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”Not the Kind of Thing Anyone Wants to Spell Out”

Lesbian Silence in Emma Donoghue’s Neo-Victorian
Representation of the Codrington Divorce

EMMA DONOGHUE’S *The Sealed Letter* (2008) is a neo-Victorian reimagination of a divorce scandal in the nineteenth century, the Codrington divorce, which involved the feminist Emily Faithfull (1835–1895).¹ In the novel, the author explores the consequences of failed heterosexual monogamy in a Victorian marriage, bringing together early feminist history and social scandal. The divorcée, Helen Codrington, and Ms Faithfull were both women who did not accommodate to the available models of femininity, and there are several hints of the existence of a lesbian affection between them. Although the Victorians were aware of lesbian affection, this was not spoken of, due, in part, to the lack of terminology to describe same-sex desire between women. In an interview, Donoghue admits that one of the reasons she finds the historical genre so appealing is that when speaking about sexuality in the past there were no labels to define homoerotic bonds (O’Neill 2008, 4). This is the central theme in *The Sealed Letter*, in which the author queers up history in a highly refined manner that mirrors the eloquent silence that circumscribed lesbianism in the nineteenth century.

This article looks into how Donoghue uses the trope of silence to reiterate lesbian history in her reimagination of the relationship between Helen Codrington and Emily Faithfull. I will argue that the public/pri-

vate dichotomy we generally associate with the Victorians is disrupted during the fictionalization of the Codrington trial, as the private lives of these women are put on public display. Firstly, I will give a brief overview of Donoghue as a lesbian author and then situate her within neo-Victorian fiction. Secondly, I will provide a socio-cultural context to the Codrington divorce. Thirdly, I will examine lesbian affection in *The Sealed Letter*, focusing on how the author applies subtle and perceptive, rather than descriptive, language to depict queer relations in the Victorian period. I will argue that the representation of the legal struggle in contemporary media entailed a gross invasion of privacy. In an attempt to demonstrate how lesbian identity is put under social pressure I will draw attention to how the protagonist faces the threat of having her sexuality publically exposed in the courtroom and reported in the media, an idea I will link to the public/private dichotomy.

Emma Donoghue: A World-Renowned Writer of Historical, Feminist and Lesbian Fiction

The Irish-born writer Emma Donoghue (b. 1969) debuted at the age of twenty-five with a queer coming-of-age novel, *Stir-Fry* (1994). Since then she has written extensively and published both non-fictional and fictional works. The author is not afraid to use different genres and her writing ranges from radio plays and stage drama to short stories, poetry and novels, including the international bestseller *Room* (2010). Donoghue has been awarded several prizes and been both short- and long-listed for different awards over the years. In 2011 she was granted Person of the Year Award by the Irish National Lesbian and Gay Federation, which points to her impact on, and importance for, the queer community. Antoinette Quinn distinguishes Donoghue for breaking the prolonged silence of lesbians in Irish literature and contends: "*Stir-Fry* represents an important contribution to the creation of a climate in which it is a little easier for students and young people in Ireland to come out, and I would see this as its principal achievement." (Quinn 2000, 154)

Donoghue's fiction has been regarded by Lambda Literary Foundation on several occasions and was shortlisted five times before becoming

the joint winner of the Lambda Award for Lesbian Fiction in 2009 with *The Sealed Letter*.² Lambda Literary Foundation was founded in USA in 1987 with the purpose to promote LGBT literature and to encourage emerging writers, and is today internationally acknowledged as one of the most influential LGBT literary organisations.³ Donoghue is a highly acclaimed writer both within and outside queer circles and her most recent novel *Room* was shortlisted for The Man Booker Prize in 2010, while *The Sealed Letter* appeared on The Orange Prize Long List last year.⁴ The author often writes lesbian historical fiction, nevertheless, not necessarily in conjunction – she is feminist writer, as well as a historical and lesbian author and in this sense the label lesbian is an additional category to the other two. Not all of her writings have a lesbian content. While *Slammerkin* (2000) and *Room* do not rely on a queer context, *Hood* and *Landing* delve into issues regarding queer identity. Notwithstanding, she considers herself a lesbian writer, and is not afraid of being labelled as one. Conversely, she contends that her authorship and lesbian identity are connected in many ways, and from the start she was clear that she was not going to write “closeted fiction” (O’Neill 2008, 1).

Donoghue is deeply concerned with queer identities and how the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community is devoid of history. She has carried out extensive research that answers to queer people’s, and lesbians’ in particular, need for a history to hold on to.⁵ Her two non-fictional books, *Passions Between Women* (1993) and *Inseparable: History Between Women in Literature* (2010), take a closer look at the history of lesbians, and the author draws attention to the lack of terminology in the past to describe sexual identities, divergent from the heteropatriarchal norm. Quinn pays heed to how Donoghue works closely with the scarce language available for lesbianism in her fiction, and in *Hood* “the absence of such term as ‘lesbianhood’ points to the unofficial, closeted status of lesbians in the past” (Quinn 2000, 159). Same-sex desire, lesbian identity and family structures are central themes in most of her work and all these topics are treated in her sixth novel, *The Sealed Letter*. Although it is a story that is deeply concerned with queer identities, lesbian affection is treated in a rather perceptive manner throughout the

narrative – this is something I will explore in this article in an attempt to explain how and why Donoghue deliberately uses effusive language to depict Emily Faithfull and Helen Codrington’s relationship.

The novel got a mixed, but generally positive, reception by reviewers who saw different reasons behind Donoghue’s choice of a historical setting. Natalie Bennett states that she is “pleased that [Emily Faithfull] has been rescued [...] from historical oblivion” (Bennett 2012, 1). However, in my opinion, this was not Donoghue’s initial intention, as she stresses how lesbian history is a relatively new topic and contends that there is more to it than excavating the traces of lesbian history to resurrect women who have been neglected by the official history (Donoghue 1993, 23). In this regard, Donoghue’s reimagination of a particular episode in the life of the Victorian feminist Emily Faithfull and its consequences on her private life is something more than a commemorative act. In my opinion, the author clearly sets out with the specific aim in mind to articulate lesbian identity as it has been omitted from official history, and thus faces two main problems. On the one hand, it was a common belief until late nineteenth century that women were asexual, and hence lesbianism was perceived in terms of relationships, not an identity. On the other hand the lack of terminology and vocabulary to speak about same-sex desire between women delimits the author to use covert and suggestive language as she “might only speak in the ‘voices’ of her or his forebears” (Davies 2012, 5), and as a result, she is only able to reflect over lesbian silence and identity “repeat[ing] patriarchal heteronormative script of passivity and objectification” (Davies 2012, 8). Therefore, I consider that her main aim in *The Sealed Letter* is to examine lesbian identities in the Victorian period, what it meant for the individual, and what the limitations the lack of terminology implied. In this article, I will address Donoghue’s usage of the trope of silence to unseal the hidden lesbian content of history focusing on how she articulates embedded lesbian identities in the past as “there are only *truths* in the plural, and never one Truth” (Hutcheon 1995, 109).

