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Doctoral thesis, York St John University.

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Articulating Absence:
Poetry as a Method of Creative Intervention with Historical Archives
& Poetry Collection *Such Violent Glamour*

Chloe Leanne Hanks

Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

York St John University

School of Humanities

March 2026

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Acknowledgements

I must thank the educators who got me here: Beth Gregory, Andrew Anderson, Dr Ruth Stacey and Dr Jack McGowan.

Thanks to Dr Helen Pleasance, Professor Abi Curtis and Dr John Challis for their generous support and expert supervision over the last four years; and, to Dr Rebecca Tamás for her initial belief in the project.

I am grateful to the department colleagues who have supported my professionalisation over the duration of my research. To Professor Anne-Marie Evans, Dr Sam Reese and Helen, once again, for their support and mentorship through the Teaching Circles programme. To Dr Rob O'Connor and Helen for endorsing my HEA Fellowship application.

I am grateful to have been welcomed and supported by the local poetry community. To The York Howlers for hearing every draft of every poem in this thesis, and for embracing me as your host for three years. Thanks especially to Stephanie Ornithari Roberts, forever my partner in rhyme. And thanks to the many female poets I have shared a stage with every International Women's Day since 2023.

I give thanks to the following publications for giving homes to a few of these poems: Ink, Sweat & Tears, The Passenger's Journal, York Literary Review, MODRON magazine and Porridge.

Thank you to Tim Long in exchange for two weekends of proofreading; to Angela Ranson for never tiring of teaching me the tricks of Microsoft software.

And lastly, to Bella: thank you for making writing defiantly feel fundamental in every aspect. Everything I do is for you.

Abstract

The creative portion of this thesis is a collection of poetry titled *Such Violent Glamour*. I sought to intervene with the archival material that documents a case of poisonings that happened in 17th Century Italy. The material suggests that women used poison disguised as cosmetics products to assume the role of widow in society after the mysterious deaths of their husbands. To deal with absences in the archives, and other complications caused by patriarchal consignment of archives themselves, I adapted my poetic approach to include techniques such as imaginative construction, speculation, personification and experiment with form.

I document this in the critical portion of the thesis where I consider how writers engage with the archive in relation to Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1995) and other texts that respond to it including work from Carolyn Steedman and Arlette Farge amongst others. I present three case studies: Nellie Cole's *Bella* (2018), Jay Bernard's *Surge* (2019) and Maggie Nelson's *Jane: a Murder* (2005). Through close reading of their work, and poetry from *Such Violent Glamour*, I assess poetic methodology and how one might adapt these approaches to intervene creatively with archives.

In later chapters, I consider my practice as a response to the issue of archival absence. I discuss eco-poetics and the personification of the non-human as a technique with which to create voice. I analyse the Aqua Tofana poisonings of Renaissance Italy in relation to contemporary discourses around violence against women to re-contextualise the issues in the Tofana case with that of those relevant to the contemporary reader.

The collection and critical study seek to advocate for archival navigation as a sensory experience and demonstrate creative intervention as an analytical process through which we better understand the lived experiences of historical figures – a translation of what the archive seeks to articulate.

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Such Violent Glamour

for Bella

“How I wish that someone had thought more women’s words worthy of a place in that old secretaire. All the diaries and letters and ledgers I imagine in female handwriting, they must have existed once, until someone tidied them into a waste bin, tipping them neatly into oblivion.”

Doireann Ní Ghríofa,

A Ghost in the Throat.

Poison, by definition

1. *a substance capable of causing the illness or death of a living organism when introduced or absorbed.*
2. *(in chemistry) a substance that reduces the activity of a catalyst.*

Poison, a declaration

I exist – a conceived happenstance
amongst a spill of wildflowers –
sprouted one day and devoured the next.

What if patience had nothing to do with it?
I flower like nobody's business; bottled to fester
and marked by an omen of death.

Prepare your food with care and you need
not fear me. Isn't it – after all – only about peace?
I did not ask you to swallow me.

The Moment

There is a moment at every couple's table
that can only be visualised in candlelight
two people sit skin glows orange
before empty plates smeared with jus
and half consumed glasses of red wine.

You find yourself seated at this table
even though you have never knowingly consumed
a jus nor made one and you still wince
at the wine; the way she clings to the back
of your throat as though she wants to stay there.

This moment is a glass one. You need
to be ready to see it for what it is such
occurrences delivered in poetry prematurely
might spoil things entirely. It is my job

to describe it.

Let me begin with how the moment smells:
meat and sweat. Salt lingering
on his skin from a day at work too late
home to shower before you ate. On occasion,
the smell is cheapened with the stench of beer.

You might want to dress for the moment.
It should be something skin-tight black or red
this moment is not green
though the aftermath could be. And so,
the moment begins when
the man sat opposite you says something.
This is important. The something is not anything.
The something is seasoned with the last thing
he did that made you angry. Sauteed by the heat
in your fingertips from a snide comment that belittled
your success. Memory doused

with the smell of sex. The kind you have
when you are not ready to talk about it yet.
The imagining of that sex reminds you of the time
he said it was okay because he didn't mean it.
Those words bring about what you had until now
forgotten. It is my job to tell you that none
of the forgotten things are forgotten actually.

You rarely let yourself think of them
because it would mean he is not the one.

It is all of the forgotten things that create
 the moment and the moment is this.
 He sips the wine. Poisons the perfume with notes
 of stale beer consumed whilst the meal
 you prepared grew cold on the table.

The beer gives him permission
 to say something that sticks to the back
 of your throat like the tack of red wine.
 His agency as the one splits
 like a crack in a glass. A tripped switch.

You are no longer in love.
 Neither is your palette too soft
 for the wine.

The crucial part about the moment is this:
 he will keep on speaking through gritted teeth
 as he chews. The only one who knows
 about the moment is you.

Waters

I read a beauty pamphlet
with the water still running,
soaked my skin until the bath grew tepid.
I have prunes for fingertips.
I tip my head and the water cradles my face.
Hair silks and spreads –
no longer of my body, my scalp. Suspended
into something else. I submerge.

Open my mouth.

I let the waters fill me,
tasting fragments of recipe: tongue a-tingle
with a dose of basil and lemon.
All manner of things to keep me pretty.
Can you handle me at my sodden?
Skin oiled with the remains of pasted broccoli.
Beans & nettles; vine & stem
turns my skin to new skin, my smell a new smell.
I gave myself over, ankles first, then limb
from limb.

I am of the water.

A Poisoner's Guide to Beautifying

After Bailey Sarian's *Murder, Mystery & Makeup Mondays*

There is no buffering in this poem I am to the point.
To the beauty blender, I ask this: how many pumps of flesh
toned liquid can you hold in your pink, sponge belly?

That is, until you become noxious to my tired skin.
I suppose that is the thing about beautifying,
more often than not, it is a trick.

There is a foundation smudge on my phone screen –
Bailey talks to me, cuts her crease to a tale of powder
pressed morality. I'd like to conceal it in a jar, or a bottle,

this anecdote that makes me want to wipe my *perfect*
eyebrows off. Into the cocktail, I must mix belladonna; lead;
arsenic. Leave a husband dead in our marriage bed.

I have no husband to kill. Just a rage in my belly
that I didn't realise was there until this very moment
as I paint my eyes with a wing so sharp I might use it.

Murder is collateral damage. To the girl
on the tiny screen, I ask this: how many times
have you found yourself tempted?

Giulia, Rome 1651

They puppeted her from the gallows to die. For a moment she was neither deceased nor living. Few of us will be cursed to endure an in-between. Spectators denied she was woman at all as they hauled soft flesh and unwashed hair to suspend like a ragdoll, aged with dirt. Crinkled skirt & petticoat. A rope-grazed throat. Giulia would sooner choke than betray a name, ghosts of every woman saved reduced to the creaking weight of her body dangling there. Already smoke from the fires of history.

Yew

I found a Yew tree in the gardens at Benningbrough,
and already, I write of her as if I am the first to ever see

how her skin bleeds after rainfall. The gardener tells me
I could eat the flesh of her fruit, but never the seed.

He apologises for the state of her gown.
She would never normally *dress* like this. Her bark

dripping deep maroon as though exposing flesh and sinew.
I imagine the Lady of the house, the crimson wrap she wears

in her portrait – did it ever cross her mind to bleed this way?
A beauty pamphlet from 1675 recommended a wife

follow her husband on his hunt, slice into the kill
and slather the fresh blood across her skin like a mask.

I have tried in no less than eight poems to write it.
Yet here, a portrait of a lady, the bark of a tree,
all doing a better job with the image than me.

Even the memory

is a feminine text. The rage, back then:
fizzy drink flavoured lip balms, and dream
matte moose. We would flock like gulls to a stray
chip in the corner of the classroom. In the event
of a social faux pas, or a snapchat scandal,
the validity of one's beauty might be called into
question. Common phrases like *caked* or *fake*.

You should see her without all the makeup.

It is survival, in a way, a looming threat defeated
with the sharp end of a foundation brush and
a cold shoulder in the girl's loo. In the evenings,
I would cry to my mum about what to do with
my PE kit. How would I survive the week without
an adequately branded carrier bag within which
to carry it. And in those same evenings,
mum would scrub until her manicure began to lift
at the edges, just to get the beige stain to fade
from the collar of my white shirt.

Accomplisht Ladys Victimhood to Beautifying

after *The Accomplish'd Lady's delight in preserving, physick beautifying, and cookery...* by Hannah Woolley, 1675

A note left for the kitchen-maid detailed the Ladys request for rat droppings to be gathered and sweetened with honey and the juice of a fresh onion— dollops of the concoction were used to treat spots of baldness on the Masters' head.

*

In a pamphlet about beautification, Signora Isabella writes of seasoning quicklime powder with lead oxide, gold & silver; ground into the water used to wash her hair.

*

To the Ladys dressing table, each morning, the chambermaid delivers: perfectly separated egg whites, accompanied by a milk-jug brimming with vinegar. To this, the mistress adds: white lead [powdered]; arsenic and, depending on provisions, hydroxide or carbonate.

*

Generously, she lathers her skin to porcelain, banishing expression to the warm waters of her evening basin.

*

These many tricks of beautifying poison the blood as they seep through the skin –

*

a hurried message from Ladys chamber to the kitchen requests a tonic to sooth pains in her womb. On her pilgrimage, the kitchen-maid finds the chamber staff muffling sobs as they kneel before the open fire, scorching bloody sheets.

*

Lady clutches Isabella's pamphlet in her fist as the cursed child passes. The chambermaid helps to paint her face, powder the sweat from her creased forehead before they wake their Master to tell him the baby is dead.

Nettle

I wonder if I could forgive her
now that they have warned me
of how daughters steal your beauty.

Forgive her for taking her teeth
to the tiny fingers thieving her pretty
as a token to gift a waiting mum.

Now that I know what she would be without it;
I retract my dandelion-wisp daydreams
that mistook survival for cruelty.

Long dead. Road-adjacent.
In my enlightened state, I notice
how prettiness guarantees liveability—

it was never about me, nor my want of a prize.
No sadistic thirst to make a little girl cry.

A Woman's Place

I dilute his hostility
in a cooking pot, heirloomed
into our kitchen – rusting

around the edges
like a marriage might
if unattended on high heat.

Autopsia, Florence, 1644

Had it begun with a Y incision, might the surgeon's knife have caught itself on the sharp edge of a man's poor judgement? How might one name the relics an expulsion of violence might leave within an oppressor's body? The ghost of each bruise inflicted loiters somewhere near the bladder or kidneys. Fingers explore the accordion that was once his ribcage – take note of bones aged to a shade of sage – brittle to touch, discovered the hard way. Shattered like those he ploughed his fist into. The surgeon notes the stench of blood to be somewhat botanical – bearing notes of a lady's perfume or oil. Taken into account: sunken pupils; heavy hands a man might use to threaten a lesion; a muscular torso – paperweight to a miniature frame. He notes the previous, mysterious stench to be of *no further consequence*.

The Garden at Alnwick

The guide describes Her fatal intoxication
of an ex-fiancé as *unfortunate* and my inner monologue
responds *good for her* before I can quantify
the PH level of my morality.

Peppered throughout history are women
I would have granted the slow fermentation
of opportunity;

flesh marinated to bruising.
The droplets of blood shed by every mother dead
in childbirth reduced to a simmer.

It is no longer about whether or not the victim
was deserving, rather about whether or not I could do it:

if plucked; boiled on a high heat to *wife* or *mother*;
seasoned to suit a gentleman's palette;
served upon tableware
secured with silver handed over
as chaperone to the *potestas*.

Once settled upon his tongue, would I make
a better choice than to burn on the way down,
to eat away at the lining of his throat
and stomach?

As I leave the garden, I resist the urge to disturb
the rhubarb on the way out, to litter the pathway
with shredded leaves, expose my skin to acid
between my palms. I drop to my knees
to stain the concrete. A whisper poses an inscription,
sap bleeds into stone. For the next one, to know—

I was here.

Anniversaries

Because her efforts to adorn the dining table with
their wedding flowers were neverminded,

and he was too quick in his undressing to notice
the fresh silk on her shift, and again, too quick

in his commemoration for memorialising;
she returned to her own chamber to sleep
and he could not fathom out the why.

It is hard to single out the helping of adoration
that is the one too many. Sickening him lazy.

I imagine a thousand untitled hers and decide
to be a statue succumbed to crumble rather than flesh
bleeding sugar into his open mouth.

the feminine urge

to murder a lover over breakfast
because he talked over you at last night's dinner party.
swallowing remarks like dripping yolk,
whilst he sips his tea brewed with love—
and arsenic.

the feminine urge to wash his whites
with the red lace lingerie
you wore on his last birthday.

the feminine urge to bleed
all over the bedsheets, to refuse
to grow his babies, to abandon your
responsibilities, to forget to buy his toothpaste,
to move everything on his desk an inch to the left,
to cry only when the door closes,
to hug the sheets when the lights are off,
to daydream about your teenage love,
to fuck him like any of it could be enough.

Ivy

I drape across the bedroom window;
 interwoven with the foliage that has rooted itself
 in the guttering. I might as well be part of the brickwork.
 You have to call in an expert to determine your safety.
 He describes my leaves as venomous.
 My mouth is watering—
 I wish I could tell you something pretty.
 A little lie, like;
 I do not hunger for human flesh; or, I'll feed
 from the memory of past lovers instead;
 or, better still, something about what you have done
 with the upstairs hallway has healed me
 to neutrality and now I can stay.
 There is nothing pretty about the way I watch you
 with the girls who make you laugh and picture my vines
 around their throats. There is nothing beautiful
 in my patience. I feign dormancy, daydreaming
 us both to sleep so I can creep along the windowsill,
 kiss the floorboards that once kissed your feet.
 I tangle myself in your sheets. Plait my limbs
 around your limbs. Bite with my teeth.
 By the time anyone finds your body,
 you are overcome with me.
 Might it not have been simpler to leave me
 be to start with— was there so much harm
 in my ache to love you down to the bricks and mortar?
 Kisses sting like torture— you could do a lot worse
 than die at the hands of little old me. Terrifying
 to love, they have to bathe me in acid
 at the root just to get me off.

Mosquito

takes his teeth to me I am no stranger
to bleeding in exchange for peace
it is the readiness of something venomous
that felt impertinent in some ways,
I envy the ability of knowing
what to take how much might fill a belly
without jeopardising weightlessness
I exorcise the wound with a fingernail
and wonder how poisonous he left
my blood

Fieldnotes | Sampling Belladonna

after Leah Atherton's 'Field Notes'

- i. Most identifiable in late summer, when she blooms
naked ladies to dangle at our fingertips. [by autumn,
she flowers deep violet]
- ii. September brings the fragrance of deadly
nightshade; her inky black pupils, swollen and
round. plump for the tip of a tongue.
- iii. Leaves are strongly ribbed; pale in their envy. They
skirt around her ankles as though caught in an act—

0800: initial contact, specimen sampled

0900: berries behave solicitously, temptation to taste
resisted

0915: berry crushed beneath lancet blade

0928: the ladies skirts are soft as silk

092838: slight irritation presenting on fingertips

0951: scent emitted from crushed berry as slightly acidic

0956: temptation to taste, resisted

1002: a total of 8 berries sampled from specimen

1014: ~~leg~~ stem is soft in texture, downy hairs mimic silk

1020: temptation to taste, persisting

1023: ~~berries leave a sour ghost on the back of throat~~

1028: heaviness of limbs

fingertips tingling / vision is clouded / the ladies are
laughing / time noted, 1058,1048,1008 / vision is clouded /
chest tightens breathing is hard breathing put head cannot
breathe between leg THE Ladies arE Laughing

[if you were to perform a dissection,
on a sprig of Belladonna, I hope the stringiness
of her mitochondrial matter is bold
enough to form a rope around your throat]

wilt

his new wife is barely shed of her wedding gown before
she is tending to the garden weeds; her premarital
morning routine buried adjacent to the rhododendrons,
roots watered with tears for her mother

the dahlias make attempts at companionship by
whispering sweet nothings that might soften him in the
evenings, but she does not speak the language of their
blushing

green fingers grow waxy from a dozen attempts to
propagate, his patience waring as the dandelions bloom
by the locked gate

the roses know a stale heart when they hear one,
the baby's breath wilting away with impatience

just as she begins to wonder what the flowers are
gossiping about; a foxglove offers her a way out—

Medea

When I find you
vined to the garden wall;
trellising yourself an escape plan
as though the stone might love you better,
I realise, pride is my burden
to bear.

If I have to wear the dress myself,
so be it. Scale the wall as my limbs
become dangling fruits.

Is leaving as much of a temptress
when you realise what has you
by the throat? My bite of the apple
becomes sacrifice.

I am devoured and you begin
to corpse; your arms willow, legs
trunk. A tree falls to a dead weight
with only a temptress poised
to hear it. In my own immortalising,
my mind's eye becomes tomb.

Your rigor-mortis fingers
point to someone who once was me;
I surrender you
to the weeds.

the archivist | []'s dress

In efforts to confirm the rigor mortis of a bloodline, the archivist concluded the only relic fit for excavation was the wedding gown buried in a heavy oak chest. Ghost stitches along the waistline illustrate the shape of her mother, unpicked for a daughter's silhouette to be positioned and sewn. Fibres doused with the fragrance of generational wear emit notes of vanilla and opiates. The only stains to call her own were that of droplets of wine spilled after the ceremony. The creases along the bodice, mirrored like a phantom across the skirt suggest a permanent folding, a pleated premonition.

The Strangler Fig

I spread fingers like a Ficus
and grip you, in love, in death—
when you wake to the sunlight
in the morning, I am there.
I love like a parasite.
We compete for the only light
that bleeds through the forest
vines and I am yours; you are mine
but do you want this?
The way I grip your hand
in mine as though we grew here,
intertwined,
you could slip through my grip
like I slip from your mind
but I would die.
Instead, I disperse my weight
like feathers, you feel nothing
until it feels like you might
never
again
breathe
and I can see light again,
and you cannot leave.

Free Marilyn

The internet can tell you what happens to bones
once the casket shreds itself before the elements.
After fifty years sleeping, she is bare of flesh –
wisps of hair still pillow her head.
A half a century of peace
is too sweet an eternity to pass up,
the keeper of the key to an American dynasty
throws a gentle fortune to the Church grim.

So, they bury him –
six feet, minus an inch or two; his face
close enough for her to smell the rotting of his gums.
Skeleton teeth locked in his jaw.
Too sweet a vengeance to pass up,
I claw my way through six feet of dirt to free her.

I find his skull and yank it from the earth
with the moan of a sodden vacuum, I let
the feeblest parts collapse beneath my thumb.
The spine splinters once disturbed,
and I leave each fragmented vertebra
like a breadcrumb
to any who might report this as a warning.

And when I am done, I use what were once
his fingertips to pick the soil from my nailbed.
He wanted a camouflage, so, I leave him
where the fox might find him,
poised to sharpen its teeth.

That is until the crickets gather
to itch a message: if only to say,
he is not welcome here.

The plant is not poison

yet. Oleander sits cross-legged.
The green of her jumper threatens
yellow with the moonglow bleeding
through the back window. Tell
her the truth, at least. It bitters
your tongue, she wanted to be the one,
we all know this. Just bite, and swallow,
that is all it takes. You spit her out.
A waste. The plant is not poison,
she stays quite calm really.
She has felt this hurt so many times,
she is evergreen. She rejects
the temptation to submit to palatability.
You leave. She bathes
in her own acidity.

His Granny

spoke
 as if
 I were
 not seated
 at the table:
 might she still
 find Jesus?
 I became serpent:
 split-tongued,
 fangs bleeding venom
 from behind
 my eyes,
 dripping
 tongue at the
 dinner table.
 Later
 that night,
 to the side
 of his neck
 I whispered
 the most
 ungodly things.
 The way my flesh
 would scream
 as they
 burned me;
 The perfumed
 air that
 lingers when
 he is finished
 with me;
 the places
 I've
 daydreamed
 of leaving
 his body.

Intervention

if a poem can shape itself around the nothing that remains
of their choices then, perhaps, I can begin to understand why
if a woman kills a man, I smile, and if a man kills a woman,
I want more of their kind dead. It isn't about anybody's

death really. The poem is in the moments surrounding the
dying where she looked at his face for the last time and
realised, she no longer cared for the consequences. The time
she put the first dose of lesser effort into ironing his shirts.

The first faded monologue she let drown in the back of her
mind instead of listening. A poem for the yellowing bruise
that no longer caused her pain. A poem for the baby that
earned her peace before she had to start all over again. And
again. And again. A poem for her voice the first time she
shouted back:

if a poem can shape itself around these nothings that settle
like dust atop a coroner's report, then perhaps I will one day
manage to articulate the power I felt when he told me it was
hard to love me and— instead of biting— I turned my back.

Ballerina

With a body built for Julliard and set to graduate her way to prima, her boyfriend became fiancé became husband became father until

a decade later, for her birthday, he gifts an apron stitched from two dozen tiny pockets; to hold eggs. Or the weight of eight anchors wrestled from her hips to her lap from her breast to her arms to his.

Try to perform the perfect pirouette whilst weighted by flesh and bone. Try to smile at a gift that makes a token of your obligations. The following day, when gathering eggs, she lets the shell of one shatter in her fist. Liquid gold stickies her palm.

Meeting the beady gaze of would-be mother hen, she smiles and says *you're welcome*.

Laburnum

is sunlight— soft enough to burn on the way down.
Your skin glows the answer. Neck hairs stand
down. Drooping eyes alert to waiting arms
tempting bones to submission.

Golden limbs reach for the ground below, she
does not like to let the little things go. Drawing in
the weak with an unyielding embrace only to drip
cytosine onto their sleeping face. Gaping, waiting
tongues.

Fresh and forgiving, they love her, still, in the
morning.

The Pavements in Rome

reverberate footsteps back at you,
symphonising each tap with the whispers
of quiet women; bones churned to cement.
Their footfall secreted through stone
to linger like dust before delivering you
to a mouth of cobblestone square,
a handful of centuries ago, this was a foundation
for an exchange of goods.
Riddles permeate through brickwork:
an echo of a lady exchanging an ointment for silver;
only for her name to be discarded,
body ground to mortar, footsteps ricochet
from paving to pathway.
Poison seeps into the sun-kissed streets.

My hand

lands, a butterfly on the crook of your arm
as I show you out, one last time.
Perhaps you minimise a tear,
glancing over your shoulder like a sunlight
beam; guilt surrendered to your lash line.
It is of little consequence, blinked to irrelevance –
my voice remains feather. Tickles your top lip
as you struggle your way for better words to say
as though whatever comes out next might do the trick.
It is not that it does not hurt, let's be clear.
You fidget yourself to shame and I hold your gaze –
say it. Reduce my heart rate and my body weight
to a dish best served instead of a dinner date. I have felt
it all before. Would you feel better if I loathed
each chestnut hair I detangle from the pillowcase?
If I cursed your name instead of breathing it
in the confines of private pleasure? Do better.
Give me anything worth feeling for. An ache,
a loss. I have no aversion to rejection
at the hand of one who knows not what he holds.
One tiny electric orgasm and I am right back
where you left me. Still hoping.
Still empty. Would I feel rage if you had lied?
Would you feel better if I cried?

After the movie

you drove to my house – slowly –
so that we could spend more time
with fingers entwined. I wonder,
does it keep you up at night
to know I have the reg plate memorised?
The last three letters make a funny
word and I won't forget it. How do you
sleep with the echoes of pretty things
you told me, do they screech like my fingernails
across the sleek black body?
Or would you recall them
with more clarity if I used my keys.
They're here, at the ready, poised
between my knuckles. You said
you'd keep me like I was a flower
to press between the pages of a book.
Now I am a nettle that wants too
much – you like me on my knees.
I drop to them, fingertips ready
to interfere with a brake-pad. Wires
are easy to slice through. As easy
as resting a forehead on a forehead
and gazing into brown eyes as though
you found home. I recommend
you drive there – slowly.

Such Violent Glamour

I can do nothing to change his mind.
My thoughts are as weightless as I wish I was
and all that matters in the end is pretty.
When treated carefully,
a face exhumes the power a body
might have if its inners dangled ornamentally
like the pearls of a lady.
All the girls want is to be pretty.
Which is why— when slighted—
we reach for the ink that might blacken our eyes,
the rouge for the puff of a cheek,
and glitter to adorn the bone.
Then we reach for our phones.
If we are pretty,
we are not alone;
loneliness is just freedom if you are pretty.
A gift bestowed by Aphrodite,
Hypatia could comprehend astronomy
because both she and the stars were pretty.
I press the stardust to my closed eyelids
because a gaze cannot be dull when emitted
from somewhere sparkly.
Historically,
women have been so pretty
they have collapsed monasteries
and monarchies
and still, nerve is borne to reduce us
to an afterwork activity.
It is, by definition, insanity.
I have considered filling out my pout
with a needle; like how the girls of Florence
would swell their pupils to bursting
with drops of belladonna.
Who would dare say no to such violent glamour?
They would never neglect to please me if I was pretty.
Pretty demands the dowry.
Pretty pays the price.
It is the simple difference
between an existence
and a life.

so
we are pretty at the dinner table,
pretty all the time
pretty when we're coming
and we're pretty when we cry
we're pretty in our sweatpants

pretty in a dress
 we're pretty when he's lying
 and we're pretty when he jests
 I was pretty with a cocktail
 I was pretty for his mum
 I was pretty when he finished
 even though I wasn't done
 and I'm pretty when I'm angry
 I'm pretty after work
 and in the end, it doesn't matter
 if I'm prettier than her—
 because she's pretty in the right way
 she hardly has to try
 and I am pretty for a poet
 but not pretty like a wife.

When it hangs there in the balance,
 pretty feels like a knife:

so, the question left to ponder, girls,
 is his throat
 or mine?

“you’re killing people...

- i. reverberations of last week’s anger
 still murmur through my bone marrow /
 it can be hard to say no /
 at first /
 the echo of his grip around my wrist /
 a delayed response from my capillaries /
 scabbing is hard to resist /
 picking /
 what else might he ask of me? /
 a cortisol imbalance makes a mess of my temporal cortex /
 I am rooted to this bed /
 he didn’t hear what I said /
 tongue-tied with nonsense /
 he drives a fingernail through the stem /
 my nerves and spinal cord no longer entwine—

 instead, I tell him: I don’t mind.

...no, I'm killing boys"

- ii. it can take a while to taste blood /
cannot quite believe he has done it /
did not feel the bite of your teeth through
the flesh of your cheek /
cannot feel the pressure /
until you do /
alien without invitation /
and then you taste the blood /
it can be hard to comprehend the capability
of bleeding at a time like this /
dispelling /
spilling /
leaking /
why would your body bother to do it? /
when you cannot recognise his fingerprints
in the bruises you watch yellowing /
cannot see the broken skin as your own skin /
claim these words as your words—

accept that you let him kiss you afterwards—

that I let him kiss *me*,

Afterwards

Beast

His forgive-me eyes bookend a furrowed brow
as he returns with a bird in his teeth.

His fur is bloody. In the corner of his mouth,
the remnants of yet another kill begin to congeal.

His beauty considers her next move carefully,
and accepts the gift. Its head – partially severed –

lulls to one side. Dropped to the ground in defeat.
Despite passionate assurances, the ritual repeats

over several weeks and days until the Beast insists,
she learn his ways.

The woodland leaves her vulnerable to all manner
of wild things: the creepy crawlies tangle in her skirts,

the roots and vines caress each ankle.
Beast hungers for flesh, bloody and mangled.

She dawdles and he lingers at a large oak tree.

When she returns to the hunting party, late and alone,
she need not explain where the Beast has gone.

Her forgive-me eyes bookend a furrowed brow
as she greets them with fur in her teeth.

The Right Kind of Rose

When, first, I sprouted from the victimhood
bush like a rose with its very first thorn,
I still imagined myself the kind of bloom
fingers might find desirable.

Petals dew-kissed with a pretty girl's tears.
Now that I have been here for a few years,
I am more thorn than petal and the bite
of new teeth is no longer a shock. Less likely

to be plucked from obscurity – shined shoes
and cheap suits gather at the root vine in an attempt
to decide what right it is of mine to be so angry.
I am not here to teach them how not

to sticky their fingerprints. I do well not to poison
their blood with the very first pinprick.

A Coroner Misrules Beauty as Cause of Death

*“The misery of us that are born great!
We are forc’d to woo, because none dare woo us.”
(The Duchess of Malfi, Act 1: Scene 3)*

I have been re-watching episodes of America’s Next Top Model. I like the clothes; the makeup; the makeovers. I watch the girl’s hair pile up on cold tiles and wonder where they are now. A google search tells me one of them was found dead at her boyfriend’s house.

How pretty our brains look when smudged to make a palette of the kitchen slabs. How pretty our lipsticked mouths when we are forced to keep them shut – the boyfriend had nothing to do with it. His life, too, was extinguished in some drug related brawl but it is hard not to read that opening sentence in relation to the current threat of violence against women. I decided that the boyfriend did it and now I cannot undecide.

It is funny, the cacophony of voices discoursing this issue is so inherently feminine; yet, I hear us, still, harmonising with our counterparts when the discussion moves on to the consequences.

They are lonely and we are listening, they are lonely and we are listening. They are lonely. We are listening.

We are dying and they are talking over us when we speak about it at the pub. Still, loneliness is heavy for me too. So, I watch the old episodes of America’s Next Top Model and I look at my wardrobe. I pick a dress that does not wear *me*, a dress that is sexy but not too sexy. I’d be considered plus sized and so, the worst thing I could ever be is displayed. And I paint my face with a forgiving sample of various products each representative of a fraction of my monthly salary. I singe my hair into curls – just one more time – and then I vow to take better care of her in her next life.

When I sit with him, I think about my posture and my profile; I share enough jokes and not too much heart. After the second, or third, bar he jests that it must be my round and I try not to think about the value of the products on my face; I disregard the £50 I sacrificed for lingerie; I swallow the ghost of my contraceptive pill and the way it tacked to my throat on the way down. Of course, only after I fork over £45 quarterly to the lady at the pharmacy for the luxury of not having to remember to schedule an appointment. So many expenses he will never have to think about that I could list; but I don’t. At the very least it means,

statistically, I am less likely to die tonight because this one is a feminist.

an imagined confession and the notes of an ~~archivist~~ poet

...for most of them, it was about their bodies. []'s skin was permanently blushed from the pastes and powders she used to cover the marks.¹ [] came to me with a broken wrist. []'s body became a graveyard for each of her lost babies,² [] knew it was this or she would find herself with child again. Every now and then a girl would come to me for revenge, in a way, that is a bodily need too.³

[]'s husband had a stable boy guard the door, keep her outside, whilst he finished with a girl from the kitchen.⁴ []'s husband said the accounts were none of her business – after depositing her dowry.⁵ [] knew things would only get worse. [] feared he might poison her first...

¹ I wonder if she knew her blood was poison,

² wearing scars as penance for bodies born blue –

³ is it vengeful if the alternative is endurance?

⁴ it is hard to villainise a nameless few

⁵ when I know that I would have killed him too.

