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# Editor's Introduction

*Juliana Dresvina*

When Bruce Holsinger, a novelist and a professor of English at the University of Virginia, started a series of tweets with the hashtag #ThanksForTyping in 2017, these went viral. The tweets highlighted the perfunctory acknowledgement of wives' assistance in academic works, and demonstrated that even in the twentieth and early twenty-first century wives of male academics – who did significant work towards their husbands' research and publications – rarely got any proper credit and mostly remained anonymous. The hashtag gathered momentum, with people sharing similar references to different female family members of male authors, academic and not, in a number of languages. The phenomenon appeared to be universal, and as the accounts continued to circulate #ThanksForTyping eventually led to a two-day international conference of the same name, which took place at the History Faculty of Oxford University, on 8–9 March 2019.

This book arises out of that conference. In it, we aim to uncover these often marginalized lives and write them into existence, telling fascinating, inspiring and often heartbreaking stories of remarkable women who were in danger of being forgotten and erased from 'his'tory. Many of these stories also discuss the nature of unpaid female labour in the light of centuries of gender inequality. We include chapters on wives, partners, mothers and other women who laboured in the shadows of their famous husbands or male relatives/employers – academics, men of letters, activists – or who carved out careers of their own yet did not receive the attention they merited. Many of these stories and documents are made available in print for the first time.

Over the years there has been a trickle of publications telling the stories of the women behind famous men. Growing up, I heard about the selfless work of Dostoevsky's and Tolstoy's wives: as a future wife, I was urged to admire and imitate them. Anna Dostoevskaya, Dostoevsky's second wife, was trained as a stenographer and came to work for her literary idol, who was twenty-five years her senior; her story was not unlike that of Valerie Eliot. Dostoevsky (unlike T. S. Eliot) took only a month to propose, after which Anna became his accountant and literary agent; yet she also dealt

with Fyodor's gambling addiction, his debts and the deaths of two of their four children – all for the sake of the great man, the keeper of whose flame she became at the age of thirty-five. Sophia Tolstaya famously copied her husband's works – including *War and Peace* – by hand many times, all while carrying and giving birth to thirteen children (and looking after the eight who survived), running the household, acting as Tolstoy's secretary and publisher, writing her own fiction and diaries, and constantly being pecked on by Leo for not sharing his views of rejecting private property and living in the Gospel poverty by physical labour. Both women left detailed memoirs in which they exonerate their husbands on the grounds of their literary genius, without noticing that the 'great man' is not a solitary genius but a construct, propped up by their unacknowledged work of typing, editing, organizing, inspiring, providing emotional support behind the scenes. (No wonder none of my school friends fancied marrying a writer.)

If women habitually responded to male talents with support, nurture and self-sacrifice (European art historians will probably conjure up at this point the numerous images of Milton's daughters), men's reaction to female talents was often far from benign. In this very book we see Frans Hals potentially stealing Judith Leyster's students, Carl Larsson and T. S. Eliot appropriating the work of Karen Bergöo and Vivienne (Vivien) Haigh-Wood, respectively, Lewis Mumford criticizing and intellectually suffocating Sophia Wittenberg and, most alarmingly, Robert Browning possibly murdering Elizabeth Barrett Browning and then attempting to stifle her fame as her literary executive, instead of fostering her legacy like many wives did. Imagine how many more women have been written off or killed off (metaphorically or literally) by men, and how much more work is still needed to recover them.

The trickle gradually became a steady stream. In 1929, Virginia Woolf published her famous extended essay, *A Room of One's Own*, in which she demonstrated how the lack of personal space (so poignantly glossed by U. A. Fanthorpe in 'From the Third Storey'), lack of resources and lack of access to education held women from writing. Woolf's work engendered many responses. One of them, forty-three years later, was Alice Walker's essay 'In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens', which drew attention to just how much more difficult, impossible even, it was to write for black women like Phillis Wheatley, 'a slave, who owned not even herself' (Walker, 1972). Same would apply to serf women of other areas all over the world, such as the Russian Empire, whose emancipation only began in 1861, four years before the abolition of slavery in the United States. 'I thought if I told no one it might not be true,' says Antoinette in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*; if no one tells the story, it is as if it never happened.