Lilian Faderman’s seminal study of lesbians in history, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the*

Renaissance to the Present, first published 1981, shed light over some of the blind spots of previous scholarship regarding relationships between women. Contrary to the taken-for-granted idea that lesbians were invisible in the past, Faderman convincingly demonstrated how the Victorians were highly aware of the possibility and existence of romantic attachment between women, and that in fact, "society appeared to condone them rather than to view them as disruptive of the social structure" (Faderman 1991, 16). Lesbian affection was overlooked and even accepted, mainly because women were considered asexual and inferior to men. In other words, lesbianism was not perceived as a threat to male supremacy because sex between women was unthinkable.

Donoghue concurs with Faderman on the point that people were highly aware of the existence of female bonding, and she is deeply intrigued by how same-sex affection between women was represented in literature in the past. In Donoghue's words, "the paradox is that writers in English and other Western languages have been speaking about this so-called unspeakable subject for the best part of the millennium" (Donoghue 2010, 4). Lesbianism was always portrayed within fixed parameters and covert language as authors tended to "evoke passion between with the discreet vocabulary of friendship" (Donoghue 2010, 8). Independently of the Victorians' knowledge of the existence of lesbians or the cultural consent of female bonding at the period, lesbian presence and voice have been excluded from official historical records. In this regard, Donoghue disentangles Emily Faithfull's queer identity, which has been sealed up by an ensued silence in history.

The Sealed Letter is, as mentioned above, based on real-life people and real-life events, but the lengthy legal battle that took place between the Codringtons from 1858 to 1866 has been compressed into a short period in 1864 (392). In doing so she manages to speed up the pace of the narrative, which DJ Taylor describes as "briskly written, deftly plotted and nicely ironic" (Taylor 2011, 2). Nevertheless, the reviewer also criticises Donoghue for at times using unnecessary quantity of cultural references to show that she is well researched in the nineteenth century (Taylor 2011, 2–3). Still, this is a device common applied by authors of historical

fiction in order to attain historical credibility to their work, and should therefore not be regarded as a flaw, because it helps the reader to situate the plot in the Victorian era. In situating the story in this period, Donoghue seeks to address lesbian history by considering the role of lesbian self-identification as circumscribed by "the legal silence on sex between women" (Donoghue 1993, 18). As a matter of fact, same-sex desire between women was not an issue under legal scrutiny in Britain, while male homosexuality was a legal offense and punishable by law.

Ever since A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990), contemporary authors turn to the nineteenth century to reimagine, revise and give an alternative account of the Victorian period. So called neo-Victorian fiction engages with the Victorian period in several ways and may be set either partly – as is the case with *Possession* – or entirely in the nineteenth century. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn have, in my opinion, offered one of the best definitions of the genre up to the moment: "[T]he neo-Victorian is something *more than* historical fiction set in the nineteenth century [...] [the work] must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians.*" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 4; original emphasis) What I find particularly relevant to this historical sub-genre is how it is defined by a series of terms that all are preceded by the prefix "re-"; neo-Victorianism is acknowledged for its *return* to the past to *reread*, *reimagine* and *rewrite* the past and in this process *readdresses* historical "truth" and *reconsiders* contemporary issues.

Arguably, the neo-Victorian novel is a doubling both of a literary and a historical past and in that sense it combines fact and fiction as it delves into issues that have been obscured or regulated by strict social norms in the past. Arias and Pulham contend that the neo-Victorian novel "represents a 'double' of the Victorian text mimicking its language, style and plot; it plays with the conscious repetition of tropes, characters and historical events" (Arias and Pulham 2012, xv). Thus, this way authors that turn to the nineteenth century playfully engage us in a game regarding authenticity by claiming to offer a version truer than other historical and literary accounts from the Victorian period. This is often

achieved through the incorporation of "lost" voices – a practice generally referred to among critics as the voicing of the silenced. This implies that previously eclipsed stories are placed at the core of the narrative and historical minorities, or secondary literary characters are often turned into the protagonists. For instance, Peter Carey (b. 1943) reimagines Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1860–1861) by turning Magwitch into the hero in *Jack Maggs* (1997). Sarah Waters (b. 1966), one of the most important popular authors of contemporary queer fiction in British literature, has situated herself as one of the prominent authors of lesbian historical fiction thanks to her neo-Victorian trilogy (although not a sequel) consisting of *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), and *Fingersmith* (2002).

The Sealed Letter is Donoghue's first neo-Victorian novel and it is based on a real divorce, the Codrington case. Donoghue found this bourgeois embarrassment an irresistible source both because of the members involved and of the media's role in the case, reporting every dirty detail at the same time as journalists were denouncing immorality and stressing the importance of domestic harmony (Lang 2011). The trial took place in 1864 and was followed closely by the press, which aroused an immense public interest as domestic secrets were revealed.⁶ *The Sealed Letter* is a fictional reimagination of this sordid divorce case in Victorian England and a feminist spinster's reluctance to become involved in the trial. The divorcée Helen Codrington and the suffragist Emily Faithfull – or Fido as she is called in the novel – are both represented as women who could not accommodate to the available roles of women at the period. In order to avoid confusion, from this point onwards I will refer to Emily Faithfull as Fido whenever I speak about the fictional character.