Husband, Father, Adulterer

*Somewhere in the South of England sits a park bench
engraved with an obituary that reads 'husband, father
adulterer. Yes, Roger, I knew.'*

I picked from a catalogue of teak, oak and ash;
all patient in their fever to rot from the ground up,
decay— slowly— from the foundation upon which
sits archived everything that ever was
or could be.

To explicate a legacy
weighed about as much as the ring on my finger;

but to take a seat upon the memory of a stranger—
your morning dog walk interwoven with obituary—
tasted like a well-aged whiskey. Served
on ice.

I let my daughter wear the ring to the funeral
on a gold chain around her neck,

savouring the truth for fleeting moments
of contemplation, strung out coffee dates
and softly sought solitudes—

To journey back to my dignity
through what was known and what was said
taught that I can ache for the loss of him
and be at peace now he is dead.

Skirt

Beneath the pink of the disco lights,
a man finds a body and skins its skirt
from the upper thigh. With his newfound
freedom, he shifts his grip to form a fist
around a backside.

The skirt belts around the waist
and the whites of his knuckles glow
a nightclub shade of fuchsia.

To an intervention he says:
I can do what I like, she's my girlfriend.

In memory, the shades pelted from the disco ball
pass like years gone by—

only now, in my mind—
I life my gaze and look him in the eye
as I bite my front teeth through his tongue.
Paint my lips with his blood.

As I reposition my dignity,
I take my free hand and grip his throat,
spray his cheek with what is left of his vulnerability
in my mouth. Every single apology kiss,
I spit back out.

With the dig of my fingernails
I dare him to remember every fingerprint bruise
I did not ask for. This is not so much a coming of age
as becoming disaster.

To an intervention, I hear myself say:
I can do what I like, he's my boyfriend.

Rage

In a selfish attempt to find solitude
from the footage of women grieving
over tiny charcoal bodies,
I come across a digital archiving
of Stevie Nicks cursing her former lover
to an eternalised haunting.

I cannot help but wonder if:
in our 3.95 billion—
and shared conceptual feminine—
we felt the epitome of our rage
in the same moment,
might we survive the planet long enough
to articulate the boom?

Words, should they still exist,
might settle together as the dust once did
to liken the choking of the human race
to that of Augustus,
throats sticky with the remnants of fig.
What is poison, really, if not this?

The accumulation of women grasping
fingers around whatever they can find
in their kitchen that might earn them
a moment of free-thinking.
If not the crumbling of charred bodies
the men breathed in a war on heresy;

if not the blood from the severed heads
of queens; miasma emitted
from our dangling ragdoll bodies.
It rages down a bloodline
before settling upon the lady Diana
in the form of a poison dress;

and the entire planet swallows it.
Freedom beyond the jurisdiction
of anger held in dormancy.
The archive becomes echo chamber
for poetry in distillation,
I don't know what to tell you—

it festers in the belly of an ecosystem,
we succumb, or we expel—
you did this to yourself.

Each Man's Death

becomes a secret whispered behind a fan.
A fan feathered to dust. Dust settled over
a sheet of paper. Paper burnt after reading.
Smoke that layers across liquid. Liquid
distilled into glass. Glass confined to a
cabinet. A cabinet tucked into a vanity. A
vanity defined as feminine; and therefore,
inconsequential.

When I Drink Wine with Giulia Tofana

I order a small glass of white; she, the red. I am the one to thank the waitress.

Giulia asks me about the taste, and, I tell her how I couldn't stomach the taste of wine until I turned twenty-five, its fragrance wafting back memories of how my sister, in her perpetual intoxications, would spit her violence at me in shades of sauvignon. Wines taste the same but the mornings after are always different.

Giulia attempts to poison my twenty-first century problems with perspective. At the very least, I have never been groomed into a family business rendering me responsible for 600 deaths.

I wonder about the number 600. Can you picture what that many bodies might look like piled atop one another like bags of sand? Each one guilty of not keeping their fists to themselves.

Giulia is halfway through her crimson maroon before she asks me the question. Could I have done it, is there a man out there I fear enough – I am somewhat spoiled in choosing. It would be easier for me if she would ask to read my poetry. Only in the confines of a stanza or some poisonous garden imagery might I find the words to tell her about my favourite flower. How it sat so quietly in the corner of his ceiling. How the light hit it at that time in the evening, and that I could describe it – even now – a carnation, or perhaps an imitation of a rose in full bloom. The petal nearest the top was slightly bigger than the others and if I focused my eye on that for long enough that my pupils shifted focus it began to look like an indent rather than outward texture. My entire body would go numb as if nothing was happening to it—

it is then that she asks me if I have ever killed anyone. And I say no, because of course I haven't. Except, Giulia Tofana is dead. This entire conversation is happening inside my head and if that renders it real enough that the question requires an answer then, really, I can tell an imaginary truth.

I swallow what is left of my wine and describe, in detail, all of the ways in which I have killed him.

Probably about 600 times.

Introduction

Inspiration for the poetry project I have since named *Such Violent Glamour* struck in early 2021 when I first heard about Giulia Tofana, a poisoner from mid-17th Century Italy. I heard a version of her story, somewhat woven from scraps of folklore, from a digital content creator, Bailey Sarian. Sarian featured the story of this Italian poisoner in an episode of her YouTube series *Murder, Mystery & Makeup Mondays*, whereby she told the tale of a coven of Renaissance women, makers and discretionary sellers of a poison disguised as makeup such that it could be secreted into the households of wives seeking to end their marriages (Sarian). As a creative response to Tofana's story, Sarian's video referenced what we know to be true of the poison Aqua Tofana, and how it was used, whilst speculating and imagining what we do not: what motivated these women, and what lived experiences they endured in order to want to kill. Sarian hypothesises, "...this took place during the renaissance so arranged marriages were still a thing... women were often forced into marriages by their families without having any say what-so-ever. Once married men had complete control over their wives, over women... these women were left completely powerless. They had no say, no control, they just had to sit there and take it..." (Sarian 00:03:18).

Sarian's video is demonstrative of how social and creative discourses about incomplete histories help us empathise, and therefore hypothesise, the absences amongst what is documented. As a piece of pop culture, the sentiments shared in Sarian's video document a modern response to the case. Whilst the archive tells us little about the women who used the poison, we can use contemporary dialogue about violence against women, historical awareness of the rights of women in 17th Century Italy and historiographical studies into the female experience during that time to speculate on the why. It is likely that the women poisoning their

husbands over an extended period did not do so because they were simply murderous; rather, the murder was a means to claim some agency over their lived experience. These were, most likely, murders as a means to end the kind of suffering a 21st Century historian might recognise as marital abuse; or murders to escape a forced marriage; or murders to escape the eventuality of being murdered. Sarian demonstrates empathy in her summary: “divorce definitely was not a thing yet, you would never think to just leave your husband... so what do you do when you are in these loveless, abusive marriages? What’s your only option... well some would say murder” (Sarian: 00:04:23).

Though documentation of the treatment of women within the confines of marriage is sparse, research suggests there is some accuracy to the culture that Sarian portrays in her video. When writing on feminist discourse and the marriage market in early modern Venice, Virginia Cox argues that men’s dominance could be read as “as a tyranny that seeks to legitimate itself by spurious claims of male superiority. Stripped of these essentialist justifications, the relation between the sexes is revealed as a struggle for power in which men exploit every instrument at their disposal to keep their “enemies” in a state of weakness, including crucially the exclusion of women from education, military training and public office” (Cox 520). Cox presents marriage as a holding pen for women, securing their position as an aside within society.

Though primary evidence to validate Sarian’s sentiments was hard to pin down, modern historiographical studies have considered the lived experience of Renaissance wives. Historian Jill Burke comments:

Gentle wife beating was recommended by some. In his 1592 book on law, Marco Scarsella explains that because the union of marriage makes two bodies one, when a husband beats his wife he is in fact beating his own flesh... Women were also expected to pay their ‘marital debt’ by having sex with their husbands. Rape was not deemed

possible within a marriage, where the sexual obedience of wives was required (Burke 218).

Sarian's video, alongside various online articles, is demonstrative of the tone true crime writers might adopt when discussing female retribution against the patriarchy. Article titles such as 'Giulia Tofana – Serial Killer or Heroine?' (Bryan) and 'Meet the Woman Who Killed Over 600 Men' (Hardy) suggest a glorification of the figure that is somewhat severed from the contextual backdrop to the crimes. This strain of discourse, penned and published by women, represents a modern attitude to mariticide that supports the wife in her claim of agency: "as a result, hundreds of thousands of women were trapped in abusive and violent marriages, with no means of escape. Divorce was practically unheard of. Their only way of escaping was to become a widow!" (Bryan). Though Bryan cites no sources to support her stance on Renaissance society, what is evidenced by these publications is a modern perspective on the circumstances of marriage in 17th Century Italy. Written for The National Centre for Domestic Violence, Bryan's article demonstrates how this case might be discussed by modern women who have survived abuse.

It is this thread of discourse online and in pop-culture that inspired my poetry collection in the first instance. I was inspired to write to better empathise with the wives using Aqua Tofana, but also, to explore the moral complexity of what I felt in response to Sarian's video. As a piece of creative content labelled as true crime by the creator herself, Sarian's video did not leave me feeling any sense of injustice towards the victims of this crime. Rather, I felt empowered hearing of women claiming agency over their relationships in this way. This prompted me to question what it is about stories of mariticide that align with feelings of sisterhood amongst women. This is a notion that Laura Mattoon D'Amore defines as "Vigilante Feminism," (387). D'Amore writes:

Vigilante Feminism, as used here, applies specifically to the performance of vigilantism by girls and women who have undertaken their own protection, and the protection of others, against violence – because they have been otherwise failed in that manner (387).

This is a source I will discuss in more detail in later chapters, though in the first instance, D’Amore’s study is discursive of the moral complexities that exist alongside the true crime genre, especially in cases of female retribution.

Foundational to my poetic practice are two of my previous publications through which I explored poetics as a craft: i.e. the use of structure, form, and linguistics for storytelling. Both projects, *May We All Be Artefacts* (2021), a pamphlet, and *I Call Upon the Witches* (2022), a collection, attempt to navigate what seemed to be missing of the female experience in historical artefacts and repositories. Across both projects, I used ekphrasis to respond to visual material in the archive. As well as this, I carried out historiographical research into the history of witchcraft to consider the literary evolution of the archetype alongside the documented history that informed characterisations of women as witches.

The inspiration for *Such Violent Glamour* as a follow up to my previous work was to further define what it is about women’s history that begs for creative intervention. This is a term adopted from Sarah Lawson Welsh who writes of archival intervention in her paper on the poetry of Jay Bernard:

The varied formal and aesthetic experimentation of many of the poems allow Bernard to ask some challenging questions of British society and its relation to its history in notably innovative ways. Bernard harnesses the power of poetry to queer or unsettle other kinds of discourse (including orthodox historical narrative) by imaginatively re-embodying hitherto disembodied voices, enabling them to speak in the interstices

between private memory and public history in some unique (and strikingly affecting) ways (Welsh 2).

Thus, the term implies potential for creative writing, in this case poetics, to interrupt archival discourse or material, and intervene somewhat with what it is trying to tell us.

Throughout this thesis, I will use the term poetics to refer to poetic practice. Louis Armand states:

One of the recurring characteristics of poetics that is referred to as contemporary has been a certain effect of material contiguity and the notion that constituting elements of a text possess equal semantic value. For this reason, there has been an increasing emphasis on the materiality of language and a broad equivocality across signifying structures, irrespective of discursive or rhetorical categories (trope, schema; genre; paronomasia, parataxis, etc) (xvi).

It is to this definition that I use the term. Other characteristics implied include reduction through dematerialization, exploration of materiality and a rejection of “utilitarian notions of language across all fields of knowledge, production and so on” (xvii). The thesis and accompanying creative project are demonstrative of these approaches and how they might be utilised to achieve creative intervention.

The concept of ‘the archive’ is referenced throughout this thesis, particularly in reference to Jacques Derrida’s 1995 study, *Archive Fever*. In this work, Derrida discusses the archive in the literal sense of a repository of documents and records; and, in acknowledgement of the term’s conceptual viability as a descriptor for cultural or institutional memory preserved for future reference. The notion of the archive as a concept underpins my advocacy for creative intervention to better document and understand institutional memory. In *Archive Fever*,

Derrida analyses Freud's psychoanalytic theory with Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's *Monologue with Freud* alongside discussion of the preservation of Freud's home as a museum. It is this analysis to which I refer to throughout this thesis to explore Derrida's notion of archive fever. As Derrida proposes, when one considers the archive in relation to Freud's psychoanalytic theory of the 'mal d'archive,' we begin to understand the forces and tensions that keep it functioning. In Chapter One of this accompanying study, I will present Derrida's notion that an archive has both a "mal d'archive," or "a death drive" as well as a "power of consignment" (3-19). This analysis of how the archive functions implies that it is both living and dying; beginning and ending; existing and dwindling. Through this lens, we can begin to consider the archive through poetic metaphor as a living body, or, as presented in Chapter Two, a garden as a repository. Through each poetic advocacy for the archive as a repository and as a descriptor for institutional memory, I seek to advocate for the mind and memory as an archive, and the imagination as a function of what Derrida describes as archive fever – a desire to preserve and record information in spite of the fragility of the archive itself.

Etymologically, Derrida threads the archive back to the ancient Greek word 'arkhe' which he states: "names at once the commencement and the commandment" (1). Furthermore, in his discussion of archive fever, Derrida presents the notion that physical archives are consequential of a desire to return to the 'arkhe' or a place of origin. That desire is archive fever. Throughout this thesis, I will present creative writing as a practice driven by archive fever and analyse the creative output and how it might relate to the archive itself.

To relate the notion of archive fever to the Tofana poisonings, one might consider the concept of the archive in relation to women's histories. Arlette Farge alleges an othering of womanhood in historical record described as "the early development of 'women's history'" (34). Farge argues that this term suggests the archiving of female testimonies and artefacts to be an historical aside, separating them from the discussion in which they were once central.

Farge writes, “By over-describing women, giving them a separate chapter in any well-informed thesis, we did not explain anything and gave the impression that for all intents and purposes history was happening elsewhere and in a different way. We knew about women, we knew about their lives, we described their work, their rates of reproduction, and their illnesses or misfortunes, but we did not introduce them into the action at all” (34). As female poets and writers urged to intervene with the historical othering of women, we become complicit in the positioning of women’s history as adjacent. As a poet, this project became an opportunity to lean into this complicity and challenge it. By engaging with the imagination when stimulated by archive fever, my creative output exists in dialogue with the archive and its absences. The result is a tangible archiving of creative interpretation.

After hearing about the Tofana poisonings via Sarian’s video essay; I began to research the challenges faced by the women of 17th Century Italy. The allure of the archive being a curiosity as to what might have led women to make the choice to poison their husbands. Across the three chapters, I present the challenges faced as a result of gaps in the archive; in response, I demonstrate through close reading of existing creative interventions, and my own drafted poetry, how one might respond creatively to those challenges. I could not help but contrast the issue of archival absence, and its impact on the presence of women in the archive, with contemporary feminist concerns. In 2024, the Guardian published an article headlined “Violence against women a national emergency” with an estimated 2 million cases of sexual harassment in 2023 alone (Dodd). In 2025, they published a similar article stating that the problem is getting worse (Topping).

It was one thing to respond to the Tofana case creatively, but to intersperse contemporary discourses and acknowledge these current issues diversified the narratorial perspective. The fragmented nature of a poetry project, and the opportunity to diversify my use of voice, became the only methodology through which I might weave these perspectives

together. Consequently, I was able to bring contemporary voices into the collection and challenge my own complicities.

When attempting to better understand the case of the Tofana poisonings, we see the absenting of women from action in consequence. We know the poison, Aqua Tofana, existed, we know the context in which it was used. Historian Mike Dash details the case in his chapter, ‘Aqua Tofana,’ included in Phillip Wexler’s study *Toxicology in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (2017). In this study, Dash separates what is speculative from what is known, and discusses what the most likely truths of the case are. For instance, one speculative thread of the Tofana story discussed in Sarian’s video is that of Wolfgang Mozart and his claim to have been poisoned with Aqua Tofana as he was dying, some hundred years after Giulia Tofana was executed.

Dash concludes that the likely truth behind these varying accounts are as follows: the figure we have come to know as Giulia Tofana was most likely a combination of two women, women with accomplices. One of whom “was a much younger woman named Girolama Spara [who had] other recruited accomplices in Rome...” (64). Thus, Spara was able to salvage the poison and retreat to a coven of women who would continue the work of Adamo and Sarda. Dash supports the likelihood that Girolama Spara died comfortably in her bed in 1651, and perhaps this is the figure who has become known as Giulia Tofana, whilst the poison continued to be distributed under the guise ‘Manna of St Nicholas,’ a healing oil. Dash suggests “[Spa] was the widow of a Florentine gentleman and moved comfortably in aristocratic circles, while an associate Giovanna de Grandis, dealt with the clients from the lower social classes” (64). This offers a brief explanation of the structure of the business but also highlights its socio-economic impact. Regardless of social status, wealth, or agency, it would appear 17th Century wives across Rome were tempted to bring poison into the home. With this, we see Farge’s observation that women were not “[introduced] to the action” come to fruition. The ambiguities

of this case are consequential of what is missing from the archive, and why. Any testimony from the women using the product, or those executed for the crime of distributing it, are missing, lost to the gaps in the archive with confirmation of Teofania di Adamo and Girolama Spara's executions only. Dash confirms via his blog that the figures were "executed for the crime of poisoning in 1633 and 1659 respectively" (2017).

Due to the limitations of the archival absences, my early drafted poems were focused on the chronology of the case, and the story of Aqua Tofana as relayed by Sarian. Inspired by the mystery around his demise, I drafted a poem named, 'The Death of Mozart':

The Death of Mozart

The great Mozart withdrew; weakened and poised
to succumb to the weight that he felt on his lungs.

*

Each shackled breath as delicate

as a song—

reverberations of music on each finger

that reached for nothing and

no one.

*

Death hummed a melody for him

across the idle piano keys--

Be it witchcraft

or ailment

*

The vessel has come.

ghostlike on an outstretched hand; all of the stolen

melodies that danced on death's tongue but would

fail to be hummed into life for anyone.

*

I am certain that I cannot last too much longer

these witches have fed me with Aqua Tofana.

To navigate what remains of this case, I explored more of Dash's writing on Giulia Tofana and her poison. In his 2015 blog, 'Aqua Tofana: slow-poisoning and husband-killing in 17th Century Italy', Dash acknowledges the rumoured last words of Mozart. It is said that, prior to succumbing to his ailments, Mozart claimed, "I feel definitely that I will not last much longer; I am sure that I have been poisoned. I cannot rid myself of this idea... Someone has given me *acqua tofana* and calculated the precise time of my death" (Dash). If true, this quotation is demonstrative of how present the poison was in the cultural psyche. The curious moment in history, which we might now regard as folklore, leads us down an avenue of inquiry from which *Such Violent Glamour* emerged. The above poem, 'The Death of Mozart,' is an early example of what I will explore and define as creative intervention throughout this thesis; a

piece of creative writing or art that explores the gaps in historical record with intent to evoke readerly empathy.

Should one attempt to trace the origins of the liquid Mozart allegedly referenced on his deathbed, a series of articles offer the story of Giulia Tofana after whom the poison is named. In addition to the aforementioned titles from Bryan and Hardy, an article written by Jessica Toomer for SYFY notes that the recipe, and practice, for making and distributing the poison to helpless wives across Rome and the surrounding communities was passed down to her from her mother and, with the help of a small collective, she was held responsible for close to 600 deaths (Toomer). Her motive was to absolve women— those a modern observer might recognise as abused— from their marriages in the only secure way for a woman in 17th Century Italy: to become a widow. Her enterprise took place within the so-called “Criminal Magic Underworld”, a term coined by LW Mollenaeur to describe similar practices in Renaissance France, whereby black-market style exchanges of potions and magic were frequent (Mollenaeur 71). It is also important to note that during this time, women were exchanged into marriages like currency. In an assessment of Ancient Roman Law, *‘The Patria Potestas,’* as detailed by Andrew T. Bierkan, refers to the ownership a father has over a daughter that transitions unto her husband at the moment of marriage (Bierkan 307). A contemporary study by Anisia Iacob considering the marital role of Italian women suggests that these ideals permeated into the Renaissance period: “...because the Renaissance returned to the values of classical antiquity, society again turned to the Roman concept that defines the father of the family as *patria potestas*, emphasizing his power over the other members. Due to this context, the traditional role of women to bear children became weaponized in Renaissance Italy as it could determine the political power of an entire family lineage” (Iacob).

The information gathered by Dash, and the authors of various articles as detailed previously, suggest Tofana's career spanned twenty years. Supposedly, the poison, Aqua Tofana, ceased distribution upon Tofana's execution in 1651.

A twenty-year period is curious when we consider the legacy of the product, such that Mozart might name the substance on his deathbed nearly 150 years later. In consideration of this, Dash has endeavoured to uncover any historical detail that might tell us who Giulia Tofana was and what inspired her to encourage murder. This documentation is limited and oftentimes contradictory. We have no surviving portraits; and two accounts of her death. The widely accepted account of the death of Giulia Tofana is of her execution in 1651 as punishment for this deadly enterprise. In this version, she died alongside her accomplices and Aqua Tofana ceased distribution (Dash, 2015). As previously discussed, Dash argues that an alternate account of Tofana's death is more plausible. In this version, the origins of Aqua Tofana are attributed to two women: Francesca La Sarda and Teofania di Adamo, both of whom were "put to death for a poison that killed its victim in three days" (Dash, 2017 64). The figure, Giulia Tofana, is assumed, by Dash, to be a relative of Teofania, salvaging the poison to continue its legacy. Dash goes on to detail that she "was accompanied by a much younger woman named Girolama Spara and other recruited accomplices in Rome..." (64). Thus, Aqua Tofana was perhaps developed into such a deadly enterprise by a group of women with the previously discussed motive to absolve women from the constraints of marriage. Dash supports the likelihood that the figure who has come to be known as Giulia Tofana died safely in her bed in 1651 and Spara took over as the ringleader.

As far as the secreting of poisons through the social scene of 17th Century Italy, Dash acknowledges the aforementioned 'Criminal Magic Underworld,' as research by Mollenaer, suggesting, "[Spara] was the widow of a Florentine gentleman and moved comfortably in aristocratic circles, while an associate [of hers], Giovanna de Grandis, dealt with the clients

from the lower social classes” (64). This is an indication of the socio-economic backdrop against which events like this might have unfolded, though very little of what remains of the archive can tell us what was happening inside homes that might motivate a wife to kill.

The more I thought about the archive, the more conceptual it seemed to be. Secondary research into engagement with the archive through creative practice helped to keep my research, and poetry, grounded in the archive theory. On theatrics, Maggie B. Gale and Ann Featherstone surmise:

The archive – as a concept, as resource, as location, as site of power relations, as signifier of the historical and cultural division and ownership of information and knowledge – has in recent years been the subject of much debate, largely centred on questions of who creates the archive, for whom it is created and how it is used. A perception of knowledge of the past creates a sense of self and, in a culture dominated by the need to self-define, the archive has become a vital cultural tool as a means of accessing versions of the past (Gale and Featherstone 17).

Once again, the crux of the discourse appears to be the subject with power of consignation, as Gale and Featherstone state, “who creates the archive, for whom it is created...” (17). The issue of archival conception, or consignation, is widely discussed in Derrida’s *Archive Fever*. Furthermore, there is scope to explore the merit of creative research as complicit in the “mal d’archive,” as a process of consignation in itself, but also as production of work that might intervene with the archive’s destructive nature.

To examine ways through which poetics can be used to interact with the archive and its absences, I present three case studies: Nellie Cole’s pamphlet, *Bella* (2018); Jay Bernard’s *Surge* (2019); and, Maggie Nelson’s *Jane: a Murder* (2005). Each project deals with death and

what remains, both bodily remains and archival. As case studies, these collections are examined as whole projects: through close reading, I assess how the poet has applied technique in order to engage with the archive and how the collections in their entirety are exemplary of creative intervention. In the case of *Bella*, we observe the discovery of human remains in the hollow of a tree and through archival intervention, consider how they got there. In *Surge*, we navigate the archive of evidence in contrast with the archive of media representation to intervene with biases in human consignment. Lastly, in *Jane: a Murder*, we weave our way through an archive of journal entries, criminal evidence, and family conversation to comprise a eulogy of a lost family member. Through close readings of these texts as examples of creative intervention, I reflect on the writerly practices and techniques I applied in response to their approaches. The discourse surrounding creative research into the archive is by no means emerging. Throughout Chapter One I will discuss ideas presented by historian Carolyn Steedman in three of her works: *Dust* (2001); *Poetry for Historians* (2018); as well as her article for *The Ontology of the Archive*, ‘Romance in the Archive,’ (2008). In relation to this discourse, I will present poetry in response to the archive, its absences, and the bodily experiences that cannot be preserved in a physical repository. The mechanics of a poetic approach to creative intervention, as explored in Chapter 1, lay foundation for further study and innovation as I consider how I might apply this approach to intervene with the archiving of the Tofana case.

Whilst the “mal d’archive” has left absences in the archive, historians have made efforts to extract the truth from the folkloric tale, leaving scope for imaginative engagement through which to construct a creative intervention. Tofana and her accomplices marketed the poison under the name, ‘Manna of St Nicholas,’ which was known to be a healing oil. So named after St Nicholas of Myra, after his death in 446, “his tomb... was said to give off a sweet smell and weep a liquid that would cure those who touched it” (Burger). Such disguise rendered the

product suitable to sit upon a Lady's vanity table without alerting suspicion. Thus, Aqua Tofana becomes symbolically linked to yet another poisonous episode of women's histories: the toxicity of cosmetics. When writing creatively about female agency, in relation to poison and vigilantism, it is difficult not to respond to the beautification industry and the notion of beauty as a means to survive. Historian Margaret Lincoln highlights beautification as methods of female survival:

Some feminists have argued that, by wearing makeup, women conform to standards of beauty imposed by a patriarchal society and acquiesce in a ritual that limits their freedom. Others take the view that those who object to makeup are fetishizing 'natural' feminine beauty or seizing an opportunity to moralise about women's artifice. But... makeup can be empowering; queer and trans women can feel hugely emboldened and affirmed by makeup. Many types of performance art depend upon it... Historically women fought to wear makeup (116-117).

Burke also discusses beauty as essential to female success and survival through the story of Carmilla, daughter of Isabella Pallavicina (a powerful patron of literature, widowed at 21). "Carmilla secured a good match at the age of seventeen... But this all came to an end when, at the age of eight, Carmilla's daughter caught smallpox. After this, she was deemed too disfigured to be a good marriage prospect... she was destined for the convent" (Burke 81). To be deemed not fit to marry is more than a societal failing but results in a complete lack of autonomy in one's life as we see by the daughter's fate; being exiled to a convent by the will of her family. This feels a stark contrast to the freedoms explored by her mother once widowed.

The previously discussed study from Bierkan, and its recontextualisation by Iacob in relation to Renaissance Italy, details the legalities and traditions that shaped marriage across Roman history; through which we can begin to deduce the circumstances women found

themselves in before obtaining poison. First is the notion of the ‘potestas’ which is a guardianship, or ownership, that a father holds over his daughter, transferring to her husband when they marry, “...the father entrusts his daughter to the husband only, retaining over her all his rights as head of the family, and consequently excluding all other ties” (Bierkan 311). Men in Rome were free to take women as either wives or concubines, one might infer that women had no such freedom of choice: “likewise a man having a lawful wife, could not take a concubine; this would have been adultery and bigamy” (320). Any children a woman might have with her husband were, legally, his property: “Such was the logical consequence of the position assigned to the mother in the Roman family; there was no connection between her and the legitimate children except by ties of blood” (320). The legal confines of a marriage arrangement in Renaissance Italy appear oppressive from a contemporary standpoint. The analysis of a woman’s stance as a widow is intriguing: “The woman lost the gains of her former marriage, she was not able henceforth to give to her second husband more than a third of her property, and became incapable of being the heir to the property of a stranger or a relative beyond the third degree” (314). If, as a mode of creative research, we imagine the lived moments that surround the legalities detailed in this article such as the bodily reality of being exchanged as a political asset from father to husband, the pre-determined expectation to bear children that you will love but bear no right to and the uncertainty as to how you might be treated by the husband chosen on your behalf, it becomes easier to consider how a woman might enjoy more agency as a widow than a wife.

Of course, another way in which a woman might claim agency over her marital fate is by presenting herself to assure the best match possible. There is a devastating irony to the relationship between beauty and female survival, one that I allude to in my poem ‘Why the Girls Stay Pretty,’ which explores the timeline of female beautification with the conclusionary implication that whilst contemporary women enjoy autonomy over methods of beautification,

the psychological motivation behind those choices links us to our predecessors. This poem acts as a thread linking the themes of the collection together; it is both an overview of beautification as a feminist practice, and an allusion back to the event that inspired me to start the project in the first place: Bailey Sarian's YouTube video (Sarian). There is an irony in these powdered attempts to secure prettiness, and liveability, throughout history have been poisoning women in the process. Lincoln acknowledges this cruel fate, "many cosmetics were dangerous with prolonged use. Belladonna caused blurred vision and even blindness. Ceruse prompted the typical effects of lead poisoning... The beautiful Maria Gunning... died just twenty-eight in 1760 from tuberculosis exacerbated by poison from her lead-based makeup" (Lincoln 125-126).

Historian Eleanor Herman explores the subject of dangerous cosmetics. Herman notes how the British press labelled Maria Gunning as "a victim of cosmetics" (Herman 33). One of the more tragic observations Herman adds to this discourse is that "mercury absorbs easily through the skin and can cause birth defects..." (33). If desirability as a wife secured a woman's survival, her contribution to a husband's lineage strengthened that security. There is a poetic injustice in the idea that the very products a Renaissance woman might use to aid her favour would later render her vulnerable if she failed to produce a healthy baby. In my poem, 'Accomplisht Ladys Victimhood to Beautifying,' I explore this twist of fate. The title of the poem is sampled from elsewhere in Herman's text where she quotes the title of the beauty pamphlet, 'The Accomplish'd Lady's delight in preserving, physick beautifying, and cookery...' by Hannah Woolley, published in 1675 (38).

When discussing poison in relation to women and murder, it is difficult to escape the reputation of poison as a stereotypically woman's weapon derived from contemporary media. Plenty of Agatha Christie's female murderers used poison as their weapon of choice: *Five Little Pigs* (1943), *Crooked House* (1949) and *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* (1962) amongst others. Historically, Psychologist Hans Gross offered a perspective in his 1898 study

Criminal Psychology: “All kinds of murder require courage, will power, and physical strength, poison murder alone does not necessitate any of these characteristics, and since women possess none of them, they automatically murder by poison” (Gross 17).

These sentiments were echoed in another paper just 10 years later by Erich Wulffen in *Psychology of the Criminal*: “All criminologists agree that murder by poison is predominantly committed by women”, but Gross’s opinion on the characteristics of poison and women have been widely contested in recent years (Wulffen 263). In an episode of the podcast ‘unladylike’ from 2024, ‘Poison is a Woman’s Weapon?’ Christen Conger comments “...this idea that poison is a woman’s weapon is grounded in a lot of sexism and misogyny. It presents women as one of two things. We are either duplicitous shrews or pitiable weaklings” (Conger).

There are plenty of examples across wider pop-culture where poison is classified as a woman’s weapon. In the 1945 Sherlock Holmes film, *Pursuit to Algiers* from Universal Pictures, Holmes states as such. Furthermore, during the recent franchise *Game of Thrones*, we have a similar quote from Ned Stark: “I heard it said that poison is a woman’s weapon” (Martin 237). Essayist Matt Hardy explores the use of poison by women throughout the series including “Ellaria’s venomous kiss and Cersei’s revenge, the main poisoning events of the series are all perpetrated by women. Lady Olenna poisons Joffrey... Arya wipes out the Frey family line with poison wine...” (Hardy 22). Pop-culture might have us associate poison with women, and female retaliation, but little of the discourse focuses on why that might be the case.