This stream continues to grow. Even those whose interests are far from gender politics have at least heard of the recent blockbusters *The Wife* (2017) and *Hidden Figures* (2016). Books about the women behind the famous men of the past have been bestsellers ever since Martin Jarvis's

controversial work on J. S. Bach's second wife Anna Magdalena, whom he posited as the main creative force behind a number of Bach's famous pieces (*Written by Mrs Bach*, 2011). The book made a splash in the popular media and was also produced as a documentary (2014). Jarvis's work has been followed more recently by *Einstein's Wife: The Real Story of Mileva Einstein-Marić*, by Allen Esterson and David C. Cassidy (2019); *Sontag: Her Life*, by Benjamin Moser (2019); *Eileen: The Making of George Orwell*, by Sylvia Topp (2020). Hallie Rubenhold's *The Five: The Untold Lives of the Women Killed by Jack the Ripper* (2019) focuses not on wives but on victims; however, her approach can also be seen as part of this broadening biographical movement.

This interest in unsung wives or partners throws into sharp relief the habitual invisibility or poor visibility of women in our societies, a phenomenon that extends far beyond the arts. Caroline Criado-Perez's excoriating analysis of the gender bias in the Western world, where almost everything is designed for a man, is titled *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (2019). Similarly, the interrogation of women's hidden roles in economics raises questions like *Who Cooked Adam Smith's Dinner?*, as the title of Katrine Marçal's 2015 book has it. Looking at the rise of the professional class in the upstate New York in the late eighteenth–early nineteenth century, historian Mary Ryan demonstrates how these college-educated men were lifted and propped in their new position by enormous and often invisible efforts of their mothers and sisters, the efforts which benefited their male relatives not only materially but also psychologically (*Cradle of the Middle Class: Family in Oneida County New York, 1790–1865*, 1981). According to some calculations, the worth of the unpaid labour done by women is a staggering \$10.9 trillion (Gus Wezerek and Kristen R. Ghodsee, 'Women's Unpaid Labor is Worth \$10,900,000,000,000', *The New York Times*, 5 March 2020). Even when women are paid, the gender pay gap still yawns (Inequality.org), and many chapters in this book, particularly those about M. E. Fitzgerald (by Catherine Hollis) or the women who worked for Penguin (by Rebecca Lyons), illuminate these inequalities. Historically, slave and servant labour facilitated many notable achievements of their more privileged masters and mistresses, and Julia Bolton Holloway highlights just how important – and unappreciated – Elizabeth Barrett Browning's maid Lily Wilson was to the poet. Today, a significant amount of intellectual and artistic work is possible because others, often lower class or migrant women, do paid household labour.

The slow realization of the scope of this unpaid or severely underpaid labour led to further understanding of the other commodity women regularly lack – time. Brigid Schulte described it best in her essay 'A woman's greatest enemy? A lack of time to herself' (*The Guardian*, 12 July 2019), which I read multiple times, quietly sobbing while breastfeeding the teething baby in the dead of night before going to work in the morning. After I told my non-

academic friend how much time I spent doing unpaid research on medieval Russian holy women, who constitute about 4 per cent of all the saints in the region and about whom barely anything is known, especially if they were not from the upper class, he remarked: ‘Maybe this is how these women got themselves erased – by serving others.’ Who knows how much more Karin Bergöö Larsson (discussed by Godelinde Perk) or Myfanwy Piper (discussed by Eleanor Knight) would have designed and written if they were allowed more leisure?

Today it is painful to read *Madame Curie*, the 1937 bestselling biography of the great scientist by her daughter Eve, who describes with wide-eyed social innocence how the newly-wed Marie was expected to cook, clean, look after her chronically absent-minded husband, do the shopping, housekeeping and accounts, study and work full-time in the lab – only to be mortified by her mother-in-law’s comments on the poor quality of her French cuisine, who wondered loudly, ‘what on earth they taught the young girls in Warsaw!’ All the while, Pierre was deep in thought about physics and ‘never even noticed the great effort she made’ (141–2). All this is depicted by Eve Curie through the lens of her parents’ inordinate love, with an almost saccharine flavour and not a hint of anger at the glaring inequality of their roles and her grandmother’s not-so-micro-aggression towards Marie. In this case, as in many others, it is particularly hurtful that it was women who were normalizing this inequality – first Marie’s mother-in-law with her remarks, then her daughter in her biography of her mother. The relationship between another iconic couple – Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning – was likewise characterized by the many limitations imposed by the husband on the wife, and forms the main subject of Julia Bolton Holloway’s Chapter 18 in this book.