The Socio-Historical Background of *The Sealed Letter*: Codrington vs. Codrington and Anderson

During the first half of the nineteenth century women had no influence at all in the legal apparatus, and the lack of women's rights was a reality inscribed in the legal code of coverture. The English common law regulated the status of woman to an inferior rank as she was always

legally represented, i.e. "covered", by a male superior. Hence, women had hardly any legal rights and were represented by her husband or father. According to the legalese of coverture, an adult unmarried woman was defined as *femme sole* in contrast to the *femme covert* (Shanley 1993, 8–10). This legal terminology derives from French and *femme sole* and *covert* literally mean "woman alone" and "covered woman" respectively. On the one hand, *femme sole* "was a woman who never had been married, widowed or divorced in the eyes of the law, and would be able to draw contracts to sue or be sued, and to inherit property and dispose of it as she wished," and on the other, the covered woman was under the total legal protection and responsibility of her husband (Atkinson 2012, 395). In addition, Victorian women's limited access to education and work complicated for unmarried women to become self-supportive.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the surplus of single women in England started to rouse anxieties and this is reflected in George Gissing's novel *The Odd Women* from 1893. This term has been associated with spinsterhood in the context of single men and women being unpaired in numbers, which was severe matter of national concern in the Victorian era. In his essay "Why Are Women Redundant?" (1862) W. R. Greg expressed his anxiety about the vast amount of unmarried working women because they represented the direct opposition to the Victorian womanhood as they were financially independent from men by working in the public sphere, in Greg's words, "in place of completing, sweetening, and embellishing the existence of others, [single women] are compelled to lead an independent and incomplete existence of their own" (Greg 1869, 3). As Mary Poovey points out, Greg's argument is an assertion of the strong beliefs regarding biological sexuality, sexual difference and the social organisation of sexual relations is natural, not social (Poovey 1988, 2). The redundancy of unmarried women was a fact and this is described by Gissing as follows: "[T]here are half a million more women than men in this happy country of ours [...]. So many *odd* women – no making a pair with them. The pessimists call them useless, lost, futile lives." (Gissing 2008, 44) The fact that odd women destabilized the social structure of separate spheres as well as gender roles gave

rise to theories of a third sex as the medical gaze turned towards women who sought an alternative lifestyle outside heterosexual matrimony.

Elaine Showalter remarks that the "odd women" undermined the comfortable binary system that underpinned Victorian sexuality and gender roles (Showalter 1992, 19). In this sense their quest for improved social conditions and legal status turned them into a political group and, as Showalter argues, "[they] used the surplus of unmarried women to prove that women's traditional domestic roles were outmoded and that social policies which denied them higher education, alternative roles, professional opportunities, and votes were self-defeating and cruel" (Showalter 1992, 20). The development of the feminist movement and the increasing hostility towards lesbians run parallel, and odd women caused social anxiety as feminists and as lesbians. They posed a threat to the heteropatriarchal structure of Victorian society, which normalized public and private space as heterosexual and male dominated. Faderman notes: "A lesbian, by the sexologists' definition, was one who rejected what had long been woman's role. She found that role distasteful because she was not really a woman – she was a member of a third sex. [...] All her emotions were inverted [...]" (Faderman 1991, 240) Lesbian women found a space within the feminist movement where they could negotiate their social status as women; however, their sexuality was still circumscribed by heteronormative values. Feminists worried that if they were associated with lesbianism, it might hinder the progress of their endeavour to improve the social condition of the female sex (Faderman 1991, 240). Thus, the feminist movement provided a women-centred space outside the domestic sphere; notwithstanding, lesbianism remained closeted and unmentionable. In the mid-Victorian era many feminist organisations were formed to promote opportunities for women, as for example, The Society for Promoting Employment for Women, founded in 1859, in which Emily Faithfull was an active member and served as its secretary (Petticrew 2013). Hence, Ms Faithfull fits the label "odd woman" for being a spinster and feminist. She struggled arduously to improve women's rights during her lifetime and worked closely with other feminists, Bessie Parkes among others,

and in 1860 she set up the printing house The Victoria Press, which only employed women.

In the divorce case *Codrington vs. Codrington and Anderson*, which was the inspiration to *The Sealed Letter*, Admiral Harry Codrington charged his wife Helen with adultery with Colonel Anderson and pressed charges to obtain a divorce. At the time, according to the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, men could apply for divorce on the ground of adultery, whereas women had to prove their husbands' adultery in combination with incest, bigamy, cruelty, neglect, or abandonment (Shanley 1993, 138). Moreover, adultery had to be proven by witnesses who could bear testimony of having caught the illicit couple in the act. In fact, the spouses involved would not be interrogated themselves in court. In her defence Helen Codrington counter-attacked, accusing her husband of neglect, and attempted rape on her friend Emily Faithfull while she lived with the married couple for a longer period. This was the first time in English legal history that a wife took advantage of a new legal rule to make counter-charges at her husband's suit for divorce (Roulston 2011, 2). In an interview Donoghue admits that she got interested in the Codrington case because it was "a highly, self-consciously modern legal battle" (Roulston 2011, 2).

The feminist Emily Faithfull's implication in the case was ambiguous, and she got involved in the case under peculiar circumstances. On the one hand, Harry Codrington claimed first and foremost that she had played a vital role in Helen's affair with Anderson by letting them have a private rendezvous in her apartment. To Ms Faithfull's horror this was mentioned in an article in *The Times*, portraying her as a go-between and giving her full name and address. Secondly, but no less important, Harry Codrington further blamed Ms Faithfull for having alienated his wife's attention from him by sharing a bedroom with Helen while living with the couple. Under unknown circumstances, Emily Faithfull had been asked to leave the Codringtons' residency and Helen's parents also interfered in the matter. The case was reported in *The Times* with full details, and as a result intimate matters were made public:

Upon his return he found reason to complain of his wife's conduct in some small matters [...] [but] the Admiral had not the slightest reason for suspecting her of any misconduct. [...] In the spring of 1857 there was a remarkable occurrence to which it was necessary to call their attention. [...] From time to time Mrs. Codrington had proposed that she should sleep with Miss Faithfull, stating that she was subject to asthmas, and in the spring of 1857 she positively and absolutely declined again to enter the same bed with the Admiral. [...] [T]he Admiral, as he was in duty bound, communicated with his wife's father and mother. [...] Miss Faithfull was dismissed from the house [...] [And] a packet was sealed up and placed by Mr. Smith in the hands of General Sir William Codrington [...]. (Quoted in Petticrew 2013)

As the excerpt from *The Times* reveals, Helen's misconduct was overlooked as long as it did not interfere with the matrimonial rights of the husband. When Ms Faithfull's presence diverted Helen from her spousal responsibilities she suddenly posed a threat to the domestic harmony, and although not stated in the article, this together with the unmentionable content, i.e. lesbian desire, of a sealed letter that had been issued to Mr Codrington's brother, pinpoint a lesbian affection between Helen Codrington and Ms Faithfull.

