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Article

Poetry, Representation and the Archive Special Issue: Editor’s Introduction

‘Poetry in / all its rawness’: Sarah Maguire’s ‘Spilt Milk’ in the Archive

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ABSTRACT

This article reads the poem ‘Spilt Milk’ by the British poet Sarah Maguire (1957–2017) in light of material held in the British Archive for Contemporary Writing at the University of East Anglia (UEA). By examining the drafts of the poem, it shows how the feminist poetics of ‘Spilt Milk’ developed in parallel with Maguire’s first-year undergraduate studies at UEA in 1984–85, from a history essay on Anglo-Saxon adultery law to a creative-critical coursework essay in which she asserted that ‘the silence around the text’ in literary studies and deconstructionist theory was a silence about the female body. The sexual encounter described in the poem is read as the corollary of Maguire’s critical assertion that ‘for women to write poetry, to authorise desire, it’s necessary to move from being the object of poetry to being its subject’. The cultural significance of the poem’s challenge to the male-dominated poetry culture of late twentieth-century Britain is reconstructed, and Marianne Moore’s phrase ‘the raw material of poetry in/all its rawness’ is used to argue that one of the valuable functions of a poetry archive – and also poetry itself – is to preserve the historical and social context of the moment of writing. A final section introduces this special issue on poetry, representation and the archive as the outcome of ‘New Ways of Collecting, Collaborating and Curating: Towards a Centre for Contemporary Poetry in the Archive’, a Mellon-funded research project and conference on poetry archives undertaken at UEA in 2022–23.

In Autumn 1984, the poet Sarah Maguire enrolled as a student in the School of English and American Studies at the University of East Anglia (UEA). At twenty-seven, she was significantly older than the average undergraduate and was entering higher education for the first time, having trained and worked as a gardener after leaving school. Her introductory modules in History, Philosophy, and Literature reflected the interdisciplinary spirit of the School, which was also becoming known for its postgraduate creative writing programme in prose

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fiction. UEA did not at that point have a creative writing programme in poetry, but Maguire was already set on it; on a single undated sheet of paper from this period, she summarized her life in key words and phrases for each year of the previous decade, from 1974, when she left school, to 1983, which ends simply: 'Poetry'.[1] During her first term at UEA, she would begin drafting what would eventually become the title poem of her first collection, *Spilt Milk* (1991). Her university studies left their trace on the poem in these lines:

> I sit here in a circle
> of lamplight, studying women of nine-hundred years past.
>
> My hand moves into darkness as I write, *The adulterous woman*
> *lost her nose and ears; the man was fined.*[2]

Maguire's archive, which is now held in the British Archive for Contemporary Writing (BACW) at UEA, contains the student work that is condensed here into three and a half lines of verse.[3] For her first-year history coursework, Maguire wrote an essay in response to the following prompt:

> Men and women did not live on 'terms of rough equality' in Anglo-Saxon England; the claim can be substantiated through an examination of the law codes of the period and the ideas about women promulgated by the Church.[4]

Asserting that women were regarded as property, Maguire writes that 'the clearest example of this can be seen in Cnut's laws on adultery', and goes on to cite the law which specifies that the husband of the adulterous woman 'shall have all that she possess, and she shall then lose both her nose and her ears', in contrast to the law which treats male adultery 'with more indulgence: in serious cases the husband would be fined'.[5] The comment of her tutor at the end of the essay begins:

> Good—I have enjoyed reading this. I would, however, like to have seen you quoting directly from the laws (printed in *English Historical Documents*, i.) and quoting less from secondary sources—it is your opinion which is wanted.[6]

What is it that we want from a poetry archive? A poet's opinions are certainly something that might be sought, and Maguire's archive contains plenty, even from this early period. The arguments of her student essays are often informed by her already well-developed feminist politics; the distinction that her history tutor draws is between citing secondary sources that support her views – such as Anne L. Klinck's revisionary article for the *Journal of Medieval History*, 'Anglo-Saxon Women and the Law' (1982) – and direct scrutiny of the primary sources.

But one discipline's secondary source is another's primary document. Maguire's notes and essay on women in Anglo-Saxon England offer perhaps the most prized kind of archival material to the contemporary poetry researcher: what Marianne Moore called, in her poem 'Poetry', 'the raw material of poetry in/all its rawness'.[7] As Alison Fraser has argued about the clippings files that Moore kept for the purposes of poetic collage,

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[1] Sarah Maguire Archive, University of East Anglia, SMa/7/2/2/2; the sheet ends with blank sections for 1984–1986, suggesting that she may have written it as a review of her adult life to date before beginning her three-year course at UEA.

[2] Sarah Maguire, 'Spilt Milk', in *Spilt Milk* (London: Secker & Warburg), p. 15. The full text of the poem can be found online, with an audio recording of Maguire reading it, at the Poetry Archive website: <https://poetryarchive.org/poem/spilt-milk/> [accessed 11 June 2025].

[3] I am very grateful to the Estate of Sarah Maguire for permission to quote from archive material in this essay.

[4] SMa/10/3/1/1984/6/1.