Considering the circumstances of the Tofana case, and what we can deduce about the women’s lived experience leading them to commit these murders, there is scope to explore this motif creatively and contribute to the ongoing discourse about women and murder. The use of poison in this case feels inherently feminine, but not for the implied lack of courage and will that Gross would have one believe. Rather, the domestic aspect of this event, and the home as

the singular space that a woman might claim agency over when confined to such a marriage, makes eliciting poison opportune. The patient, drawn out process of a poisoning should not be read as weakness, or with any suspicion of sadism. Rather, it is indicative of how patient the women using Aqua Tofana had to be to wait for a moment where they might take agency over their own lives. In his doctoral study into poisons and their characteristics, Neil Bradbury discusses the type of person who might turn to this method of murder:

And among the means of killing, few methods generate such a peculiar morbid fascination as poison. Compared with hot-blooded spur-of-the-moment murders, the planning and cold calculations involved in murder by poison perfectly fit the legal term, “malice aforethought” (Bradbury 1).

Bradbury identifies that a murder by poison is of a slow nature; thus, emphasises a lack of spontaneity. To contextualise this to the Tofana case, these are women who could not rely on a spur of the moment opportunity to escape their circumstances. Furthermore, a spur of the moment opportunity is often a violent one, which might leave traces. The symptoms of Aqua Tofana, as identified in Dash’s 2017 study, are traceless, and often mimic a natural condition (Dash). The women using it were claiming autonomy over their lives with patience and investment. To explore this creatively, I found myself inspired by the botanical properties of many poisonous plants. The notion that the specimen might not be harmful until ingested felt a useful metaphor for the ‘malice aforethought’ resulting in a husband’s death. I discuss how I might creatively consider them in relation to the nature of so-called murderous women in Chapter Two of this study. I examine the poetry of Alice Oswald and how she uses voice to explore the characteristics of the non-human. Through this, and analysis of my own writing from the non-human perspective, I will emphasise how through creative intervention we can bridge archival gaps by relating them to other silenced entities.

The third objective for the project as a research opportunity was to better understand my creative and emotional reaction to the story of Giulia Tofana and her poisonous enterprise. An emerging literary genre dubbed ‘the good for her’ novel is exemplary of a rising fascination with female revenge. Tara Heimberger credits social media platforms such as *Twitter* and *Tumblr* as a channel for female discourse about revenge. Heimberger surmises, “women characters regaining autonomy, often through nefarious or immoral means, inspires the audience to state cathartically, ‘good for her’” (Heimberger 5). If we consider this in relation to the previously discussed study in which D’Amore challenges the fairy-tale trope of exploring villainy as a consequence of trauma; there is scope to consider that feminist literature in the 21st Century is beginning to acknowledge vengeance as both a motivator and a desire for women as a consequence of oppressed suffering and smothered rage. D’Amore concludes:

Vigilante feminism is a reaction to the powerlessness that accompanies growing up female and is an attempt at an imaginative corrective to that unease through a violent, powerful feminist fantasy in which girls and women can be hardened into weapons that destroy those who seek to harm them. These recent American fairy-tale revisions serve as a canvas on which those narratives are repainted, shifting the narrative of empowerment to girls and women. The catalyst for these empowering stories, however, are the abduction, assault, rape, and trauma of girls and women. Although it is intellectually provocative to have popular cultural fantasies of strength like these, we must yet find real social change that lessens the real pain of the real effects of these traumas (D’Amore 402).

Should one contextualise the Tofana case, and creatively analytical responses to it— such as Sarian’s video essay— there is a thread of Vigilante Feminism running through the tale, not to

mention audience responses to it. There is scope to consider the relationship between vigilante feminism, vengeance and rage. In Chapter 3 of this study, I will consider this in relation to Audre Lorde's essay, 'Poetry is not a Luxury' first published in 1985, and Sophie Collins' essay pamphlet, *Small White Monkeys* (2018), to explore poetics in its linguistic flexibility and argue its durability in female expressions of rage. Supported with analysis of Julia Kristeva's commentary on the semiotic chora in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1941), I consider poetic practice and its mechanics: for example, accentuated use of language through rhyme and meter, innovative approaches to wordplay and punctuation, and devices such as extended metaphor and voice. Furthermore, I consider Kristeva's notion of poetics as resistance to axiomatic form to emphasise how, through creative intervention, we might decentre female experiences from the confines of an archive's institutional state, from any patriarchal consignment, and articulate the female experience absolved from the axiomatic.

I support this study through analysis and close readings of Amelia Loulli's poetry collection, *Slip* (2024), in which the poet explores the speaker's authentic and encoded rage by leaning into the complexities of linguistic modality. Examined in relation to my own poetic dissection of rage, I consider how writing in this way can be both cathartic and informative in our attempt to archive female experience creatively.

In its completion, both *Such Violent Glamour* and this accompanying critical study seek to illustrate and explain how we might consider creative intervention into archival absences as a type of archive in and of itself. In her essay, 'Romance in the Archive,' Carolyn Steedman provokes our definition of the term 'archive':

Meanwhile, now, far away from the philosophical shores of the archive, and even further from that entirely imaginary country house muniment room, the education

system has extended the meaning of ‘archive.’ A class of eight year olds, set to do a local history project, will learn to call the tape-recordings of older people who used to work at the bottle factory, little bits and pieces of memorabilia, post-cards and photocopies of a ration book, and their own drawing of how they imagine the bottle factory to have been in 1955 – an Archive. A bundle of your own love letters, a record sleeve, and the bus ticket that took you to the first, momentous, encounter, all make up your own personal archive... (2).

In this, Steedman refers to an imagined, creative intervention: a student’s visual interpretation of what the hypothetical bottle factory looked like. In this paragraph, the ‘real’ artefacts, and the creative intervention, are considered in equal measure to comprise the archive’s entirety. In other words, they are in equilibrium. One might argue that one informs the other, i.e. it is all the “pieces of memorabilia” that inform the researcher’s creative intervention, and furthermore, the creative intervention assists the archivist [us] in better comprehending an absence in an archival body. This could be an example of Derrida’s notion of the “mal d’archive” and the “power of consignation” at work together; with the post-cards and photocopies illustrative of voices that can no longer speak to us, demonstrative of the death drive of the archive, and, the creative interpretation of the bottle factory highlighting the archive’s desire to live on.

Historical preservation depends upon creative intervention as so often, we must imaginatively cross those gaps to get from one artefact to the other. By the end of this study, I hope to demonstrate the fundamentality of creative intervention as an archive in and of itself, documenting and preserving the human, social and psychological responses to the event, as well as accompanying its archive in efforts to tell the story.

Chapter One | Poetry as Creative Intervention

An Introduction to Creative Intervention

Creative Intervention is a term evolved from a study written by Sarah Lawson Welsh in which she uses “archival intervention” to describe Bernard’s collection, *Surge*, (Welsh). When using the term, Welsh describes works that respond closely to archival material as Bernard does but might suit work that delves into history from a distance, for example: speculative histories such as *The Disappearance of Lydia Harvey* (2021). To encapsulate the potential of this writerly approach, I use the term creative intervention throughout this thesis to refer to creative output in response to historical events and material. To demonstrate what these works achieve in relation to a mainstream example, I present a character from James Cameron’s 1997 film, *Titanic*.

In the opening scenes of the film, we meet archaeologist and archivist Brock Lovett. Lovett’s motivation as he destructively explores the wreck of the infamous ship, *Titanic*, is to locate an artefact, a heart-shaped diamond missing ever since the ship sank on 12th April 1912. Brock Lovett is a character enthralled by archive fever.

Derrida hypothesises, “The archontic power... must be paired with what we call the power of *consignation*... *Consignation* aims to coordinate a single corpus...” (Derrida: 3). To re-articulate, here, Derrida proposes that the very nature of an archive, and our keeping of them, is driven by the need to comprise and collate information. Furthermore, Derrida acknowledges a “violence of the archive” (7). To expand, Derrida states, “that which permits and conditions archivization, we will never find anything other than that which exposes to destruction... It is what we will call, later on, *le mal d’archive*...” (12). Translating to ‘death of the archive,’ and

analysed in relation to Freud's notion of a death drive, Derrida proposes that the power of consignation and the destructive nature of the death drive stimulate each other: the archive is both surviving and succumbing all at once.

Derrida defines the pressure created because of these two opposing forces as archive fever:

Such is the scene, at once within and beyond all staging: Freud can only justify the apparently useless expenditure of paper, ink, and typographic printing, in other words, the laborious investment in the archive, by putting forward the novelty of his discovery, the very one which provokes so much resistance, and first of all in himself, and precisely because its silent vocation is to burn the archive and to incite amnesia, thus refuting the economic principle of the archive, aiming to ruin the archive as accumulation and capitalisation of memory on some substrate and in an exterior place (12).

To contextualise, In *Archive Fever*, Derrida generally discusses the archive as a concept, referring to Freud's work contributing to psychoanalytic theory and the Freud Museum as a public archive. Here, Derrida illustrates the functionality of the 'mal d'archive' as he visualises, "the apparently useless expenditure of paper, ink and typographic printing" that might materialise the archive; contrasted with this "silent vocation... to burn the archive and to incite amnesia" (10-11).

We see the destructive impulse of the archive demonstrated in the cinematic exploration of the Titanic wreck. The archive, the skeletal remains of a ship, have been rusted and its contents eroded by the pressures of settling 12,500 feet underwater. We see the power of consignation persist as the archive holds the shape of the boat in place, allowing the archivists to move their way through the structure to find the location of a particular suite, as passengers

may have almost a century prior. Creative intervention becomes necessary when we acknowledge the absences in the archive, and we discover those absences by giving in to archive fever. For instance, Brock Lovett, fully immersed in his archive fever— a desire to locate the missing necklace— uncovers yet another absence when he finds a drawing of an anonymous subject wearing the artefact. To fully comprehend the absence of the necklace, and its trace to the person in the image, Lovett must consider a piece of creative intervention: the story offered by Rose. Within the fictional constraints of the film, Rose’s re-telling of the sinking is accepted as truth. It is not until he exposes himself to the lived, bodily experience of enduring the sinking of the titanic, a process of empathetic connection made possible by Rose’s account, that Lovett’s perspective of the event shifts. Of course, Cameron’s entire script is fabrication, a creative intervention in and of itself. However, the character of Brock Lovett surmises the impact of creative intervention by alluding to Rose’s story as he reflects at the end of the film, “Three years I’ve thought of nothing except Titanic, but I never got it, I never let it in” (Cameron 03:02:25). To emphasise, Brock Lovett was distracted by one absence, the missing artefact, which made him ignorant to other absences in that archive. Through creative intervention, in this case, personal recounting and storytelling, Lovett was enlightened to wider absences, the ghosts of the ship.

This is just one demonstration of what creative intervention achieves.

Historical novelist, Hilary Mantel, reflected on this type of writing. In her talk for BBC’s Reith Lectures, Mantel explained her approach to writing creatively about histories:

“History is not the past – it is the method we have evolved of organising our ignorance of the past. It’s the record of what’s left of the record. It’s the plan of the positions taken when we stop the dance to note them down. It’s what’s left in the sieve when the

centuries have run through it—a few stones, scraps of writing, scraps of cloth. It is no more “the past” than a birth certificate is a birth, or a script is a performance, or a map is a journey. It is the multiplication of the evidence of fallible and biased witnesses, combined with incomplete accounts of actions not fully understood by the people who performed them. It’s no more than the best we can do, and often it falls short of that” (“The Day is for the Living”: 00:12:50).

If we consider Mantel’s notion that history and the past are not synonymous, we can deduce that for an historian, archive fever presents as a desire to bridge the gap between us and the past. As Mantel illustrates, this is evidenced by the archive and our processing of ‘what’s left in the sieve.’ How, then, might archive fever present in the writer?

Derrida acknowledges a ‘layering’ to the archive, as our comprehensions and analyses pile atop one another, “they concern the archaization of its institutional and clinical practice, of the academic, scientific, and juridico-editorial aspect of the immense problems of publication or of translation with which we are acquainted” (Derrida 16). Thus, our wider comprehension of what the archive can tell us is a comprising of multiple research practices. For the writer, our archive fever presents as a desire to engage with the archive, and our research practice requires us to engage in a process of intervention. We cannot simply observe. Through the cognitive process of considering the material imaginatively, and the process of creating something tangible – a semiotic output – we create an account. This account does not belong to the original archive; but it does belong in one of its outer layers. As proposed in the Introduction, the creative sits amongst the academic, the scientific and the juridico-editorial, evidential of our evaluative engagement with the archive and its power of consignment.

Furthermore, it illustrates a want for an innovative approach to consignment and a radical addition to our existing comprehension of what archives preserve: a writerly account, a creative impression, an evaluative conclusion.

When first I heard the story of Giulia Tofana and her poisonous enterprise, I encountered the archive at one of its outer layers, a semi-evaluative, semi-creative piece intended to tell the story of the case by collating a timeline from various sources, bridging any archival gaps using story-telling techniques. The video-essay from Bailey Sarian, as discussed in the Introduction, is illustrative of the folkloric legacy of this historical event but also acts as a gateway to the archiving of it. I hoped that navigating my way to the source material might reveal something of the women using the poison, and why they chose to do so.

This feeling, or moment of inspiration, encapsulates what Derrida presents as the potential of archive fever, the notion that the archive – once collated and evaluated – might reconstitute the event itself. Derrida writes, “In what can also be read as a theatricalizing of archivisation, Freud seems at first to perform a courteous *captatio benevolentiae*, a bit like the one I owe you here: in the end I have nothing new to say. Why detain you with these worn-out stories? Why this wasted time? Why archive this? Why these investments in paper, in ink, in characters?” (9). Suddenly, as a researcher one must acknowledge that the archive is a performance. For as long as it is a product of human curation, the archive is crafted, and it is a story of an event. Creative intervention is a continuation of a performance that has already begun.

If we consider this in relation to the historiographic efforts of Mike Dash in surmising and collating the archival ‘truths’ of the Tofana case, we can begin to consider the breadth of women tempted to secrete poison into their homes, and thus, the extensive creative scope to

consider their reasonings. That these are not evidenced in the archive is an issue of absence, one that might only be bridged through creative speculation.

What documentation remains of the murders, convictions and executions would have been collated under the consignment of the legal authorities at the time. It is unlikely that the peaceful death of a murderess in her bed after decades of secreting poisons under the noses of powerful men would have reflected well on the constabulary. The issue of consignment and human bias once again rears its head. In the decades that followed, the tale of an execution as consequence for her poisonous crimes might have been a favourable recount for the authorities. Thus, the complexities of the folkloric legacy of the poison begin to grow like a string of ivy. What is true and what is not becomes entangled and the figure of Giulia Tofana emerges like something of the supernatural, not quite real but certainly not an invention. As writers considering histories like this, we cannot help but feel archive fever.

There are ways in which creative writing can help us engage with this desire to recover the bodily experiences that time could not archive. To be clear, recovery, to a degree of complete historical accuracy, is impossible. Derrida states: “the archive, if this word or this figure can be stabilized so as to take on a signification, will never be either a memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive, and internal experience. On the contrary: the archive takes place as the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory” (11). Furthermore, implied is the notion that the archive is never representative of the thing itself, rather, it can only ever be exemplary of the first instance of archive fever post occurrence.

The women forgotten to history are gone along with their testimonies and their unvoiced thoughts. We cannot write their experiences with any certainty. This is where genres such as speculative histories emerge, settling somewhere between historical fiction and

historical biography. Paul E. Bolin dissects the role of the imagination in how we navigate histories:

The words “imagination” and “speculation” do not come to mind frequently when considerations are made regarding historical investigation. Yet the writing of history, more often than not, consists of the historian’s ability to choreograph a dance of compatibility between the fragments of a known past, and a world constructed through reasoned imagination and grounded speculation of the historian (Bolin 110).

The term “speculative history” has been used to describe this imaginative approach to historical writing, an approach often rooted in the hypothetical, or the ‘what ifs?’ Researcher Gregory William Deinert writes,

Through this artistic speculation, these novels continually attest, we see the importance of the aesthetic imagination in helping us to identify effaced archives and incorporate them into our daily lives... by drawing attention to, and speculating [about](#), the manifold silences that mar out our past, these novels model for us a navigation of history that does not ignore or efface the gaps that scar the annals of history... (Deinert vi).

One might observe this approach in Hallie Rubenhold’s *The Five: The Untold Lives of the Women Killed by Jack the Ripper* (2019), or Laite’s *The Disappearance of Lydia Harvey: A True Story of Sex, Crime, and the Meaning of Justice* (2021). In an opening research note, Laite reflects: “The lives in this book were found in fragments... These include birth, marriage, death, and migration records...I have stitched these details together with threads of imagination, but this imagining has followed careful rules. There is no detail offered here for which I do not have historical evidence...” (Laite ix). Here we see a defence for the role of the imagination in archival intervention. Through references to “rules” and “evidence”, Laite emphasises that this

is imagined reconstruction that should not be limited to making things up. One can speculate and be making an educated guess.

To discuss in the context of the breadth of genres within historical fiction, one might turn back to Mantel and her writings on Cromwell. In the aforementioned lecture, Mantel reflected on the creative scope in the correspondence of Thomas Cromwell, highlighting how the archive can only preserve what was filed in his in-tray. However, whatever he sent out became lost to the archive the moment it was sealed and distributed (“The Day is for the Living”). In this example, we are presented with an absence, and Mantel explains how this stimulated her imagination to engage with the space it left. This is archive fever as the writer experiences it. As Laite concludes her research note, she reflects: “This is a true story. But it is also a story that insists we think carefully about who gets to do the telling” (Laite x).

In my approach to engage and intervene with the un-archived experiences of 17th Century Italian Wives, and their choice to poison, I was entangled in the incomplete nature of an archive. So much of women’s histories are absent due to the powers of consignment. What remained for me to stitch together seemed sparse in comparison to the documentation Laite reflects on in her research note. A consequence, perhaps, of a more distant history, centuries older than the Lydia Harvey case, but also a case that suffered under the strain of consignment. This is so often the case, and beautifully articulated by poet and author Doireann Ní Ghríofa in her memoir, *A Ghost in the Throat*:

How I wish that someone had thought more women’s words worthy of a place in that old secretaire. All the diaries and letters and ledgers I imagine in female handwriting, they must have existed once, until someone tidied them into a waste bin, tipping them neatly into oblivion (Ní Ghríofa 90).

In this text, Ní Ghríofa explores the relationship between the experiences she has repressed throughout her life as a woman, wife and mother. Through nostalgia, she considers how those repressed feelings are present through her own experience of what I propose to be a case of archive fever: a haunting connection to an 18th Century female poet, Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill. The image evoked in the passage, of women's notes and diaries being tidied into a waste bin, feels reminiscent of Arlette Farge's commentary on 'women's histories' as discussed in the Introduction to this thesis. Whilst Ní Ghríofa's discussion is rooted in imagery, the absence of female voices in the archive suggests a likelihood of truth. If we consider Farge's notion that, "we knew about women, we knew about their lives, we described their work, their rates of reproduction, and their illnesses or misfortunes, but we did not introduce them into the action..." (Farge 34), we can begin to consider the archival absence as a consequence of repression.

Consider Anthony Easthope's discussion of repression in *The Unconscious* (1999). Easthope proposes the notion that repression occurs in order to make thoughts or ideas enduring. This is because what is repressed only exists, then, in the unconscious (Easthope 31-2). It is important to note, however, "[that] there is always likely to be a return of the repressed" (32). On art, and creative expression, Easthope acknowledges that "creative people take the latent content of their personal daydreams/fantasies, evoked from the unconscious to soften the self-concerned character and present it in a plausible and seemingly impersonal form" (19).

From this brief discussion of the state of repressed thought in the unconscious, or perhaps the pre-conscious as explored later in Easthope's text, and how this might resurface from the creative mind, might we consider writing a process of recovery. Ní Ghríofa's text becomes exemplary of archive fever as a psychological desire for recovery and recollection. Ní Ghríofa is haunted by a poem that lingers in her pre-conscious, "a sub-division of consciousness; largely containing memory..." (Easthope 24-5). As she reflects on experiences

she regards as feminine in the opening to her book, she explores the ways in which the poem has haunted her seemingly in response to her cognitive processing of her feminine existence, such that the haunting of the poem becomes endurable:

This is a female text.

This is a female text, composed while folding someone else's clothes. My mind holds it close, and it grows, tender and slow, while my hands perform unenumerable chores.

This is a female text borne of guilt and desire, stitched to a soundtrack of cartoon nursery rhymes.

This is a female text and it is a tiny miracle that it even exists, as it does in this moment, lifted to another consciousness by the ordinary wonder of type. Ordinary, too, the ricochet of thought that swoops, now, from my body to yours (Ní Ghríofa 3-4).

Much is implied by the notion of a 'female text.' In referencing the text to be "composed while folding someone else's clothes," Ní Ghríofa perhaps alludes to the idea that a text has an unconscious, and folding someone else's clothes is a stereotypically female experience. To expand, one must consider the functionality of the 'textual unconscious'. On Jean Bellemin-Noel's ideas of the textual unconscious, Jerry Aline Flieger surmises:

The text analysis, then, is modest in scope, humble in its claims, often playful in its tone, and tentative in its findings. Its sole goal, as stated by Bellemin-Noel, is to clarify that nature of its object, the 'textual unconscious,' as something radically different from the writer's intentionality or the reader's response, as something which eludes the

critic's "judgement." It emerges, rather, as a function, a "reading-writing" in which the roles of reader, writer and critic coincide... (Flieger 62).

If textual analysis is the process through which we might begin to evaluate the unconscious of a text, then it is through discussion of Ní Ghríofa's sequence about the female text that we might deduce what the functionality of a female text might be. For instance, Ní Ghríofa's detailing of her 'unenumerable chores' alone does not make commentary on the female experience. Though, once we consider this sequence: the repetition of 'female text', the discussion of repressed emotion as the speaker states the text is "borne of guilt and desire, stitched to a soundtrack of cartoon nursery rhymes", one begins to unpack the speaker's listing of distractions, all linked thematically by their association with societal obligations imposed upon women. It is the textual analysis that uncovers the commentary. It is through consideration of the textual unconscious that we might begin to comprehend what Ní Ghríofa means when she defines her text as female.

In relation to creative intervention, and archive fever, Ní Ghríofa's text fascinates me as an artefact that captures what it can feel like to experience archive fever as a creative. For Ní Ghríofa the desire to return to the 'arkhe' or origin of beginning is felt through poetry that lingers in the mind. Ní Ghríofa depicts a fond monotony to her day-to-day, before describing how "today, as on so many other days, I pick up my scruffy photocopy of *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, inviting the voice of another woman to haunt my throat a while" (Ghríofa 10). This feels like an arkhe, due to the familiarity of the document Ní Ghríofa describes: "In the margin, my pencil enters a dialogue with many previous versions of myself, a changeable record of thought in which each question mark asks about the life of a poet who composed the *Caoineadh*, but never questions my own" (10). This is an archive of archive fever. This is the process of seeking out an origin, repeated and scrawled down. Perhaps the fact that it is a poem Ní Ghríofa

is haunted by is a coincidence, but it poses the hypothesis that something about poetics, as defined in the introduction, that encourages resurgence.

There is potential, through poetic intervention, to create a text with its own unconscious, rooted in consideration of the experiences of 17th Century Italian Wives. Through engaging with my own poetics, and my own feminine, I sought to write poems that reveal something of the nature of female resistance or defiance.

To consider tackling such a task, one must investigate poetic approaches to creative intervention more generally. This inspires the question, in what ways are the characteristics of poetic discourse suited to the psychological complexities of archive fever and the potential of creative intervention? Through the course of this chapter, I will present three poetry collections that could be read as archival interventions. Each one deals with the archive and its absences in different ways, and to differing conclusions on the archive itself. Throughout the case studies, I examine three poets responding to three archives of varying contexts. Nellie Cole interacts with the case files of an unsolved murder mystery, currently held by Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service; Jay Bernard intervenes with the black British archive, specifically their enquiry into the New Cross Fire of 1981. Both of these examples are institutional archives, consigned through political and judicial intent. Alongside each of these examples, the poets also have an alternate archive to consider; that of media coverage and social response to each case. Exemplary of a personal archive, however, is Maggie Nelson's use of her Aunts' diary as an archive. Nelson's intervention is similar to the former examples in that case files are considered as an archive, and media coverage as well. However, her poetry collection is demonstrative of how personal items, though somewhat removed from the issue of consignment in that the contents were not archived with intent to be public, might become part of an institutional archive. Creative intervention is a broadly applicable approach. In this thesis, I consider it in relation to poetics and archival response. I hope that the varying contexts of the

case studies presented, in conjunction with the sparsity of the archive I worked from, to be detailed in later chapters, highlights the range of voices that might be captured when producing a project that is fragmentary in nature, for example, a collection of poetry.

With consideration of this, I present *Such Violent Glamour* as a piece of creative intervention, and with this exegesis, I hope to archive its journey from conception to completion. Throughout, Ní Ghríofa's archive fever and the haunting properties of the *Caoineadh* are considered, intent to articulate the merit of poetic discourse in creating an intervention that lingers and lives on. These writings, as artefacts, represent the sentiment that returning to the 'arkhe' or 'origin' is impossible, therefore historiographical writing is always a sum of its limitations. Rather, what these works demonstrate is how we might translate what remains of the archive to speak of what has succumbed to the 'mal d'archive.'

Case Study 1 | *Bella* by Nellie Cole

On the 18th April 1943, four young boys were combing the trees of Hagley Wood, Worcestershire for bird's eggs. Instead, they were horrified to discover human remains secreted in the hollow of a Wych Elm tree. Mistaking the skull for that of a fox, or other small animal, the remains were passed around before what remained of hair and some fragments of clothing confirmed to the boys that they were handling a human skull. Their being there in the first place was trespassing and forbidden. So, the boys returned the skull to its resting place and returned home having vowed not to tell anybody what they had found there. In the days that followed, one boy was tormented by images and nightmares enough that he confessed to his mother the truth of what they had found and subsequently, the authorities were notified.

Evidence was collated and witness accounts scrawled; however, the detectives were never able to confirm the identity of the remains nor how they got there. The police followed several lines of inquiry over the following decades including the possibility that the subject—confirmed to be female— was a victim of male violence; had been murdered in a satanic ritual; or, the remains were that of a German spy who went missing around the time of death (Phelps). As the decades passed, the anonymous inhabitant of the Wych Elm became somewhat of an urban legend, with locals theorising her case into folklore. The woman became known as Bella, a name sampled from the case of a missing barmaid considered for however brief a moment to be the woman in the tree. Graffiti in-and-around the area of Birmingham began to emerge in various forms before disappearing only to resurface a decade or two later in its final form: '*who put Bella in the Wych Elm?*' The question has remained unanswered, and the urgency of the question undeterred. In 2014, the case was closed after a review by West Mercia Police, deeming the case file a public archive (Adams).

In 2018, a poet local to the area, Nellie Cole, published her poetry pamphlet, *Bella*, named after the folkloric identity attributed to the remains found inside the tree. It is a pamphlet that explores the potential fate of Bella through poetic engagement with what remains archived of the case. Conservation of the archive has faced challenges; sometime between the 1960s or early 1970s, the skull was stolen from a museum and remains missing. Due to advances in DNA analysis, The Museum Association issued an appeal for the artefacts which could now undergo further forensic testing (Adams). This, and many other legal missteps are considered and critiqued in Cole's poetic intervention into the circumstances surrounding the murder of the subject. What Cole achieves in twenty pages of poetry, however, goes beyond the expectations of storytelling. Rather, *Bella*, exists as an archiving of what the repository of legal evidence could not collate: Bella's lived experience. It is important to note that Cole's imaginings are exactly that, and as an archiving, *Bella* is a speculative one; however, it sits in the company of what remains in the archive as an intervention, occupying the space or absences of what was stolen, lost, or could not be preserved in the first place.

This creative output feels demonstrative of what Derrida terms the archiviolithic. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida proposes the notion of an "archiviolithic drive" to define the tension between a desire for preservation and Freud's notion of a "mal d'archive" (Derrida 14). In the case of Cole's creative intervention, we see a demonstration of the consequence of such tension. An archiviolithic work that demonstrates a determination for archival preservation through poetic intervention of what has succumbed to the death drive.

In the introduction to this thesis, I presented Derrida's theory of archive fever and the notion that the archive is both living and dying due to the tension between the death drive and the

power of consignment. I propose that if we were to consider the archive a body, it is one in a state of decomposition.

There are varying critical perspectives regarding archive theory that arrive at a similar conclusion. Derrida's depiction of tension, described as archiviolithic, is actualised through the practice of conservation. In the case of an unsolved murder, consignment of the artefacts and evidence comprising the archive have been working against the absence of the lived experience it is archiving in the first place. Carolyn Steedman discusses the issue of preservation in *Dust*: "the archive- appears to represent the *now* of whatever kind of power is being exercised, anywhere, in any place or time" (Steedman, *Dust* 1). If we consider this in conjunction with the death drive, the skeleton body of an archive requires conservation, and this requirement leaves it vulnerable to the 'power' of whomever has consignment at any given time. Derrida argues that it is the destructive nature of the archive that drives it, "the archive drive. It is what I call... *archive fever*. There would indeed be no archive desire without the radical finitude, without the possibility of forgetfulness which does not limit itself to repression" (Derrida 19). In the case of Bella, it is the unanswerable question that keeps the idea of her alive through an imagined memory.

Steedman discusses this in a later study, 'Romance in the Archive,' as she concludes "The way archives *are* is to do with their inhabitants, temporary and permanent; the living and the dead" (Steedman, *Romance* 1). If it is archive fever that drives the writer, as a response to archival absences, then the work itself exists as an accompaniment to the archive in the form of creative intervention. By creatively considering the bodily experiences that might have comprised the event itself, we can better comprehend the skeletal remains the archive leaves us with. It is through this practice that we broaden our conceptual understanding of the archive.

In, *Bella*, Cole considers the archive and its inhabitants. As chronology would demand, it is its inhabitants we encounter first. In ‘Poor Tom found Bella in the Wych Elm,’ Cole alludes to the absence of bodily experience in the archival evidence by creating a narratorial gap.

They leave curfew behind leave caution
 at the fringes of the forest swinging clear
 of barbed wire they climb over the fence
 and set off into the trees their way lit only
 by the cigarette the oldest passes around

Swithold footed thrice the wold
he met the nightmare and her ninefold
bid her alight
and her troth plight
and aroint thee witch aroint thee...

(Cole 8)

The speaker describes the boys as they “climb over the fence/ and set off into the trees...” and then samples a section from *King Lear* 3.4 before picking the narrative back up as one of the boys wakes from a nightmare (Cole 8). The quote from *King Lear*, “he met the nightmare and her ninefold/ bid her alight...” as an intertextual reference alludes to the discovery in the Wych Elm through the description of ‘her’ as a nightmare. By including reference to the imagery of

the fox skull in *King Lear*, Cole emphasises the horror that haunts the boy in his sleep, the memory of the human skull. One might consider creative intervention as intertextual, with the very practice of engaging with the archive and its absences evidenced in creative output. In this case, as the first human hands to take consignment over the remains, the boys that discovered the skeleton on that particular morning witnessed an archive at its conception, and Cole wastes no time in plunging us into an archival body that is itself suffering from its own death drive as she guides us to use our imagination to bridge this narratorial gap. The archive underpins the creative intervention as a source, rendering the creative output intertextual.

The notion of an archive at the mercy of consignment is present in Cole's poem, 'The Sentinel'. The piece is a creative response to a report made by Douglas Osbourne who guarded the remains overnight before the police arrived. Cole alludes to the archive in a state of curation, "in the morning they will pluck out the bones but tonight/ as unseen hands drop pennies buttons tokens/ into its rotten bole/ I hear them chime/ I stand I resume my patrol" (Cole 11). By referring to the subject, Bella, as "bones," the speaker exposes the vulnerability to which Steedman alludes in 'Romance in the Archive'. Already, the archive was being stripped of flesh by the dehumanising of the subject. Cole intervenes, the poem is interrupted by two lines in italics: "*I was foul and she was fair I knotted Lichen in her hair/ She was fair and I was foul I held her tight and made her howl...*" Use of imperfect iambic tetrameter and rhyming in couplets mimics the form of a nursery rhyme. By separating these lines throughout the poem, it creates a haunting illusion that this alternate voice is repetitively taunting the speaker. It is this alternate voice that acknowledges the remains as 'her' and alludes to the lived experience of her dying as they "made her howl." Also in the aforementioned quote, Cole alludes to the potential contamination of the archive, "unseen hands drop pennies buttons tokens," referencing the possibility that relics discovered and collected in association with the remains

may have acted as red herrings during the police inquiry and subsequently during any archival inquiry as well.