In an interview Donoghue highlights that the term of "alienating a wife's affection" was a phrase in nineteenth century legalese commonly applied to men courting married women (Roulston 2011, 2). Thus, there are several facts pointing at a lesbian relationship between the two women. Ms Faithfull's initial role in the trial was to support Helen's side by bearing witness to the Admiral's cruelty towards his wife and to testify about an attempted rape on herself. She was unwilling to report the incident in public, but Helen's solicitor broke the promise of not dragging her into court and forced her to appear in the trial. At the very last moment Emily gave the defence an unexpected surprise by changing her testimony and denying her previous statement. It is believed that the star witness' suddenly changed version had to do with the still unknown content of the sealed letter that had been placed in hands of Mr

Codrington's brother. Consequently, Helen Codrington lost the case and with that, also her children.⁷

Martha Vicinus has studied this divorce trial in an attempt to prove that the Victorian literary and legal elites acknowledged lesbian sexuality in a variety of complex ways. Vicinus claims that, "the silence at the heart of the Codrington trial – the unnameable thing – is lesbian sex, which everyone acknowledges, but no one names" (Vicinus 1997, 94). She demonstrates how at a time when the medical discourse still had not put a label on female same-sex relationships, homoerotic bonds between women were recognized in a number of ways. Vicinus' interpretation of the Codrington trial together with a close reading of Faithfull's novel *Change Upon Change: A Reed Shaken With the Wind* (1873) makes a strong case for lesbian affection between Helen Codrington and Emily Faithfull. The scholar remarks that "we do not find an absence of lesbians in the Victorian period, rather, an eloquent silence" and highlights how "the refusal to name names may have had a more powerful effect than actual naming, categorizing, and fencing off" (Vicinus 1997, 72). Helen and Emily are thus both odd women in the sense that apart from being a divorcée and a spinster respectively, their views on sexuality were divergent from heterosexual normativity.

Lesbian Silence in *The Sealed Letter*

The Sealed Letter is set in the mid-Victorian period and Donoghue delimits lesbian desire within the frame of unnameability and reimagine unthinkability. She explores the trope of silence in order to explore the lacuna of lesbianism in the nineteenth century through a lesbian affair between two women and its consequences. The author describes Sarah Waters as particularly fearless in her description of lesbian relationships in her novels, and refers to her as a model to follow for other writers of lesbian historical fiction. Yet, in *The Sealed Letter* Donoghue is quite subtle in her treatment of the lesbian affection between Helen and Fido. Their friendship awakens Fido's lesbian consciousness and when she first meets Mrs Codrington; "[s]he felt drawn to Helen at once, by instinct, like a bloom opens to a bee" (Donoghue 2011, 17). Although

Fido's queer affection for Helen is not spelled out, it is repeatedly implied throughout the narrative and in this quote it is easily detected since the author uses the imagery of blossoms and bees. But rather than being a flaw, I suggest that this reflects perfectly Vicinus' description of Victorian same-sex relationships between women; they were a fact that was recognised by society, but not spoken of.

As mentioned before, Donoghue is familiar with the lack of definitions to describe sexuality in the past, especially same-sex desire, and this is one of the main reasons why she likes to write historical fiction. Donoghue skilfully combines lesbian invisibility and silence with the spatial and gendered division imposed by the public/private dichotomy, to comment on gendered and sexual discrimination and exclusion from public space and discourse. Here, Jürgen Habermas' theory on public space offers an interesting point of departure.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962) Jürgen Habermas elaborates his concept of the public sphere, distinguishing between the state and civil society. His theory regarding the public sphere has had an immense impact on spatial theory as it foregrounds the public realm as an inclusive and discursive arena where inequalities can be bridged mainly through dialogue to discuss common interest:

[A]lthough it had more or less been solidly integrated into the hieratically ordered, locally rooted representations of social ranks, the public could nevertheless be interpreted as composed by free individuals. Social intercourse occurred in the medium of society [...] in accordance of strict rules of equality and frankness, under a code of self-protection and courteousness. (Habermas 1991, 131)

Habermas focuses on a particular society at a specific point in history and traces the development of public/private dichotomy to the growth of the bourgeoisie. Several critics have drawn attention to this fact and remark that the limitations of his theories lie in that they are enclosed within a Westphalian framework. For instance, Nancy Fraser is at odds

with Habermas's conceptualization of transnational public sphere in terms of a space that is conceived as a communicative generation of public opinion, and that is fair and inclusive (Fraser 2010, 76). Yet, Fraser's criticism of Habermas does not consist of a wish to eradicate the public/private dichotomy, conversely, she urges for the need to "repoliticize public-sphere theory" (Fraser 2010, 78). On the one hand, she favours Habermas' idea of the public sphere as "a theatre in modern society in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk [...] [-] an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction" (Fraser 1994, 110). On the other hand, Fraser draws attention the flaws in his theory, noticing how "he fails to examine other nonliberal, nonbourgeois, competing public spheres" (Fraser 1994, 115). The major impediment of Habermas' conceptualization of the public sphere is that his ideas are clearly situated within a patriarchal and heteronormative framework of the European bourgeoisie, and as a result, the ideal of the public sphere as a site of verbal interchange that bridge social differences, is limited to the interest of male, middle class and heterosexual citizens.

Feminist geographer Nancy Duncan remarks that, "[l]ike gender, sexuality is often regulated by the binary distinction between the public and the private. It is usually assumed that sexuality is (and should be) confined to private spaces. This is based on the naturalization of heterosexual norms." (Duncan 1996, 137) The Victorian bourgeoisie was underpinned with the ideology of separate spheres that dictated a set of binary divisions as public/private, male/female, and (sexual) activity/passivity. Faderman highlights that men perceived romantic friendships as unthreatening and even encouraged it, as it sustained their view of women as "primarily sentient beings" and consequently retained women within a private sphere (Faderman 1991, 162). Donoghue connotes male unwillingness to consider and spell out the unthinkable – lesbian sex – as women were categorized as asexual beings:

Will an English jury understand a glancing allusion to this sort of vice?
[...] It's all nonsense, though. "No doubt," William assures him. "My
own dear wife insists on sleeping with her friends, whenever they visit."