[5] SMa/10/3/1/1984/6/6.

[6] SMa/10/3/1/1984/6/10.

> We can analyse Moore's reading habits by examining her notebooks, poem citations, and prose, [but] we who 'demand' 'the raw material of poetry in/all its rawness' are left with distilled rather than raw material. The clippings files open up access to Moore's poetic 'rawness'.[8]

Moore's possessive pronoun, however, is ambiguous: does 'all its rawness' refer to the 'raw material' – as we might at first assume – or to poetry itself, as we might reflect after realizing how the tautology of the first reading has been delicately muted by Moore's enjambment? Imagine the line break placed two words earlier: 'the raw material of/poetry in all its rawness'. Here is the phrase as it falls in the middle of the final sentence of Moore's poem, which leave its terms circling elusively:

… In the meantime, if you demand on one hand,
the raw material of poetry in
    all its rawness and
that which is on the other hand
    genuine, then you are interested in poetry.[9]

Is this really an opposition of qualities or a description of the same thing in different words? Where, exactly, does the line fall that separates 'the raw material' of art from the 'genuine' result? Both are judgements about what is 'real'. 'Poetry' begins with the statement 'I, too, dislike it', but by the end it has argued itself into the logical position that *everyone* is 'interested in poetry' – because who isn't interested in both 'the raw material of poetry' (i.e. everything) and 'that which is … genuine'?

'Poetry in/all its rawness' becomes Moore's paradoxical middle term for the unstable compound of form and content that we call 'poetic'. Many critics of poetry, however, seek to draw a firmer line between the 'raw' and the 'genuine' (just as they might prefer a poet to use firmer line breaks than Moore). For Charles Lamb, for example, to see the manuscript draft of Milton's 'Lycidas' was to discover with horror that a 'fine thing' had once been found in 'ore':

> I had thought of the Lycidas as of a full-grown beauty—as springing up with all its parts absolute—till, in evil hour, I was shown the original written copy of it … How it staggered me to see the fine things in their ore! interlined, corrected! as if their words were mortal, alterable, displaceable at pleasure! as if they might have been otherwise, and just as good! as if inspirations were made up of parts, and those fluctuating, successive, indifferent![10]

What is damaged for Lamb after seeing Milton's draft is the poetic illusion of 'Lycidas' as a work of simultaneous spontaneity and perfection. Lamb's horror is not only an aesthetic reaction, however; it is also an ideological one, about the transcendent nature of canonical genius, as fixed by 'final' versions ('print settles it', he says in the same passage). Such fixity is

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[7] Marianne Moore, 'Poetry', in *New Collected Poems*, ed. by Heather Cass White (London: Faber and Faber, 2017), pp. 27–28 (p. 27).

[8] Alison Fraser, 'Mass Print, Clipping Bureaus, and the Pre-Digital Database: Reexamining Marianne Moore's Collage Poetics through the Archives', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 43.1, 19–33 (p. 26).

[9] Moore, pp. 27–28.

[10] Charles Lamb, 'Oxford in the Vacation', in *Essays* (New York: Maynard, Merrill, 1895), pp. 58–65 (p. 65).

something that the publication history of Moore's 'Poetry' – which appeared over the years in several versions, including one of only three lines – quietly subverts.[11] To encounter any poem in another version is to entertain the possibility, with Lamb, that it 'might have been otherwise, and just as good'. As Ruth Abbott has recently written:

> Most poems in most archives prompt the same question—what *is* this?—and challenge expectations of what a poem will be. Sometimes this is because they are earlier or later versions of published poems … Is each of these a poem in its own right or are they all versions of one poem, and how different can a version be before it becomes a separate poem?[12]

Lamb would like to remain secure in his belief in the spotless page of inspiration, as represented by 'Lycidas': a lament for the death of a real person (Edward King, 'unfortunately drowned in his passage from Chester on the Irish Seas, 1637'), which translates that raw material into a timeless pastoral realm.[13] But Moore's paradox of 'poetry in/all its rawness' suggests instead that the appreciation of the 'genuine' in poetry *depends* on the knowledge that 'fine things' are always emerging from 'their ore'; that what interests us in poetry is the verbal drama of moment-by-moment feeling finding seemingly final form (as Robert Frost put it: 'a poem is the emotion of having a thought while the reader waits a little anxiously for the success of dawn').[14] Lamb might have reflected that 'Lycidas' would not have affected him as much as it did had it not originated in the very possibility of being 'otherwise': a unique combination of elegiac occasion, innovative form, and historical moment which produced a poem that critics have generally agreed is unlike any other before or since.[15]

To study the drafts of a published poem in an archive is to meet them in their historical moment, and thereby gain a greater appreciation not only of how a writer drew them from their 'ore', but how they might, through the refinement of poetic form, make an enduring claim for the interest and value of their prosaic raw material (to quote Moore again: 'nor is it valid/to discriminate against "business documents and//school-books"').[16] The fact that David Norbrook's influential discussion of the political significance of 'Lycidas' in *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (1984) appeared the same year that Sarah Maguire started her degree at UEA is a reminder that one of the cultural contexts for the writing of 'Spilt Milk' is the 'historical turn' in literary studies, and the questions such criticism raises about how lyric form and subjectivity might resonate with contemporary political significance remained one of her preoccupations. Contributing a statement about her work to *Poetry Review* in 1994, she wrote:

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[11] Moore, pp. 363–64.

