



Mousetraps. Thumbnail to *Voices of the past. Letters from the NLN's collection of transcriptions.* The thumbnail has been enhanced Upscale.media (AI).

The National Library of Norway (NLN) has provided a digital typed transcription of Norwegian author Camilla Collett's correspondence from 1863-64. The letters are accompanied by an introductory commentary and a legend explaining the code to transpose handwriting into digital type. The compound can be downloaded into a variety of select digital readers' file-formats. The question explored in this handout is the transition from the tactile and sensorial *presentation* of the original handwritten letters, to the coded *representation* of her letters in digital type.

The question asked is whether conventions used to represent material aspects of the correspondence can fruitfully be compared to the representation in set-theory, and thereby be understood as an elementary example of programming from data: that is, the information featuring in the manuscript letters, as a sensorial reference to the reading of the coded digital text. The code contains e.g. references to unreadable text indicated by $\langle \dots \rangle$ when the handwriting has been deemed thoroughly unreadable (while a suggestion is written when plausible [such as plaus \langle ible \rangle]).

If beyond reasonable doubt, the missing *text* is given in [square brackets], **strikethrough** is used for crossed out text, additions are given in ^{superscript}, comments added by others (a category of metadata) are generally not included. Paper standard/format and folding is not included (though referred to in Collett's correspondence). Italics are used for Collett's underlining. The legend also includes some specialised terminology: a *concept* is a draft of a letter that may/not have been completed and sent. In this handout we are interested in the assignments of *sameness*, *similarity*, *difference* and *otherness*.



Portrait of young Camilla Collett (née Wergeland) by her father Nicolai Wergeland in 1830-31 (part of Norway's Constitutional Assembly in 1814).

The question asked here is whether the conventions used in the transcription—explained in the above legend—features a processing of the information of the original, when we consider it from the vantage point of *usership*: that is as *executed* by the reader of the transcript. The same question can be raised from Badiou/Cantor's representation of the elements presented as \mathbf{x} and \mathbf{y} as a set: $\{\{\mathbf{x}\}, \{\mathbf{y}\}, \{\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}\}, \{\emptyset\}\}$. The question whether/not this point is important is determined by whether the same kind of distinction can be trailed in the 1863-64 correspondence itself, as Camilla Collett goes through a change from a widow into an author through the hardships of a Grand Tour on the verge of bankruptcy. Leaving the widow, conquering the authoress. She won recognition in the 1870s.

Much of the content of the letters accessed by the archive, stand on the brink between the *quotidian* and the *mundane*; resembling in this other written accounts—work of the hands under the conditions of itinerancy. Her pecuniary worries and sorrows is trusted information expounded to people to whom she maintains an intimate private relation—predominantly her son Alf—articulate with people with whom she maintains professional relationships, and obliquely implied to people with whom she maintains mundane familiar relationships: including friends and family.

To Hedevig Wedel Jarlsberg—a lady of aristocratic descent with whom she was friendly—she confided: “Out [in the world] I have been thriving and suffering—both. The main conclusion, however, is that one would live a wonderful life out there, as soon as one has learned how. And this experience alone, which I have brought with me home, is worth a journey.” Her son and confidant Alf, her second oldest son, subscribed to that: “...from the year 1962 she was regularly on journeys abroad with longer sojourns in Copenhagen, Berlin, Paris, Stockholm, München and Rome.”

She was betrothed to Peter Collett (lawyer, literary critic and later professor) in 1839. Their relation lasted 12 years till he died in 1851. During that time she had 4 sons with him Robert (1842), Alf (1844), Oscar (1845) and Emil (1848). When she was widowed, she was left with a meagre pension and two of her sons were raised by two uncles. Alf and Emil were raised by her. When they were deemed old enough to be on their own she began journeying abroad. As a widow she was falling off the grid of her social standing. Though she had been published she was still not an author.

Her journeys, in this aspect, are in quest of emancipation through itinerancy and recognition at home in Norway. When the Parliament awarded her a salary in 1876, it was still half of what was awarded to her male colleagues, a fact to which she was much disappointed: she was still an authoress and not a woman author. She was early to use the term ‘feminism’ in her essay *Women in Literature* published in the anthology *From the Life of the Muted* in 1877. Whether her struggle for public recognition as an author was won at the cost/benefit of itinerancy cannot be assumed.

It must be assigned. If we expand the *mousetrap* from its origin in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*—as a play within the play—to coin a *detour through which the truth is revealed*, then possibility is opened for a truth-procedure and its analysis, in Badiou’s sense: that is, including the archival work of accessing Collett’s correspondence to be something named and counted (according to the tents of feminism that the private is political). Also in the sense, pointed out by the archival commentary that Collett’s portrayal of the *quotidian* is a material for her social realism.

However, if the mousetrap is contraption that is likely to be of avail from the large to the minutest gesture, the latter is indicated that she folded letters/foldable items into some of her letters to Alf, with detailed assignments to be followed by him with great care. Both in terms of directions on the specific items contained, but also taking care of not forgetting the removal of her own letter to him, given the confidential nature of all that she shares. It is not for anyone else’s eyes and lips. Of a similar nature are the gifts sent from the content back to Norway in numerous hatboxes.

So, the mousetrap is a clearly identifiable mechanism in her correspondence if expanded to the full scope of her *communicative interaction*. This is of course also marked by the variety of her *other* exchange: her business correspondence with Jonas Lie, and her mundane correspondence with Oscar Wergeland. The former following the protocol of letter-writing that applied well into the 20th century. The latter conveying the mundane shine of the sensorially enhanced polite society abroad. A struggle for a reputation that had already been earned by her literary work: e.g. the *District Governor’s Daughters* (1854/55). In Danish & German transl.



Camilla Collett (1893). Nasjonalbiblioteket. Foto: Robert Collett. The term feminism was coined by Charles Fourier in 1837, and became an organising ferment from 1848 onwards.

The handwritten letters are the *same* as the ones she wrote. In the transcription of this materials a systematic effort is put into make the reader accept the analogy: i.e., it is coded to propose a *similarity* to the original. It is a mouse trap inasmuch as it features a legitimate detour to hatch truths from the materials, to contemporary readers. However, it is different from the original materials in the same way as Collett’s own mousetraps features *difference* within her own correspondence. *Other*: the difference can be *productive*, or the originals can *go dark* (depending on future accession).