

Afterword

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‘For we think back through our mothers if we are women’, wrote Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). Except that mothers are often invisible, unnamed — or covered by others’ names. Yet, as Jacky Bratton argues in her tracing of women’s work in London’s theatre industry in the nineteenth century, genealogy is women’s history.¹ From the Restoration onwards, the work that women did in bearing, raising, educating, and inducting the next generation into the British theatre business was significant, both for the formation of the profession and as productive work in itself. The theatre in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was nothing if not a family business, and the role of women as its producers and managers is slowly being revealed.²

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf invents an imaginary woman — Judith Shakespeare — to trace a female history of creation and production. Since 1929 feminist historians have gradually replaced Woolf’s imagined woman with the many actual women writers, artists, thinkers, and activists whose work and worlds we have inherited. However, it is still interesting to use Woolf’s genealogical imaginings in *A Room of One’s Own* to reflect on the presence, or otherwise, of women’s lives in the archive. Woolf’s sketch of a female genealogy suggests anything but a formal or a material archive, rooms in which documents of people’s lives are held in organized readiness for scholars’ investigations. Judith Shakespeare did not exist, of course, and the thinness of provision for thinking, creating, producing women in Cambridge colleges in 1929 is sardonically and powerfully encapsulated in Woolf’s description of the prunes served at the women’s college dinner:

And if anyone complains that prunes, even when mitigated
by custard, are an uncharitable vegetable (fruit they are not),
stringy as a miser’s heart and exuding a fluid such as might run

¹ Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 178–79.

² See Jacky Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage: Marriage, Management and the Mapping of Gender in London, 1830–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) for an extended discussion of the familial structures of the British theatre industry. See also, Tracy C. Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage 1800–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 273–306.

in misers' veins who have denied themselves wine and warmth for eighty years and yet not given to the poor, he should reflect that there are people whose charity embraces even the prune.³

Women's bodily and mental cultivation is dependent on the stringy prune and charity, Woolf surmises, her anger masked by wit. Woolf's famous argument for £500 a year and a room of one's own is predicated on women's historical lack of a room of their own, and a lack of money, agency, space, and privacy.

For Woolf, the 'room' is both material and symbolic — a space in which female autonomy can be exercised: autonomy which is intellectual, imaginative, and embodied. In other work, Woolf is painfully alive to the delicacy of surviving traces of women's lives — the 'orts, scraps and fragments' of historical women writers,⁴ and the imagined lives of domestic women such as Clarissa Dalloway or Mrs Ramsay, artist women (Lily Briscoe), or activists such as Mary Datchet. The traces of these women's lives are in their daily exchanges with intimate and domestic others, as well as in their documented writings and records. Woolf's interest, even in historical women writers, is in the possibilities of imagining the processes of making art, and the consciousness of the woman artist. She is acutely aware of the barriers to full expression of that consciousness. In one of her most powerful and disturbing passages (if only for its violence and catastrophe), Woolf imagines the consequences of women's full autonomy and freedom as artists:

The image that comes to my mind when I think of this girl is the image of a fisherman lying sunk in dreams on the verge of a deep lake with a rod held out over the water. She was letting her imagination sweep unchecked round every rock and cranny of the world that lies submerged in the depths of our unconscious being. [...] Her imagination had [...] sought the pools, the depths, the dark places where the largest fish slumber. And then there was a smash. There was an explosion. There was foam and confusion. The imagination had dashed itself against something hard. The girl was roused from her dream. She was indeed in a state of the most acute and difficult distress. To speak without figure she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it

³ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide, 2015) <<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/wg1r/>> [accessed 15 November 2018]. Ebook.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide, 2015) <<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/wg1b/>> [accessed 15 November 2018]. Ebook.

was unfitting for her as a woman to say. [...] She could write no more.⁵

In patriarchy, women's bodies and women's emotions are unspeakable, and stop the full development of the artist; in records and archives, women's bodies — their productivity and reproductivity — disappear into family histories, and care for others. These brief reflections on Virginia Woolf's approach to recovering and understanding the genealogy of women's art and its making have been productive for me in thinking about the archival traces and silences of Constance Beerbohm (1856–1939). Beerbohm's archival remains are multiple, both speaking volubly and not telling me enough. Just when I think I have done the work, found the sources, I lose my way in a jumble of materials. My encounters with writer and playwright Constance Beerbohm have felt like this. Her life and work can only be partially assembled from fragments of her own texts and her appearances in others' lives and work.