[12] Ruth Abbott, 'The Poem in the Archive', *The Cambridge Companion to The Poem*, ed. Sean Pryor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), pp. 265–82 (p. 266).

[13] John Milton, 'Lycidas', in *The Major Works*, ed. by Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 39–44 (p. 39).

[14] Robert Frost, 'The Constant Symbol', in *Collected Poems, Prose and Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995), pp. 786–91 (p. 788).

[15] The poet and scholar F.T. Prince analyses the unique formalism of 'Lycidas' in his chapter on the poem in *The Italian Element in Milton's Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), which concludes: 'The discipline of *Lycidas* has left little mark on the tradition of the English ode; it has proved to be inimitable. And this is scarcely surprising, if the peculiarly combined forces described in this chapter are among those which went into its making' (p. 88). For the view that the 1638 poem also has a time-bound political context of 'peculiarly combined forces', we can begin with Milton's own 1645 note on the poem, which claims that it prophesied – with its digression on neglectful shepherds – the downfall of Archbishop Laud ('fortels the ruine of our corrupted Clergy then in their height' (p. 39)).

[16] Moore, p. 27. For a compelling articulation of the view that 'readings that aspire toward the historic or political' risk 'a back-projection of an illusory politics fantasized in the present' if they limit themselves to the notion of a 'single-text' poem rather than reading the 'material page' of the printed text with an awareness of 'the other material pages that might have been presented instead', including archival drafts, see George Bornstein, 'Modernism and Material Textuality', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 32.1 (1999), 30–58 (p. 56).

> I want to transgress the boundaries of the lyric tradition, with its connotations of hermetic intimacy, without employing the exhortations of polemic, without losing sensuality or richness of language. 'There is no history outside its subjective realisation … just as there is no subjectivity uncoloured by the history to which it belongs' (Jacqueline Rose).

The drafts of 'Spilt Milk', written a decade earlier on the same A4 lined paper used for her undergraduate essay notes, show her negotiating these imperatives to write a new kind of lyric poem little seen in the literary magazines of Eighties Britain: one which would tacitly assert (as she concludes) that 'for women to write poetry, to authorise desire, it's necessary to move from being the object of poetry to being its subject'.[17]

Writing about women and desire is at the heart of 'Spilt Milk' from its first drafts. What seems to be the earliest version of the lines about her historical research sets it down in brisk summary:

I sit here in a circle of lamplight
writing of how Anglo-Saxon woman
were mutilated for adulterous love
(the men simply fined)[18]

Then, in what seems to be earliest full draft of the poem, dated 15 November 1984, this becomes:

I sit here in a circle of lamplight working
on women twelve-hundred years ago;
my hand moves into darkness as I write:

'mutilation, a woman would lose her nose
and ears for adultery.'[19]

'Twelve-hundred years' would in the published version be amended to 'nine hundred', presumably in light of Klinck's argument that, in the later Anglo-Saxon period, the punishment of mutilation in Cnut's laws about adultery may have reflected the mitigation of an earlier death sentence.[20] The other revisions, however, are more subtly concerned with embodiment and temporality: the poet's 'hand' enters the lyric poem's formal 'circle of lamplight', its focused present ('here'), and 'moves' with the line it is writing *about* the line that it is about to write. As a regular iambic pentameter ('my hand moves into darkness as I write'), the draft line itself falls audibly into the rhythm of poetic tradition, while the colon and the stanza break at the end coincide to express this moment as one of conscious reflection before action. Placed in quotation marks, the sentence that follows disrupts the smooth rhythm of thought with the syntactical inversion of a study note intended for expansion ('mutilation,'). Every revision here, in other words, is concerned with 'colouring' the first draft's note-taking with Rose's 'subjective realisation', by turning factual paraphrase into something more alive: the moment of writing rendered as reported speech. This redraft also heightens the violent physicality of historical fact with 'nose/and ears', while losing the parenthetical contrast with the treatment of the man, and its quiet note of outrage: 'simply'.

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[17] Sarah Maguire, 'Sarah Maguire writes … ', *Poetry Review,* 84.1 (1994), p. 68.

[18] SMa/1/2/7/1.

[19] SMa/1/2/7/3.

[20] Klinck's argument is summarized in the handwritten study notes contained in SMa/10/3/3/1, pp. 53–55.