”What I mean though is, Fido – the woman – did stir up some trouble at one time, took Helen’s side. I’d go so far as *alienation of affection*, even if we’re to use legal jargon.[...] These all engrossing passions of theirs can be damned inconvenient, can even come between man and wife, I don’t deny that. But to go beyond, and fancy a monster behind every bush –.”
(Donoghue 2011, 296–7)

The excerpt underlines the paradoxical acknowledging of romantic bonds between women and denial of lesbian sex. The domestic, or private, sphere was linked to femininity, and although this women-centred environment provided a space for ”romantic friendships” between women, this ideology also relegated lesbianism to the private sphere, circumscribing it as closeted, unnameable, and invisible.

Concealment in this context is an act of oppression, of control of lesbian identity that is comparable to violence. Judith Butler claims: ”Here oppression works through the production of a domain of unthinkability and unnameability. Lesbianism is not explicitly prohibited in part because it has not even made its way into the thinkable, the imaginable, that grid of cultural intelligibility that regulates the real and the nameable.” (Butler 1991, 20) Gill Valentine, following in the same lines as Duncan, asserts that the normative regulation of same-sex desire to the private sphere naturalises the public realm as a heterosexual space, whereby publically displayed non-heterosexuality tend to be suffocated through acts of violence (Valentine 1996, 146). While Duncan and Valentine are concerned with lesbian visibility and space, Butler suggests that silence works as a tool of oppression. She contends that the exclusion of lesbians from political discourse is itself an act of violence; ”[t]o be prohibited explicitly is to occupy a discursive site from which something like a reverse-discourse can be articulated” (Butler 1991, 20). In this sense, silence bereaves lesbians of the possibility to reverse discourse of oppression. Habermas’ ideal of the public sphere as a site where social differences can be overcome through discursive acts fall short, not only in regard of gender, but of sexual identity.

Donoghue’s neo-Victorian engagement with the relationship between

Helen and Fido is rather perceived as one of lesbian desire than openly exposed as a same-sex erotic connection. Neo-Victorianism is acclaimed for its revisionary impulse and tendency to make the accounts of minorities visible. Samantha Carroll distinguishes this trend as an "important contribution to the model of social justice via recognitive justice", and makes reference to Sarah Waters for making lesbianism visible by placing them at the core of the narrative (Carroll 2010, 195–6). Donoghue is different from Waters in her representation of lesbian characters and even though they are the main characters of the story, they are made visible in a different treatment of their sexuality. Donoghue uses dialogue between the two women that hints at a relationship that suggests something more than friendship:

"If ever I give you... misleading impressions, it's because I don't know what I'm doing from one minute to the next, or I'm ashamed to admit even to myself how far I slipped. When I love, I can't hold back. I can't help myself," says Helen in a choking voice. "You know that about me, don't you? You've always known." (Donoghue 2011, 111)

The author repeatedly uses ambiguous language, which on a surface level depicts a strong affinity between two female friends, while on a deeper level suggests a sexual alliance between the two women. Donoghue recognizes that female friendships were central to the Victorian culture as women spent time and travelled together and even brought female companions on their honeymoons (Vowles 2009). However, this also implies that woman-centred environments provided a space for lesbian relationships.

Lesbian affection filters through the dominating silence, and one strategy used by the author is to use "a language that [is] in no way different from the language of heterosexual love" (Faderman 1991, 16). When the Codringtons have separated Helen turns to Fido for help and stays the night with her. The dialogue between them is charged with emotional language that pinpoints a mutual affection:

Helen squeezes back. "I've nothing to hide from you. My heart's split open as if on the vivisector's table!" Fido winces at the image. She bends over Helen. "Lean on me, my own one. I'll stand by you." "Through everything?" "Everything!" "I can stay?" "For long as you need." *Forever*, Fido's thinking, though she doesn't dare say it, not yet. "Oh, Fido! How did I manage without you all those lonely years!" (Donoghue 2011, 172)

The conversation describes the unnameable love between women; however, although Helen spends the night with Fido the reader does not get a glimpse of a love scene. This is consciously done by the author in order to suggest that sex between women did occur at a time it was regarded unthinkable.

Jeffrey Weeks remarks that the nineteenth century sexual regulation rested upon the public/private dichotomy and Victorian morality was premised on a series of binary divisions such as family/society, domestic restraint/promiscuity, and he stresses that "these divisions in social organisation and ideology were reflected in sexual attitudes" (Weeks 1989, 80–1). The ideology of separate spheres arose parallel to the growth of the middle class and was in many ways a purely bourgeois set of values, where heterosexual marriage was the norm. Traditional interpretations of the public/private dichotomy as gender-biased associate the private – the home – with women. Yet, several critics point out that the domestic sphere was, in fact, never a private space for women (Pollock 1988, 69; Gan 2009, 48). In Wendy Gan's words "the private sphere had been conceptualized as a means to provide public man a refuge from the public world" (Gan 2009, 48). Thus, rather than being a female space of privacy, the domestic realm was a male retreat from the public. This is clearly shown in the novel as the moment when Helen chooses to share the bedroom with Fido, and consequently shuts the bedroom door against her husband, coincides with the incident when Fido is asked to leave the Codrington household. Duncan remarks, "the private home has been historically seen as a place where men have assumed their right to sexual intercourse" (Duncan 1996, 130), and when Fido alienates Helen's feelings from her husband, their relationship turns into a threat. Thus, female bonding was only accepted

as long as it did not interfere with male supremacy and disrupt the public/private harmony for men. In Vicinus words:

Women could and did claim sexual subjectivity when they did not disrupt heterosexual custom. But when lesbian sex intruded into marriage, or when it seemed to prevent a young woman from marrying, or when it was linked with heterosexual adultery, it became visible subject of anger, mockery and dismal. (Vicinus 1997, 94)

Hence, as long as same-sex desire did not interfere with domestic harmony and destabilized the ideal of domesticity, it was more or less overlooked, and this is one of the key issues in *The Sealed Letter*.