In ‘Leaf by Niggle’ (1945), the work that comes closest to both allegory and autobiography in his oeuvre, J. R. R. Tolkien describes the afterlife journey of a painter, Niggle, whose passion was to lock himself up in a shed and paint his tree. He is later joined by his materialistic neighbour, Parish. Both men have to learn to work together and discover each other’s *fortes*: the creativity of Niggle and the practicality of Parish. Later in the story, Parish refuses to move on towards the paradisiacal mountains without his wife – Tolkien’s thinly veiled tribute to his life-partner Edith, who receives her own chapter in this volume by Maria Artamonova. I always read this story as Tolkien’s metaphor for the splitting he experienced in his life, being on the one hand a scholar, a writer and a creator, locked in his quiet study, and on the other a family man, a colleague and a friend, which imposed very different demands on his limited time on Earth. But how many parts does a woman with aspirations have to split herself into, even today? Despite the popular belief that women are naturally good at multitasking, a number of recent studies suggest that neurologically it is not true – women simply have no option but to multitask. More research will hopefully clarify whether women’s superior ability to multitask is

biologically informed or culturally enforced. One more recent notion, emotional labour, is yet another facet of the same social setup: women are usually expected to be default household managers of many thankless tasks for their partners and children: delegating, keeping track of tasks, planning ahead . . . keeping that laundry mountain of Doom under control (see Gemma Hartley, 'Women Aren't Nags – We're Just Fed Up: Emotional labor is the unpaid job men still don't understand', *Harper's Bazaar*, 27 September 2017). It is exhausting; it can leave little headspace for creativity. And at the end of the day it reflects the same damaging belief: that women's time is less valuable than men's, and their lives are disposable. Writing this in spring 2020, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, I, too, have joined the chorus of women who previously relied on institutional childcare and who now feel as if they were thrown back to the 1950s, caught in the never-ending cycle of cleaning, cooking, educating and entertaining, because our time is viewed as cheaper and valued at lower rates. Academic segments of Twitter and Facebook are currently awash with discussions of the data suggesting that during the lockdown, women's productivity plummeted while men's productivity went up.<sup>1</sup>

The assumption of female inferiority still permeates our very cultural fabric. Several years ago I visited the Charles Rennie Mackintosh room in Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow. Next to one of the items on display there was a quote from Mackintosh's letter openly stating that he and his wife, Margaret Macdonald, were working on the item together; however, the item exhibited had a label with his name only. At least her husband did not destroy many of her works of art after her death – the fate that befell her sister, Frances Macdonald MacNair. More recently, *A Portrait of Elizaveta Yakovleva*, a much-praised painting, initially identified with confidence as a forgotten masterpiece by Kazimir Malevich, turned out to be by his female pupil Maria Dzhagupova (Konstantin Akinsha and Vanessa Thorpe, 'Rediscovered masterpiece "was actually work of Malevich's pupil"', *The Observer*, 7 April 2019). The basic instinct of an art critic was that it had to be painted by a man. The stories of Jeanne de Montbaston (by Melek Karataş in Chapter 9) and Judith Leyster (by Irene Kukota in Chapter 10) in this volume provide a fascinating variation on the same theme.

This is not to say that a marriage inevitably choked female creativity and stole women's time. Historically, it was a key part of many women's identities and often provided resources and opportunities for their own work, as seen in the examples of Valerie Eliot, Sophia Mumford (discussed by Karen Christensen in Chapter 3) and Ann Golding (by Nicola Presley in Chapter 16). While the excessive emotional investment in her marriage seems to have pushed the already mentally unstable Vivienne Haigh-Wood Eliot over the edge, at least temporarily (as demonstrated by Arwa al-Mubaddel in Chapter 14), a romantic partnership could also be a further catalyst for the already existing inspirations and collaboration, as the career trajectory

of Marie Sargent-Černý demonstrates (in Chapter 7 by Hana Havratilova). Children, too, can be a source of comfort, pride and inspiration, yet it is often forgotten that the same goes for parents, especially mothers, even (or perhaps especially) such mothers as Monnica of Hippo (discussed by Patricia Grosse in Chapter 13) and Eva Larkin (discussed by Philip Pullen in Chapter 17), whose intellectual feedback and emotional support was so important to their sons. Sometimes what looks ostensibly like a woman fighting for the narrow interests of her family becomes a fight for a greater political cause, and can even result in the women, such as Maissi Erko (Chapter 6 by Reetta Hänninen) and Servilia (Chapter 5 by Susan Treggiari), going against certain members of this family. Activism defines the story of Kim Hak-soon (as told here by Woohee Kim in Chapter 8), who reshaped herself as a social justice warrior, recovering her life and her purpose after nearly losing them to profound trauma.