This omission is then carried through multiple redraftings of the poem, until 'the man was fined' returns, stripped of its 'simply' – and soon after, 'mutilation' is removed too, as the last draft (dated 26 June 1985) arrives at laconic juxtaposition: 'the adultrous [sic] woman/ lost her nose and ears. The man was fined'.[21]

Maguire's adjustments to her lines depicting a woman writing about women seek a tonal balance between fact and feeling, so that the final version sounds an eloquent irony through the grammar of sentencing, in the legal sense: the woman 'lost her nose and ears' as though passively responsible for this loss herself, while the man who 'was fined' is able to clear his social debt; the women is branded 'adulterous', while the man remains 'the man'. There is no escape from misogynistic judgement in the illuminated circle of academic enquiry; the hand of the writing woman enters the 'darkness' of patriarchal law and language, where the woman is more harshly punished than the man for the same desires. Maguire would later argue that, because women 'are not traditionally able to take the place of desiring subjects in a patriarchal society: we are the desired objects', lyric poetry has been a particularly difficult art for female writers to enter on equal terms:

> Lyric poetry, of course, is the very form in which our status as desired objects has been most fully and most poignantly articulated. ... The wonder is that any woman dares to write poetry at all. The miracle is that anyone who did publish her poetry, certainly in earlier times, survived the violent self-contradictions that it provoked.[22]

Maguire is writing in 1999, by which time she was successfully established as a poet and critic. But the 'earlier times' to which she refers are not necessarily previous centuries. This passage closely echoes 'Poets Prefer Blondes?', a review article published in the BBC's *The Listener* magazine in November 1990, shortly before she made her own debut with the collection *Spilt Milk*. In it, she roundly criticizes the sexism of the poetic establishment and reflects that 'the remarkable thing is that women have ever attempted to write at all, particularly that they have been bold enough to assert themselves as the subject of their own desires'.[23] Elsewhere in the 1999 essay, she alludes to 'the dark ages of the mid-1980s', and this blurring of historical periods is not jocular in the context of an essay which includes a mid-1980s anecdote about having 'a furious argument with Craig Raine, then the new poetry editor at Faber, as to why Faber published no living women poets. "Because there aren't any good enough", he'd flatly informed me'.[24] When the poet's hand 'moves into darkness' in 'Spilt Milk', it is not simply moving from lamplit modernity into patriarchal past, but asserting the continuity of women's invisibility.

'Spilt Milk' was published in the *London Review of Books*, one of Britain's most prestigious literary magazines, on 21 November 1985, just over a year after Maguire began to draft it alongside her university essay notes. The poem's first lines establish its occasion as a conventional lyric scenario of loneliness and vulnerability, in which the speaker contemplates aspirins dissolving in a glass and rain running 'into the drain by my window' – a modernizing, perhaps, of Keats '[emptying] some dull opiate to the drains' at the start of 'Ode to a Nightingale'.[25] The unconventional enters with the second stanza's explicit identification of the speaker as a lyric subject remembering a male lover, albeit one whose semen is

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[21] SMa/1/2/7/17.

[22] Sarah Maguire, 'Dilemmas and Developments: Eavan Boland Re-Examined', *Feminist Review,* 62 (1999), 58–66 (p. 64).

[23] Sarah Maguire, 'Poets Prefer Blondes?', *The Listener*, 29 November 1990, 124. 3193, p. 30.

[24] Maguire, 'Dilemmas', p. 60, p. 58.

[25] John Keats, 'Ode to a Nightingale', in *The Poems of John Keats,* ed. by Jack Stillinger (London: Heinemann, 1978), pp. 369–72 (p. 369).

metaphorically queered as feminine: 'Out of pain and exhaustion you came/into my mouth, covering my tongue with your good and bitter milk'. The poem then imagines the lover entering a bank to cash 'that cheque', with the implication of payment for an unspecified transaction – and the transactional nature of the relationship is implied again in the poem's final statement of desire:

> I still want to return to that hotel room by the station
>
> to hear all night the goods trains coming and leaving.[26]

'That hotel room', like 'that cheque', uses the demonstrative to imply both intimacy and estrangement: this was a sexual encounter outside the patriarchal codes of marriage and monogamous norms of heterosexual romance, and although the speaker wants to return to the scene of it, it is not clear that she wants to return to the encounter itself. Instead – recalling 'Ode to a Nightingale' again – she yearns to be lost in the sound of a world of 'goods' beyond, in which the 'coming and leaving' of casual sex becomes, by reverse innuendo, an ecstasy of transience (Keats: 'the voice I hear this passing night').[27]

But if the highest desire of Maguire's speaker in 'Spilt Milk' is a Romantic one to escape the limits of self, the ambition of Maguire the author is simultaneously to assert the physical reality of the female body, and the social reality of its suppression, on the printed page. A phrase that enters the poem in the first full draft is 'the silence around poetry'. It is placed in the middle of the moment of sexual climax –

> Out of pain and exhaustion (the silence
> around poetry) you came into my mouth

– and it remains in this form, enjambed on the word 'silence', through multiple drafts of the poem which also take it as a title.[28] It is then excised by hand from a late typescript draft, after which it also disappears as title, to be replaced in one draft by 'In Silence', and then eventually 'Spilt Milk', where the idea of silence and suppression is more obliquely buried in the allusion to proverbial advice: 'no use crying over spilt milk'. This revision follows a comparable process to the development of the lines about Anglo-Saxon adultery laws: the final version condenses the original statement into image and irony, through which the speaker's inarticulate feelings are now more fully implied (no draft of the poem mentions crying, but now it haunts the title, which leads into further images of liquid melancholy: aspirin dissolving in a glass and rain on a window).