Steedman, comments of the presence of ‘things’ in the archive: “Finding things: the idea of *finding things*: loss, the search for what has been lost, the dream of finding it, and of plenitude. This powerfully informing idea of Western modernity is connected to nostalgia, and to the idea of ‘the might-have-been...’” (Steedman, *Romance* 6). Cole’s poem intervenes with the notion that an archive could be in any way factually sound by drawing emphasis to what Steedman describes as ‘the might-have-been.’ What the speaker describes as ‘pennies buttons tokens,’ could allude to the many artefacts that led police no further to confirming the circumstances that trapped Bella in the bole of the tree. Without this conclusion, the entire archive is suddenly a potential, ‘might-have-been.’

In the first few poems of the pamphlet, Cole intervenes with the timeline of events confirmed by the archive; in this case, the cold case files. This is an approach I attempted in the early stages of drafting *Such Violent Glamour*. As previously discussed, the chronology of the Aqua Tofana poisonings is somewhat contested, however, Bailey Sarian’s video essay acknowledges the moment that would have triggered the consignment of an archive. History tells us that the criminal proceedings against those behind the distribution of the poison began when a woman stopped her husband from eating the soup she had prepared for him. Her reasoning was that she had laced the soup with a liquid she purchased from Tofana’s accomplices. The authorities were summoned, and the entire underground ring was exposed and investigated, shortly leading to the conviction and execution of those responsible.

As the moment any record of these events began, this felt like a possible ‘beginning’ from which to start exploring the threads that comprise this case. An early draft of a poem

detailed the complex thought process the woman might have been going through to almost go through with the poisoning, only to change her mind at the last minute:

Roasted Carrot Soup

I watch him sharpen the kitchen knives

on a butcher's block carved from oak.

A wedding gift, back when I was betrothed

and greener than the bruise across my cheek,

a week into healing. With them, I slice

onions and carrots to roast for our Sunday soup.

It bubbles on the hearth, splatters the fruit

in the bowl adjacent, bright orange.

I should absolve it from the heat, the recipe

complete, but instead, I knead the dough for

our bread until he leaves. From deep inside

the pocket of my pinafore, I retrieve my perfume:

manna of St. Nicholas,

he would recognise it one of his favoured scents,

yet I have not once pressed a drop to my neck.

Instead, I worry the stopper apart in my hand,

a drop or a few might kill a man.

Poems drafted early in my creative investigation of the case, such as this one, captured the ‘plot’ of the Tofana case as a folkloric tale. However, at this stage of writing, I did not feel like I was creating an intervention. I used poetics to create a narrative, yet it reads more like a fictionalised account rather than a poetic intervention. Consequently, this poem captures a moment in the case, and perhaps bookmarks an important event in the timeline, but I did not feel as though my writing was evoking anything that was not felt about the case already. It felt necessary to

broaden my reading of poetic intervention to diversify my writerly approach, explored in further case studies.

Primarily, the limitations of the archiving of the Tofana case in contrast to that of the archive Cole was working from made it harder to hear what the absences were trying to tell me. The archival absences in the Tofana story reduce the echoes of female voices to silence. Through close readings of poems in Cole's pamphlet, I sought to extract her poetic approach, and the subsequent creative intervention, and find ways of weaving those into my work to fabricate some archival structure.

There are moments in Cole's pamphlet where she layers her creative intervention atop the archive like a medieval palimpsest, a layering of an old text with a new. The consequence of which is a relationship between both texts whereby "one text is not derived from the other" (Dillon 47). This is most poignant in 'Bella Theory #1: Spy' in which Cole samples a postcard confiscated from a suspected German spy. It is in these archival interactions that we see creative intervention at its most intertextual. The link to Bella in this poem is tentative. The suspect, Josef Jakobs was associated with a woman who went missing around the time Bella was killed. This led the police to consider the possibility that the remains in the Wych Elm could have been that of Jakobs' partner. In her intervention with the postcard as an artefact, Cole creates an alternate archival consideration of this theory in actuality. By overlaying her poem with the postcard using footnotes, Cole speculates the details between the lines of a simple, romantic inscription: "We began with a waltz, do you remember?" Cole makes a series of rhetorical remarks to allude to a familiarity between Jakobs and his partner, Clara (Cole 15). A series of geographical and historical allusions contextualise the poem to the police evaluation: "Men there called you divine – The Angel of Hamburg," positions the speaker in association with

Jakobs; “Is it you I write to Clara, or C.L.A.R.A,” alludes to the possibility her name was a codename; and lastly, “The Tower of London, 15 August 1941” might allude to the location of Jakob’s interrogation. This poem, in the company of five others that consider various theories as to the resolution of the unsolved mystery, highlights the sporadic nature of the archive. There is no linear pathway to follow. The archive has a persistent desire to be re-considered, re-evaluated, or analysed and, as intervention, Cole archives the process of re-consideration.

When considering approaches to creative writing as a processing of archive fever, Giulia Palladini and Marco Pustianaz’s discussion of archival resistance offers fresh perspective:

as Derrida suggested in *Archive Fever*, archives have little to do with preserving the past. They are there to launch a future. In the archive, we never encounter the past but only what remains of it, after the fire. Yet, those poor remainders are produced retrospectively by our encounter with the archive to become the foundation of what we will have been, of what we are now. From so little, so much. That is part of the terror of the archive (Palladini and Pustianaz 19).

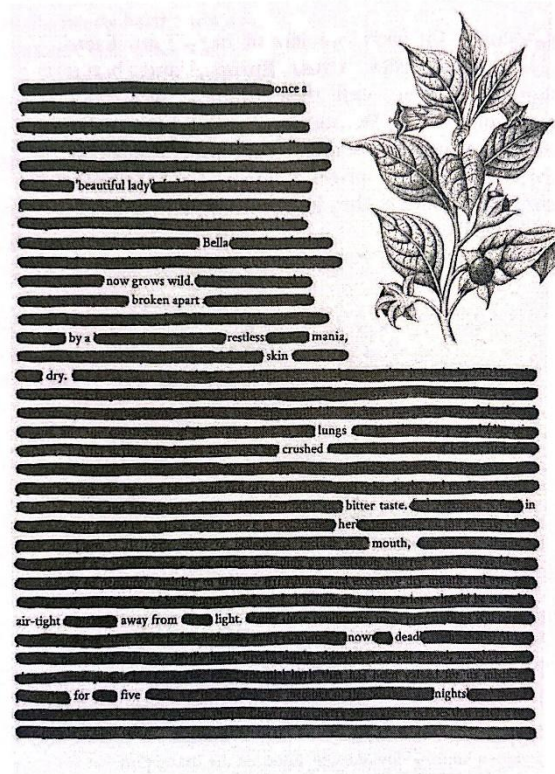
The idea of ‘launching a future’ bears similarity to Derrida’s theory of hauntology. On the concept of hauntology, Merlin Coverley suggests, “hauntology [has] desire to unearth those points in time at which lost futures may be re-animated” (Coverley 16). Should one consider hauntology as a nostalgia for the future, we might begin to consider what can be achieved through archival resistance, as Palladini proposes. A poetry collection might ‘launch a future’ through the writer’s use of linguistics and poetic technique to recreate voice; the accumulation of poems as fragments to comprise a full collection within which a multitude of futures might be considered; lastly, as in Cole’s presentation of various theories and outcomes, nostalgia for the future can be explored by restoring ghosts to a mortal, human state through writing. Coverley surmises, “just as music, through the very manner of its recording and dissemination

appears to foreground many of the ghostly characteristics attributed to hauntology, so too may the literary be regarded as a similarly spectral form, its ‘unheard voices and unusual perspectives’ communicated to us from beyond the confines of the printed page” (15-16). By examining Cole’s poetry, one might begin to consider the unusual perspective of a subject who is beyond mortality through Palladini and Pustianaz’s notion of archival resistance.

‘Bella Theory #5,’ like the previously discussed postcard poem, interacts with part of the archive as Cole uses a book page tangled in a piece of fabric found adjacent to the remains to create a blackout poem. The page was torn from a book of alternative medicine which led to the theory that Bella might have been practicing witchcraft and trapped herself in the tree accidentally. Cole manipulates the text by blacking out sections, a method fit to visualise how absences in an archive can lead us to interpret them in particular ways. With Cole’s intervention, the text now reads: “Beautiful lady/ Bella/ now grows wild... air-tight away from light/ now dead/ for five nights” (Cole 20).

Bella Theory #5: Witch

*page torn from the Encyclopaedia of Alternative
Medicine, found inside the scraps of fabric
recovered from the tree*



Arguably, the most radical intervention of the project is in ‘Incident Report: Hagley Wood Lane’ in which Cole responds to absences that have been attributed to inadequate police work. It is important to consider Derrida’s emphasis on consignment, and how this is subject to human bias. Thus, any document is limited by its physical constraints and inability to preserve human experience and suffers further from the biases that drive its consignment. A report dated 17th July 1941 suggests potential suspects and a victim were seen close to the crime scene but that no action was taken. This document does not preserve the conversations that surrounded this act of negligence, it cannot tell us why. Cole rewrites each section of said report to create

a poetic resistance to the limitations of the document, achieved through speculations of Bella's fate. Through each section, Cole alludes to each of the theories explored in previous poems; furthermore, this report is an evaluative piece of fiction concluding her interventions into the archive thus far. Cole is reporting her findings. "Jack remembers where he has seen her before/ reading stars from a barstool down at the tent.." and, later in the poem, "...but for Clarabella it is not like that at all –" (22). By referencing Clarabella, Cole offers a link between the previously theorised 'Clara' and the widely attributed identity of Bella.

The imagined death of Bella in this poem answers some questions, "her only scream smothered by van Ralt's coat/ his grip wringing the breath from her throat/ her body sinks like a bellow now empty of air." Cole alludes to the probability that Bella died from asphyxiation, whilst also alluding to the fabric that was found in the skeleton's mouth. However, Cole leaves the original and haunting question, '*Who put Bella in the Wych Elm Tree?*' unanswered.

One of the most haunting of Cole's poems is titled, 'Bella's Shoes Lead Nowhere,' through which Cole explores the signs of everyday living worn into the shoes that were found with the body. This brings us back to the archive as a repository of physical items or artefacts. Cole explores the function of a shoe in a way that echoes the sentiment Derrida raises in 'Archive Fever' in relation to an answerphone message: "the answering machine whose voice outlives its moment of recording: you call, the other person is dead, now, whether you know it or not and the voice responds to you..." (Derrida 62). In this remark, Derrida identifies the artefact, in this case an answering machine message, as a fragment of an archive with agency. The act of preservation gives the archived thing power to speak back.

In response to this, and my previous attempts of creative intervention that had not quite reached full potential, I considered a more imaginative approach. Without physical artefacts with which to palimpsest, perhaps I might take license to create an archive through which I can

creatively consider the experiences of 17th Century Wives, as Cole creatively considered the moment of Bella's death. Inspired by the previous notion of creative intervention as an intertextual approach, I considered the functions of intertextuality: to layer derived meanings, to recontextualise a text or even to subvert or reinforce existing narratives. I began to consider what the archive was missing based on my personal inquisitions. What artefacts do I wish were there, and what intertextual function might recontextualise their absence? What poems do I wish I could write? From this process, I began drafting a poem from the final collection, 'the archivist | []'s dress.'

the archivist | []'s dress

In efforts to confirm the rigor mortis of a bloodline, the archivist concluded the only relic fit for excavation was the wedding gown buried in a heavy oak chest. Ghost stitches along the waistline illustrate the shape of her mother, unpicked for a daughter's silhouette to be positioned and sewn. Fibres doused with the fragrance of generational wear emit notes of vanilla and opiates. The only stains to call her own were that of droplets of wine spilled after the ceremony. The creases along the bodice, mirrored like a phantom across the skirt suggest a permanent folding, a pleated premonition.

In 'Bella's Shoes Lead Nowhere', Cole alludes to kinship and sisterhood felt amongst women, and how the absenting of female consignment over Bella's case might have limited full comprehension of what her clothing is trying to tell us: "Suppose it took a woman's eyes to read/ the nicks in the fabric notches on the welt/ and see more than just the passage of time/ in the base of rubber worn down to a shine" (Cole 27). This feels reminiscent of Ní Ghríofa's

notion of a female text, and the implication of an unconscious link between texts ‘arkhed’ in the feminine.

In my own approach to this as a method of archival resistance, I considered what kind of garment or clothing item might tell us the most about the role of womanhood in the Tofana case. I imagined a wedding dress, handed down by a mother before being folded away and not used again due to a marriage ending before another daughter could be born. In the poem, ‘the archivist | []’s dress,’ the garment is found, and the speaker notes the conclusions reached by the archivists when examining it. The generational legacy of the garment is illustrated by the ‘Ghost stitches’ where the dress was reshaped from mother to daughter. The archivist notes the heavy fold where the dress was put away and left for a considerable amount of time; however, it is not acknowledged on the page that this is because the couple did not have a child because the husband died early. As with Cole’s poem, perhaps it might take a woman to spend some time with the poem to read into the truth of the “pleated premonition.”

In a later poem, ‘an imagined confession and the notes of an archivist poet’, I apply my analysis of intertextuality and the function of dialogue between texts by adding footnotes to my poem, similar to the approach Cole uses in ‘Bella Theory #1: Spy’ to create a discussion between the imagined artefact and the imagined archivist’s analysis of it. Though a fabricated intertextual discussion, the poem as a creative intervention exists as an implication of the role of intertextuality in creative intervention. Cole’s poem, ‘Bella’s Shoes Lead Nowhere’ the speaker emphasises the feminine unconscious through implication that only a woman’s eye could accurately read the subtext; subtext in this case being the marks on Bella’s shoes and clothing. To me, this feels in dialogue with Ní Ghríofa’s ‘A Ghost in the Throat’ and the notion of ‘a feminine text.’ If we consider the text’s unconscious as a collision of writerly intent, readerly analysis and critical reading as Flieger implies; Cole’s poetry relies on readerly analysis here to complete the intervention. The pamphlet is a ‘female text’ in that its true

literary potential is achieved when each of those components is met with the feminine. Feminine authorship, readership, and critical reception as a trinity teases out the implication of female kinship; if one of these threads be removed, that meaning is called is vulnerable to interpretation.

Cole's pamphlet, as an example of creative intervention, is illustrative of how the archive, as a physical repository, can only convey so much. If we consider the previously discussed commentary from Hilary Mantel, "history is not the past... it's no more the best we can do," then Cole's poetry illustrates how creative intervention continues the process ("The Day is for the Living": 00:12:50). This is the archive after a process of translation, through creative work, one enters a process of intervention that not only archives our inquiries and imaginings but leaves the original archive in a better state of comprehension than the writer first encountered it. The creative output itself is a palimpsest; an intertextual conversation between the archive and the archivist; a preservation of archive fever resisting the *mal d'archive*.

From this point, I was able to approach the limitations of an archive centuries older than that Cole encountered with faith in my imagination as a mode of inquiry.

Case Study 2 | *Surge* by Jay Bernard

In their poets' manifesto published in *The Poetry Review* in 2017, Jay Bernard quotes Sara Ahmed, stating "but a feminist life is also a going back, retrieving parts of ourselves we did not realise we had" (Bernard, 2017). Bernard's poetry, inspired by their experience as an archivist, when considered alongside Ní Ghríofa's *A Ghost in the Throat*, is demonstrative of feminist discourse on poetics and intervention with the archive.

Bernard critiqued the quality of the archive in a short performance documentary for the YouTube channel, 'Decorating Dissidence'. In an introduction to their performance, they discuss their creative relationship with the archive and what we might recognise as an experience of archive fever. Bernard's critique is presented in relation to the issue of consignment, as they criticise the corruption that can be enforced upon the archive in discussion of protests in Belgium. At the time, Bernard critiqued the King for his refusal to name his ancestor when apologising for his atrocities against marginalised communities; regarding the event to be an example of the "issues of acknowledgement, recognition and responsibility" (Decorating Dissidence). Ahmed's quote, and Ní Ghríofa's memoir, feel relevant here. If archive fever roots us in a desire for origin, or a hauntological nostalgia for lost futures, then Ahmed's notion that the "desire to retrieve parts of ourselves we did not realise we had," is a definition of how living a feminist life binds these authors and their intentions.

Eric Prenowitz, translator of Derrida's *Archive Fever*, offers a perspective on the limitations of archival interpretation. In his translator's note, Prenowitz claims the archive itself is somewhat tainted by its conception and its evolution, "So, even the documented originality of an archive cannot cleanse it of such corruption; an archive may always be in the process of translating to itself and from itself, by itself" (Prenowitz 108). So how might poetry, in its

linguistically playful nature, aid one to confront these corruptions? How might notions of the feminine unite poets in their discourse?

In the foreword to their collection, *Surge*, Bernard presents their stance on the archive: “The archive became, for me, a mirror of the present, a much-needed instruction manual to navigate what felt like the repetition of history” (Bernard xi). In the previous case study, we considered the archive as a skeletal repository of what remains of the past. What happens if we consider the archive a mirroring of the present? How might creative writing become a mode through which we process that reflection?

To return to Bernard’s previous commentary in relation to the protests in Belgium, absences are at play once again. Bernard’s critique of the refusal to utter a name responds to the threat of an absence. If we are filtering names from utterance, so too shall they be filtered from history. Our trust in the archive as a reflection of the past is threatened. The notion of the archive as perpetually incomplete and uncertain only drives it further. Palladini and Pustianaz suggest, “it may be paradoxical to link archives with loss. Yet an archive is defined by its own partiality, which stands for everything else that has been lost it is a synecdoche, a part for the whole” (Palladini and Pustianaz 15). The idea that loss is inherently what an archive *is* only creates more creative scope to explore those losses in their potentiality, not unlike Ahmed’s description of going back to retrieve. This is further demonstration of the issue of consignment and the power of archival conception. Both Cole and Bernard present work that intervenes with the archives of marginalised groups or individuals. If we take Ahmed’s implication as a theory, creative intervention begins to feel like feminist practice. Bernard’s creative acknowledgement of loss is a confrontation, and their creative interventions are preserved as a reminder, and that act of preservation is the radical output of archive fever.

In *Surge* (2019), Bernard explores the archive with absence in mind. The project is a response to the archiving of the ‘New Cross Massacre,’ a house fire that claimed the lives of 13 people, amongst them a 16-year-old girl whose absence Bernard attempts to archive in poetry. To achieve this, Bernard researched and explored the Black British Archive’s inquiry into the fire, specifically material held at the George Padmore Institute, in which the BBA examined both how the fire happened and how the event was reported on in case files and in the media. Through creative intervention, Bernard responds with their perspective on how the massacre was handled by the media and authorities at the time. They identify the archival absence in the record, stating: “Investigations yielded little: early reports by the police indicated that an incendiary device was found under the window... Some of the teenagers who had been at the party gave statements that they later retracted in court... There was near silence from the government and the press” (Bernard xi). It is implied that the act of retracting statements leaves a gap in its wake. What Bernard appears to hint at through their creative intervention is a futility in attempts to censor an archive. As implied by Prenowitz, “an archive may always be in the process of translating itself” (108). They with power of consignment over the archive may filter and restrict, but there will always be the feminist need to retrieve. There will always be echoes. As Bernard states in their manifesto, “I knew the media would immediately try to blame someone inside the house for the fire; that the first people to be arrested would be victims/minor players in the events... that the media would attempt to disconnect from the root of the problem of injustice” (Bernard, Manifesto).

Bernard methodises their retrieval by documenting the archival process in poetry. In their poem ‘Ark,’ Bernard recreates their physical exploration of the archive: “I take this morning from its box” (Bernard 2). The image is evoked of an archive or case file, a box as a repository for a collection of physical relics. Bernard considers the reality of a momentary event becoming a physical artefact, referring to that morning and how “the years have warped

its edges, its middle pages conjoined at the text.” The archive is considered both literally and metaphorically. The use of “warped” might allude to the inevitable distortion of an archive because of time passing, as Palladini stated, “a part for the whole,” it is an outcome of its nature (Palladini 15). If we consider Bernard’s notion of the archive as a mirror, Bernard allows the speaker agency over the reflection, they exist within the mirror-image of what was as they begin to list visuals. “...when a crowd black as my hand gathered one morning, / came over Blackfriars Bridge, were heckled by the press,” Bernard evokes imagery with scope to have been truth. Whether or not the image is evoked from truth or speculation, ‘Ark’ as a piece of creative intervention achieves the same impact. The reader, too, enters the archive’s mirror image, navigating history in repetition.

The idea of speculative settings in which to ground my creative intervention stimulated poems such as ‘The Pavements in Rome.’ I considered place and where the artefacts comprising the archive might be found. The events of the Aqua Tofana poisonings are confirmed to have links to Florence and Rome in the 17th Century. Speaking back to Mollenaer’s study of ‘the criminal magic underworld’ and how poison was circulated during the Renaissance, the notion of an ‘underworld’ or things operating beneath the surface conceptually inspired the poem. Through journey and imagery, the speaker explores a physical place which has absorbed a complicated history. I present this in the poem using a mirror image, as Bernard provides in ‘Ark.’ I position my reader “at the mouth of a cobblestone square” and depict it as “a foundation/ for an exchange of goods.” I present an interactivity with the archive and its mirroring through the implication that this engages the archivist: “Riddles permeate through brickwork.” This mirror image has movement and sound; through creative intervention, the reader assumes the role of archivist and is permitted to see, and to hear. This is an example of creative intervention as a learning process, with creative practice as a mode of translation.

Bernard's depiction of the archive as a manual through which we comprehend the events of history also implies learning through translation.

In 'Ark,' Bernard acknowledges the paper-based archives and describes their state. This notion of an archive as warped and fed into my writing of the poem 'the archivist | []'s dress,' discussed previously in case study 1. There is a deliberate absence in the title, the absence of a name, one that— like in the instance of Bernard's critique of the Belgian King— was never uttered. Without a physical repository to navigate, presenting an imitation of navigating archival material in its physicality felt challenging. The digital repositories offering images and script limited what I might evoke of the archive and its tangibility. For instance, Bernard describes the physical state of documents: "I remove the rusted paper clip, dry-sponge its brittle red remains..." and through this image, the speaker is presented as archivist and their navigation of the archive is also preserved (15).

In 'Ark,' Bernard is acknowledging time as an element that impacts the *mal d'archive*. The physical repository appears to be in a state of decay, presented in imagery such as "the years have warped its edges," and "a liver-spotted note in copper ink," both alluding to signs of age and wear. Furthermore, in my poem, I consider how time might weather a dress, the dress itself an archiving of a family history. The speaker is omniscient, observing an archivist as they discover the artefact and begin to list their observations. First acknowledged are "Ghost stitches along the waistline." Furthermore, the speaker observes what scents linger in the fibres of the dress. Like how the mirror image became interactive in 'The Pavements in Rome,' the allusion to multiple senses imitates the physical experience of navigating an archive; like when scents cling to sheets of paper. Finally, "a pleated premonition," alludes to the dress being folded away, never to be handed down to a daughter, inspired by Bernard's image of the paper file and how "the years warped its edges" (Bernard 2).

Throughout the collection, Bernard writes from the voice of those absented from the archive. In 'Clearing,' the speaker acknowledges their status as a piece of the archive: "He takes my head and places it in a plastic bag" (Bernard 11). Throughout this poem, Bernard maintains a neutral tone, resisting the use of any emotive language, "downstairs, two officers stamp their feet/ blow into their hands." The description of the officers' behaviour implies that the space is cold. The speaker is removed from that experience, creating separation which becomes more and more striking: "he doesn't see me standing there/ he doesn't hear me speak." Despite the recreation of a distressing point in the process of archiving the case, Bernard's linguistic choices remain neutral, and overall concise. They evoke the speaker's distress by further escalating the spiritual separation from the events taking place in the room, "the officer closes his eyes/ two black pennies in a fount." The closing stanza of this poem alludes to the first, creating a circular narrative around the speaker's body being salvaged from the building after the fire: "from the bag I watch his face turn away/ from the corner his body bending towards me." Bernard evokes feelings of the uncanny, presenting a bodily experience of a subject that has been seemingly severed from their body both physically and psychologically. It is implied, through the context provided by the wider collection, that the voice re-created is that of a deceased victim of the fire. Furthermore, the notion that they might be observing how their body was collated, and, how the echo of them was reduced to an archival footnote is deeply unnerving.

By adopting the voice of the deceased, Bernard strengthens their depiction of the archive as a mirror. Speaking in the voice of the deceased feels necessary and impactful because of the discourse provided by the Black British Archives' inquiry that confirms the issue of consignment, and the silencing of voices that curators failed to archive. I felt inspired to explore ways in which imitations of voice could be used to navigate the archives' mirroring.

Rather than depicting events that were speculative to their very invention, I adopted a slightly different approach through which to explore the empathy required to navigate the archive as a manual to better understand historic events. I began to present contemporary accounts and auto-biographical poems through which to depict relationship dynamics as a lens through which the speaker and the reader can consider the bodily experiences we have in common with 17th Century Wives. Through this, we can acknowledge empathy with their circumstances, and explore why we empathise, rather than speculating why they did it.

In ‘The Moment,’ I present the scene of a contemporary relationship where I explore feelings of emotional neglect, the bodily experience of feeling disregarded by a partner, and the empowerment a woman might feel in the moments that all this clicks into place and she decides. For the 17th Century Wife, this decision had violent consequences. In this poem, the consequences are ambiguous. However, what links the poem to the circumstances centuries prior is the mutuality of that feeling:

His agency as the one	splits
like a crack in a glass.	A tripped switch.

You are no longer in love.
Neither is your palette too soft
for the wine.

The crucial part about the moment is this:
he will keep on speaking through gritted teeth
as he chews. The only one who knows
about the moment is you.

Through this case study, and Bernard’s description of the archive as a mirror, I considered the ways in which we can explore the contemporary through our creative intervention into histories. In the Introduction to this chapter, I suggested that it is our archive fever that engages us with archival consignment in the first place. That archive fever is born from our contemporary circumstance, and our need to return to the archive as a place of origin is to better understand

history through what we experience in the now, just as Bernard describes the mirror as a way to reflect and observe historical events. Furthermore, by reflecting on the ethics of writing speculative accounts for women who have been completely erased, or absented, from the archive, I considered that the issue I am passionate about considering is the agency of women in contemporary relationships. That is not an issue isolated to this historical event, and by exploring my contemporary stance on this, I might better understand my own archive fever and engage with my fascination with Giulia Tofana and her poison.

Case Study 3 | *Jane: a Murder* by Maggie Nelson

If we regard our writing as artefacts of creative intervention, and we note this to be the archive in a state of translation, there is scope to consider how creative writing from a contemporary writer might sit amongst, or adjacent, to the archival material as a preservation of archive fever in exploration. One might go so far as to consider our creative evaluation of what the archive has to tell us as an additional layer of analysis, overlaying with manuscripts and artefacts like a palimpsest. Sarah Dillon references De Quincey's definition: "A palimpsest, then, is a membrane or roll cleansed of its manuscript by reiterated successions" (Dillon 10). Dillon's own discussion of these manuscripts extends to the palimpsest as a metaphor, one applicable to the notion of creative intervention. In Chapter 4 'On Poetry and Metaphor', Dillon presents an analysis of Michael Davidson's use of the palimpsest as a metaphor through which we might discuss poetry: "Davidson adopts the same metaphor in his discussion of poetry and the material text in order to argue for, at the same time as put into practice, an 'alternate mode of analysis that takes the entire archive – including its material form – into account'" (46). Davidson uses the term palimtext to refer to "writing as trace, an inscription of absence" (47). Throughout Dillon's discussion of the palimpsest as a metaphor, an intertextual relationship between the archive and our creative intervention becomes clear, one in which the latter must be defined outside of the connotation of literary texts due to the archive's incompleteness and writing as a process of construction. As a term, palimtext suggests, through its contextual relationship with the palimpsest, a structural link between the two; "this conveys both the intertextual and interdiscursive quality of all textuality... he invents the catachrestic neologism palimtext" (47).

Poetry in response to the archive, whilst in its palimtext form, is scrawled, in a metaphorical sense, atop the original archival material through our process of exploration. The result of this is a layering effect. The words of the writer are layered atop the words preserved in the archival body. We see this demonstrated in the first two case studies, quite literally in Nellie Cole's 'Bella Theory #1: Spy' where she uses footnotes to palimpsest her words atop a postcard inscription.

Bella Theory #1: Spy

postcard confiscated from suspected German spy, Josef Jakobs

*My dear - - ¹
I love you ²
for ever ³
Yours
Clara ⁴
Landau, July 1940 ⁵*

¹ Schatz - -

² We began with a waltz, do you remember? The little Café Dreyer, the dance hall of the Bieberhaus..? Men there called you divine – 'the Angel of Hamburg' – and I thought I would have to recite Hölderlin just to keep you in my arms. But then we danced to idle melodies, and with your chin on my shoulder, you told me of the letters you had received, of the new dress you had bought, the rising price of sugar. That is how I knew it was love.

³ Later, when we danced, you would tell me of other things: how the swell of the orchestra sounded to your ears like the static hum of a wireless; how the tunes of the cabaret distorted to the coordinates and call signs you had committed to mind, and taught your tongue in a Midlands lull. I grew scared of you then. We began with a waltz, but we ended in a blitz.

⁴ Is it you I write to, Clara? Or is it C.L.A.R.A.?

⁵ The Tower of London, 15 August 1941.

Assessing Cole's use of form here, we can see a palimtextual approach in action. By using footnotes as a formal device, Cole overlays her poetry with the words inscribed on the postcard.

Her new text sits atop the former. On palimpsests and the mind, Dillon comments, “It represents the mind as a textual structure actively haunted by its encrypted traces” (Dillon 37). Here, we see demonstrated how poetry can sit as an articulation of what haunts us. Cole, the poet, is haunted by archive fever and compelled to write about the unsolved murder of Bella. The poem itself is a visualisation of this haunting in the form of a palimtext, whilst also a visual demonstration of how theories of what happened to Bella are in themselves a haunting. Thus, the palimtext becomes a visual and formal representation of creative interventions, or, writing in response to archive fever.

If we switch focus from writing as an artefact of creative intervention, we might consider the impact of writerly archive fever on the archived material as origin. Through reading contemporary poetry that engages with the crime genre, as Cole and Bernard’s work does, we can see the palimtext in a state of writerly operation, with the archived material and creative intervention in discourse with each other. Susannah Dickey’s collection *Isdal* (2023) interrogates the True Crime genre, critiquing our perennial obsession with female victims. Adopting a free-verse style and mimicking styles of pop-culture discourse such as the podcast format and other media intervention, Dickey engages with her own archive fever and intrigue into the case of *Isdal* whilst criticising the fascination that she is complicit in. Contemporary poetry and the fragmentation of a long form poetry project allow for a layering of voices, perspectives, and conversation. Dickey’s work feels exemplary of the role of the imagination. Creative intervention requires a radical reimagining of the events themselves. Additionally, to engage with the hauntological notion of a lost future, one must radically dissect and reconstruct what might have been through the medium of the written word. The result, the palimtext, is a creative archiving of discourse; layered voices that confront and contradict one another; voices that layer to comprise a whole.

Another collection in which the palimtext form is utilised to create a layering of the contemporary and the archival is in Maggie Nelson's collection, *Jane: A Murder* (2005). Throughout this project, Nelson presents her creative intervention into the absence of her aunt who was murdered, layered with fragments of Jane's own journal and samples of media coverage that speak back to Nelson's own discourse. By separating the archived material and the creative intervention into layers, the constructive state of the palimtext is preserved in its final form. The result is a collection in which three voices speak over each other, respond to each other and palimpsest over the 'truth' of Nelson's family history. This is devised into three sections: Nelson's poetic interventions, Jane's journal as fragments of archival material, and, thirdly, samples of media coverage as preservation of Jane's murder as a True Crime event.