During the fictional recreation of the Codrington trial the public/private dichotomy is altered by exposing intimate details of the Codrington's matrimonial life, but also for placing a female witness in the dock. Janet Stobbs notices that women were turned into public figures in the courtroom and claims, "the courtrooms were crowded with people interested rather in details from the private lives of the accused rather than the truth" (2008, 125). In *The Sealed Letter* the Codrington trial makes a public spectacle out of Helen's private life and the author includes excerpts from *The Times*, reporting from the trial, in the narrative. The article on the Codrington trial epitomizes the Victorian double standards as it condemns divorce as a social evil and at the same time makes intimate details public. At first, the journalist seems reproachful to write about the subject:

The public now turns to the Law Reports for a succession of sensational narratives that air details so filthy they put cheeks to blush and make ears ring. Any journal that reports on the Court's proceedings at length, then, risks stooping below the level of a French novel. (Donoghue 2011, 205)

But then in order to make the evils of the divorce court known, the reporter concludes the article by promising to "from the first day of the trial embark on the most minute diurnal reportage of the case" (Dono-

ghue 2011, 205). In the volume *The Spectacle of Intimacy*, Karen Chase and Michael Levenson argue that during the period between 1835 and 1865 the privacy of Victorian domestic life was deranged and legal pressures like the Infant Custody Act and Matrimonial Causes Act were putting the bourgeois normativity to the test. The scholars point out that the "Victorian private life came to know itself in the stress of popular sensation" and give the example of Caroline Norton, whose private life was blazoned in the press during her divorce (Chase and Levenson 2000, 5–6, 36). In this sense, a divorce trial breaks the public/private division as these supposedly separate realms merge together in the courtroom.

In *The Sealed Letter*, the character of Fido is described as a victim who is manipulated by the Codringtons on grounds of her sexuality. Helen takes advantage of Fido, first as a go-between for her and Anderson's illicit encounters, and then as a witness against her husband. Deceitful women and betrayal are running themes in Donoghue's writing and female relationships in different forms are characterised by both affection and betrayal, and here *The Sealed Letter* is no exception.⁸ Lesley McDowell emphasises that the author does not "offer a pretty picture of female solidarity". Fido is socially ostracised from feminist circles for getting involved in an immoral and scandalous divorce case – similar to what happened to the real Emily Faithfull (McDowell 2011, 1). This is something that Donoghue illustrates in the novel in a dialogue between Bessie Parkes and Harry Codrington in which the feminist clarifies that her establishment has severed all connections with Fido on moral grounds and to avoid the risk of attaining a bad reputation by association. Yet, Donoghue makes an implicit reference to Fido's lesbian tendencies as being a decisive cause for fellow feminists' dislike for her:

"But in some few cases, especially if the individuals lack any real religious faith, something . . . goes awry," says Bessie Parkes, her mouth twisting. "Spinsterhood is a sort of spiked armour that such women as Fido Faithfull wear with relish. What's been revealed in court about the lengths to which she's gone in thralldom to you wife –" She shivers. (Donoghue 2011, 324; original ellipsis)

Repeatedly, the author uses suggestive language to describe affection between women. The excerpt conveys the lack of terminology to describe same-sex desire between women simultaneously as it points at a social awareness of its existence. First, Donoghue uses ellipsis in "something ... goes awry" which mirrors the lack of language to describe lesbianism but also the social reluctance to speak about it. Second, Bessie Parkes shivers when speaking about Fido's "thralldom" to Helen, which is an elusive remark on lesbian infatuation, something the speaker openly expresses her dislike for. Thus, although not stated explicitly, Fido's lesbian inclination is made clear.

The novel at large describes how Fido is manipulated and deceived by Helen, who is able to take advantage of Fido because of her lesbian attachment to her. One example of this is how she convinces Fido that Mr Codrington attempted to rape her on one occasion, when she was drugged with laudanum for her asthma. When Harry Codrington finds out about Fido's accusation he gets furious and, in a counter-attack, he threatens to make the content of a sealed letter public in court. The letter in question was sent to Mr Codrington's brother when Fido was asked to leave the Codrington's home years back. As Stobbs argues, newspaper reports turned private life into public scandal (Stobbs 2008, 125), and when Fido reads about the trial in *The Times* she is horrified when she realizes how her privacy is violated:

Her eye moves up the column again. *His wife's passionate feelings for this person were causing her to shrink away from her husband.* Fido stares at that sentence, reads it again, and once more. *Oh, good God.* A proof of suspicion, only. No one has named that suspicion, in court or in the newspaper. (Not the kind of thing anyone wants to spell out, even in these tell-all times.) A word to the wise. Those who don't understand it won't even notice what they're missing; those who do, will comprehend the whole business in a moment. *Sealed up.* (Donoghue 2011, 316; original emphasis)

Of course, the power lies in the potential use of the letter rather than actually using it.⁹ The consequences would have been devastating for Fido,

as it would have pointed her out as an adulterous and, even worse, a lesbian home wrecker. One critic argues that the law opened the closed doors to the lives of the women on trial, revealing a whole range of taboo issues concerning women's sexuality (Hartman in Stobbs 2008, 131). In this sense, the courtroom poses a threat of revealing the most intimate secret of the two women involved.

The letter supposedly contains information that testifies to a lesbian affection between Helen and Fido. Neither the content of the document, nor their romantic friendship is overtly articulated in court: "All this testimony has been circumstantial and contradictory. We have heard inferences, not facts [...]" (Donoghue 2011, 346) The speculations that invoke a lesbian affection between the Helen and Fido puts Fido under extreme pressure of having her private life put on display in the courtroom and during the trial she realizes that "unspeakable things can all be spoken in this packed, stifling room" (347). Lesbianism is made unnameable and as it is eradicated from legal and political discourse, it problematizes the process of subversion of heteronormativity to negotiate and appropriate a lesbian space in the public sphere. Here, Donoghue's understanding of silence has significant parallels with Butler's reflections on the unnameable and unthinkable in terms of violence and oppression of lesbian subjectivity. Butler poses the question:

[I]sn't it quiet crucial to insists on lesbian and gay identities precisely because they are being threatened with erasure and obliteration from homophobic quarters? [...] Isn't it "no accident" that such theoretical contestations of identity emerge within a political climate that is performing a set of similar obliterations of homosexual identities through legal and political means? (Butler 1991, 19)

Especially women were targets of disapprobation during nineteenth century trials and Helen, as an adulterous wife, has her privacy exposed in public. Stobbs remarks that as a strategy of defence, the accused depended on the theatrical potential of the courtroom. For instance, by engaging with stereotypical imagery of female submissiveness and do-

mesticity women could enhance their innocence while, if failing to meet its depiction the trial could have serious consequences for them (Stobbs 2008, 125). Fido takes advantage of the theatrical potential of the courtroom in an attempt to save her reputation. Under the threat of having her lesbian sexuality revealed in the courtroom and to be publically exposed as one of Helen's illicit lovers, Fido changes side and gives a "brilliant performance" of having been misled by the older, married and therefore sexually experienced woman (Petticrew 2013). Hence, Fido is constantly put under pressure and manipulated on grounds of her sexual inclination.