One interpretation of 'the silence/around poetry' would be to associate it with the words it follows, 'pain and exhaustion', and take it to be a version of Wordsworth's 'emotion recollected in tranquility' – the reflective silence in which poets compose their feelings into poetic form.[29] But as a parenthesis, the phrase also precedes other words: 'you came into my mouth'. The effect is intentionally disjunctive: the intellectual and the sexual, barely separated by a bracket. And this disjunction might take us back to the first stanza of Moore's 'Poetry', where the assertion of poetry as 'a place for the genuine' is immediately followed by a list of instinctive physical reactions – 'Hands that can grasp, eyes/that can dilate, hair that can rise' – which, we are told, 'are important not because a/high sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are/useful'.[30] The 'high sounding interpretation' of Maguire's draft lines might go like this:

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[26] Maguire, 'Spilt Milk', p. 15.

[27] Keats, p. 371.

[28] See SMa/1/2/7/3 onwards.

[29] Wordsworth, 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802)', in *The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 595–615 (p. 611).

> Wordsworth defined poetry as 'emotion recollected in tranquility' and the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'. We see this literalised in '(the silence/around poetry)', as the speaker of the poem conflates a memory of oral sex with the moment of inspiration: the poem, as well as the lover, 'came into my mouth' out of 'pain and exhaustion'.

But that would be to assimilate sexual realism as poetic allegory, rather than registering the cultural importance and 'useful[ness]' of its originality: this was very possibly the first time a British female poet had written explicitly about fellatio as a 'desiring subject'.[31] And perhaps it was because she foresaw a high-minded male critic downplaying her realism as metaphor that Maguire excised the phrase and, for good measure, made the title of the poem a wry allusion to ejaculated semen. Because, plausible though such a Wordsworthian reading may be, it misses her own polemical meaning for 'the silence around poetry'; a phrase which disappeared from the poem, but which then – in a reversal of how she repurposed her notes on Anglo-Saxon adultery – had a second life in a student essay.

In the summer term of her first year at UEA, Maguire took a seminar called 'Deconstructive Readings (Literature and the Body)'. It is not easy to discern the exact content of the course from the archival record, which comprises a brief one-page description calling it 'a useful introduction to some modern ways of reading and writing about literature', specifically concerned with 'the idea of the text as a play of differences found in (e.g.) Derrida's work'. How this relates to the body is not mentioned, and the list of primary texts for student purchase is ludic and eclectic: Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*; Poe, *Complete Tales and Poems*; Baudelaire, *Selected Poems*; Borges, *Labyrinths*; Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, B.S. Johnson, *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry*. A note at the bottom of the page tells students that the seminar leader, Dr Tadeusz Sławek, 'will be visiting from Poland, where he lectures at the university of Silesia and is well known as a poet and for his poetry and jazz performances'.[32]

The experience of the seminars seems to have stimulated Maguire to some of her best academic work that year, allowing her to combine the personal history and feminist politics that informed her poetry with her growing intellectual range and confidence as a literary critic. The essay submitted is called 'The silence around the text', and presents a creative-critical mix of memoir, theory, and polemic. It begins with an epigraph taken from the song 'Sixteen Going on Seventeen' in the 1959 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *The Sound of Music*: 'Your life, little girl, is an empty book/That men will want to write on … '. This is then followed, without explanation, by a single paragraph containing two apparently autobiographical stories of misogyny from Maguire's youth. In the first, a friend called Sue is regularly beaten by her father (once, due to crude graffiti written about her in the lifts of their tower block). Sue is already familiar with the patriarchal imperative to make herself physically attractive to men and teaches Maguire 'how to pluck the hairs from around your nipples. It hurt but it was worth it'. Sue's sophistication then contrasts with 'the boys on the estate having a pissing competition’ by the sheds. Afterwards, one boy comes up to Maguire and presses something into her hand:

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[30] Moore, p. 27.

[31] The year before Maguire's book *Spilt Milk* appeared, the poet Fiona Pitt-Kethley had expressed a more negative view of 'Blow Jobs', using the same simile: 'the taste's a tepid, watery nothingness –/skimmed milk?'; see 'Two Poems', *London Review of Books*, 12.19 (11 October 1990), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v12/n19/fiona-pitt-kethley/two-poems> [accessed 11 June 2025]. The poem drew a letter in response from the American writer Elaine Segal, who warned 'it's dangerous to generalise about this business, particularly as it is rare that a woman is given an established forum to speak plainly about sex'. The letter included Segal's own poem on the subject, in the form of several short prose scenarios, 'so that there might be another woman's voice crying out in the darkness about fellatio' (ibid).

[32] SMa/10/3/5/4.