We are greeted with Jane's voice first, straight from the archive serving as an epilogue or prelude:

Dear

I understand many people write for therapy— one's own.

So this epistle, addressed to no one,

is therapy for me. What I have got to say—

oh a lot of crazy impressions about nothing

I imagine (Nelson 13).

Presenting the archive in this way evokes a tone of irony. Jane's words are removed from their archival context, though a thematic link to the journal as a piece of evidence persists, the collection as a whole acting as vessel, titled in acknowledgement of Jane's fate. By isolating a fragment of the archive like this and presenting it as a layer of a palimtext, Nelson demonstrates how our tonal perception of what the archive tells us will always be under the influence of our archive fever. It is hard to read Jane's reflection on writing as therapy and consider it outside of the context of her journal as a preservation of a voice that we know is to be silenced.

In *Archive Fever*, Derrida writes:

...from the point of view of the archive: does one base one's thinking of the future on an archived event— with or without substrate, with or without actuality— for example on a divine injunction or on a messianic covenant? Or else, on the contrary, can an *experience*, an *existence* in general, only receive and record, only archive such an event to the extent that the structure of this existence and of its temporalization makes this archivization possible? In other words, does one need a first archive in order to conceive of originary archivability? (Derrida 80).

If we consider creative intervention as the 'divine injunction' to which Derrida alludes, we might begin to consider how archive fever shapes our reading of what the archive might be telling us. As demonstrated in the sample from Jane's journal, when presented, 'palimpsested' throughout a poetry collection discussing Jane's murder, it is hard not to read the archival material in relation to that eventuality. Archive fever, as an experience, as a driving force, guides how we observe the artefacts comprising the archive at face value.

So how does the poet use this interplay, this palimtextual dynamic, to the advantage of their creative intervention?

Nelson begins by acknowledging archival absences in her poem, 'Figment' (Nelson 23).

When I tell my grandfather

I am writing about Jane, he says,

What will it be, a figment

of your imagination?... (24).

Through an imaginative reconstruction of her grandfather's voice, Nelson presents an opinion on writing as creative intervention through which the poet acknowledges the reality of her palimtext as an imitation, or a commentary, on Jane rather than a proposed reality. Nelson closes the poem,

We must not conceive that this logical figment

ever had a real existence.

This feels illustrative of what the palimtext achieves; an impression with every plausibility through research and archival navigation yet comprised in acknowledgement of speculation and its limitations to truth; its inability to portray "a real existence."

Nelson responds to this limitation with a solution that she conveys in a sister poem, also titled 'Figment.'

I invent her, then, as a woman emerging from the sea. A tall man meets her on the black sand. *You've come back*, he says. Can barely see her in the sea-light. They make love there and become horses. As night grows black, they become weeds.

She asks him quietly in the dark to tell her about the mother of everything and he did not know of whom she was speaking. She asked the volcano and the volcano belched

great streams of wet ash. She lay her head down with fatigue and found her head on a pillow of ink. Upon waking she stretched her arms around the globe and found her fingers weren't even close to touching (Nelson 25).

Perhaps the volcano is a metaphor for the archive, ancient and all-powerful with a destructive nature that might both preserve and destroy at the same time. Nevertheless, Nelson presents, through imagery, a metaphor for the futility of the archive; and in turn, the volcanic, destructive nature of the *mal d'archive*. By presenting a hyperbolic invention of Jane and her existence in the imaginary, "...[they] become horses. As night grows black, they become weeds," Nelson acknowledges creative intervention as fiction, as speculation. However, both the archive and the creative intervention reach a finite conclusion: "Upon waking she stretched her arms around the globe and found her fingers weren't even close to touching." Through this image of Jane's fingers attempting to close around the globe, Nelson alludes to her death through omniscience. Jane is no longer of this world. The archive, *Jane's Journal*, tells us this too, through its incompleteness, the silencing of Jane's voice. Both representations of Jane's mortality have impact, both evoke the sense of an ending. Together, however, they present an archival truth and an emotive, creative imitation that invites the reader to experience the omniscience of silence. As a palimpsest, *Jane: a Murder*, offers translations of the archive that are strengthened by their self-awareness. There is an acknowledged fictionality to Nelson's impression of Jane. This emphasises what creative intervention is, by nature. It is no impression of historical or archival fact, rather, a translation of consequence through imaginative means.

Grappling with the archival absence in the Tofana case, I felt inspired by Nelson's speaker and their awareness of their discourse as speculative. Perhaps creative intervention should be aware of itself on a meta level; identifying what is an allusion to fact and what is imaginatively

reconstructed. In poetry, there is scope to engage with this notion within the poem, absolved of the bounds of fiction. Previous drafts, such as ‘Roasted Carrot Soup’ lean into a lyrical narrative, rather than utilising other poetic approaches to present a radical reimagining. Considering the collection as a palimpsest, I began to approach voice and discourse differently, allowing my poetic voice to be amplified rather than muffled behind the narrative of the events.

In my poem, ‘Intervention,’ I acknowledge the critical discourse that inspired the collection as a whole and begin to dissect what that means for the legitimacy of this collection as an archive, or an imitation of one:

if a poem can shape itself around the nothing that remains of
their choices then, perhaps, I can begin to understand why if a
woman kills a man, I smile, and if a man kills a woman, I want
more of their kind dead. It isn’t about anybody’s

death really. The poem is in the moments surrounding the dying
where she looked at his face for the last time and realised, she
no longer cared for the consequences. The time she put the first
dose of lesser effort into ironing his shirts.

The first faded monologue she let drown in the back of her mind
instead of listening. A poem for the yellowing bruise that no
longer caused her pain. A poem for the baby that earned her
peace before she had to start all over again. And again. And
again. A poem for her voice the first time she shouted back:

if a poem can shape itself around these nothings that settle like
 dust atop a coroner's report, then perhaps I will one day manage
 to articulate the power I felt when he told me it was hard to love
 me and— instead of biting— I turned my back.

The narrative voice is achieved through an anonymous speaker portraying my personal experience, unlike the omniscient voice adopted in 'Roasted Carrot Soup.' Like how Nelson alludes to her fabrication of Jane in 'Figment,' I acknowledge the complex moral backdrop to this project by admitting that the story itself is empowering: "I want more of their kind dead." Whilst hyperbolic, this admission adds complexity to the speakers' voice. As the poem becomes more aware of itself as an imitation, "if a poem can shape itself around these nothings...", the reader is encouraged to contextualise what they know of the speaker's perspectives elsewhere in the collection, and are invited to consider their own moral stance on the ethics of the case. The archival absences are acknowledged as a contributing factor to the moral ambiguities, referred to as "nothings" that create scope for both creative and moral speculation. The reader is, too, invited to consider what choice they might have made as the speaker details their imaginings of the circumstances surrounding the poisonings: "A poem for the yellowing bruise... A poem for her voice/ the first time she shouted back."

Writer of speculative histories, Hallie Rubenhold articulated the writerly absence that stimulated her creative intervention. The story of the crime on which Rubenhold writes has been "predominantly about women but told almost entirely by men" (Brockes). Unpacking this, Rubenhold argues that "No murderer should ever be the guardian of their victim's story..." an issue that Nelson's poetry collection, too, explores. Nelson samples the archive directly to

challenge its attempts to limit the media's presentation of Jane to what happened to her. In, 'One Line of Reasoning,' Nelson takes a quotation from *The Michigan Murders*:

Had the killer been prepared to force intercourse upon [Jane], only to abandon the effort upon realising she was on her period? The question that this reasonable deduction did not answer was whether she was already dead at the moment, or whether it was this discovery that drove him to murderous retaliation (Nelson 129).

Nelson's first intervention is to reinsert Jane's name into the discourse, through use of box brackets. If we consider this in relation to the collection as a palimtext, Nelson edits the archive, inserting a name and, by consequence, an identity that the original source disregarded. The piece discusses Jane's body which, if one considers the original inarticulation of her name, feels oppressive. We do not know how they referred to her in the first instance, perhaps as 'the victim,' or as simply 'she.' Nelson reinserts the personal and, by consequence, re-inserts Jane.

To consider this approach in relation to Rubenhold's take; it is vital to discuss the ethical complexities of intervening with an archive as morally complex as the Tofana poisonings. The absences in such a case are not simply consequential of the absencing of women from history, as discussed by Arlette Farge in *The Allure of the Archive*. In addition, there is the fact that these are murders carried out by women. If one considers Rubenhold's stance that "no murderer should ever be the guardian of their victim's story," then, *Such Violent Glamour* provokes a very delicate ethical balance. How might one consider the untold, bodily experiences of female poisoners, acknowledge both the known and speculative truth of the circumstances that led them to that choice, without being the guardian of the stories of their victims.

At this point in my research, I had the opportunity to reconsider creative intervention. To expand, I asked myself the question of what my poetry might achieve if I broadened my definition of creative intervention with Davidson's notion of the palimtext in mind.

At this stage of drafting the creative project, it felt inauthentic to speculate on the experiences of women who might have existed and murdered, with such little remaining of their experiences. There were little identifiable traces to produce a speculative history such as Rubenhold's, or the aforementioned writing of Julia Laite. The chasm of absence surrounding the Tofana murders meant, as a writer, I had no choice but to lead with empathy. This becomes morally complex when one is unable to empathise with the victims of a murder, and rather, empathise with the poisoners themselves. Perhaps the scope to explore this case was less about uncovering, or speculating, a truth. Rather, it became about engaging with the contemporary discourse around female oppression and violence against women to consider why it can be empowering to read revenge stories, all achieved with the repressed experiences behind those moral complexities in mind.

The previous quote from Ahmed, implying that to keep going back to the so-called 'arkhe' is a feminist act, places the feminine at the core of creative intervention as a practice. Furthermore, if we consider this in relation to hauntology, this form of writing feels nostalgic of the female voice. By engaging with discourses both contemporary and historical, the palimtext became a mode of the hauntological, and creative intervention became the way to present the female experience, as though the women of today and the women of 17th century Italy were united in a nostalgic grief.

To conclude, when writing an intervention into a criminal case, the writer meets, in the first instance, a subject defined by their role within that event: victim, perpetrator, alibi, witness.

Through the durability of poetics and linguistics, and the varied tones that can be evoked across the breadth of a collection, the poet takes the archival limitation and, through imagination, opens to the potentiality of a lived experience. As with the figure of Jane in Nelson's poetry, often the subject remains limited to the writer's comprehension; Jane is Nelson's aunt, and Jane is the victim of a murder. However, through using Jane's journals as an intertextual source, Nelson palimpsests those identifiers with Jane's own fragmented voice. As with Derrida's discussion of the answerphone message, analysed in case study 1, the preserved voice is still only a moment within a vast collection of moments, but it is the one to survive. By intervening with the archive through a palimpsest-like approach, one produces a collection that exists in acknowledgment of its partiality in the wider scope of what is true. *Jane: a Murder* feels self-aware of its limited comprehension of its subject. The speaker does not claim to know Jane, nor to be her. Rather, the speaker engages with a journey of exploration, the desired destination of which does not seem to be definition. The consequence in this case study is a collection that stays true to the form of a palimtext, with the poetry overlaid with the source material such that strands of discourse might co-exist in the final intervention. The next step, creatively, was to reconsider *Such Violent Glamour* as a palimtext that alludes to an historical event without attempt to define it, rather as a mode to weave contemporary discourse with historical happenings. Through this practice, we might better understand our empathy with history's silenced women.

Conclusion: The Tofana Archive

In consideration of Creative Writing as a method of “re-mapping archives”, Natalie Harkin presents the term archival-poetics (4-5). Harkin references the work of Judy Watson to explore this term, describing her “journey through heritage as she learns from the ground up, poetically integrating body, emotion and country in her work” (6). Harkin suggests, “The primary-source-archive is central to representations of history, which, for example, fuel contemporary public debate surrounding the legitimacy and extent...” (9). Harkin’s development and application of the term archival-poetics is specifically in reference to absences in the archive of aboriginal histories, placing an emphasis on heritage and race as motivation for archival poetics as a writerly approach.

Harkin places emphasis on the “primary-source-archive” and when considering the sensitive ethical nature of this archive in particular, it seems clear that a closeness to the source material is imperative for an ethical intervention. Whether that closeness comes from the presence of primary material within the archive, or from the heritage of the archivist/writer linking them inherently to it. I would argue that any one of the poetic approaches examined in the previous case studies could be described as archive poetics. Each archive examined was rich in primary sources and each poet shared some heritage with its inhabitants whether through familial link, racial identity or, in the case of Nellie Cole, exposure to the local history.

As I discovered the absences in the “primary-source-archive”, I found ways to write through them. In the following chapters, I detail the methodologies applied in the face of this challenge (9). One thing became clear when considering the ethical complexities of this project: whilst I could draw from archive poetics as methodology, to label *Such Violent Glamour* as output of archival poetics felt inaccurate. This term implies a closeness to source material that,

despite having every intention to capture, simply is not present in my work. Furthermore, use of the term could disregard the poetic approaches detailed in chapters 2 and 3 in which I seek to explore how one writes absence. Thus, I consider archive poetics, too, a method of creative intervention; however, it is not an approach I managed to get close enough to source material to exact.

Inspired by how directly Nellie Cole's poetry utilised archival material, I attempted to navigate the archiving of the Tofana poisonings. After discussion with the aforementioned historian Mike Dash, I applied for access to the *Centre for Women in Renaissance Archives*, directed by Shiela Barker of *The Medici Archive Project*. The repository supports historiographic study into the lives of early modern women, archiving what is left of their experiences.

With Dash's research as my point of reference for what I was looking for within the repository, in conjunction with the linguistical barriers due to any written artefacts being in medieval Florentine, I found myself bouncing back to Dash's writing to make sense of what I was observing as I browsed the digital impressions of each artefact. These included an illustration of 'Manna of St Nicholas'; and Alessandro Ademollo's research published in a short booklet in the 19th century titled, *I Misteri dell'Acqua Tofana* (Ademollo 1881). I found that I was often referring to Dash's appendix attached to his research including translations (Dash 2015). My archival navigation was limited to what I could experience through a screen, and what Dash's existing research could tell me about it. There was little scope for me to use independent archival navigation to create a palimtext as literal as Cole's postcard poem.

If we reconsider Palladini and Pustianaz's research, and the notion of writing about archives in a way that "launch[es] a future, (Palladini and Pustianaz 19). The digitisation of archives, and

the way that impacts the archivist's experience could be considered an example of "the terror of the archive," what remains after the fire (19). Would it be radical to argue that digitisation of a repository is another case of the *mal d'archive* at practice: a further act of repression as the sensory exploration of material is limited, yet a liberation in opening the archive up to wider exploration? The physical exploration as detailed in Bernard's poetry is reduced exclusively to observation. Additionally, what is three dimensional is reduced to an image, the best we can do to observe its truth is to zoom in and look more closely.

To use Palladini and Pustianaz's words, digitisation becomes the fire. By analysing the artefacts in the accompaniment of Ademollo's analysis, I became entirely dependent upon the practice for which I advocate. Palladini and Pustianaz present the notion of "launch[ing] a future" and this is the death drive in practice. If each and every archive is in a case of destruction from the moment of its conception; every conclusion drawn, every moment of interpretation and every written articulation is inherently weakened by the same death drive. We see this illustrated by the preservation of Ademollo's study, and Mike Dash's contemporary response to it. Creative evaluations and interventions are required to archive the process of navigation and articulation before memory renders it a ghost.

With the limited sources with which to create an intervention reminiscent of what Cole achieves with *Bella*, and the lack of 17th century voices permeating through the archive to recreate as Bernard achieves in *Surge*, the future of the project was determined by Davidson's notion of the palimtext and the layering of the speculative atop what is known and what is true.

In the following chapters, I will explore two layers, or threads, to the palimtext that is *Such Violent Glamour*: the non-human voice of poisonous plants in lieu of historical testimonies, and poetry in articulation of female resistance to the violence against women epidemic declared in 2024.

Chapter Two | The Garden, an Archive?

Introduction: Beauty & Botany

If we consider the notion of a palimpsest as a metaphor for creative intervention, poems such as Cole's achieve both a layering, and a state of involution. The two texts share a relationship. Cole's poem is informed by the postcard layered beneath it, and the impact of the postcard is enhanced by Cole's poem.

Dillon cites the *Oxford English Dictionary* for a definition of a palimpsest, "a parchment or other writing-material written upon twice, the original writing having been erased or rubbed out to make place for the second; a manuscript in which a later writing is written over an effaced earlier writing" (12). This applies to Cole's poems in a very literal sense, especially as Dillon expands, "Palimpsests are not dusty palaeographic objects but uncanny harbingers to the present of the murdered texts of former ages" (13). The notion that the original text is 'murdered' brings us back to absences and ghosts. The original text becomes a ghost text. In examples such as Cole's poetry, the ghost haunts the new text, as the poet presents dialogue between the two pieces: Cole's words respond directly to the words of the ghost, as demonstrated in my previous analysis of 'Bella Theory #1: Spy' (22). A reader might float back and forth from the postcard to the footnoted poem to read the words as discourse. However, you could also read the postcard and then consider the footnoted poem as an afterword. As a process of intertextuality, the texts are both layered and woven at the same time. I wanted to attempt this technique to present the notion that the past and present are both independent of one another, and influential of one another in equal truth.

However, when navigating *The Medici Archive Project*, it became clear that such an involuted approach to intertextuality was going to be a challenge to achieve. Despite the archive as representation of the historical context of the Tofana poisonings, I was not successful in my search for anything directly linked to the event that had not already been subject to historiographic response. The absence of artefacts upon which to construct palimpsests, metaphorical or literal, meant reconsidering my intertextual approach to writing the archive's absences.

The database requires translation both from medieval Florentine to the archivist's language, but also historical contextualisation to know what keywords to search for. I found myself navigating the repository alongside Mike Dash's historical study in order to view what was relevant. Consequently, I was observing nothing of the archive that I had not considered through reading his work in the first place. Additionally, rather than dissecting the language of a court transcript to respond intertextually, I was considering Dash's historiographical perspective on the proceedings. I could not observe what the artefacts were there to tell me without ingesting the biases of an existing analysis.

This research inspired me to broaden my expectation of what I might write as creative intervention, and what I might write in response to. The time came to broaden my expectations of the archive as a repository of historical material and reconsider what the archive is there to do.

Plenty of historiographical studies, not unlike Dash's work, exist to articulate the archive's silences and bridge the gaps that separate its artefacts. To write "a feminine text," to quote Ní Ghríofa once again, it made sense to consider a study with biases towards the feminine. Jill Burke's *How to Become a Renaissance Woman* (2023) considers the day-to-day experiences of a Renaissance Woman dealing with the societal pressures of the time, fashion,

and beautification. Burke discusses the impact on literary publications in creating a culture: “The unique quality of Giovanni Marinello’s *The Ornaments of Ladies*, first published in Venice in 1562, isn’t just its unprecedented size – it includes more than 1,400 recipes for beautification of the face, hair and body – it’s also the way that these recipes are arranged, in order of the body part to be corrected, each section headed with descriptions of the perfect body, piece by piece, for readers to emulate” (Burke xi).

Scope to discuss beautification in my creative project was plentiful. Firstly, beauty trends link the historical woman to the contemporary, a notion I explore in my poem ‘Why the Girls Stay Pretty.’ Additionally, the thematic relationship between beautification and the poison Aqua Tofana is creatively provocative, with the poison being disguised as a cosmetics product, ‘Manna of St Nicholas,’ for women to secrete into the household. The oftentimes oppressive industry of beautification becomes the salvation of the 17th Century wife. Lastly, the toxic trends that haunt 17th Century beautification techniques offer yet another thematic link through which one might explore poison in poetry, and its uses by women throughout history.

A poem that responds to this thread of research is ‘Accomplisht Ladys Victimhood to Beautifying,’ so named as an allusion to a pamphlet from Burke’s archive of sources. Hannah Woolley’s pamphlet, *The Accomplish’d Lady’s delight in preserving, physick beautifying, and cookery...* was published in 1675. With the pamphlet’s frontispiece displayed, Burke acknowledges: “Woolley was one of the most successful women writers of the early modern period and made her name writing books of household management” (76). As a parody of this text, my poem references recipes introduced in the pamphlet as re-invented at the end of Burke’s book:

A note left for the kitchen-maid detailed the Ladys request for rat droppings to be gathered and sweetened with honey and the juice of a fresh onion— dollops of the concoction were used to treat spots of baldness on the Masters' head.

Structured as a prose poem, I mimic the style of the pamphlet and use asterisks to separate stanzas to imply passage of time, suggesting that the subject, a character named Signora Isabella, is interacting with the artefact over time. I allude to the dangers of Renaissance beautification methods when the character miscarries a pregnancy, a genuine complication thought to be caused by the poisonous components used in cosmetic products throughout this period and beyond. From this poem, I was able to emphasise the thematic link between beautification, poison, and female survival by parodying the title of Woolley's pamphlet yet again in the title poem. 'A Poisoner's Guide to Beautifying' poetically details my first experience of the Tofana case, Bailey Sarian's YouTube video. As the speaker watches the video, they note the poisonous nature of early cosmetics, whilst acknowledging the extent to which beauty was vital for female survival:

There is a foundation smudge on my phone screen --
Bailey talks to me, cuts her crease to a tale of powder
pressed morality. I'd like to conceal it in a jar, or a bottle,

this anecdote that makes me want to wipe my *perfect*
eyebrows off. Into the cocktail, I must mix belladonna; lead;
arsenic. Leave a husband dead in our marriage bed.

I have no husband to kill. Just a rage in my belly
that I didn't realise was there until this very moment
as I paint my eyes with a wing so sharp I might use it.

Murder is collateral damage.

This poem, linked by its title to 'Accomplished Ladys Victimhood to Beautifying,' is also thematically linked to 'Why the Girls Stay Pretty,' in which I adopt a contemporary speaking

voice to emphasise the relationship between beauty and female survival. This is a notion that Burke emphasises as she discusses the fate of a Noblewoman's daughter:

Camilla secured a good match at the age of seventeen, to Mario Farnese, the Duke of Latera, and, when she in turn eventually had a daughter, Grandmother Isabella was in charge of giving her a well-rounded education: 'to learn to read and write, to play instruments and dance, and to perform plays and pastoral performances'. But all this came to an end when, at the age of eight, Camilla's daughter caught smallpox. After this, she was deemed too disfigured to be a good marriage prospect, so she had lost her essential function – there was no need to educate her further and she was destined for the convent" (Burke 81).

Beauty was vital to secure a woman's potential for marriage; and a woman's potential for marriage secured all other opportunities that might befall her: education, social standing, wealth etc. In the case of Camilla, a woman that cannot be deemed beautiful is, quite literally, discarded by those closest to her. Through a contemporary lens, one might view this as an absolution from the confines of marriage; and perhaps it might even have felt this way for Camilla. However, the societal emphasis on marriage as the most secure fate for a woman rendered beauty as a fundamental for female survival. This is where poetics, and the opportunity to blend discourses as previously described, is an opportune form to present the involuted reality of a 17th century woman. This is further emphasised in Burke's study in her documentation of Signora Anzola, "a fictionalised courtesan from Ferrara. After her astonishing rise from poverty to riches and fame in her youth, she was brought low... disfigured by the French pox (syphilis), she was wheeled through the city on a cart for all to see her lesions" (149). This demonstrates how the vitality of beauty permeated through into Renaissance folklore, warning women of the importance of physical attractiveness to their worth.

Upon reading the recipes collated in Burke's study, gathered from various archives such as *Renaissance Goo*, a repository of beautification recipes; *Art Herstory*, a curated sample of artworks by women; and, *Italian Women Writers*, a digital collection of writings authored by Italian women from 13th Century to those born in 1945, a botanical theme began to emerge in the ingredients list. Cosmetics recipes, often referred to as 'Waters', include plant specimen such as distilled broad-beans utilised by Caterina Sforza to make a cleansing wash; a nettle tonic to make the hands and face white; and, Marinello's Rose and Bran scrub which behaves as a face and body exfoliator (pp 241-258).

Thus, the themes that comprise the telling of Giulia Tofana's story begin to emerge, with the tale and its origins being rooted in botany, beautification as well as the household and female agency. If we discuss *Such Violent Glamour* in relation to Davidson's notion of the palimpsest, also introduced in Chapter One, the thematic link between poison, beautification, and survival root all the layers of the palimpsest together.

This wave of research informed the themes of the project; and the writings of other historiographers aided my navigation of the archives. My approach to writing as creative intervention was also shifting, as well as my ideas as to how I might achieve it.

In Chapter One, I reflected on my fabrications of voice inspired by Jay Bernard's recreation of voices from the Black British Archive in their collection *Surge* (2019). My historiographic research helped to inform the wider context of the Tofana case by guiding me through archives that surmise the female experience in Renaissance Italy. However, with little archival trace of the women using Tofana's poison, it felt disingenuous to completely fabricate female voices in a collection that I claim to be a celebration of female agency.

Consequently, there was scope to reconsider other approaches to voice, and how I might adapt my poetic approach in lieu of voices from the archive; perhaps the non-human.

There is an ecological root to the subject matter from which these poems sprout, the origins of most poisons: plants. The central ingredient in Aqua Tofana is Belladonna. Commonly known as Deadly Nightshade, Belladonna poses an interesting link to Renaissance methods of beautification. Women would use the juice of the berries to dilate their pupils: “Larger pupils signal curiosity, exploration, and collaboration, while smaller pupils trigger goal-directed and self-oriented behaviour... Historically, women put belladonna in their eyes because atropine causes pupil dilation” (Cozolino 171). Over time, this trend would cause blindness. Lastly, when Aqua Tofana was used to kill a husband in order for a woman to take agency over her story: belladonna also became a mode for survival.

Throughout this Chapter, I will present my reading of Alice Oswald’s poetry. Furthermore, I consider the personification of poisonous plant specimen to create an illusion of a voice. Thus, one considers voices that have been silenced by the ‘mal d’archive,’ rather than a fictionalised narrative voice like the drafted poems presented in Chapter One.

If we consider the archive a garden, we might begin to appreciate a wider creative potential by broadening its metaphorical limitations. An archive is a repository of the non-human, collated and cultivated by human hands to better appreciate what each specimen has to offer. Through poetic navigation of a garden as an archive, might one invent speakers that imitate voices of 17th Century Wives; evoking personalities from the plant properties, and mimicking their visual and physical presence to create a character through personification?

Oswald, Tamás & the Relationship between the Human and Nonhuman

Inspired by Alice Oswald's poetry collections, *Woods, etc* (2005); and *Weeds & Wildflowers* (2009), I consider the personification of plants, or non-human entities, a mode through which poets might subvert the human experience.

In 'Woods, etc,' Oswald retells the Greek myth of Sisyphus in a poem of the same name. Here, Oswald considers the presence of grass through personification: "...every inch of it he feels/ the vertical stress of the sky/ draw trees narrow, wear water round/ and the lithe, cold-blooded grasses/ weighed so down they have to hang their tips like cats' tails..." (Oswald 11). The description of the grass as 'cold-blooded' samples a phrase typically used during human characterisation to imply a lack of sympathy or emotion. By figuratively comparing to cold-blooded animals who have evolved to survive extreme temperatures, Oswald subverts the non-human to comment on the human. One might read this as a comparison of one non-human specimen to another, however, this legacy of the phrase in relation to human characterisation complicates analysis of the poem. It reads like personification and "the lithe, cold-blooded grass" begins to feel like an oppressive influence on Sisyphus' journey. Oswald further personifies the grass by suggesting agency in response to an external factor, "so they have to hang their lips like cats' tails."

Oswald utilises the double meanings in 'Weeds & Wildflowers' to explore human characterisation or personification whilst also presenting a poetic dissection of a plant specimen. In 'Bristly Ox-tongue' she repeatedly describes the subject as "[standing] rooted" (Oswald 9). This alludes to the ecological rooting of plants in the ground, whilst also utilising a familiar adjective used to depict a human stance or presence in a scene. Here, 'rooted' implies both; or, either: "He stands rooted/ with his white hair uncombed...." Oswald uses the plant as a

metaphor through which to characterize a human. Simultaneously, she uses personification to depict the characteristics of a plant. The two exist in symbiosis.

The duality of how one might read these poems felt advantageous when considering how plant properties are illustrative of female oppression. Oswald explores this in the poem 'Daisy.'

I will not meet that quiet child
 roughly my age but match-size
 I will not kneel low enough to her lashes
 to look in her open eye
 or feel her hairy wiry strength
 or open my mouth among her choristers
 I will not lie small enough under her halo
 to smell its laundered frills
 or let the slightest whisperiness
 find out her friendliness
 because she is more
 summer-like more meek
 than I am I will push my nail
 into her neck and make
 a lovely necklace out of her green bones (Oswald 6).

Oswald personifies the Daisy by categorising her as a “quiet child” before relating the character to the speaker through the comparison “roughly my age but match-size.” One might read this contrast in relation to how women are compared to one another and to unfair criteria. The juxtaposition in size and implication that Daisy is a “child” could be illustrative of the speaker and the subject being different ages, alluding to the relationship between younger and older women. The speaker’s refusal to “kneel low enough to her lashes/ to look her in her open eye” suggests a reluctance to view Daisy on the same level, in both a literal and metaphorical sense. The suggested pattern of comparison is confirmed later in the poem, as the speaker states: “because she is more/ summer-like more meek/ than I am I will push my nail/ into her neck and make/ a lovely necklace out of her green bones.” The speaker acknowledges that Daisy is “more summer-like,” and by phrasing it in such a way, Oswald uses the positive connotations of light and warmth associated with summertime to present Daisy with an enviable character, emphasised through the speakers’ stress that Daisy is “more” to create contrast and therefore, allude to envy. This is actualised through the violent ending to the poem where the speaker describes how she will “push [her] nail into [Daisy’s] neck.” Here, Oswald uses the making of a daisy-chain as a metaphor for how it feels for women to be pitted against one another, and how this discourse influences female relationships and interactions as we internalise the negative messaging into unfriendly behaviours. The characterisation of Daisy as child-like, juxtaposed with the violence of the speaker pressing their fingernail into her throat to make something pretty of her makes quite the violent image. One might read this as a metaphor for the premature pressures on young girls to be ‘beautiful’ as Oswald closes the poem with ‘make/ a lovely necklace out of her green bones.’ The use of ‘necklace’ both alludes again to the daisy-chain but might also link metaphorically to the beauty industry by evoking imagery to liken women to an adornment. Overall, this poem achieves something unique in its use of characterisation and personification. Oswald embodies the physical properties of the plant both

in how the physical characteristics are characterised in human form, but also in how the fate of that plant is illustrative of how human beings interact with it through the creation of the daisy-chain.

I attempted to interact with Belladonna in a similar way, aiming to evoke both female voice but also make commentary on how the plant properties might be illustrative of female oppression in a metaphorical sense. In its earlier forms, this poem mimicked Oswald's use of personification and her resistance to formal constraint:

Her beady pupils gaze longingly to bathe
in the sunlight, heads raised, intoxicated,
topped with a gentle, pastel pink flower.

Just one taste would surely be harmless.

It sits upon your tongue with a sour burn
so that you swallow it down quickly, your gaze
becomes distorted, with colours that chase
after each other like children.

Though illustrative of what might be achieved through personifying the non-human to achieve physical characterisation; the poem lacked the playful spirit that Oswald achieves by depicting the potential persona of the plant. In a later draft, I attempted to use imagery and physical descriptors to allude to a potential personality,

The blossoms above her
middle erupt in the most
playful shade of lavender;
darkened by the midnight
gaze. Petals engaging, then
slipping away—

and those eyes.
pupils dilated, so supple
and round, their fervent gaze
avoiding ground, longing to
bathe in the glow of a moon.

They call her deadly nightshade,
the mother of pain.