In this short afterword to the articles of this issue of *19*, I want to reflect on the challenges to the historian of women's artistic work presented by my work on Constance Beerbohm and the particular challenges of her archival remains. I have written about Beerbohm elsewhere.⁶ Some of the documentary traces of Beerbohm's private life and familial, domestic work are held in the University of Bristol Theatre Collection, because she was the half-sister of both Sir Herbert Beerbohm-Tree and Max Beerbohm. Beerbohm's letters are preserved in that part of the Beerbohm-Tree archive which the Bristol Theatre Collection categorizes as the 'Tree Family Archive' as material recording 'other family members'.⁷ Beerbohm's voice and lived experience is both preserved and obscured by her more famous half-brothers. She did not marry, nor have children, so our ability to 'think back' through Constance Beerbohm is available only because she was a diligent, loyal, and devoted sister and aunt, rather than a mother. We still do not have an extensive language or frame of reference for the significance of these kinds of relationships; and the dynamics of unconventional families, and the 'forgotten' sisters within them, requiring us to rethink how we track influence and agency, is an abiding concern for the articles in this issue of *19*.

Constance Beerbohm was at the centre of one of the most successful theatrical families of the final decades of the nineteenth and the early

⁵ Virginia Woolf, 'Professions for Women', in *The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide, 2015) <<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/wg1d/>> [accessed 15 November 2018]. Ebook.

⁶ Katherine Newey, 'Feminist Historiography and Ethics: A Case Study from Victorian Britain', in *Theatre History and Historiography: Ethics, Evidence and Truth*, ed. by Claire Cochrane and Jo Robinson (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016), pp. 85–102.

⁷ Herbert Beerbohm Tree Archive <<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/theatre-collection/explore/theatre/herbert-beerbohm-tree-archive/>> [accessed 15 November 2018].

decades of the twentieth centuries. Her half-brother Herbert Beerbohm-Tree was London's leading actor-manager, after Henry Irving. Together with his wife, Maud Tree, Herbert produced and performed such sensations as *Trilby* — he is perhaps best remembered for introducing Svengali onto the London stage and into early film — as well as premiering Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) and introducing the New Drama of Maeterlinck and Ibsen to the mainstream West End theatre.⁸ Herbert built Her Majesty's Theatre and ran it for over twenty-five years establishing his company at the centre of late-Victorian and Edwardian high culture. Constance Beerbohm's younger half-brother, Max, was perhaps even more highly regarded than his elder half-brother as a writer, critic, and opinion maker, nominated the 'incomparable Max' by George Bernard Shaw in *Our Theatres in the Nineties* (1932).⁹ Constance Beerbohm was one of the hidden, domestic linchpins of this sprawling, multigenerational, dynamic family.

Her emotional and domestic labour helped keep her stepmother, brothers, sister-in-law, and nephews and nieces organized and cared for. Beerbohm was particularly helpful to Max at the start of his career: it was Beerbohm who used her magazine connections to show Max's drawings to the editor of the *Strand Magazine*.¹⁰ Her daily support to her sister-in-law, Maud Tree, in managing both family and family business, appears to have been crucial. Beerbohm's letter to Maud after what may have been a suicide attempt by Maud (and not the only attempt) is telling in her sharp rebuke: 'How sad & how disapproving I felt to hear from Mamma 20 grains of anti pyrim you had taken. It's wicked. You might really kill yourself — and what would Viola do? To say nothing of others.'¹¹ The silence here is as much about Maud Tree's strategies for coping with her husband's lifelong infidelities — he died leaving a 'second' family of six children, including film director Carol Reed — father of Oliver Reed (*ODNB*). But that is another story, of another largely silenced woman, mistily discernible in Beerbohm's correspondence with Maud, and her regular assurances to Maud that she is much loved and needed.

The documentary traces of Constance Beerbohm's life and work are to be found in the Beerbohm Family Archive and in the pages of late nineteenth-century journals, now more quickly done through their numerous digitizations, but still requiring assiduous searching, and knowledge of

⁸ B. A. Kachur, 'Tree, Sir Herbert Beerbohm (1852–1917)', *ODNB* online <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/36549>>.

⁹ N. John Hall, 'Beerbohm, Sir Henry Maximilian (1872–1956)', *ODNB* online <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/30672>>.

¹⁰ N. John Hall, *Max Beerbohm: A Kind of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 42.