> I couldn’t see what it was because the sheds were dark. Later, I found it was one of the numbers from the shed doors. He said to me, It’s a nine because you’re worth nine girls. Or a six—you’re as good as six boys. And he turned it the other way up, pushing it into my palm until the skin was ridged and slightly indented.[33]

This passage is followed on the next page by a present-day account of being troubled by ‘terrible problems with reality over the last three weeks: is there a “reality” beyond/behind signs and language or not?’ Maguire’s modules that term also included one on Marxist criticism (‘studying Lukacs on “realism” concurrently has not helped!’ she notes re: reality) and she goes on to advance counter-arguments against ‘a narcissistic deconstructionism’ that ignores ‘material production’:

> What concerns me is silence—not simply the elisions in the text itself—but that which is around the text. The silence of those who cannot speak or do speak but are ignored, of those who write into darkness.

To read this essay in an archive which also contains the drafts of ‘Spilt Milk’ is to see how creative writing and critical thinking were merging in Maguire’s mind during this academic term. From the unfinished poem she takes the idea of ‘the silence around the text’ and also her poetic image for it: ‘writ[ing] into darkness’. Then, further down the page, she asks:

> It is vital to ask of the author of each text—who services you? who washes your socks? who cooks your dinner? who satisfies your body? why do they not write?
>
> And the answer to these questions, the silence around the text, the abyss of western culture—is the woman’s body. This ‘civilisation’ is constructed out of the dis-membered bodies of women.[34]

Here, starkly, are the questions that ‘Spilt Milk’ implicitly poses and answers with its poetic attempt ‘to construct a new discourse of the feminine, to write the female body’ (as the essay later puts it).[35] Maguire’s critical questions highlight how the poem destabilizes traditional heterosexual gender roles, making the female author someone who commands ‘services’ (by writing a cheque), satisfies a lover *and* writes lyric poetry. Her argument concludes with a statement about language which echoes the post-structuralist feminism of Julia Kristeva, the critic most often quoted in the essay:

> Language for women is the acceptance of loss—the loss of the truly feminine, the loss of the mother’s body, the loss of other women. Language is the Law of the Father.
>
> Yet language is also, in its hysterical excess, affirmation, reparation, a means of re-membering the female. Speaking the pain of this loss is both to experience and heal it.[36]

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[33] SMa/10/3/1/1985/4/2.

[34] SMa/10/3/1/1985/4/3.

[35] SMa/10/3/1/1985/4/7.

[36] SMa/10/3/1/1985/4/8.

Later, in 1991, Maguire would translate this moral for a non-academic readership in the *Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, writing of *Spilt Milk* that

> The first obvious theme is indicated by the title of the book: spilt milk. What does that suggest? Initially the cliché 'there's no use crying over spilt milk'. Yet in so naming the book I'm explicitly suggesting that there's a lot of use crying over mistakes and losses.[37]

The crying of tears cannot *un*spill the milk, however, and for all the hopeful resonance of the essay's claim that 'speaking the pain of this loss' can 'heal it' (which is followed by a quotation from Heidegger affirming the same idea), it is itself a notably 'unhealed' text; raw, that is, in the most painful sense. The opening recollection of adolescent misogyny – which, with its vividly unsettling details, reads like a formative memory recovered for psychoanalysis – is simply not mentioned again.[38] Instead, it is left to stand without comment, in silence (to echo the alternative title of 'Spilt Milk') and unre-membered (to echo Maguire's hyphenated pun), implicitly asserting the 'reality' that deconstructive criticism seems to call into doubt. As Maguire's archive shows, 'Spilt Milk' is a poem whose words arise from the feminist enquiry of her student essays and also return to it, as they seek 'the genuine' poetic expression of the ideas and reality that inform them.

(Which leads to a coda: as I finished the research for this essay in the Sarah Maguire archive I discovered, among her meticulous documentation of the life and work of a woman poet in a patriarchal world, two student essays written for a class taught by the poet and academic Fred D'Aguiar in 1994, both of which offer acute close readings of 'Spilt Milk' in light of Maguire's *Poetry Review* statement that 'for women to write poetry, to authorise desire, it's necessary to move from being the object of poetry to being its subject'.[39] Without naming it, the silence around poetry had been broken.[40])

POETRY, REPRESENTATION AND THE ARCHIVE SPECIAL ISSUE: EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

> This, then, is poetry's labour: to bring together, carry, transfer pieces of language that have been torn apart, decontextualised and placed in different categories (subjective/objective; personal/political). And it does this through the figure of the intimate self (the invisible mender). A way of happening. A mouth.

These are the concluding words of Sarah Maguire's essay 'Poetry Makes Nothing Happen' (2000). The title of the essay takes up a famous claim from W.H. Auden's 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' (1939), and answers it by chiming in with Auden's own answer to his seemingly defeatist view of the social agency of poetry: 'it survives,/A way of happening, a mouth'.[41] To do so, Maguire draws on John Berger's 1982 essay 'The Hour of Poetry', which argues that 'poetry can repair no loss, but it defies the space which separates … by its continual labour of reassembling what has been scattered'.[42] She also speaks of the power of 'the intimate self' from the authority of her own work as a poet: *The Invisible Mender* (1997) was the title of her next collection of poems after *Spilt Milk* (1991).