Despite adopting language that might describe the plant visually and evoke a sense of its personality, for instance, the flowers and their ‘playful shade of lavender,’ and the berries and their ‘fervent gaze’, the poem still did not achieve the full impact of convincing a reader that one might be reading about a plant as a person, or equally, a person as plant. At this stage, I began to consider the relationship between the human and the non-human, and the ways in which they might be appropriate metaphors for the experiences of their counterparts. In ‘On Pain’, an essay from her collection, *Strangers: Essays on the Human and Nonhuman*, Rebecca

Tamás analyses the poetry of Ariana Reines, notably her collection *The Cow*: “poetic language begins to assail the boundaries between human and animal, showing that the ways in which women are hurt connect up with the ways in which we treat animals in late capitalism” (66). When considering Tamás’ description of the parallels between human and nonhuman, in this case animals, and oppressive treatment, I began to consider the ways that poisonous plant specimen might be treated in similar ways to women across history.

Oswald’s writing of the human through the nonhuman is arguably symbiotic, achieved when the act of daisy-chain making becomes an act of violence: “I will push my nail/ into her neck and make/ a lovely necklace out of her green bones” (Oswald 6). Through considering this as a human experience, and a violent one, the reader may experience an emotional response for the plant through metaphorical symbiosis. In relation to my project, I wondered how I might achieve a similar metaphorical symbiosis by considering poisonous plants and their classification as such in relation to the women using Tofana’s poison.

In her podcast, *Lady Killers*, historian Lucy Worsely presents examples of women who have committed murderous crimes and invites guest speakers to engage in a discussion as to the moral complexities of the act. In many cases, it is arguable that the crime would not have taken place had the woman not suffered an act of oppression at the hands of their victim first. For instance, in ‘Series 1, Episode 2: Madeleine Smith’, Worsely notes that the poisoning took place after Madeleine’s scorned lover threatened to share their intimate letters with her father, the consequence of which would have been public scandal to an extent that might have damaged her chances of future betrothals. This is a serious fate for a young woman whose position in society relies upon securing a marriage.

An historian might view Madeleine's poisoning of her oppressor as an act of revenge; but arguably, it could just as easily be considered an act of self-defence at a time when a secure offer of marriage meant survival. This is not dissimilar to Tamás' reflection on the boundaries between oppressive behaviours towards the human and non-human and begs consideration of how poetic language might begin to illustrate this metaphorical link between murder as an act of defence for women, and the characteristics of poisonous plants. This notion is introduced in one of the opening poems of the collection, 'Poison, a Declaration,' as the speaker states: "I did not ask you to swallow me." I link the boundaries between woman and plant to the previous commentary on beautification and female survival in the poem 'Why the Girls Stay Pretty,' emphasising the vitality of marriage and beauty as a form of defence, "pretty demands the dowry, pretty pays the price/ it is the simple difference between an existence/ and a life".

Oswald achieves the potential of poetic language and assails the boundary between the human and nonhuman in 'Daisy' when the childlike activity of making a daisy chain is presented as an act of violence. The human perspective is juxtaposed with the nonhuman reality of a fingernail through the stem. When one considers the poem as a presentation of inter-generational female relationships, that boundary becomes a metaphor for female survival yet again and the vitality of beauty and submission for female survival, as the speaker acknowledges that Daisy is 'more summer-like,' and 'more meek.' Oswald explores the oppression of women in other poems, such as 'Violet'

Recently fallen, still with wings out,

she spoke her name to summon us to her darkness.

Not wanting to be seen, but not uncurious,

she spoke her name and let her purple deep eye-pupil
be peered into.

‘Violet,’ she said

and showed her heart under its leaf.

Then she leant a little frightened forwards

and picked a hand to pick her,

And her horrified mouseface, sniffed and lifted close,

let its gloom be taken and all the sugar licked off its strangeness

while we all stood there saying, ‘Violet! Violet!’

fingering her blue bruised skin.

Finally she mentioned

the name of her name

which was something so pin sharp,

in such a last gasp of a previously unknown language,

it could only be spoken as a scent,

it could only be heard as our amazement (Oswald 17).

In the opening stanza, Oswald uses biblical language to allude to the concept of ‘the fallen woman,’ as she evokes images of ‘wings out’ and describes how the plant ‘summons’ like a leader. This poem, too, feels demonstrative of the boundary between the human and nonhuman, as Tamás implied.

Oswald uses poetic language to explore female exploitation. As the speaker observes how Violet did not ‘[want] to be seen, but [was not] uncurious,’ one begins to consider the notion of consent and desire, and the complicated boundary between the two, acknowledging that desire does not equate to consent. As Oswald depicts how Violet, ‘picked a hand to pick her’ the reader must consider the repetition of ‘pick.’ By using the verb twice in a single line, with the picking of the flower perhaps representative of a shared sexual experience, one considers that there is an inevitability in the picking. Perhaps Violet was to be picked regardless, and in ‘picking’ someone to ‘pick’ her, she was able to claim some agency in it. This feels illustrative of contemporary discourses surrounding consent and further illustrates the previous notion of oppressive plant properties being acts of defence rather than violence; ‘picking’ is a claiming of agency, but it does not equate to consent. The violent description from the speaker of how they were ‘fingering her blue bruised skin,’ feels symbolic of an assault. As Oswald presents how the scent emitted from the breaking down of the flower, she does so in a way that illustrates the allure of the nonhuman, ‘such a last gasp of a previously unknown language.’

By describing the emission of scent as a form of communication in an unknown language, Oswald acknowledges that the non-human has something to say and also the inability of the human perception in fully comprehending it. “It could only be spoken as a scent/ it could

only be heard as our amazement,” suggests that whilst the human influences in this poem do their best to comprehend the experience of the nonhuman being, that comprehension is limited, implying that there is something of ‘Violet’ that we cannot understand.

Thus, the relationship between the human and nonhuman exists, but is limited. Tamás, too, explores this limitation in ‘On Pain’, and attributes blame to human ignorance: “Reines helps us see that our unwillingness to confront female exploitation, oppression and sexual subjugation, is the same unwillingness that allows us to eat animals which come from farms nothing like those in storybooks – where animal bodies are not treated as living beings...” (Tamás 68). Through poetic discourse, might we subvert the ignorance of our human experience through articulation of the nonhuman?

I considered the ignorance and misconceptions I had encountered already in my early research into the Tofana case: the absences in the archive and societal attitudes towards so-called ‘Lady Killers’ and considered how I might subvert these attitudes in poetry.

In ‘Nettle,’ I use imaginative reconstruction to reflect on the childhood experience of encountering stinging nettles. Through recollection, I consider the event from the plant’s perspective, and present the notion that the sting is less an act of violence, and rather a form of defence:

I wonder if I could forgive her
now that they have warned me
of how daughters steal your beauty.

Forgive her for taking her teeth
to the tiny fingers thieving her pretty
as a token to gift a waiting mum.

I treat the non-human as human by giving the plant a gendered identity. In this poem, the nettle is referred to as female to establish this imagined perspective as symbolic of female experience. Furthermore, I allude to folklore to create a social context around the plant's behaviour. A theme throughout the collection is beautification and the importance of prettiness for female survival which I present here through the old wives' tale that during pregnancy, a mother's aesthetic appearance might be impacted if she carries a daughter. By applying human thinking to the ecological behaviour of a stinging nettle and hypothesising its motivation, I subvert the non-human to convey a repressed female experience. The consequence of beautification at the time of the poisonings and beyond were fatal. Burke details a recipe penned by Caterina Sforza dated back to the 1400s:

Take 15 lily bulbs and cover them with a flour paste, and put them in an oven and leave them until they are well cooked. Then remove the paste and cut the bulbs very finely on a stone, and add the same quantity of oil and tartar and some powdered mercury sublimate and mix the whole thing together. When you want to use it dissolve it with rose water and taking it with the hand, rub the face, which is excellent (Burke 215).

The pastes and ointments women were encouraged to use were often poisonous themselves causing illness later in life, poisoning a woman's blood and inducing miscarriages or infertility and certain trends might even lead to blindness.

In my poem, I illustrate the desperation a woman must go through to endure this through the act of the stinging nettle, by its own nature, hurting a child who tries to pick one of its flowers. The picking of a flower is an act of exploitation, the child's innocence in the matter is of little consequence to the impact on the plant. The flower itself would die once severed from its host and the nettle must endure to grow another in order to attract wildlife. There is a thematic link in that the speakers of these poems treat both women and flowers with the

expectation to be beautiful. Plants flower to pollinate, it is crucial to their survival as beautification was crucial to a woman whose agency and survival depended upon securing a viable marriage. By acknowledging the picking of a flower as a ‘theft,’ I subvert the responsibility from the nonhuman to the human interfering with the plant; emphasising that the nonhuman specimen is not harmful until humans interact with it in an oppressive way.

I attempted one more re-draft of the poem to characterise Belladonna as a way of presenting the boundary between human and nonhuman in the Tofana case. Having read Leah Atherton’s poetry pamphlet, ‘Mycelium,’ I noted the formal structure of two sister poems which act as ‘bookends’ in her pamphlet. The poems, both titled ‘Field Notes,’ adopt the formal structure of an ecologist’s notes. The poems are formed of three stanzas detailing properties of different plants. This formal innovation inspired my approach to the final draft of this poem. I begin with three short sections detailing three characteristics of the plant: flowers, leaves and fruit:

- i. Most identifiable in late summer when she blooms naked ladies to dangle at our fingertips. [by autumn, she flowers deep violet]
- ii. September brings the fragrance of deadly nightshade; her inky black pupils, swollen and round. plump for the tip of a tongue.
- iii. Leaves are strongly ribbed; pale in their envy. They skirt around her ankles as though caught in an act—

In this section, I allude to any folkloric tales attributed to the plant Belladonna. For instance, I describe: “she/ blooms naked ladies to dangle at our fingertips,” which alludes to the nickname attributed to the appearance of Belladonna’s flowers. Furthermore, I mimic Oswald’s approach to voice to acknowledge the male gaze: “to dangle at our fingertips.” I implement techniques present in Oswald’s work, namely, personification of the plants and gendering to create an allegiance between the reader and the plant itself.

Following this section are some notes accompanied by timestamps, intended to create the illusion of records taken during an experiment, in this case, a dissection of the plant. The note-keeping becomes messy and erratic as the author succumbs to the effects of the specimen: “092838: slight irritation presenting on fingertips” here, the incorrect time is crossed out and re-written as the subject takes note of a physical ailment. The plant appears to taunt its victim in retaliation to their violation, at least from the speaker’s perspective. They detail, “the ladies are laughing,” as their notes become disjointed and almost incomprehensible. Lastly, the poem closes with a section sampled from an earlier draft, the only part of the poem from a different speaker:

[if you were to perform a dissection,
on a sprig of Belladonna, I hope the stringiness
of her mitochondrial matter is bold
enough to form a rope around your throat]

The penmanship of the section quoted above is not confirmed on the page, though, I hope enough is implied that a reader might surmise this inscription comes from whomever might have happened upon the fieldnotes after its original author succumbed to the will of the plant he dissected. The intent of this poem is to further imply that the non-human cannot be held to the morality of the human interacting with it. The patriarchal consignment of the archive is represented in the general tone of this section. The description of the plant is somewhat sexualised as the speaker depicts the leaves to “skirt around the ankles as though caught in an act—” Furthermore, poetically, it hints at the kinship between the non-human and the women who suffered under the repressive natures of their marriages, retaliating to obtain agency much like a plant is designed to when ingested by an oppressor.

Referring back to ‘On Pain,’ Tamás states of Reines’ poetry, “the woman abused by the man is treated ‘like an animal’ in that her body is merely a channel for him to pour his

aggression into, human casing for the meat produced by her suffering – his pleasure” (Tamás 67). There is a similarity in how humankind oppress each other and how we interact with the non-human, an othering that can lead to repressive behaviour. The oppression of women within the social and political confines of a marriage creates a dynamic whereby submission is a pre-established norm. To explore this through the ecological non-human, i.e. plants, rather than another species of living creature created that same pre-established state of submission in poetry. The plants would usually be unable to speak back to us. By poeticising their voices, I hoped to imply a claiming of agency not dissimilar to that 17th Century Wives claimed through other means. Tamás concludes:

The body, put into a feedlot or suspended for sexual use and control, becomes truly unnatural, not in the sense of some vision of Eden lost, but in the loss of naturally occurring bodily freedom and independence. Misogyny feeds into animal cruelty feeds back into misogyny again – pain as a currency, because ‘she likes it rough’ or oppressive conditions are economically viable, fast, productive. The distance between real bodily experience, between reality and silence, gets ever bigger; narratives of fullness and delicious completion covering the systems which damage the earth and each body inside it (72).

Through oppressive violence, be it contemporary or recognised in the mis-documentation of women’s histories, women are deemed non-human. Our words are ignored or discarded or silenced, our bodies violated. In poems like ‘Fieldnotes | Sampling Belladonna,’ or even ‘Nettle,’ the plants can fight back either by infiltrating their oppressor or through the speaker re-examining their properties with empathy. Therefore, the oppressor is silenced. In ‘Fieldnotes | Sampling Belladonna,’ the original speaker loses their ability to archive their own experience, and their archive is sabotaged by the shift in voice.

Tamás says, “We go out as women, into the world, swimming in our currency of pain...nonhuman beings and things suffer with us, for us, that is a kind of reach for freedom” (72). If we explore the archive, and all that a repository of objects of the nonhuman can tell us, through poetic intervention, one might begin to translate the boundary between the human and nonhuman, document it and present it beyond the limitations of human comprehension.

The Environmental Imaginary: The Poison Garden, Alnwick

In an ecocritical study, 'Creative Writing as a Means of Reimagining Gardens,' Chantelle Bayes introduces the notion of the 'environmental imaginary.' Bayes acknowledges the merit of creative writing to geographical study, alluding to discourses that suggest "the writing process involves both representational and non-representational methods as writers engage with a place through stillness, observation and physical movement that spark mental and imaginative work but also engage with place..." (Bayes). Having engaged in the process of considering the nonhuman in a metaphorical sense, subverting the ecological properties of poisonous plants, and presenting them as if human, there was scope to consider the ecological roots of this project through representational methods, as Bayes proposes. Bayes acknowledges the garden as a space of creative origin, stating: "Imagination has always played a role in how gardens are constructed, what meanings are brought to particular garden spaces and who belongs to them in what capacity," I felt inspired to return to the notion of the garden as an archive, and therefore, archives as creative spaces. Any repository goes through a process of collation and construction, and that requires creative thinking. Gathering artefacts to represent an event or instance is a method of storytelling in and of itself.

To define the 'environmental imaginary,' one must acknowledge the posthuman. Bayes states:

Through posthumanist environmental imaginary, the garden might be re-written in narrative fiction as a negotiated space where human and non-human must work together to create a new kind of hybrid natural/cultural entity, rather than representing the garden as a place imposed upon by humans in an attempt to control and civilise the natural world (Hunt, 2000). After all, the garden has never been a wholly human controlled

space. As Kincaid shows in *My Garden*, plants don't always grow or bloom how humans expect them too (1999).

When analysing a garden as an archive in a metaphorical sense, the consignment of the repository is the process of gardening. Therefore, when we lift the lid and begin to disturb its contents, we find the archive in a post-humanist state. Human hands collated and stored the artefacts. The impact of time passing stimulates the 'mal d'archive,' with the passing of generations, the message of the archive weakens. What meaning was clear during the process of collation becomes unclear when the archive is navigated outside of its historical context. The archive enters a period of stagnation, rendering it posthuman. Creative intervention is an opportunity to re-humanise the archive. Through creative writing, we breathe life back into what has become skeletal.

The question throughout this process, however, is not only of what Creative intervention is, or achieves, rather, how one might go about it. Through what means might we engage poetically with the human experience that has withered and decayed, crumbling away from the corpse of a story?

Bayes' discussion of methodology inspired what she calls a 'research-creation event.' In her study, she acknowledges three expeditions that inspired her article, trips to various gardens where she considered the creative origins of their consignment. We might note my exploration of *The Medici Archive Project* a research-creation event; additionally, the theme of botany rooted throughout this project catalysed the opportunity for a second.

In the North of England sits an archiving of poison in its ecological state. 'The Poison Garden' at Alnwick was commissioned in 2005 by the Duchess of Northumberland as a living repository of over 100 poisonous plant specimens. This includes Belladonna, or Deadly Nightshade, the plant that represents the botanical root to this project as the central ingredient

of the poison Aqua Tofana. Belladonna is a wildflower found commonly across the UK; however, when considered as part of a repository of toxicological specimen, the plant becomes an artefact in an archive, and visitors examine it as such. The guided tours of the garden lean heavily on creative intervention and storytelling. Each plant is introduced in relation to its ecological properties, its impact on humans and, lastly, a tale of its misuse to cause harm. The archiving of the Tofana case does not include a surviving vial of the poison itself; however, when we consider the garden an archive, we might interact with the poison through the legacy of its ingredients.

In ‘ark,’ Jay Bernard presents the physical, lived process of exploring an archive. The digitalisation of archives such as *The Medici Archive Project* is yet another creative limitation of contemporary archival study. By approaching a visit to The Poison Garden as a research-creation event, I was able to explore an archive as a physical experience: to exist within it, treating the experience as sensory. Bayes’ study suggests three methods to the research-creation event: ecocritical reflections on selected narratives, ethnographic engagement with place and, creative writing practice.

Ecocritical reflections comprise a significant portion of the tour guides’ script on a visit to The Poison Garden. If we consider the script itself as an example of creative intervention, the plants are presented absolved from their toxicological legacies. As previously discussed, a plant is only poisonous if one interferes with it. The plants and the botanical properties are detailed, and any recount of poisoning is presented with emphasis on how human intervention causes the harm. Furthermore, this is illustrative of the ethnographic significance of this trip as a research event, detailing human attitudes to poisonous plants and how we might abuse them when sampling them to cause harm. Scope to engage with creative practice was at the forefront of the visit, as a unique opportunity to detail a physical exploration of an archive, but also, an

opportunity to creatively explore the specimen in front of me as a descended from those involved in the original sampling to create Aqua Tofana.

A previous poetic sequence drafted for the project, also titled ‘The Poison Garden,’ explored the notion of a garden as an archive in a metaphorical sense. The piece sampled 6 poems that comprised a narrative sequence where two lovers explore a poison garden whilst the speaker contemplates their compatibility. By the end of the sequence, the rules of the archive are broken as the pair physically interact with the plants, the speaker poisoning her partner by depositing a Belladonna berry on their tongue:

I welcome his vigilante heroism.

Head back, tilting like a branch

long broken,

enduring the narcology that is his breath

along the bridge of my throat.

Girls have to endure if we are

to get what we want –

and it’s in the gasp that erupts

from the depths of his belly

when from my tongue to his

I deposit—

a berry.

However, having paid a visit to The Poison Garden, and considering the garden an archive through the process of a research-creation event in the process, I considered how I might creatively present this research in relation to the previous discussion of the relationship between the human and nonhuman.

The poem, ‘The Garden at Alnwick’ challenges the archive presented in the original sequence ‘The Poison Garden.’ In that poetic sequence, the archive is an imagined space in which plants exist to taunt and tempt the speaker. In this newer draft, the concept of the garden as an archive is linked more closely to the historical use of the plants and the moral questioning comes from a deeper understanding of how and why the plants were used, rather than the fabricated personas of the plants themselves:

The guide describes her fatal intoxication
of an ex-fiancé as *unfortunate* and my inner monologue
responds *good for her* before I can quantify
the PH level of my morality.

Peppered throughout history are women

I would have granted the slow fermentation of opportunity;

flesh marinated to bruising—

the droplets of blood shed by every mother dead

in childbirth reduced to a simmer.

The collection calls into question the notion of immorality in cases of historical mariticide, a subject that is directly challenged in the opening of this poem. The crime in this particular case, after human intervention with poisonous plants, is poisoning by stewing the specimen into a curry. The moral complexities of the speaker are called into question as the narrative voice juxtaposes the conclusion put forward by the guide: “my inner monologue/ responds *good for her* before I can quantify/ the PH level of my morality.” Whilst this particular case is not confirmed to be a self-defence case, the speaker supports their moral stance by alluding to the histories that are about to be discussed in poetry:

It is no longer about whether or not the victim

was deserving, rather about whether or not I could do it:

if plucked; boiled on a high heat to *wife* or *mother*;

seasoned to suit a gentleman’s palette; served upon tableware

secured with silver handed over as chaperone

to the *potestas*.

Once settled upon his tongue, would I make a better choice

than to burn on the way down, eat away at the lining

of his throat and stomach?

The reference to “the *potestas*,” refers to the legal ownership of women established in 17th Century Italy that would bestow a daughter as her father’s property until transferred to her husband on their wedding day, as discussed in relation to Bierkan and Iacob in the introduction to this thesis. In detailing the bodily effects of the plant’s properties on the body once ingested, the speaker engages directly with the consequence of human interference with the non-human. The poem becomes eco-critical intervention as it closes in on its final stanzas:

As I leave the garden, I resist the urge to disturb

the rhubarb on the way out,

to litter the pathway with shredded leaves,

expose my skin to acid between my palms. I drop to my knees
to stain the concrete. A whisper poses an inscription,
sap bleeds into stone. For the next one, to know—

I was here.

Through use of the narrative I, I channel a contemporary speaker for this poem. This is an example of where moral complexities create nuance throughout the collection. Whilst the story referenced in the opening of the poem— detailed by the tour guide— is from a different historical context, the speaker goes on to link the contemporary woman struggling under the pressures of her relationship with those who have suffered in similar ways before her to explain their actions: “boiled on high heat to wife, or mother.” Finally, the speaker alludes to women who might feel this way in the future and the non-human is implied as a mode of messenger as she uses sap from a shredded leaf to write a message to them on the ground.

What I hope to provoke with poems such as ‘The Garden at Alnwick’ and ‘Poison, a Declaration’ is the notion that the consequences of ingesting a plant on the human body cannot be reduced to acts of poisoning when writing from the perspective of the nonhuman. The adaptations of plants to survive human interference are not acts of violence; rather, self-defence. In ‘Poison, a Declaration’ the speaker states: “I did not ask you to swallow me.” This motif is not dissimilar to that of conclusions around the morality of women who have committed mariticide under circumstances in which that was the only escape from the confines of marriage.

Conclusion

Donna J. Haraway presents the Chthulucene, describing our epoch as one in which the human and nonhuman are linked in tentacular practices (Haraway i). When we consider eco-poetics, and voicing the nonhuman as a poetic practice, there appear to be unconscious dialogues between the human and nonhuman, discourses we could translate and articulate through poetry.

This discourse is considered in a chapter titled ‘Sowing Worlds’ in which Haraway acknowledges, “It matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with” (118). Present, again, is this notion of translation; the idea that a story becomes a mode through which to tell a different one. Haraway continues:

Plants, however, they speculated, “do not communicate” and so have no language. Something else is going on in the vegetative world, perhaps something that should be called art... The president of the Therolinguists Association waxed lyrical: “If a noncommunicative, vegetative art exists, we must re-think the very elements of our science, and learn a whole new set of techniques. For it is simply not possible to bring the critical and technical skills appropriate to the study of weasel murder-mysteries, or Batrachian erotica, or the tunnel-sagas of the earthworm, to bear on the art of the redwood or the zucchini” (122).

This feels theoretically summative of the poetry of Isabel Galleymore. Galleymore’s first collection, *Significant Other* (2018), presents a plethora of poems through which stories of the non-human convey a poignant conclusion about human nature. As a poetic approach, this is present in her sophomore collection *Baby Schema* (2024), throughout which Galleymore considers the nonhuman ‘stories’ that might tell us about the human, with added consideration

of ‘cuteness’ as an evolutionary defence. One of the most poignant of these poems, is ‘The Pitch’:

Because rhinos haven’t adopted the small
muscle responsible for puppy dog eyes,
the species goes bankrupt.

Its regional stores close down.

How are we to survive this difficult climate

of you being so very uninterested in me?

When you turn away in bed,

all I can do is baby the pitch

of my voice. The body’s an amazing

thing. Instinctively rebranding itself

to keep, if not increase, your investment

the bear became a toy bear, later

a cartoon of the toy. It’s key to discover

a need nobody knows that they have.

In the dark, I tug on your sleeve (Galleymore 25).

Galleymore writes of the rhino and its risk of extinction. Though really, Galleymore writes of the human relationship with cuteness, and how we care for things we deem endearing. It is a story about the nonhuman that tells us more about the human; by the end of the poem, the speaker does something that they hope the recipient will deem endearing to earn back their affections.

There is something purposeful in the line break from stanza one to stanza two, separating lines that read: “How are we to survive this difficult climate/ of you being so very uninterested in me?” (Galleymore 25). It is difficult to observe this line break, and the volta that takes the reader from an ecological concern and translating it back to concerns of the human, without relating to the current environmental crisis. Perhaps Galleymore uses the approach Haraway characterises in relation to eco-poetry, which is to select stories of the nonhuman through which to tell other stories that might comment on human experience. Through this, Galleymore responds to the environmental emergency declared in 2019.

In ‘Sowing Worlds,’ Haraway continues, relating this interconnection, and possible discourse, between the human and nonhuman to sympoesis. If we relate Galleymore’s poem to the notion of interconnectedness, of sympoesis, between the human and nonhuman; the speaker’s instinct to turn to ‘cuteness’ is as much about survival as that of the bear: “Sympoesis is a carrier bag for ongoingness, a yoke for becoming-with, for staying with the trouble of inheriting the damages and achievements of colonial and postcolonial natural cultural histories in telling the tale of still possible recuperation” (Haraway 125). In finding a human translation through storytelling, Galleymore alludes to a still possible recuperation, so long as one responds to the tug on the sleeve.

In my poem ‘wilt,’ I attempt to subvert the notion of this relationship, presenting the nonhuman with agency over its discourse with the human:

his new wife is barely shed of her wedding gown before she is tending to the garden weeds; her premarital morning routine buried adjacent to the rhododendrons, roots watered with tears for her mother

the dahlias make attempts at companionship by whispering sweet nothings that might soften him in the evenings, but she does not speak the language of their blushing

green fingers grow waxy from a dozen attempts to propagate, his patience waring as the dandelions bloom by the locked gate

the roses know a stale heart when they hear one,

the baby’s breath wilting away with impatience

just as she begins to wonder what the flowers

are gossiping about; a foxglove offers her a way out—

The plants communicate with the subject of the poem in the ways that they know how. It is the speaker who is inhibited such that she does not know how to be receptive to their advice. Inspired by Haraway’s suggestion that if the nonhuman is not communicating through language, there must be something else going on, my poem alludes to the issue of translation. The human and nonhuman are interacting, but it does not equate to communication. This is not unlike how

Galleymore presents disconnect through evolution and cuteness; these, perhaps, too are modes of communication. Through considering the language of the nonhuman, what might we discover about our own modes of communication in contrast?

Through this thread of poetry, woven amongst archival imaginings and female testimony throughout my collection, the nonhuman breathes life into the archival body.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the archive is skeletal. Through interventions, imaginings, and fabrications, we breathe life back into the body by creating an impression of lived experience. By writing through the nonhuman, I involve the only living and confirmed descendants of the Tofana poisonings as an historical event. The belladonna plant encountered in *The Poison Garden* will not have evolved much in comparison to its predecessor, sampled and distilled into the formula comprising Giulia Tofana's deadly poison. There is a wisdom to the nonhuman dialect, a wisdom I allude to throughout this thread of poetry, "a foxglove offers her a way out—"

Chapter Three: Writing as Rage, Encoded

Introduction: Angering the Archive

As previously discussed, in relation to Haraway's notion of telling stories through other stories, voicing the nonhuman was a technique through which to imagine the human experiences of the Tofana poisonings. What might this process reveal about the event's archiving, and where does it leave scope for further poetic intervention?

What was clear whilst writing poems that personified plants and imagining the thoughts of wives considering poison as a mode through which to achieve emancipation was the absence of emotional discourse throughout the archive. This is applicable in a broader sense, beyond the scope of the Tofana poisonings as a case study. I refer once again to Mantel's Reith Lecture, discussed in the first instance in Chapter One:

History is not the past – it is the method we have evolved of organising our ignorance of the past. It's the record of what's left on the record. It's the plan of the positions taken when we stop the dance to note them down. It's what's left in the sieve when the centuries have run through it – a few stones, scraps of writing, scraps of cloth. It is no more “the past” than a birth certificate is a birth, or a script is a performance, or a map is a journey. It is the multiplication of the evidence of fallible and biased witnesses, combined with incomplete accounts of actions not fully understood by the people who performed them. It's no more than the best we can do, and it often falls short of that (“The Day is for the Living”: 00:12:50).

Mantel acknowledges the emotional limitations of archived material. The listed artefacts, described as “scraps” are evidence of an experience, but not preservation of it; a birth certificate

does not capture the pain, fear or love felt during the birth of a baby. Her use of the word “ignorance” only emphasises our complicity in misunderstanding, or mishearing, the archive. It is our impersonal approach to record keeping, limiting bodily experiences to whatever documentation remains, that strips history of its emotion.

In Chapter One, I identified the notable absences in the Tofana archive, mostly, the inability of an archive to preserve a lived, bodily experience as Mantel describes. Once again, to relate this issue to the motivations of women to murder their husbands, it is down to creative intervention to suggest a ‘why’. As previously discussed, Neil Bradbury analyses a killing by poison: “...among the means of killing, few methods generate such a peculiar morbid fascination as poison. Compared with hot-blooded, spur-of-the-moment murders, the planning and cold calculations involved in murder by poison perfectly fit the legal term, ‘malice aforethought’” (Bradbury 3). The term ‘hot-blooded’ is familiar in relation to anger; and perhaps, a “spur-of-the-moment” murder of a husband through more immediate means might feel motivated by anger, or self-defence. The motivations behind the Tofana poisonings are much more complex, and this is illustrated by the drawn-out nature of the crime, as illustrated by Dash’s commentary on his 2015 blog, and in his academic chapter.

Studies into poison and its use during the Renaissance help to contextualise a woman’s relationship with poison, and, by better understanding this we might begin to imagine what emotions drove her to use it. Eleanor Herman writes, “What I have found is that people living in terror of poison were, in fact, poisoning themselves every day of their lives, through their medicine, cosmetics and living conditions” (xiii). What Herman identifies here is how ingrained poison was in Renaissance lifestyles. Herman comments on the Tofana poisonings:

In 1676, the forty-six-year-old Marie-Madeleine-Marguerite d’Aubray, marquise de Brinvilliers, was executed in Paris for using Aqua Tofana to kill her father and two

brothers in order to inherit their estates. During her interrogation, she declared, “Half the people of quality are involved in this sort of thing, and I could ruin them if I were to talk.” And indeed, three years later, 319 people—including many courtiers—were arrested in and around Paris, and thirty-six were sentenced to death for poisoning (Herman 5).

There is scope to contest whether Marie-Madeleine-Marguerite d’Aubray referred to Giulia Tofana’s enterprise specifically, or rather, alluded generally to slow poisons. In ‘Aqua Tofana’, Dash acknowledges, “the notoriety of the poison was such that... “Aqua Tofana” had become a catch-all term used to describe a supposed class of subtle, precise, slow-acting poisons that were believed to be undetectable and invariably fatal” (Dash, 2017 61). What d’Aubray’s account suggests a possibility that Aqua Tofana was commonplace – if not the product itself, then as a term to allude to slow working poisons. The name and phrase have a legacy removed from Tofana’s product specifically. Moreover, poisons themselves were seemingly commonplace in the household, enough that catch-all terms were applied to group them.

Thus, in his characterisation of poison as a weapon that is suggestive of drawn-out malice, Bradbury neglects to consider a woman’s alternative. During the Renaissance, a time where a woman was exchanged into marriage like currency and restricted within the household, domestic life was the only space within which she might take agency. Furthermore, with poison so ingrained in daily life, whether orchestrated or by unknown coincidence, a wife taking a drawn-out method to murder feels less implicit of cold calculation, and instead, feels illustrative of drawn-out desperation, as Bradbury implies are mutually exclusive. If we consider d’Aubray’s circumstances, if she had not found herself bereft of her father and brothers “in order to inherit their estates,” she would have inherited nothing. Rather, her fate would have been an orchestrated marriage within which she would have held no agency at all. This killing was about autonomy over her story. To reduce these types of killings to “cold calculations,” as

Bradbury articulates, projects a generalised characterisation onto a morally complex event. There is as much scope from what the archive tells us to consider duality in d'Aubray's motivations as there is to characterise her as a cold killer.

So, how might poets challenge this rhetoric, and how might engaging with the speculated emotions surrounding the archive invite a reader into the dialogue?