For the two women involved, the consequences of having their private lives made public are immense. Both Helen and Fido are unconventional women because they fail to represent bourgeois codes of femininity. DJ Taylor notices that Fido is an example of the New Woman and suggests, "her printing firm [is] a prototype for the employment bureau staffed by Rhoda Nunn in Gissing's *The Odd Women*" (Taylor 2011, 2). Indeed, there are similarities between Gissing's and Donoghue's female characters, that turn them into odd women; Monica Widdowson and Helen Codrington refuse to remain trapped in their failed marriages, and the two spinsters Rhoda Nunn and Fido are deeply engaged with feminist activism that help single women. Interestingly, none of these women conform to institutionalised models of marriage, and they search for alternative models of womanhood. As Faderman suggests, the feminist movement provided a sphere where women could negotiate "a new scripts for woman's life" (Faderman 1991, 178–9). Similarly, Poovey emphasises the cultural contestation on gender roles and claims that gender itself served as a site of reflexion and discussion of femininity:

[D]espite repeated invocations of the domestic ideal, despite the extensive ideological work this image performed, and despite the epistemological centrality of woman's self-consistency to the oppositional structure of Victorian ideas, the representation of woman was also a site of cultural contestation during the middle of the nineteenth century. (Poovey 1988, 9)

However, Helen and Fido are not only odd women in the Gissingian sense. Showalter has drawn attention to how advanced thinkers acknowledged female sexual desire towards the end of the century. Under the chapter heading "Odd Women" the critic discusses how sexologists perceived same-sex desire among women as morbid and masculine, and often equated feminism with lesbianism (Showalter 1992, 23). Thus, in these lines, Helen and Fido are odd women because their sexuality transgresses heteropatriarchal family structures in a period when women were classified as passionless. Hence, in agreement with Showalter, female oddity in the Victorian period applied to lesbians as well.

As a neo-Victorian novel, *The Sealed Letter* draws particularly interesting parallels to contemporary society. As mentioned earlier, Donoghue found this matrimonial dispute a truly modern legal battle. In an interview, she contends that she consciously set the story in a more modern-feeling Victorian London than the darkly gothic city of Dickens, since she felt fascinated by the bustling metropolis imbued with new concepts like feminism and mass-media (Lawlor 2008, 1). This makes the novel comparable to Gissing's *The Odd Women* as this novel takes the New Woman in the modern metropolis as its subject matter. Nevertheless, in *The Sealed Letter* the author introduces comments regarding the modern nature of the Codringtons' relationship:

It suddenly strikes Fido that the Codringtons are – or rather were – a thoroughly modern couple. Progressive, even, in some ways [...]. The discreet limitation of child-bearing, the separate friendships, the refusal to allow two unique characters to be assimilated into one – are not these ideals her friends at Langham Palace have often invoked when discussing *a new relation between the sexes*. (Donoghue 2011, 349; original emphasis)

In many ways the marriage does not fit the Victorian ideal of matrimony, and alternative structures to the traditional nuclear family is a main concern for Donoghue. Through the characters of Helen and Fido, the author enhances the difficulties women, and in particular lesbians, wishing to for a different life faced.

Throughout the novel the author is almost evasive in her denotation of lesbian affection between the two women albeit it is one of the central themes. Harry Codrington is one of the few persons who recognise Fido's infatuation with his wife, mainly because it is a gendered reversal of his own affection for her: "You're in thrall with her. I was too, once, so I recognize the symptoms. You mistake her firework displays for true feeling." (Donoghue 2011, 326) The reader's awareness of the lesbian subplot grows as the narrative unfolds until it is finally spelled out at the end of the novel, when Helen turns to Fido for money:

The silence stretches like a rope on the verge of snapping. "If we've never spoken of it, it's because words would even distort it. There are no..." She strains for breath. "The words don't fit." Helen shrugs impatiently. "We took pleasure like nature's other creatures, I dare say. And now it so happens that someone must pay up. Since you were the first to lay hands on me – long before those others – shouldn't you be that someone?" (Donoghue 2011, 388)

Donoghue invites readers to see the sealed letter as symbol of possible secrets "hidden away in the human heart" because of Victorian repression (Vowles 2009). Furthermore, the sealed letter stands as a metaphor for how testimonies of lesbian affection have been hushed down in the past and excluded from historical records. The author concludes the novel with Fido's incapacity to resist the temptation of breaking the seal of the letter: "The seal cracks between Fido's fingers. The folded paper parts like water. The page is blank." (Donoghue 2011, 389) In this sense, the empty pages of the letter, which is suspected to describe the homoerotic affair between Helen and Fido, become representative of how people chose to turn a blind eye to their lesbianism. Of course, the moment the letter is opened the private becomes public through the narrative. Yet in this case there is only an empty page, which nevertheless serves as an image of silence, rather than absence.

Louisa Hadley argues that the Victorian past is mediated to the present through its textual remains and authors, who use the neo-Victorian

mode, often examines nineteenth century textual archives to uncover vilified accounts and use them as sources to reimagine the past (Hadley 2010, 117). Therefore, the rupture of the sealed letter serves as a metaphor for the neo-Victorian mode itself as this historical subgenre dives into the secrets of the past in an attempt to fill in the blank pages of history. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn point out: "Victorian sexuality and the way we re-imagine it, its contradictions, excesses, dissimilarities from or correspondence with our diversity of experience holds an irresistible appeal for the neo-Victorian imagination." (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 107) Thus, by ending the novel with a blank page the author is making a metafictional reference to the narrative itself as artificial and plays with our desire as contemporary readers to discover the Victorians' secrets that have been, echoing Donoghue's words, "sealed up" for more than a century (Donoghue 2011, 316). Hence, the final act of breaking the seal, articulates the contemporary desire for filling the historical gaps in queer history, and Donoghue masterfully manages to engage with the eloquent silence that circumscribes queer history.

