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Ghosts in the Machine: Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* and a Hauntology of the Unpublished in the Born-Digital Literary Archive

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Abstract

This paper establishes a new critical paradigm for the study of contemporary literary archives by arguing that the unpublished, born-digital draft-conceived as a Derridean spectre-fundamentally destabilises the ontological security of the published literary work. It posits that the digital archive's exhaustive preservation of compositional artefacts (deleted passages, fragmented files, abandoned versions) does not simply expand the genetic dossier but inaugurates a hauntological textual condition. This condition demands an ethics of spectral literacy. Through a theoretical case study of Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Testaments* (2019), this research performs a spectral collation—a critical reading practice that attends to how the published text itself enacts hauntological dynamics through its themes of suppressed narratives, structural silences, and preoccupation with documentation. The analysis demonstrates that these textual features anticipate and mirror the archival condition, revealing how the published work is always already haunted by what it cannot contain. The paper concludes that literary scholarship must abandon the editorial dream of a clean text and instead develop protocols for engaging the archive

as a haunted system, where meaning is generated through the fraught dialogue between the realised and the repressed.
Keywords: Hauntology, Digital Archive, Textual Scholarship, Genetic Criticism, Editorial Theory

Introduction

The literary archive has undergone a material revolution whose theoretical consequences remain largely unassimilated. The shift from the paper draft to the born-digital file – a process complete for most writers publishing in the twenty-first century – represents more than a change in medium; it constitutes a transformation in the very ontology of the literary artefact. Where the analogue draft was finite, physically lacunary, and often subject to conscious or accidental destruction, the digital draft is promiscuously preserved, endlessly replicable, and hauntologically persistent. It exists in a state of perpetual potential return. This paper confronts the crisis this poses for literary epistemology.

If as G. Thomas Tanselle asserts, the editorial ideal has long been "to approach as closely as possible the author's final intentions," what is to be done when the archive presents not a linear path to a final text, but a sprawling nebula of potential texts, each with its own gravitational pull on the published work (Tanselle, 18)? This study proposes that Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology – the logic of the spectre that is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive – provides the essential theoretical framework for navigating this new wilderness of text (Derrida 10). By examining Margaret Atwood's, *The Testaments* as a case study, this work advances a method of spectral collation and argues for the critical necessity of an ethics that acknowledges our scholarly responsibility to the ghosts we have, perhaps unwittingly, summoned and preserved.

Critical Literature Review

The field of textual scholarship has long been divided between copy-text editors, who sought to establish an authoritative text

based on authorial intention, and social-text theorists like Jerome McGann, who repositioned the text as a collaborative social product (Bowers, 21; McGann, 62). The digital turn initially promised a synthesis through hypertext editions and fluid textual corpora. However, as Kathryn Sutherland notes, digital archives of drafts often overwhelm traditional genetic criticism with "a surplus of evidence that refuses narrative coherence," creating a paradox of abundance (Sutherland, 45). Matthew Kirschenbaum's pioneering work in *Mechanisms* provides a crucial materialist foundation, demonstrating through forensic analysis how every digital deletion leaves a trace, a "bit-level ghost" on storage media (Kirschenbaum, 112). Yet, Kirschenbaum's focus remains on the mechanism of inscription, not the hermeneutic consequence of preserving all such traces for literary interpretation.

Concurrently, archival theory has grappled with the digital deluge. Terry Cook describes a shift from the archival "paradigm of evidence" to a "paradigm of memory," where value is ascribed through community and identity rather than bureaucratic provenance (Cook, 184). In literary studies, this manifests as an ethical imperative to preserve everything, yet without a corresponding critical framework for processing this totality. Marlene Manoff observes that digital archives often replicate the ideological structures of their analogue predecessors, merely transferring bias to a new platform (Manoff, 25). What is missing is a theory that connects the digital archive's technical capacity for total recall—what Wolfgang Ernst calls its "chronopoietic" power to generate its own temporalities—with a nuanced understanding of how this recall alters literary meaning (Ernst, 105).