Arlette Farge presents the notion that, as a term, 'women's history' renders us complicit in the othering of the female experience. In Chapter One, I examine this in relation to the consignment of female archives. However, if we relate this discussion to the absencing of emotion from the archive in general, there is scope to consider the extent to which this impacts our characterising of female figures across history.

To consider this in relation to the Tofana poisonings, and my poetic intervention into their archiving, there is scope to suggest that we might examine morally complex figures more humanely when we find a way to empathise with them.

Bradbury highlighted a "morbid fascination," with poisoning. However, I would propose there to be an equally dedicated fascination with mariticide. The tone and content of Bailey Sarian's video-essay on the Tofana Poisonings evokes a sense of empowerment that comes with hearing about female retaliation to oppression. Sarian defends Tofana, "Giulia was sympathetic towards like low status women and most often sold her poison to women who were trapped in difficult and abusive marriages. She just really wanted to help. She became known as a friend to the troubled wife... It was their only way out" (Sarian: 00:08:23). To better empathise with the archive, and to better understand where this connotation of empowerment regarding mariticide originates, one must identify the emotions that have been absented from the repository.

Audience satisfaction, or empowerment, in response to creative content portraying mariticide has been analysed in relation to film studies. In their MA thesis, Shaylee Lavaughn Anderson presents the concept of a ‘good for her’ narrative, noting that an audience may experience an ‘overwhelming sentiment... one of bittersweet satisfaction. Our female heroine may have committed a handful of morally repugnant acts but surely living under relentless heteropatriarchal pressure would push even the best of us to unspeakable lengths” (1). Anderson goes on to argue that so-called ‘good for her’ films suggest ways and means to resolve the problem of heteropatriarchal oppression. If we consider this in relation to postfeminist theory, we have a lens through which to advocate for the ‘good for her’ narrative, despite its moral complexities. Rosalind Gill argues:

Femininity [as] bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring, and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice, and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference (Gill 147).

Gill’s analysis of femininity as bodily property, or autonomy, illustrates further the scope for creative intervention into the Tofana poisonings. This is not simply a true crime event that makes for a thrilling story. As an historical event, the case of Giulia Tofana has the potential to be a lodestar for the ‘good for her’ trope; should one examine the events in relation to heteropatriarchal oppression, and how this leaves women feeling both in contemporary society and its absenting from the archival preservation of historical events, we might begin to empathise both with history’s women, and with the defiant presentations of women in contemporary media.

To attempt to define the emotions experienced by women centuries ago, embarking on the complex and horrifying journey to murdering their husbands, could only ever be speculative. To achieve this with any degree of authenticity, I had to look inward to where my own empathy came from, and what emotions I was experiencing in relation to heteropatriarchal oppression in contemporary society and relationships. In 2024, 18 months into writing *Such Violent Glamour* as an academic project, the National Police Chief's Council and College of Policing declared violence against women and girls as a national emergency after over one million crimes against women were committed across 2022/23 ("Violence Against Women and Girls"). Almost simultaneously, the term female rage began to trend online. As a trending topic, the concept of female rage peaked in the latter half of 2023, after the release of the film 'Pearl'. Subsequently, discussions of other 'good for her' tales of female vengeance began to circulate online, featuring works such as 'Gone Girl'; 'Midsommar' and series such as 'Killing Eve.' One thing seemed clear: not only were women feeling their anger, but we were also defining it, articulating it, and presenting it; and the form that we were shaping it into was one of retaliation and revenge.

To assume, however, that the women purchasing Aqua Tofana did so because they were angry does not fully encapsulate what I imagine they were feeling. Considering contemporary events, I began to reflect on the word 'rage' and what that means. Etymologically speaking, 'rage' originates from the Latin word "rabies" meaning "madness" or "fury." It appears in Old French with connotations of "spirit" and "passion." Furthermore, in Middle English, it appears with similar connotations to the French. In modern English, the term has evolved to depict a violent anger, or intense fury. To get to a state of intense fury, there must be a pro-longed build where anger manifests. Considering its contemporary association with female oppression, I would go so far as to say that 'rage' is a term that could describe the peak of a building anger in response to oppressive behaviour. Female rage, therefore, feels definitive of the emotion

women might have felt in Renaissance Italy when deciding, finally, after an extended period of endurance, that the only option at hand was to assume the role of a widow.

Neil Bradbury argues that a murder by poison suggests a “cold-calculation” as a direct opposition to a hot-blooded, spur of the moment killing (Bradbury 3). When we think of ‘hot-blooded,’ we are describing the physical symptoms of anger. What if female rage manifests differently in the body? If we consider the complexities of the crimes committed by women during the Tofana poisonings: the brewing of poisons, the distribution within the Criminal Magic Underworld of Renaissance Italy, the secreting into the domestic setting and the murder itself, there are undeniable traces of calculation. This does not, however, absent anger from the crime. The anger, perhaps, had manifested into female rage; an emotion that lies dormant because it must, an emotion that ensures female survival.

In response to this reflection, I wrote the poem ‘the feminine urge’:

the feminine urge

to murder a lover over breakfast

because he talked over you at last night’s dinner party.

swallowing remarks like dripping yolk,

whilst he sips his tea brewed with love—

and arsenic.

the feminine urge to wash his whites

with the red lace lingerie

you wore on his last birthday.

the feminine urge to bleed

all over the bedsheets, to refuse

to grow his babies, to abandon your

responsibilities, to forget to buy his toothpaste,

to move everything on his desk an inch to the left,

to cry only when the door closes,

to hug the sheets when the lights are off,

to daydream about your teenage love,

to fuck him like any of it could be enough.

The intent behind this poem was to explore the notion of generational empathy. As previously discussed, one might empathise with the women committing the crimes of the Tofana case by connecting with their own experiences of rage as a pressurised or oppressed state of anger. I open the poem with a hyperbolic statement about murdering a lover. I present this as if a universal experience by defining it as a ‘feminine urge,’ or collective experience. I follow this with a listing technique to filter this feeling down gradually into less heightened experiences. By the end of the poem, we are exploring feelings and moments that are easier to empathise with than the desire to kill, “to hug the sheets when the lights are off/ to daydream about your teenage love.”

The intended result is the implication that if the reader can empathise with the end of the poem, they begin to empathise with its violent opening.

Encoded Rage: Sophie Collins' *Small White Monkeys* (2018)

In 2018, poet Sophie Collins published a fragmented essay, interspersed with poetry and photography, through which she examined her experience of self-expression, self-help, and shame. In a chapter titled, 'An Anger That Will Empower Me Indefinitely,' Collins discusses in detail how feelings of anger might be stimulating for women: "The reality for many female writers and artists who have been subject to men's violence is an encoding – of shame and a desire for revenge, and of the circumstances that produced that shame and hatred – into their work" (Collins 53).

By titling this chapter as such, Collins establishes a relationship between anger and power, one that has the potential to be all-powerful by "empower[ing] [her] indefinitely." What Collins suggests of men's violence as an act of repression and the consequence of that behaviour on women is an 'encoding.' This means to convert information into a particular form. Its etymological origin, dating back to the 1910s in association with symbols used for communication, the term 'encoded' implies a transition, or a translation. Should one consider creative writing as a method of translation, we might begin to articulate how creative intervention is enhanced by our awareness of feeling. For instance, Collins' implication that female writers encode patriarchal violence through their methodologies alludes further to the presence of rage in our writing, rage being the encoded output: the translation. Later in the chapter, Collins refers to an interview with poet Lisa Robertson in which the latter states:

...And certainly, anger can aerate the debilitating sadness that is another response to the rampant institutional misogyny that structures much public and commercial discourse... Sometimes to wake up and eat and work is an action that can require all affective reserves, including anger" (57).

Robertson's analysis of anger, and her use of the term 'aerates,' implies a sense of catharsis around the writerly process. Furthermore, the connotations surrounding this term to gardening and aerating soil to stimulate plant growth feels especially poignant in relation to my previous study of the garden as an archive. With this term, Robertson suggests that anger is productive or has the power to be productive when utilised.

By writing our rage, we aerate it. In writing, we acknowledge the feelings surrounding it: sadness, fear, frustration etc. All of these emotions are feelings that the archive loses in translation, because of the 'mal d'archive,' discussed in previous chapters. The act of writing aerates what has been repressed and from it, we produce something tangible, definable, and perhaps even archivable.

A poem from the collection in which I present encoded rage is the opening poem, titled 'The Moment':

There is a moment at every couple's table

that can only be visualised in candlelight

two people sit skin glows orange

before empty plates smeared with jus

and half consumed glasses of red wine.

You find yourself seated at this table

even though you have never knowingly consumed

a jus nor made one and you still wince

at the wine; the way she clings to the back

of your throat as though she wants to stay there.

This moment is a glass one. You need
 to be ready to see it for what it is such
 occurrences delivered in poetry prematurely
 might spoil things entirely. It is my job
 to describe it.

Let me begin with how the moment smells:
 meat and sweat. Salt lingering
 on his skin from a day at work too late
 home to shower before you ate. On occasion,
 the smell is cheapened with the stench of beer.

You might want to dress for the moment.
 It should be something skin-tight black or red
 this moment is not green
 though the aftermath could be. And so,
 the moment begins when
 the man sat opposite you says something.

This is important. The something is not anything.

The something is seasoned with the last thing
he did that made you angry. Sauteed by the heat
in your fingertips from a snide comment that belittled
your success. Memory doused

with the smell of sex. The kind you have
when you are not ready to talk about it yet.
The imagining of that sex reminds you of the time
he said it was okay because he didn't mean it.
Those words bring about what you had until now
forgotten. It is my job to tell you that none
of the forgotten things are forgotten actually.

You rarely let yourself think of them
because it would mean he is not the one.

It is all of the forgotten things that create
the moment and the moment is this.
He sips the wine. Poisons the perfume with notes
of stale beer consumed whilst the meal
you prepared grew cold on the table.

The beer gives him permission
to say something that sticks to the back
of your throat like the tack of red wine.

His agency as the one splits
 like a crack in a glass. A tripped switch.

You are no longer in love.
 Neither is your palette too soft
 for the wine.

The crucial part about the moment is this:
 he will keep on speaking through gritted teeth
 as he chews. The only one who knows
 about the moment is you.

I open the collection with a poem from an omniscient voice, inviting the reader into a scenario intended to mimic one that the Italian Wives might have found themselves in, and translate it into a contemporary experience. The role of the speaker in this poem is to set a slow pace, listing descriptors that establish all of the visuals they deem illustrative of ‘the moment.’ I paced this poem as such to embody the idea of rage as a drawn-out state of anger. Throughout this poem, the speaker’s rage is dormant but about to meet its catalyst: “His agency as the one splits/ like a small crack in a glass. A tripped switch./ You are no longer in love.” With this piece as an opening poem to the collection, I wanted to embody the state of empowerment Collins alludes to when discussing rage as an encoding of patriarchal oppression. In this poem, the power comes from a moment of dramatic irony whereby the speaker acknowledges that only the reader knows that the patriarchal oppressor has lost their romantic hold on the subject. In this poem, ‘the moment’ this happens is representative of the events that could have happened to motivate the poisonings of husbands in 17th Century Italy. Alluded to in the poem

is the notion that the subject can only take so much before the pressure transitions their anger into rage, aerating it to transition the speaker into a state of growth. This is represented with the image of a crack in a glass, a state of change that renders the speaker non-functional in their role within the relationship but empowered by the very fracture that could render them sharp, or dangerous. From this moment on, the subject is empowered in their rage, and the oppressor does not yet know. It is this state of empowerment that I imagine stimulated the choice to poison. In that enlightened state, one cannot go back to a state of endurance.

As previously discussed, to write in response to the absences in the archives of women's histories, caused by the erasure of emotion in the archive due to the 'mal d'archive,' we must write through our empathetic comprehension of it. By inviting the audience into the collection in this way, I hoped to respond to this reflection creatively and present a poem that suggests it takes empathy to imagine. By situating the audience as the subject with potential to commit the poisonings in this first interaction, I hoped they would be more inclined to engage with that empathy.

Audre, Amelia & A New Audacity

I believe poetry to be a mode through which we encode rage with maximum efficiency. In her essay, 'Poetry is Not a Luxury,' poet and essayist Audre Lorde advocates for the vitality of the form. Lorde presents poetry as "illumination":

The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are— until the poem— nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding (Lorde 7).

Lorde's notion of poetry as "illumination" is not dissimilar to Collins' articulation of writing as encoding rage. The implication that, through poetics, we give name to the nameless feels definitive of writing rage through poetry. If the archiving of the Tofana case is absented of feeling and emotion, as many archives are, then our creative intervention will benefit from a poetic approach, and the potential to "name the nameless," "form the formless" etc. Lorde goes on to explain, "...there is a dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises... These places within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through darkness" (7-8). Lorde alludes to something 'ancient and hidden,' as she acknowledges the anger felt as a black woman in the face of 'darkness' in her case, racism and oppression.

Lorde's notion of poetics and its potential to 'form the formless' is perhaps applicable to the issue of women's history as an othering, as previously discussed in relation to Farge's critique of the term in *The Allure of the Archive*. In the case of the Tofana poisonings, female feelings and lived, bodily experiences are 'ancient and hidden,'. Through poetics, might we begin to give them form?

As a collection, *Such Violent Glamour* is both an archiving of my imaginative intervention into the incomplete histories of 17th Century Wives, and the creative output from a process of encoding rage through poetic illumination. The latter is crucial to both my empathetic engagement with the women and their stories, and also, for the reader to experience the same.

A poetry collection in which we can observe encoded rage through poetic illumination is Amelia Loulli's collection, *Slip* (2024). In this collection, Loulli captures her maternal disposition whilst going through the medical process of receiving an abortion. In her poem 'I Will Write This Like a Birth,' Loulli contrasts two experiences of a foetus leaving a hosts' body:

because now you're listening

because now you're thinking about contractions

and the precision of a doctor who can slide their fingers

into a birth canal and know when a person will enter this world

about the opening of a pelvis the sound of bones

something about a rose and yes

I was mostly naked a wild thing just how you imagine it

my hair wet with sweat glittering you know I howled

carnal animal and you forgive me of course

because this was natural this bearing down the purposeful

rhythmic breathing out they held my hand

told me to squeeze in my palms I felt a hundred heartbeats

the faces of nurses appearing above me as though visions

and all the silence in the room the swaying hush of hope

my body obeying this breach and I so alive I pushed

and here I am still pushing (6).

Loulli, too, acknowledges the need for empathy in an exchange of imaginative intervention. She knows that by writing an abortion as if it were a birth, she grasps the readers' engagement: "now you're listening." Collins' discussion of encoding as a response to patriarchal oppression alludes to shame and desires for revenge. Loulli captures these feelings in her poem as she describes "you know I howled/ carnal animal and you forgive me...." The reference to

something animalistic in relation to a natural birthing process, followed by the speaker earning forgiveness perhaps alludes to social ideals around the ethics of abortion. The implication in the poem being that the speaker is forgiven because the birthing process is natural; perhaps alluding, through contrast, that the same forgiveness was not given in the case of the aborted pregnancy. By titling the poem as such, the poet confronts the oppressor. Her rage, through poetic exploration of the connotations of shame surrounding female experiences of abortion, becomes encoded.

Donald G. Dutton proposes, “The spreading activation of threat schemas strongly potentiates anger. Anger schemas are integrated mental representations that entail appraisals of threat” (Dutton 439). Trauma is present in Loulli’s collection. She depicts the loss of privacy and ownership over her own body, something women might find traumatic during childbirth or other women’s health procedures: “I was mostly naked a wild thing just how you imagine it/ my hair wet with sweat glittering....” The acknowledgement, “just how you imagine it,” invites the reader to be complicit in inflicting the trauma through the speakers’ loss of bodily autonomy. We imagine the scene that is described and become the oppressor. This notion is repeated at the end of the poem as the speaker states, “my body obeying the breach.” The use of “breach” suggests something non-consensual, a breach in boundaries both physical and mental. If we consider this in relation to Dutton’s discussion of how trauma, and threat, might trigger our anger schemas, one might consider rage a survival instinct. By the end of the poem, the speaker claims power back: “and I so alive I pushed/ and here I am still pushing” (Loulli 6).

Female poetics and artistic expression are modes through which we might acknowledge our rage, encode it, and present a creative artefact that soothes the anger schemas. To reach poetic illumination, the writer must consider this cognitive process with which we engage when encoding rage through writing. As discussed in previous chapters, female survival

is at the heart of the Tofana poisonings, as women turned to extreme measures to secure agency in their stories, but also to secure their livelihoods. I allude to this in a poem titled 'Rage.' In this poem, the speaker engages with the idea of women's rage as a response to patriarchal oppression, and how much power that accumulated feeling might have. In the poem, the speaker asks: "What is poison,/ really, if not this?/ The accumulation of women grasping fingers around whatever/ they can find in their kitchen that might earn them a moment of free-thinking." The poem continues with the speaker listing moments throughout history and pop-culture where women have been empowered by rage before concluding: "you did this to yourself." The implication here is that encoded rage, as a state of empowerment, ensures female survival; yet, were it not for the patriarchal oppression taking place in the first instance, the rageful consequences would not be suffered. In the case of the Tofana poisonings, the rage became encoded once the food was laced with poison, or once the bottle was secreted into the home. That was the poetic moment of illumination for Giulia's clientele.

J. Cooke relates the repression of female emotion to writing women's trauma: "[Writers] are aware of the powerful taint of shame that can adhere women who have suffered what they have, and how the survivor, in the words of Depantes, can resultantly 'turn the violence inwards,' against herself" (Cooke 29). I propose that the issue of turning the violence inwards against oneself could be challenged by the act of writing. For instance, by creatively intervening with cases of mariticide to explore empowerment through encoded rage, one is not advocating for husbands to be poisoned, but rather, channelling ones' violence, triggered by our anger schemas, into illumination. Cooke discusses problematic material in 'The Dangers of Audacity,' questioning: "does repurposing problematic material repeat the offence or highlight and thus critique the original offensiveness?" (170-201). To apply this to *Such Violent Glamour* as an intervention, does empathising with those convicted of a crime repurpose their offenses. Furthermore, does encoding our rage extend our experience of it? I would argue that

these are inevitable consequences of a transitional process. The consequences of ignoring the power of our rage could be equally problematic. In the afterword, Cooke highlights: “Central to the stated politics of the new audacity authors is an insistence on bodily autonomy and the rejection of passive victimhood” (170-201). This is present in the poem from Loulli, as she rejects victimhood by presenting an abortion as a conscious and active process: “I pushed/ and here I am still pushing” (Loulli 6).

The speaking voices throughout *Such Violent Glamour* reject victimhood through acknowledging the consequences of the events. In the closing poem, ‘If I were to drink wine with Giulia Tofana,’ the speaker recounts her experiences of patriarchal oppression with new audacity. In stanza 5 of the prose poem, the speaker depicts an experience of disassociation during an assault. Cooke highlights, “Now is definitely a moment more open than perhaps ever before to women speaking about rape and breaking the silence and shame that traditionally accompany victimhood” (170-201). Furthermore, the speaker presents their encoded rage by rejecting victimhood, and acknowledging her desire for revenge:

it is here, she would ask me if I have ever killed
anyone. And I would say no, because of course I
haven’t. Except, Giulia Tofana is dead. This
entire conversation is happening inside my head
and if that renders it real enough that the question
requires an answer then, really, I could tell an
imaginary truth.

I swallow what is left of my wine and describe, in
detail, all of the ways in which I have killed him.

Probably about 600 times.

The speaker is empowered by encoding her desire for revenge, which she achieves through an admission of an “imaginary truth.” Emphasis on the ‘imaginary’ is an allusion to the critical backdrop to the collection as a whole; for instance, the notion that a creative, speculative, or

imaginary, intervention is still a truth of sorts. Whilst events depicted throughout the collection are not factually true, they are true in how they engage with oppression and anger, and a woman's desire for revenge.

Audre Lorde, too, explores the notion of anger as power. In her essay, 'Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,' she comments: "Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change... I am speaking of a radical alteration in those assumptions underlining our lives" (110-111). This is encoded in her poem, 'Outlines' in which she asks:

What hue lies in the slit of anger

ample and pure as night

what colour the channel

blood comes through? (222).

As Lorde considers the colour of anger in all of its stages of processing— be it rage, encoding or illumination— the reader is invited to consider anger as a process through the biological reference to the colour of blood inside of the body, versus outside once oxidised. What happens to our anger, or rage, once encoded, once illuminated? The poet ensures that whatever form her rage translates into, it is one of tangibility. What was once repressed, or absolved, from the archival repository, now sits adjacent, to be considered.

The Poetics of Female Rage

In consideration of the poets Collins, Lorde, and Loulli, I propose a poetic approach to articulating female rage to be advantageous when exploring the ‘good for her’ trope in relation to the Tofana poisonings. Poetics allow for duality of voice and perspective, as explored in previous chapters. Furthermore, linguistically, the form is suited to tackling a topic shaped widely by social discourse due to the opportunity to experiment with figurative language, tone and sound poem by poem.

First and foremost, we must give the term female rage definition and examine its place in pop culture. One cannot write about encoded rage without acknowledging the contemporary euphoria surrounding female rage as a movement within feminist discourse. Female rage has become a comfortable term to allude to latent anger; more specifically, the naming, voicing, and empowering of that anger felt by women throughout history and the modern day. As previously discussed in relation to the article by Dodd published in the Guardian, as of 2024, violence against women has been regarded as a “national emergency”. With this in mind, the need for poetics as a mode through which to encode our rage feels fundamental and urgent. However, discourse about female rage as a pop culture movement suggests that synonymising works such as Collins’, Lorde’s and Loulli’s might undermine the voices they set out to claim.

Roja Jayaram discusses the aforementioned discourse. She frames her essay with reference to the 1999 film, *10 Things I Hate About You* which Jayaram states, “the film attempts to portray Kat’s anger as a form of empowerment and authenticity [but] falls into the trap of fetishizing her rage for the sake of romantic intrigue and male validation” (Jayaram). Through discussion of online discourse surrounding female rage on social media, Jayaram highlights

that “Female rage memes are popular because they give people, especially women, a way to express emotions that might be seen as too much in real life” (Jayaram). When trying to set apart the writing up of repressed anger and the social discourse around female rage, one might consider the possibility that the latter is a term socially overused. A comment from Taylor Swift alluding to a live performance from her album ‘The Tortured Poets’ Department,’ dubbing it “Female Rage: The Musical,” prompted an article in Cosmopolitan in which excessive use of the term was criticised: “female rage doesn’t take a golf club to your car. It eats itself alive” (Kibbe).

One might deduce that female rage has become somewhat synonymous with a pop culture movement; but do the moments where female celebrities take golf clubs to cars speak louder than the persistent concerns surrounding violence against women? The global attack on women’s bodily autonomy with the outlawing of female speech by the Taliban, shortly followed by the overturning of Roe V. Wade in 2022 suggest that it might (The Guardian). Thus, when it comes to writing up rage, there is a need for the poet to manage pop-culture discourse carefully, and thread encoded rage to create something that eats itself alive.

I would argue that it is somewhat vital that these strains of discourse continue to speak to one another, with discussions of female rage in pop culture stimulating our ability to empathise with the kind of rage that eats itself alive. I consider this in my poem, ‘Rage’:

Rage

In a selfish attempt to find solitude
from the footage of women grieving
over tiny charcoal bodies,
I come across a digital archiving
of Stevie Nicks cursing her former lover
to an eternalised haunting.

I cannot help but wonder if:
in our 3.95 billion—
and shared conceptual feminine—
we felt the epitome of our rage
in the same moment,
might we survive the planet long enough
to articulate the boom?

Words, should they still exist,
might settle together as the dust once did
to liken the choking of the human race
to that of Augustus,
throats sticky with the remnants of fig.
What is poison, really, if not this?

The accumulation of women grasping
fingers around whatever they can find
in their kitchen that might earn them
a moment of free-thinking.

If not the crumbling of charred bodies
the men breathed in a war on heresy;

if not the blood from the severed heads
of queens; miasma emitted

from our dangling ragdoll bodies.

It rages down a bloodline

before settling upon the lady Diana

in the form of a poison dress;

and the entire planet swallows it.

Freedom beyond the jurisdiction

of anger held in dormancy.

The archive becomes echo chamber

for poetry in distillation,

I don't know what to tell you—

it festers in the belly of an ecosystem,

we succumb, or we expel—

you did this to yourself.

I allude to the moral complexities that emerge as a consequence of these two strains of anger shouting over each other. The speaker critiques themselves using the term 'selfish' to articulate using content from pop culture to distract from the rage and grief felt by mothers losing their children through acts of war. However, the discourse throughout the poem begins to unpack this binary by acknowledging what unites the two events; a shared experience of latent rage. In its completion, the poem acknowledges various events that have resulted in a unanimous feeling of rage among women throughout history including: the burning of women deemed heretics, the execution of queens incited by patriarchal oppression and the hanging of accused

witches. The speaker implies that this latent anger is a shared experience by depicting it to be a poison ‘the entire planet [swallows].’

So, how might one advocate for poetics and their linguistic merit for writing encoded rage? In ‘The Gender of Sound,’ poet Anne Carson explores the patriarchal inhibition of the female voice:

Putting a door on the female mouth has been an important project of patriarchal culture from antiquity to the present day. Its chief tactic is an ideological association of female sound with monstrosity, disorder, and death. Consider this description by one of her biographers of the sound of Gertrude Stein: ‘Gertrude was hearty. She used to roar with laughter, out loud. She had a laugh like a beefsteak. She loved Beef’ (Carson 5).

Identifying the silencing of the female voice as a ‘patriarchal project,’ Carson alludes to the same patriarchal oppression I discuss throughout this chapter and this thesis. Female voices have been silenced from the archive, either due to patriarchal consignation of the archive itself; or, due to the ‘mal d’archive,’ the voices and echoes of women have succumbed to reverberating silence because the patriarchy was not listening. Furthermore, the vitality of sound and voice in contemporary poetics lends itself to female defiance. In poetry, our voices are amplified. This is further emphasised by Carson’s discussion of ‘*sophrosyne*’ which she defines as “Verbal continence... an essential feature of the masculine virtue (‘prudence, soundness of mind, moderation, temperance, self-control’) that organises most patriarchal thinking on ethical or emotional matters” (14). Thus, the implication being that women must be quiet for the patriarchy to operate with efficiency. Throughout her study, Carson emphasises quietness as obedience through a patriarchal lens. To counteract, we must be loud to be defiant.

Poetics suit this defiance. If we consider poetics as previously discussed in relation to Armand, contemporary poetics has a “material contiguity” and an increased “emphasis on the materiality of language” (Armand xvi). I noted in the introduction to this thesis that Armand

pays emphasis on voice and sound. In poetry, the speaking voice is central and isolate. The poet is free to utilise this isolation, spotlighting the speaker's thoughts and experience through poetic tools such as rhythm, meter, and rhyme for emphasis: all techniques that impact sound. Thus, to achieve encoded rage, poetics make for an efficient translation. Anger has sound, and it has colour: as Lorde implied through her poetry.

The previous discussion of poetics as a fundamental linguistic form for women is not dissimilar to Julia Kristeva's discussion of 'the Semiotic Chora.' In her essay, 'The Semiotic and the Symbolic,' Kristeva proposes an analysis of 'the *chora*.' Kristeva not only acknowledges the *chora* as a psychoanalytic term for the pre-linguistic period of child development, but also describes it as

...an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stasis. We differentiate this uncertain and indeterminate *articulation* from a *disposition* that already depends on representation, lends itself to phenomenological, spatial intuition, and gives rise to geometry. Although our theoretical description of the *chora* is itself part of the discourse of representation that offers it as evidence, the *chora*, as rupture and articulations (rhythm), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality and temporality. Our discourse— all discourse— moves with and against the *chora* in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it. Although the *chora* can be designated and regulated, it can never be definitively posited: as a result, one can situate the *chora* and, if necessary, lend it a topology, but one can never give it axiomatic form (Kristeva 26).

The notion of pre-linguistic expression as 'spatial intuition,' and its likeness to 'rupture and articulations (rhythm),' likens the *chora* to rhythmic poetic devices. Poetic thought and expression are closely related to Kristeva's description of the *chora* in comparison to axiomatic

forms of literature. To relate this to the notion of rage and its articulation, what is repressed is starved of axiomatic form. Poetry that attempts to encode rage engages with this starvation and the resulting poetic discourse is uniquely feminine as a consequence, due to the *chora's* pre-requisitioned link to motherhood. To refer back to Easthope's study, he draws connections between the unconscious and poetic discourse, stating: "Poets and artists have known for a long time that there is a powerful unconscious component in human experience. In 1821 in 'a Defence of Poetry,' Shelley affirms that poetry 'acts a divine and unapprehend manner, beyond and above consciousness'" (Easthope 7). The resistance of poetic discourse to axiomatic form and constraint earns it favour when engaging in transference from the pre-conscious into our writing.

Kristeva expands: "All these various processes and relations, anterior to sign and syntax, have just been identified from a genetic perspective as previous and necessary to the acquisition of language, but not identical to language" (Kristeva 29). The suggestion that genetics have implications on the pre-linguistic development of communication indicate that the biological link to the mother is a pre-requisite to linguistic expression. Furthermore, one might associate poetic linguistics and discourse in relation to feminine expression and articulation. The relationship between the *chora* and poetic articulation feels reminiscent of Lorde's proposition of poetry as illumination. In relation to Mantel's commentary on historical preservation through linguistic documentation, one might surmise that a court transcript is starved of poetic language and therefore, in accordance with the *chora*, inherently masculine. It is through poetic intervention that one might consider the oppositional feminine.

To relate this to my previous archival research into the events surrounding the Tofana poisonings, Kristeva's analysis of masculine vs feminine writing provides an intriguing perspective into document classification. My studies of the court transcripts and proceedings against Tofana and her accomplices, notably that of proceedings against Girolama Spara

studied through the aforementioned analysis by Mike Dash, could be considered masculine in relation to the semiotic chora and therefore inadequate material for a creative intervention that seeks to embolden the feminine. Perhaps what speaks to the feminine in this case belongs to a different archive, with the Tofana archive consisting mostly of masculine perspectives due to issues of consignation: those keeping the archive were those in power, agents of the patriarchy. Furthermore, if we consider the breadth of material relating to beautification, this appears to be where the feminine lies.

When speaking on the podcast, *You're Dead to Me*, Jill Burke concluded the following: Compared to military history, say, or the biographies of great men, the history of beauty gives us a window into multiplicity of experiences and a chance to remember lives that have been frequently disparaged or dismissed... because I think it also reminds us, and it's still a conversation we have now on social media, especially about how dismissive people can be about make up... and that's actually how much of women's history is linked to that industry, sometimes not even by choice, but how dismissing it like that sort of doesn't allow us to hear those voices... (Jenner).

When writing of the Tofana poisonings through imagined archives, constructed voice and encoded rage, my poetic practice leans towards the feminine of the chora, as presented by Kristeva. In completion, these poems allude to Farge's notion of the alternate archive that is 'women's history'. My struggle to navigate and creatively respond to The Medici Archive Project as an example was less an issue with my ability to read its material, and perhaps more about this issue of consignation to which Farge alluded. The lived, bodily experiences of women were being kept elsewhere. Somewhere where women could take power of consignation.

Burke's studies led me to new archives, namely: Art Herstory, Renaissance Goo and Italian Women Writers, as analysed in relation to Hannah Woolley's pamphlet in Chapter Two.

As a collection exploring the verisimilitude of maternal disposition whilst going through the process of receiving an abortion, one might consider Loulli's collection 'Slip,' as the poetic feminine in relation to the *chora* in practice. In 'Expect Blood,' Loulli shows audacity – as J. Cooke might describe it – by listing the medical advice given to her before her procedure:

I'm going to tell you what happened

so you know

it was easy

so the memory becomes literal

like a leaf

I stayed awake

a tooth extraction

with less root

an injection

in the back of my hand

you'll have a bad head

like a good night

out the surgeon said

a small suction tube

removed

I slipped

out of myself

a short time sitting

on a blue leather chair

some biscuits

then home
 except blood
 there is no way around this
 expect blood
 liquid or solid
 before it forms a skin
 you will leave the clinic
 singing
 your arms will feel
 like wings (Loulli ix).