¹¹ Letters to Maud Tree from Constance Beerbohm, University of Bristol Theatre Collection, Beerbohm Family Archive, 2.8/A3/MBTC 14.

the kind of writing Beerbohm undertook. She comments on it herself (to Maud) as trivial writing done for money:

I can't get work except piffling paragraphs once in a while in the *Evening News* (nothing), after 8 years quite lucrative work at the 'London Mail'.

Now for weeks I get not the vestige of a P O O. The stage is good, that you can play your age — if its [*sic*] 30, 40, or 50 — But in my sort of ladies maid journalism you have to know how to pretend to be youngish & get about.¹²

The letters are carefully preserved by professional archivists in labelled, catalogued boxes, as one might expect. But on opening the boxes, it is as if chaos descends. They scatter. They are not individually catalogued; and in fact, to do so would be almost impossible. The letters are rarely dated by Beerbohm and there is little internal evidence by which they *can* be dated. There are partial letters, torn pages, long letters which carry on over several separate documents, and levels of handwriting from the neat 'lady's hand' to scrawls which one might surmise are the equivalent of telephone calls, in a city with three postal deliveries most days. Reading the letters through Woolf's imagined young woman, allowing her consciousness to roam, the letters give me the sense of a passionate woman, active in mind and body, but constrained by sororal and daughterly duties, including the need to earn a family living to support her stepmother and other sisters. If Beerbohm's reach and grasp were limited to 'ladies maid journalism' this was a result of her limited education (while Max went to Oxford), and her double duties as breadwinner and domestic manager and carer for her household, which comprised her stepmother (and her considerable debts), her sister Agnes and brother Max, and often her nieces and nephews, while Herbert and Maud toured.

Despite these hundreds of words, in letters written at speed, with urgency and feeling, there is a silence at the centre of this collection of remains of a life. Beerbohm was clearly *not* a silent woman, but her writing is inevitably shaped by gendered ideologies *then*, and historiographical frameworks *now*. Constance Beerbohm's life remained largely domestic and private, and I am faced with an ethical question: how does a feminist historian engage with a voice which is so caught in what seem to us now to be harmful structures of femininity? How does a contemporary feminist historian write about these dutiful, painful female narratives without being presentist on the one hand or, on the other, uncritically historicist?

Tracking Constance Beerbohm through the archive — her *brother's* archive, in fact — requires a different way of approaching one of the most interesting, but challenging, tasks for the historian: understanding and

¹² Beerbohm Family Archive, 2.8/A3/ MBTC 14.

interpreting the negotiations of individuals with the constraints of the social structures within which they live. Using scattered evidence from a partial archive starts to reveal the kinds of agency Beerbohm had, and how she used her access to the considerable social and cultural capital of her family. For a feminist historian, this is an investigation into the opportunities for women in patriarchy to develop autonomous and realized selves, and the extent to which they were able to do so — *or not*. In considering the life and work of Constance Beerbohm, I find myself intrigued by how I deal with the ‘not’ of her life, which seems to dominate any sort of self-actualization. While I could seek and expand on traces of Beerbohm’s resistance to the role into which she was pushed — pushed by love and duty and care — to do so would be to look for validation of twenty-first century notions of women’s work and significance. In considering the case of Constance Beerbohm, I am more than ever convinced of the necessity of understanding the uncomfortable evidence of the archive, and honouring Beerbohm’s emotional labour, in spite of the pain (both mental and bodily) it caused her. To do this requires the exercise of a historical imagination which works through empathetic engagement with the recovered archival traces. Although a celibate, childless woman, Beerbohm mothered the Beerbohm family business, providing economic and emotional sustenance. This was the invisible but productive labour which lies at the centre of Beerbohm’s archival remains: silent, but perhaps retrievable by a historian allowing her ‘imagination [to] sweep unchecked round every rock and cranny of the world that lies submerged’ in the archive, if not the historian’s consciousness.

The articles in this collection offer variety and breadth in their empathetic reconstructions of women’s lives and work from archives which are often fragmentary and occluded. The particular constraints of women’s lives in the long nineteenth century explored in these articles mean that often there is no unitary archive — no ‘room of one’s own’ in which records are held and can be examined. These women’s lives and work need to be reassembled from scattered records. In these articles, scholars take their cues from objects, paintings, diaries, letters, public records, and lost manuscripts as well as those found. There is noise to be made from silence.