To conclude, *The Sealed Letter* recovers lesbian history by situating a lesbian affair at the core of the novel. Simultaneously same-sex desire is relegated to silence and closeted spaces and I suggest that this is consciously done by Donoghue to direct criticism towards contemporary society. As argued in this article, the public sphere was, almost, closed for women in the Victorian era, and for lesbians in particular.

Drawing on Faderman (1991) and Vicinus (1997) I have argued that romantic relationships between women were accepted, but overlooked as long as they remained closeted and silenced. In this regard, Habermas' conceptualization of the public sphere as an inclusive realm of social discourse has proven to be flawed. His theories have been prone to critique, especially from feminist angles. Contrary to his idealist image of the public realm as social space of free individuals who participate in public discourse (Habermas 1991, 131), the ideas highlighted in this article by feminist and queer critics such as Nancy Fraser (1994; 2010) and Judith Butler (1991), alongside feminist geographers as Nancy Duncan (1996) and Gill Valentine (1996) testify to the fact that lesbian identity is still

today circumscribed by heteronormative ideology that delimits lesbian participation in public space and discourse. In these lines, Donoghue pushes lesbian silence to the forefront, using a self-reflexive mode as the neo-Victorian to comment on the present – rather than giving voice to the silenced, Donoghue evokes silence as a disruptive tool to challenge the oppression and suppression of lesbianism as she reiterates the very same discourse she wishes to alter.

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NOTES

1. The research for the writing of this article has been funded by the Research Project *Grupo de Investigación y Desarrollo Tecnológico Andaluz HUM-858*, "Literaturas contemporáneas en el ámbito europeo." Part of the research behind this article has been carried out at Språk och Litteratur Centrum at the University of Lund.
2. The joint winner was Chandra Mayor's *All the Pretty Girls* (Conundrum Press). Donoghue has been shortlisted for the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian fiction in 2005 with *Life Mask* (winner of the Ferro-Grumley Award for Lesbian Fiction the same year), and 1996 with *Stir-Fry*. In 2000 and 1999 she was shortlisted for the Lambda Award for Lesbian Anthology with *The Mammoth Book of Lesbian Short Stories* and *Poems Between Women* respectively. Donoghue has also written non-fiction on queer gender identities and was shortlisted for the Lambda Award for Lesbian Non-Fiction with *Passions Between Women* (1993).
3. The Lambda Literary Awards, or the Lammies as they are popularly called, are celebrated annually and covers a wide range of different categories of LGBT fiction and non-fiction. Their mission statement is "[t]he Lambda Literary Foundation nurtures, celebrates, and preserves LGBT literature through programs that honor excellence, promote visibility and encourage development of emerging writers". For

further information visit Lambda Literary Foundation's official web site at <http://www.lambdaliterary.org>.

4. The novel was originally published in America in 2008 (Harcourt) and first published in Britain in 2011 (Picador).
5. For a full list of Donoghue's literary history articles, visit her official web site at <http://emmadonoghue.com/writings/literary-history-articles.html>.
6. Previously, in the case of Norton vs. Melbourne in 1836, George Norton sued the Prime Minister Lord Melbourne for engaging in "criminal conversations" with his wife Caroline Norton (Atkinson 2012, 2). The case attracted the interest of the general public already from the outset, partly due the nature of the marriage scandal, but mainly because of the public figures involved. After the subsequent divorce, in which Caroline lost the custody of their children, she spent the rest of her life struggling for the custody of her children, mainly by writing pamphlets that later would lead to the passing of the first Infant Custody Act in 1839 (Shanley 1993, 22–5).
7. According to the Infant Custody Act children under the age of 7 would remain in the care of the mother if she were a virtuous and good mother. At the time of the Codrington divorce their two daughters were aged 11 and 12.
8. In *Slammerkin* (2000) women are deceitful and the protagonist Mary Saunders is repeatedly let down by women throughout the narrative. First, her mother throws her out into the street when it is discovered that Mary is pregnant. There, the prostitute Doll Higgins teaches Sue how to survive on her own, and insists that she ought to live under the motto "every girl for herself" (Donoghue 2000, 99). Finally, after having worked in the household of the Joneses for a long period, during which Mrs Jones and Sue have gotten intimate and established a sort of mother/daughter relationship, Mary is accused for stealing and sent to jail and sentenced to execution.
9. This was a device used in Edgar Allen Poe's (1809–1849) short story "The Purloined Letter" (1845) in which the content of a stolen letter "gives the holder a certain power in a certain quarter where such power is immensely valuable" (Poe 2006, 2503). "The Purloined Letter" is mentioned in *The Sealed Letter* and accounts for the key strategy on the Admiral's behalf (Donoghue 2011, 294).

SAMMANFATTNING

I *The Sealed Letter* (2008), en skönlitterär framställning av Codrington-fallet, en verklig skilsmässorättegång i artonhundratalets Storbritannien, gestaltar Emma Donoghue på ett lysande sätt den talande tystnad som omger queerhistoria. I sitt återskapande av relationen mellan Helen Codrington och feministen Emily Faithfull, utforskar Donoghue den sfär av otänkbarhet och onämbarhet som gjorde lesbiskhet osynligt i det viktoriaiska samhället. Lilian Fadersmans banbrytande studie *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (1981) fyllde en viktig lucka i lesbisk historia genom att presentera historiska dokument och belysa relationer mellan kvinnor. I linje med detta visar denna artikel hur Donoghue använder tropen tystnad för att återbilda lesbisk historia genom att återkalla den romantiska vänskapen mellan Helen Codrington och Emily Faithfull. En av huvudpunkterna i artikeln är att dikotomin mellan offentligt och privat som vi vanligen förknippar med viktorianerna, destabiliseras när dessa kvinnors privatliv hamnar i offentlighetens ljus. Med utgångspunkt i den feministiska kritiken av Jürgen Habermas tankar om den offentliga sfären som den för alla öppna, sociala diskursens domän, analyserar jag konsekvenserna av lesbisk inblandning i gångna tiders heteropatriarkala familjestrukturer. Med hjälp av teorier formulerade av forskare som Nancy Fraser, Nancy Duncan och Judith Butler, studerar jag hur Donoghue använder sig av den neo-viktoriaiska litterära genren för att å ena sidan skildra lesbiskhet i det förflutna, och å andra sidan koppla dåtid till nutid.

Keywords: Emma Donoghue, *The Sealed Letter*, neo-Victorian, lesbian history, silence, public/private