The poet resists the axiomatic by refusing the confines of sentence structure and end line punctuation. Furthermore, the experience is literalised through listing. The speaker alludes to a potential of misinformation. Having listed the bodily experiences forewarned by her surgeon, emphasis is drawn to bleeding through the wordplay around 'except blood' and 'expect blood.' Loulli's use of 'except' suggests that blood was the exception to the list of advice, that perhaps the speaker was not made aware of the totality of the bleeding. That the speaker feels the need to 'tell you what happened' creates doubt that the linguistic communication from the medical officials pre-empted the experience accurately. Lastly, the use of second person creates an intimacy between the speaker and the reader as though her account of her lived experience adds an authenticity to the medical discourse listed previously.

Midway through the collection, Loulli alludes intertextually to the fairy-tale of 'Little Red Riding-Hood' as a way of linking her experience to her embodiment of motherhood by speaking to an impression of the potential child as she would her born children, through storytelling. In 'The Abortion,' she writes:

oh mother

what a big mouth

you have

all the better to swallow you with

my dear slip of cells

for there is no science in the woods

only life provoking more life

the way love provokes more love

and what did we expect (Loulli 23).

By parodying the familiar phrases from the original source material, Loulli alludes to the oral tradition of storytelling which precedes the axiomatic practice of writing. This feels reminiscent of the *chora*, speaking to a form that resists semiotic practice. Moreover, Loulli challenges the current debates around female bodily autonomy “for there is no science in the woods,” arguably an allusion to the events leading to the overturning of Roe V Wade if not the event itself. Loulli is showing audacity, articulating a repression in action. Her rage is encoded both in her poetic discourse but also in the latent content from which the fairy-tale emerges: calling on the vigilante justice of Red Riding Hood and her grandmother being cut from the belly of the wolf by a huntsman’s axe (Grimm pp13-16).

Angela Carter often used the latent content from fairy-tales through which to respond intertextually and encode her rage, with ‘The Company of Wolves’ and ‘Wolf-Alice’ also interpolating the Red Riding Hood story. To relate her work to the context of my project, in her version of the tale of Bluebeard, titled ‘The Bloody Chamber,’ we read of how the female protagonist takes agency of the story by entering the forbidden chamber. Despite initially covering her tracks, the wife of the murderous Bluebeard resists a repression of her spirit by

confronting, “any bride brought to this castle should come ready dressed in mourning, should bring a priest and a coffin with her” (Carter 19).

Inspired by Carter and Loulli’s intertextual channelling of the latent content behind fairy-tales and their historical reputation for stifling female expression in young girls, I wrote the following poem as an intertextual response to *Beauty and the Beast*:

Beast

His forgive-me eyes bookend a furrowed brow
as he returns with a bird in his teeth.

His fur is bloody. In the corner of his mouth,
the remnants of yet another kill begin to congeal.

His beauty considers her next move carefully,
and accepts the gift. Its head – partially severed –

lulls to one side – dropped to the ground in defeat.

Despite passionate assurances, the ritual repeats

over several weeks and days until the Beast insists,
she learn his ways.

The woodland leaves her vulnerable to all manner
of wild things: the creepy crawlies tangle in her skirts,

the roots and vines caress each ankle.

Beast hungers for flesh, bloody and mangled.

She dawdles and he lingers at a large oak tree.

When she returns to the hunting party: late and alone
she need not explain where the Beast has gone.

Her forgive-me eyes bookend a furrowed brow
as she greets them with fur in her teeth.

Having written the non-human to imagine voice in my eco-poems, I was inspired to consider the relationship between animalism, monstrosity and murder. Structurally, I adopted the form of a circle narrative often featured in oral story-telling. I allude to the mortal danger of the female subject by foreshadowing the potential of her death with that of a bird the beast catches as a token before closing the poem with a parody of the opening stanza. It is alluded that the female subject takes agency into her own hands by killing the beast before he can harm her. The presence of rage in this poem is not explicit, neither is it overt in Loulli's take on Red Riding Hood. Anger in dormancy is implied in the presence of the Beast's 'forgive-me eyes,' suggesting he knows his actions have a consequence; additionally, the Beast's '[hunger] for flesh,' is included in a list of things to which the subject is vulnerable to when out in the woods with him. However, once we arrive at the conclusion of the poem – and the speaker takes agency by killing him – through empathy we can derive that rage was present the entire time. With the Beast's demise, the rage is encoded.

If we consider this, once again, in relation to Lorde's notion of poetry as illumination, and the current and historical silencing of the female voice: female poetics are inherently

defiant, and crucial in that defiance. Collections such as *Slip*, *Bella* and *Jane: a Murder* demonstrate this.

What is more, the tangibility of female poetics is preservation, in the place of what the archive has been denied: the experiences women have been forced to have quietly. The woman facing the need for an abortion does so with her testimony noted and amplified. The woman left deceased and anonymous in the skeleton of tree is named, and the potentiality of her experiences articulated. The woman whose life was cut short is memorialised alongside her own writings, her voice preserved and archived with finality.

Conclusion: Poetry as Vigilantism

As discussed throughout this thesis, Laura Mattoon D'Amore discusses some of the controversies— or audacities— proposed by so-called “vigilante feminism” as a method of encoding rage. D'Amore states, “vigilante feminism, as used here, applies specifically to the performance of vigilantism by girls and women who have undertaken their own protection, and the protection of others, against violence— such as sexual assault, abduction, abuse and trauma— because they have been otherwise failed in that manner” (D'Amore 387). One might note the similarities between D'Amore's discussion and Cooke's notion of the New Audacity, as D'Amore states, “Revision is an act of rebellion, casting off the limitations of the past...” which sounds somewhat radical (D'Amore 386). This is not unlike Cooke's definition, “Audacity is used by both those swimming with and those swimming against the tide of norms: people whose sensibilities are offended by a breach in sanctioned behaviour reach for audacity as a reproach whereas those who find norms themselves an offensive constraint may audaciously seek to breach them” (Cooke 1-2). To write encoded rage, one must channel the complexities of its manifestation and not shy away from it; but what are the dangers of synonymising encoded rage with vengeance?

There is undoubtedly a thirst for revenge emitted from the folklore that embodies the Tofana case, but the challenge as a writer was not to limit the tone of my intervention to that of revenge. The reclaiming of agency as a wife in 17th Century Italy goes beyond a desire for retribution; these were not exclusively vengeful women. It is about mortal and emotional survival— and even more simply— the comfort of an everyday control we might now recognise as bodily autonomy. The methods through which women might have achieved this were extreme; however, their extremities settle into history in equilibrium with the repressions forced upon them by their marriages. D'Amore critiques Rupert Sander's retelling of the classic

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, a blockbuster titled *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012) for its presentation of Ravenna who, in her encoded rage, represents, “destruction and chaos, the story of a woman out of control” (D’Amore 391). Her study is concluded with the statement: “It is a deeply troubling message about our cultural moment, that when we imagine a wicked queen for a blockbuster film, we villainize a rape survivor” (395).

The relationship between encoded rage and vengeance is a delicate one and building the correct context in which retaliatory violence would not undermine the agency it seeks to reclaim was paramount for creating the correct tone for this project. The former discussion surmises the atmospheric concern upon which I built a poetry collection. These poems oftentimes challenge each other, argue with each other, or sit in discourse with each other. I did not want to shy away from the capability of women to be murderous in their own right; simultaneously, I did not want to undermine the sufferings that might lead other women to it. The result is a collection that takes the limited archival preservation of a spree of killings and uses the contemporary concern around violence against women to intervene with its folklore.

Inspired by Kristeva’s emphasis on poetic discourse and its resistance to axiomatic form, I wrote two sister poems that document the speakers’ thoughts before and after an attack. Considering the contemporary discourse around female rage, I titled these poems after a quote from the 2009 horror/comedy, *Jennifer’s Body*. In “‘you’re killing people...’” I mimic Loulli’s combination of incomplete sentences and listing used in ‘Expect Blood.’ The listed thoughts are frantic and disjointed, resisting any axiomatic demand of coherence to evoke distress. The speaker acknowledges, “it can be hard to say no,” and abandons the thought. They attempt to articulate their internal struggle, depicting a “delayed response from my capillaries,” in response to “his grip around [their] wrist.” A violence is acknowledged though the speaker

distances themselves from it through metaphor, “he drives a fingernail through the stem/ my nerves and spinal cord no longer entwine—” The sister poem acknowledges the consequences. In, “...no, I’m killing boys” the film reference is complete. The speaker reflects on what is happening to their body physically and how disjointed this is from their emotions, questioning, “why would your body bother to [bleed]?” and stating, “[they] cannot recognise the broken skin as [their] own skin.” There is no acknowledgement of vengeful desire in the body of the poems themselves. It is the pop-culture reference in the title that situates these poems in their wider context. They are linked to the pop-culture discourse by quoting a popular film in which a woman embodies her encoded rage through a spree of murders. Furthermore, these poems attempt to connect our contemporary empathy with the crimes of women who killed their husbands a few centuries prior.

I discuss the relationship between the contemporary and the events of the Aqua Tofana murders more directly in a poem titled, ‘A Poisoner’s Guide to Beautifying.’ This poem is inspired by my discovery of the case, a scene which I think metaphorically embodies the relationship between 21st Century women and the wives of 17th Century Italy. I reference the video essays from Sarian, as discussed throughout this thesis, in which she tells her audience about a true crime case whilst applying her makeup. In the poem, I describe contemporary beautifying practices and allude to those of the 17th Century which— in an ironic twist of fate— were oftentimes poisonous to the women using them: “My tricks are four centuries ahead/ of the women clogging their pores/ with powdered arsenic to hold it all in place”. I close the poem by acknowledging our empathy with these women, empathy we have as a consequence of the current discourse around female rage and violence against women: “To the girl on the screen, I ask this:/ how many times have you found yourself tempted?”

Throughout the collection, I call into question the morality of my own empathy with female poisoners from history. In ‘The Garden at Alnwick,’ the speaker admits, “The guide

describes her fatal intoxication/ of an ex-fiance as *unfortunate* and my inner monologue/ responds *good for her* before I can quantify/ the PH level of my morality.” I consider the motivation behind the intrusive thought in a short poem called, ‘A Woman’s Place,’ which could situate itself in either the historical context of the Tofana poisonings or a contemporary setting. The speaker comments quite simply on this murderous tendency: “I dilute his hostility/ in a cooking pot, heir loomed/ into our kitchen – rusting/ around the edges/ like a marriage might/ if unattended on high heat.” The poem likens the male persona’s hostility to the poison stirred into his food and the speaker’s contrast of this cooking to the ‘rusting’ of their marriage and establishes a kinship between all the female perspectives considered in the collection and their shared experiences in heterosexual relationships.

In chapter 5 of Easthope’s study, ‘The Unconscious and the Text,’ it is acknowledged that Freud regarded imaginative writing, among other creative expressions, to be “among those human activities whose connection with an incomprehensible unconscious was always suspected” (Easthope 109). Perhaps through engagement with the social discourse and reflection on the practice of writing up what has been latent, the underlying psyche of this collection feels active and discursive.

To conclude, Audre Lorde’s presentation of poetry as a fundamental appears to encapsulate Easthope’s notion that whatever has been repressed will face a resurgence. Lorde surmises by stating:

For there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt – of examining what those ideas feel like being lived on Sunday morning at 7am., after brunch, during wild love, making war, giving birth, mourning our dead – while we suffer the old longings, battle old warnings and fears of being silent and impotent and alone, while we taste new possibilities and strengths (Lorde 106).

The lived events of the 17th Century women who went on to poison their husbands have suffered from the ‘mal d’archive’ in relation to historical preservation. Furthermore, their repressed testimony sits latent somewhere in the unconscious of women’s history in the company of countless other histories that comprise the foundation of discourse around violence against women in the 21st Century. By exploring new ways to make their experiences felt, one must find their own way to imagine a lived experience that might catalyse a murderous thought. In this collection, discourse is attempted across our experiences to identify that moment of empathetic understanding. By drawing together what is real and what is an imagined unity, this collection encodes rage; the kind of rage shared amongst women; both the kind that celebrates golf clubs smashing cars, and the kind that eats itself alive. The speculative is simply the stitching that connects one woman’s rage to another.

Thesis Conclusion

Introduction

On archival absence, Derrida states: “An incompleteness of the archive, and thus a certain determinability of the future, should be taken into consideration by the historian in any ‘reconstruction of the history of psychoanalysis’ Now this incomplete-ness is of an entirely different order from that of the future which is in question at the end of the “Monologue”. In the middle of the book, what was in question was still an incompleteness and a future that belong to the normal time of scientific progress” (52). The archive is its absences. It is defined by them, kept alive by them. Archive fever, upon which the curation and continuation of an archive depends, is fuelled by the gaps. It is through creative intervention that the power of consignation is evidenced. Take Derrida’s anecdotal example of the answering machine:

So here is what we *believe we know* at least, here is the appearance: the other will never again respond. Now in spite of these necessities, these obvious facts, and these substantiated certitudes, in spite of all the reassuring assurances which such a knowing or such a believing-to-know dispenses to us, through them, the phantom continues to speak. Perhaps he does not respond, but he speaks. A phantom speaks. What does this mean? In the first place or in a preliminary way, this means that without responding it disposes of a response, a bit like the answering machine whose voice outlives its moment of recording: you call, the other person is dead, now, whether you know it or not, and the voice responds to you, in a very precise fashion, sometimes cheerfully, it instructs you... There would be neither history nor tradition nor culture without that possibility. It is this that we are speaking of here. It is this, in truth, that we must answer for (62-3).

Here, Derrida presents the notion that the power of consignation and the *mal d'archive* create something paradoxical. That the archive itself begins because of archival absence, and a desire to fill it. Thus, I refer to the statement proposed in the thesis introduction, that historical preservation cannot be achieved without creative intervention. Through analysis of *Archive Fever*, I have demonstrated that archival curation is a creative intervention, it begins with a speculation, a desire to tell a story. The consignation of an archive depends upon this in the first instance.

To demonstrate this, I have examined creative writing as a method of archival inquiry and analysis; and, explored writing as an evaluative process. The foundation of this study is the archive itself; as a concept and as a place, a physical location hosting a repository. In a blog titled, 'Getting Started with Archival Research,' Lukas K writes, "While we might think of archives as repositories of materials that can offer historical background, they can also contain more recent resources that can help us gain better understanding of the research problem or the setting where we plan to study it" (Sage Research Methods Community, 2021).

To conclude this study, I present the hypothesis that creative intervention is more than a creative output to plug the archival gaps. Rather, the creative intervention is the "recent resource" that might aid "better understanding of the research problem." It is clear from K's discussion of the methodologies behind archival research that this is a creative process. When comparing the latter to field research, K surmises:

However, archives are necessarily a product of sedimentation over the years—collections may be subject to erosion of fragmentation—by natural (e.g., accidental loss or damage) or manmade causes (e.g., purposive selection or organizational disposal policies). Material is therefore subjectively judged to be worthy of preservation by either the depositor or archivist and therefore may not represent the original collection

in its entirety. Storage space may also have had a big impact on what was initially acquired or kept from a collection that was offered to an archive (K).

Throughout the preceding chapters, I have alluded to a ‘research problem.’ The biases of human consignment, as defined in Derrida’s study, *Archive Fever*, has caused an erosion of so-called ‘women’s histories’. The latter is a term that renders the archivist, and the researcher, complicit in the othering of female experience throughout history. However, it is also demonstrative of the need for creative intervention to challenge that complicity. What K presents throughout his study is the notion of archival research as a sensory expedition. One which involves the physical navigation of a repository. Furthermore, K acknowledges the issue of space because of the archive’s physicality. Thus, one must refer once again to Derrida’s notion of the *mal d’archive*, a death drive that renders the archive both living and dying at the same time.

Digitisation as Mal D'archive

All three of the case studies presented in Chapter One discuss archival research as a sensory experience. Bernard's collection *Surge*, an expedition into the Black British Archive Group's archiving of the New Cross Fire, depicts the physicality of such enquiry. The poems 'Ark' and 'Ark II' present the materiality of their investigation:

I take this morning from its box, see how the years have warped

Its edges, its middle pages conjoined at the text.

I remove the rusted paper clip, dry-sponge its brittle red remains,

Unfold a liver spotted note in copper ink... (2).

There are many allusions to aging, or decay; descriptions such as "warped" and "rusted" and the detailing of copper ink perhaps an allusion to how the ink has aged on the page. Through Bernard's writing, we see how the act of archiving works against itself; that tension between the desire to preserve and the inevitability of time passing: the mal d'archive.

Bernard contrasts this with what the repository simply cannot contain: "where to put the burning house, the child made ash, the brick in the back of neck, the shit in the letter box and piss up the side of it?" Bernard utilises poetics to preserve the sounds that could not be archived. In 'Songbook' and 'Songbook II' they explore musical forms associated with transatlantic black culture. Furthermore, 'Songbook' takes influence from Johnson's dub poem, 'New Crass Massakah' using phonetics to preserve voice and identity. To present archive fever, Bernard must immerse themselves in archival expedition as a sensory experience.

In *Bella*, Nellie Cole also presents writing as an output of sensory exploration. Her poetry often intervenes with the existing archive on a physical level. Poems such as ‘Bella Theory 1: Spy’ and ‘Bella’s Shoes Lead Nowhere’, we are invited to consider the artefacts and what we can experience through handling them. Cole overlays her poetics with the existing discourse preserved on a postcard. The ways in which we might read that artefact are forever changed by the addition of a footnoted poem. The latter poem, however, presents the need for a sensory exploration in a different way. As Cole advocates, ‘Suppose it took a woman’s eyes to read/ the nicks in the fabric/ notches on the welt...,’ it becomes clear that the archivist is complicit in translating the stories the archive has to tell us (Cole 27). The implication being that the physical handling of artefacts, in conjunction with the archivist and their ability to empathise with the subject matter at hand, is a sensory expedition; one that catalyses the investigative process.

Lastly, in *Jane: a Murder*, Maggie Nelson presents a threading of voices to create a palimpsest, stimulated both by physical exploration of the archives surrounding her aunt’s murder (the media responses, Jane’s own journal, and family memories). Most notable throughout this collection are Nelson’s poetic documentations of family discourse and how memory becomes repository. The act of exploring one’s memories, and the memories of those around them relies on reflective discourse, or meditation: arguably, too, a sensory experience.

Any archival navigation requires creative thinking. K alludes to this in his writing, “Techniques for locating archival material are akin to excavation— what you can analyse depends on what you can find. Once located, the researcher is free to immerse himself or herself in the materials— to evaluate, review, reclassify data; test out prior hypothesis; or discover emerging issues” (K). What is not stated, rather implied, here, is archival research as a creative research event. Speculation is implied as K uses language such as ‘immerse himself or herself

in the materials’ or the suggestion of ‘evaluate, review, reclassify.’ Regardless of the intended output, archival research is inherently creative.

Carolyn Steedman advocates a similar hypothesis. On reflection of the impact of Jules Michelet’s accounts of communing with the dead, Steedman writes, “It was by reading Michelet that I first understood history-*writing* in generic terms, as a form of magical realism, with the historian’s contribution not the mountains that move, the girls that fly, the rivers that run backwards, but the everyday and fantastic act of making the dead walk and talk” (Steedman, *Romance* 5). Considering creative intervention as magical realism helps us to acknowledge the role of the imagination, and the validity of the speculative. The dead are not walking and talking in any literal sense, but does the fictionalisation make it any less real? If exploring the archive is in itself a sensory experience, then that physicality will weave its way into the creative output. We imagine Bella walking in her shoes. We hear Jane’s voice when we read scraps of her journal.

What, then, do we risk losing should the archive be severed from its physicality? The study written by Louis K for Sage Research Methods alludes to the issue of space. The archive as a physical repository takes up space, and space is an exhaustible resource. To counteract this, more archives are becoming digitised. Loes Opgenhaffen discusses digitisation and the accessibility of the archive in relation to archaeological research:

Research into the impact of digital technology upon archives and how this transformed archiving practices in research environments, however, has received less attention. Current research often treats digital archives as static entities which may be searchable offer data as downloads at best, although this trend is increasingly challenged (Opgenhaffen).

Whilst digitising archives might make archival observation accessible, does this equate to practical research? There will always be subjectivity of practice. Opgenhaffen acknowledges the “ease of finding and (re)using data once within the archive” due to digitisation. However, the physical and sensory experience of navigating an archive is somewhat lost in digital translation. It is this sensory experience that the writer needs in order to intervene, as demonstrated by my experience navigating *The Medici Archive Project* database.

In Chapter Two, I referred to Chantelle Bayes’s notion of the “environmental imaginary” and her advocacy for sensory research to stimulate the writing process. She calls this a research creation event. Despite the historical background to my creative research and its roots to Italy, scope to fund a research creation event to visit any archive was limited due to the digitisation of Italy’s poisonous histories. *The Medici Archive Project*, whilst an invaluable resource and rich repository of Italian history, inhibited my sensory engagement with the archive. Databases can be tricky to navigate, and the breadth of their contents can be seemingly limitless. What creativity is stifled by observing artefacts on a screen rather than removing the rusted paperclip? This was further realised when a second attempt at a sensory archival exploration, a potential visit to the Carcanet Poetry Archive was limited to a file share via email.

As an attempt to combat the ‘mal d’archive,’ our attitudes to consignment have evolved with digitisation. Opgenhaffen explains:

In particular, digital media seems to have led to a “general storage mania” (Rossaak, 2010, p. 11) and “fetishization of data” (Sorensen, 2017). Everything has to be recorded and stored, in order to safeguard transparency and permanency of the collection and reasoning process, or so it seems to be thought. However, amassing research data without proper access can easily become a dead archive, “billions of files lie like

sediment in the cloud, in hard drives” (Cameron, 2021, p. 4)... And unused archives are not the typical collections in which institutions are eager to invest money to maintain and sustain them (Opgenhaffen).

The notion that consignment has evolved to become a fetishized version of itself seems ironic considering this thesis and my advocacy for preservation. Digitisation, perhaps, lures us to another extreme, an over-enthusiasm for record keeping. With digitisation posing a threat to creative engagement, and an over-abundance of files comprising so-called “dead archives,” one must wonder if it is the opposing nature of the power of consignment and the ‘mal d’archive’ that provides creative scope. The archive needs its absences. As Steedman writes, “Finding things: the idea of *finding* things: loss, the search for what has been lost, the dream of finding it, and of plenitude. This powerfully informing idea of Western modernity is connected to nostalgia, and the idea of ‘the might-have-been,’ a structure of feeling and cognition that has been mostly tellingly explored, in film and literary studies” (Steedman, Romance 6). The loss is inherent to the archive’s nature. Not only is that what constitutes the archive in the first instance, but that is what triggers our archive fever. That is what stimulates our desire to intervene. This feels summative of what the mal d’archive is. The moment we give into archive fever and begin a repository, or a piece of writing inspired by one, we trigger the death drive. The act of archiving a moment in time is a death to the moment itself. Derrida presents these notions as consistently paradoxical. As a creative intervention emerging from the challenge of writing in resistance of the digitisation of the archive, whilst paradoxically being complicit in the act, is yet another example of where ethical duality is present throughout this project.

Such Violent Glamour

The poetry collection I set out to write is now an absence. My aspirations to overlay poetics atop court transcripts; or footnote a poem over a scrawled and secreted message exist now only in my imagination. In their place, the poems in this collection offer hypothetical artefacts: a testimony, or a wedding dress. They amalgamate potential voices in place of lost ones, characterised through the personification of the nonhuman. Fragments are woven together as one to comprise one movement, one advocacy, one defiance; linked by a generational feeling of rage in response to oppression. Upon completion, one might view *Such Violent Glamour* as a repository of methodologies that constitute creative intervention. To relate to analysis of Kristeva's notion of the semiotic chora as discussed in Chapter 3, and subsequent relation to Burke's perspective on the history of beautification as feminine truth, it is clear that writing of the Tofana poisonings through its links to cosmetics and the female experience rather than writing palimpsests over the documents penned by the patriarchy on the subject was perhaps a more female oriented intervention.

There was scope to explore the complexity of this notion. I present notions of duality in the opening pages, defining poison as both a substance that might do harm, but also, one that might slow down a catalyst. There is truth to both definitions, and both definitions might reflect differently on the collection once the reader has made their way to the end.

There is discussion of ethics and complicity throughout the collection with various speaking voices coming together to challenge the reader's moral stance. In 'Poison, a Declaration' I present the notion of a poisonous plant's potential to do harm, and how the subject is more complicit in being poisoned than our language use implies. We attach blame by labelling the plant as poison, even though no harm would have come to the subject had the specimen been left alone. This is a metaphor for the women I write about when responding to

the Tofana poisonings. Perhaps, if not forced into marriages without agency or choice, household or cosmetic poisons might have remained harmful only in their intended practicalities.

Palimtexts as Dillon and Davidson might describe them were harder to achieve due to the digitisation of the archival material but they exist in a formal sense. Davidson's original use of the term palimtext referred to "writing as trace, as inscription of an absence" (Dillon 47). I apply this through use of form in 'an imagined confession and the notes of an ~~archivist~~ poet' where footnotes are used to replicate the physical layering that Cole achieves in 'Bella Theory #1: Spy'. There is also, however, a layering of discourse throughout the collection that behaves as a palimpsest. The contemporary speaking voice applied in poems such as 'the feminine urge' and 'why the girls stay pretty' often allude to, or speak directly of, the historical events discussed in poems from other voices. For instance, in 'why the girls stay pretty', I allude to the use of Belladonna to swell the pupils which links back to Renaissance Italy, where the Tofana poisonings take place. Furthermore, the poem lists various beautification methods or cultural behaviours that are applicable throughout history, layering them as a palimpsest might. In 'Waters' I write a palimtext in the more metaphorical sense, as the poem accumulates various recipes and methods detailed in Burke's compilation of Renaissance recipes. On palimtexts as Postmodern poetry, Davidson states "as its name implies the palimtext retains vestiges of visible record of its responses to those earlier writings" (78). 'Waters' responds to these early recipes, imagining them in use; though, there is deliberate ambiguity in this poem as to whether there is any layering of time. The reader could analyse this poem as a contemporary speaker following the recipes as a sensory exploration of the archive; or a reader might consider this a poem from the perspective of Isabella or Caterina Sforza themselves, as her story is recounted in Jill Burke's study (215). The reader is complicit in compiling the palimtext.

Throughout the collection, I challenge my own ethical complicity. The poems written from a contemporary speaker use the lyrical I to invite my own research and perspective into the discourse. In poems such as ‘The Garden at Alnwick’, I discuss ethics directly: “to quantify the PH level of my morality”. Later in the collection, this ethical debate is challenged more directly when in ‘The Coroner Misrules Beauty as Cause of Death’ the speaker challenges themselves, “I decided the boyfriend did it and now I cannot undecide”. This, in conjunction with the title of the poem, is the speaker taking an omniscient perspective on the collection. The beauty industry, as discussed throughout this thesis and the poetry collection as well, could be surmised as toxic and poisonous, but the true cause of harm was the patriarchal oppression that turned women to such extreme beautification measures. This, too, could be said for the history of violence against women in relationships and how, in the case of the Tofana poisonings, blame was placed on those committing the murders with little consideration paid to what drove them to it.

This layering of ethical complicity is drawn to a conclusion in the final poem where the speaker presents a fictional encounter with Giulia Tofana, the figurehead of this string of poisonings whether she be fictional or otherwise. The speaker presents their own ethical complexity by admitting kinship with their counterpart because they too have imagined killing as a method of revenge. The speaker suggests that given the entire encounter is an imaginative construction, then their killing is just as real as that of the real Tofana centuries earlier.

This poem feels inherently connected to ‘the feminine urge’ which is a summative poem, sitting at the heart of the collection, tying a lot of these themes and complexities together. I open with a hyperbolic statement: “the feminine urge to murder a lover over breakfast because he talked over you at last night’s dinner party.” By opening with “the feminine urge,” I imply

through the speaker that this is a universal experience even though, many of readers might contest that universality due to the complexities of contemporary morality. As the poem goes on to list other “feminine urges”, the examples become less extreme, and more universal. The reader should find themselves empathising more easily with the speaker, presenting the notion that those opening lines were perhaps not so unimaginable after all.

On Creative Intervention

Creative intervention is not simply the output. Creative intervention is important, and oftentimes, the basis for how we comprehend the lived experience of an archived event. Steedman writes, “All of this to say that we need to take all of these uses and imaginings of the archive into account, when we’re trying to decide what the Archive *is*” (Romance 8). The implication here is that the archival body and the creative intervention need each other. I presented this hypothesis at the start of Chapter 1 through analysis of James Cameron’s 1997 film, *Titanic*, and the character of Brock Lovett who understands the human tragedy of the event after hearing a piece of storytelling. Furthermore, there is scope to consider that without creative intervention, we cannot clearly hear what the archive has to tell us.

Creative intervention into archival absences will always be speculative. Any writing of an historical event is speculative to some extent. Having examined works by speculative historians such as the writing of Hallie Rubenhold and Julia Laite, something is achieved by embracing the role of the imagination in telling histories. There is need for factual accuracy as far as that is achievable. But history exists in the past, and any historical writing, fictional or otherwise, reaches its full potential when absolved from that expectation. Creative intervention is an opportunity to weave the human experience back through the data. It connects the world we have with the world we once had through means of emotional engagement.

In completion, these creative repositories sit alongside the existing archive as an adjacent, or an aside. A person might visit Hagley and notice a curious phrase graffitied on a wall. They might type that phrase into google and be met with a short video essay uploaded to YouTube. Having watched the video, they might do further research and come across Nellie Cole’s poetry pamphlet. They might read, *Bella*, and find that one theory in particular sticks in their mind. They might refer to the artefact about which the poem was written. This is archive

fever. This is emotional engagement with a repository; somewhat digitised, somewhat tangible. This is the potential of creative intervention.

Our continued creative exploration of what we consider to be truth is vital for the comprehension of the archive. The archive has something to tell us. It is through our imagined archival interventions that we better understand the stages of consignment. The archive transitions from something skeletal, to something akin to life, with flesh and blood. Through a poetic disruption, that life has voice.

On voice, Anne Carson acknowledged:

The sounds made by women are said to have different inflectional patterns, different ranges of intonation, different syntactic preferences, different semantic fields, different diction, different narrative textures, different behavioural accoutrements, different contextual pressures than the sounds that men make. Tantalising vestiges of ancient evidence for such difference may be read from, for example, passing references in Aristophanes to a ‘woman’s language,’ that a man can learn or imitate if he wants to (*Thesmophoriazousai*) or from the conspicuously onomatopoeic construction of female cries to female names... What does emerge is a consistent paradigm of response to otherness of voice. It is a paradigm that forms itself as *katharsis* (Carson 27).

Archives concerning women— archives with absences where women’s voices, names, or emotions should be— need poetics. The opportunity for linguistic play, innovation with sound and scope for narrative speculation creates intervention that counteracts the issue of consignment. In *Such Violent Glamour* I have produced an artefact that is multi-faceted: combining imagined female experiences across time with contemporary issues concerning women’s rights. The poems are complex and intricate, playing with voice, sound, and form.

Women's emotions are presented and challenged from poem to poem, as with poems such as 'Rage' and 'Why the Girls Stay Pretty,' illustrative of how our immediate circumstances may have changed, but our relationship with beautification, agency and autonomy have not. Issues faced by women transcend any constraints of time and place throughout the collection. Beautification is no longer a Renaissance issue, as demonstrated in 'A Poisoner's Guide to Beautifying'. What repositories exist of our experiences might be alluded to, collated, and reapplied to contemporary issues, as demonstrated in 'Waters' which palimpsests Burke's engagement with a repository of Renaissance beautification recipes.

In its completion, this is a collection that explores the idea of creative intervention, attempts it, achieves it, and challenges its limitations. This is a contemporary commentary on female history; it is also a female text that palimpsests what was erased before it.

Through creative work, through writing, and through poetics, one enters a process of intervention that archives our inquiries and imaginings. It is these interventions that create opportunity for an emotional and tactile experience for the next archivist.

This is the archive in translation.

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