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[37] Sarah Maguire, 'Slipping and Spilling: Sarah Maguire on Her First Collection', *Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, 149 (1991), p. 4.

[38] In Maguire's year-by-year review of her life between 1974 and 1984 she notes that she began psychoanalysis in 1982 (SMa/7/2/2/2).

[39] See fn. 14, above.

[40] The essays are filed with clippings of published reviews of *Spilt Milk* from the early Nineties (SMa/12/1/31 and 32).

[41] W.H. Auden, 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats', in *The English Auden*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), pp. 241–43 (p. 242).

[42] Sarah Maguire, 'Poetry Makes Nothing Happen', in *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, ed. W.N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Tarset: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), pp. 248–51 (p. 251).

In my archival reading of 'Spilt Milk', I have tried to tell the story of the poetic work of reassembly that Maguire undertook during her first year as a student at the University of East Anglia, where her archive now resides, and where it informed the project that led to this special issue of *English* on poetry, representation and archives. For Maguire, it might be said, the careful preservation of the intimate written record of her life and career continued the work of representation undertaken by her poetry in defying the 'silence' she found in the male-dominated literary culture of the late twentieth century around the equal reality of the female self. But her politics of representation were not confined to feminism: much of the archive relates to the Poetry Translation Centre, which she founded in 2004 with the aim of new bringing international poetries into English and also promoting understanding of poetries being written and spoken in the UK itself. During the Cold War of Maguire's youth there had been a CIA-supported boom in the translation of dissident Russian and East European poets. But at the same time, she wrote, 'growing up in London … with a widening circle of friends from Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia, I was also beginning to be aware of other poetries that were having a far harder time making their way into English'.[43] Through translation, poetry could continue its political work of being 'a mouth' that brings together 'pieces of language that have been torn apart'.

Sarah Maguire died in 2017. Her archive was the first major collection of the papers of a poet to come to the British Archive for Contemporary Writing, which was founded at UEA in 2015 after the novelist Doris Lessing – whose novel *The Golden Notebook* (1962) has often been read as a foreshadowing of the second-wave feminist slogan 'the personal is political' – donated her correspondence, diaries and personal papers.[44] The official launch of the Sarah Maguire archive, and its online catalogue, happened at UEA on 25 May 2023, at the end of a one-day conference organized as part of the Mellon-funded research project 'New Ways of Collecting, Collaborating and Curating: Towards a Centre for Contemporary Poetry in the Archive'. The project aimed to continue the progressive spirit of Maguire's work as a poet, critic and translator by creating

> an archive fit to represent, value, promote and preserve the archives of contemporary poets of colour, queer poets, and other historically underrepresented backgrounds and practices. Our approach to understanding and defining underrepresentation will be alert to cross-cutting forms of discrimination in British and Irish literary culture relating to class, gender and ability. We will also look to critically value and promote innovative formal approaches to contemporary poetic composition—such as the conceptual, the visual, the performed and the digital—as well as the poetic use of dialects and creoles spoken by communities which have been historically marginalised in the UK and Ireland.[45]

The methodology, activities and findings of the project – including its use of the BACW 'Storehouse Model' to take selected materials on temporary loan – can be read in a report available online, along with the reflections of the five participating poets: Jay Bernard, Anthony Vahni Capildeo, Will Harris, Gail McConnell, and Joelle Taylor.[46]

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[43] Sarah Maguire, 'Introduction', in *My Voice: A Decade of Poems from the Poetry Translation Centre* (Hexham: Bloodaxe, 2014), pp. 9–17 (pp. 10–11).

[44] See, for example, Gayle Greene, *Doris Lessing: The Poetics of Change* (University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 15.

[45] *Uncollected: Towards a Centre for Contemporary Poetry in the Archive Project Report* (Norwich: University of East Anglia, 2023), p. 17.

[46] The project report can be downloaded at <https://contemporarypoetryarchive.omeka.net/exhibits/show/publications/uncollectedpoets> [accessed 11 June 2025]. For more on the history of BACW and the development of the Storehouse

The project began by asking 'who is represented in a poetry archive?'; this special issue expands that question to ask: '*what* is represented by a poetry archive?'. It brings together contributions by several participants at the conference – Lauryn Anderson, Carl Kears, Bhanu Kapil, and Mantra Mukim – whose work responds critically to the question of how we might reimagine the relationship between poetry, representation and the archive as both an institutional space and a place of creative activity. This question has also been asked by my co-investigator on the project, Justine Mann, who was the BACW archivist from 2015 to 2023. In an article reflecting on the implications of the project findings for future approaches to a post-custodial, writer-centred model for literary archives, Mann picks up on a small but significant intervention by the poet Will Harris, who joined the UEA project team as a Visiting Poetry Fellow:

