Despite her erasure from the Wattses' grand narrative and from history, Christina is here reclaimed as a pioneering professional woman writer and influential cultural producer who lived, worked, and collaborated in an unconventional familial set-up with leading artists of her day. This article has used Victorian women's life writing to explore the complex interconnections of married couples, adult sisters, and siblings-in-law, inviting a re-evaluation of filial bonds, conjugal arrangements, and unspoken eroticized relationships in the long nineteenth century.