Professional relationships can also bring intense satisfaction once the supporting role, the second violin, is duly acknowledged, as illustrated by the life of Miss Hytti (by Anu Lahtinen) and her part in the leading cultural institutions in twentieth-century Finland. It is no accident that in this collection Finland features twice, since this was the first country in the Western world to allow women various freedoms, including the unrestricted right to vote and the opportunity to be elected as officials (1906). Municipal suffrage existed in the country since at least 1872; from 1915, women were to be accepted to the universities on the same terms as male students. The first female minister in Western Europe, former factory worker Miina Sillanpää, joined the government in 1926, three years before her counterpart in the UK (but nine years after Alexandra Kollontai was appointed a *komissar* to the Bolshevik government of Russia, the first woman in history to become a member of the government). The country's current government is formed of the first-ever all-female coalition.

It appears that female same-sex partnerships, romantic, entrepreneurial or political, were overall more balanced when it came to the distribution of labour and fulfilment of ambitions, although admittedly they, too, suffered a significant degree of invisibility throughout history. A fine illustration to this thesis is the story of Tove Jansson and her partner Tuulikki Pietilä (Tooti), both of whom had successful careers in art, as Boel Westin has recently highlighted in *Tove Jansson: Life, Art, Words: the Authorised Biography* (2014). Chapter 20 in this volume on U. A. Fanthorpe and her partner R. V. Bailey (written by Elizabeth Sandie, with R. V. Bailey's input) provides a somewhat different perspective to the majority of the essays in this book, yet in its exploration of the marginal voice, the devices female authors use in publishing, and the mutual inspiration of literary partners, echoes many of the strands of the collection. This book began with literary labour but gradually expanded to a number of other areas of female experience: family obligations, childbearing and childrearing, bereavement, nursing,

facilitating. However, despite the dramatically different circumstances under which the women profiled in this collection laboured, typing is a labour many of them shared. It is only fair, therefore, that Lisa Mullen's *Epilogue* to this book is dedicated to the cultural relationship between humans and typewriters.

Structurally, we tried to arrange the contributions by topics, but could not entirely get away from the chronological organization within the sections. Despite our best efforts to swim against the tide of collective forgetting, this collection still displays a white Euro-and US-centric, as well as upper-class and middle-class slant. This in many ways reflects the inertia of the traditional academic research interests as well as the availability of the surviving sources: more often than not, the more marginalized group the person belongs to, the more difficult it is to find surviving sources about her. The stories of our book are but separate pebbles on a vast beach of human lives, washed ashore by the whims of recorded memories and the circumstances of our own existence. Initially several chapters were planned to cover a wider geographical range, but unfortunately these could not be completed in time to appear in this collection. As is, the collection highlights how easy it is for women to be invisible in plain sight, in historically the most well-documented and privileged societies. But we hope that this initial volume and its counterparts will help eventually to expand the research into women's stories and bring more of them out of oblivion.

My own emotional investment in the topic of the invisible and forgotten women behind famous men of the past began by mourning the unpainted, the unwritten, the uncomposed, the unachieved, the lives not lived to their full potential and satisfaction, the voices silenced, lost or muffled. A painting by Vera Lane Poole, unknown even to specialists, spoke powerfully enough to inspire me to attempt to rekindle the dying ashes and tell her story loud and clear. Soon I discovered many like-minded colleagues who wanted to do the same for the women whose stories they encountered in their own lives, inspiring story-telling, collaborations, friendships, connections, sharing in unpaid labour – the labour of love. Behind every successful book there is a collaboration, just as behind every successful man there is support, feedback and contribution of mothers, wives, secretaries and others. Besides the contributors, this volume would not have been possible without the feedback from Alex Anokhina, Douglas Bell, Eltjo Buringh, Elena (Alyona) Chepel, Candace Falk, Genevieve Gerrard, Maijastina Kahlos, Antonina Kalinina, Natalia Kim, Stephen Pink, Natasha Romanova, Clare Broome Saunders, Frances Spalding, Ilya Sverdlov, Atty de Waard, as well as the three anonymous reviewers provided by Bloomsbury, without the support from my husband Gábor (Gabi) Györkei, and, above all, without the unfailing help and encouragement from Vicki Blud and Daniel Gerrard, to whom it is dedicated. May this book be our gift to one another and to whoever

is willing to join us in remembering and appreciating women who were fighting for a cause, subverting the circumstances, doing their professional and familial duty or making the best out of what they had – which also required courage and dedication.

## Note

- 1 <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/21/early-journal-submission-data-suggest-covid-19-tanking-womens-research-productivity>