> Harris represented the views of the poets in all decision making and offered the poets' perspective on the methodology and the project deliverables through weekly project team meetings. Harris also co-ordinated the poets' involvement with the curation of their own archives. As co-chair of the Advisory Group with the Academic Director, Harris took an active role in scoping and shaping the project outputs. For example, Harris made an early intervention to adapt a proposed 'creative process interview' to become a 'conversation.' On the surface this may seem like a subtle, semantic shift but the result significantly altered the dynamic of the interaction and, as the published transcripts testify, enabled a poet-led discussion that (particularly in the case of Jay Bernard and Gail McConnell) robustly interrogates and challenges the Storehouse Model of collecting and the motivations and ethics of institutional archiving.[47]

One such moment came in the conversation Harris had with McConnell:

> **WH:** So then is the archive a repository of what is no longer alive to you?
> **GMC**: Well, this is the key thing, Will, this is the thing I've been thinking about. Right, so if the poem is/was a living text, and if the poem is 'modified in the guts of the living', to quote Auden, you know, 'In Memory of W.B.' – 'the words of a dead man/are modified in the guts of the living', or even the words the alive person modified, I guess – is the archive necessarily always on the side of the dead in one way or the other? Is it always dead material to the living literary text? That's a real question I've been throwing around in the last little while. Even when the archive is of contemporary literature and living writers, what is that material? […] when you go back into the quote unquote 'raw' material, to expose some of that just brings huge risk and that's been the stuff I've been really conscious of, thinking about what I'm including in this and what I'm excluding because what I'm excluding feels as important, if not more important, as what I want to put in, because I'm still going, I'm still writing, and there are things that need to be protected – not by an archivist, or an institution, or a library, but by me and I've been very aware of that this last little while.[48]

Model, see Justine Mann, 'Drafts as Archival Sources: The British Archive for Contemporary Writing (BACW) at the University of East Anglia (UEA)', in *Creative Writing: Drafting, Revising and Editing*, ed. Graeme Harper and Jeri Kroll (London: Red Globe Press, 2020), pp. 68–80.

[47] Justine Mann, 'Capturing, Collaborating, and Curating: a Community-Led Approach to Contemporary Born-Digital Literary Archives', in *Cultural Heritage and the Literary Archive: Objects, Institutions, and Practices Between the Analogue and the Digital*, ed. by Tim Sommer (New York: Routledge, 2025), pp. 207–25 (p. 213).

[48] Will Harris, 'Conversation with Gail McConnell', in *Uncollected*, pp. 35–39 (p. 36).

The questions that McConnell raises here go to the heart of what a poetry archive might be doing in relation to 'the raw material of poetry' – what it might be able to protect, and preserve, and represent, and what it might have to leave alone, at least for the time being, 'in/all its rawness', in order to realize its potential life as poetry. An archive of still-living poets, after all, is a relatively recent phenomenon. When founded in the 1930s, the Poetry Collection at the University at Buffalo was the first systematic institutional attempt to collect the working manuscripts of contemporary poets in the USA. Commenting on its existence in 1947, W.H. Auden remarked:

> One cannot imagine the idea occurring to anyone before the twentieth century. Until recently the concern of critics and public alike was a reader's concern with the final published product, the questions of value they raised, reader's questions. 'Is it good or bad? Why do I like it or dislike it?'
>
> But the existence of this collection seems to me a sign—there are plenty of others—that, today, more and more people are coming to look at poetry, for instance, not primarily as readers but as actual or potential poets, to be raising therefore quite different questions. 'How is poetry written? Could I write it? Is writing a poetry a valuable occupation? Would I like being a poet?'

Auden's tone here implies a certain scepticism towards the institutionalization of the writing process that he suggests a poetry archive represents (he goes on to remark: 'dreadful word – "creative" writing').[49] Yet the insight remains true: as well as being a place of research, a contemporary poetry archive is a place of teaching – my reading of 'Spilt Milk' began, in fact, as a class with the students on the UEA Creative Writing Poetry MA about the drafting process of a poem, for which we examined a selection of other material relating to Maguire's time at UEA in order to explore how poems emerge from a life. As Maguire's documentation of her studies demonstrates, the writing and reading of lyric poetry is always implicitly social, informed by time, place, and other people. This article, for example, began during those conversations with Poetry MA students (particularly about the idea of 'the silence around poetry'), and before that in conversations with the archivist about the materials for the class (particularly the discovery of an essay titled 'The silence around the text'). It then took further inspiration from the process of reading and responding to the other contributions to this issue, and final form after comments from UEA colleagues on a first draft (my thanks to Tiffany Atkinson and Will Rossiter). My aim was to read 'Spilt Milk' afresh: to restore how Maguire's first published poem, with its original representation of female desire, might have read 'in/all its rawness' to its first readers. Poetry, Auden says in his elegy for Yeats, 'survives/ In the valley of its saying'.[50] It is an image of poetry's inherently social origin; and one way of valuing the poetry archive's 'raw materials' might be as the preservation of that valley.

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[49] W.H. Auden, 'Squares and Oblongs' (1947), in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose, Volume II: 1939–1948*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 339–50 (p. 340).

[50] 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats', p. 242. Auden would later revise 'saying' to 'making' (*Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson, 2nd edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 248).

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