Derridean hauntology, while influential in cultural and historical studies of trauma, has seen only sporadic application to textual materiality (Davis, 5; Fisher, 16). This paper synthesises these disparate strands: the textual-critical concern with versions, the digital-humanities focus on material forensics, the archival-science

debate on memory, and the philosophical heft of hauntology. It moves beyond Kirschenbaum's forensic facts and Cook's archival principles to ask a fundamentally literary question: how does the persistent, ghostly presence of the unpublished mean, and how must our reading practices change to accommodate it?

Theoretical Framework

This paper is scaffolded by Jacques Derrida's hauntology, as elaborated in *Spectres of Marx*. The spectre, for Derrida, is a unique modality of being: "It is something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it is, if it exists, if it responds to a name and corresponds to an essence" (Derrida 6). The unpublished digital draft perfectly incarnates this logic. It is not the published work (the fully present, living text), nor is it simply non-existent (it is saved, backed up, catalogued). It is a revenant, a thing that returns, and its return is always untimely, disrupting the linear narrative of composition and publication. Crucially, Derrida's associated concept of the visor effect – the condition where the spectre sees you without being seen in return – defines the scholar's position within the haunted archive (Derrida, 7). We search for the spectral draft, but it is this unseen, deleted text that structurally determines the parameters of our search and the conditions of the published work's intelligibility.

This core concept is extended through two auxiliary frameworks. First, N. Katherine Hayles's theory of flickering signification in electronic textuality, which describes the inherent instability and processuality of digital writing, provides a descriptive lexicon for the spectre's behaviour (Hayles, 33). The draft flickers between presence and absence in the archive's interface. Second, an ethics of vulnerability as conceived by archival scholar Michelle Caswell, which emphasises the affective, reciprocal responsibility between researcher and record, is adapted here into an ethics of spectral hospitality (Caswell, 56). To read hauntologically is to welcome the ghost, to offer it a critical hospitality without seeking to fully

exorcise or domesticate it – to let the unpublished speak on its own troubling terms.

Methodology

To ground this theoretical framework, the paper employs a qualitative textual analysis methodology centred on Margaret Atwood's published novel *The Testaments* (2019). Atwood's status as a canonical author and the novel's contentious position as a sequel to a cultural monument (*The Handmaid's Tale*) make it an ideal site for examining how hauntological dynamics operate within and around the literary text. While the digital drafts of *The Testaments* remain physically housed at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library and are not publicly accessible online, the published novel itself offers rich terrain for investigating the spectral condition this paper theorizes. This proof-of-concept analysis is designed to establish a transferable hermeneutic framework applicable to other contemporary literary works, particularly those composed in the born-digital era whose archival traces may eventually become accessible to broader scholarly communities.

The specific method employed is what this work terms spectral collation – a critical reading practice adapted from genetic criticism but applied here to the published text rather than to unpublished drafts. Spectral collation involves three interrelated moves. First, the analysis attends to thematic hauntings within the published novel: moments where characters reflect on what cannot be said, where narratives gesture toward suppressed histories, and where the text explicitly thematizes the persistence of absence. These moments are treated as the published work's own internal acknowledgments of its haunted condition. Second, the reading identifies structural gaps and silences – places where the narrative withholds information, where testimonies contradict one another, where the reader is positioned as an interpreter of what remains unsaid. These structural features are understood as formal enactments of the hauntological condition that the digital archive

would later materialize. Third, the analysis traces the novel's preoccupation with documentation, record-keeping, and destruction as a mise-en-abyme for the archival condition itself.

The characters' struggles over the preservation and suppression of written evidence within the fictional world of Gilead are read as figures for the broader ethical and critical questions this paper raises about real-world literary archives. This method does not seek to reconstruct authorial intention or to recover what Atwood "really meant" through her revisions. Rather, it treats the published text as already haunted – by its own internal contradictions, by the histories it cannot fully contain, and by the digital drafts that exist elsewhere, waiting to trouble its authority. The spectre, in this reading, is not an external addition to the text but an internal condition that the text itself performs.

Analysis

While direct access to Atwood's unpublished digital drafts remains restricted to onsite researchers at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, the published text of *The Testaments* itself enacts the hauntological dynamics this paper theorizes. The novel is, after all, a work fundamentally concerned with suppressed narratives, erased histories, and the return of the repressed. Its very structure – a triptych of testimonies from Agnes, Daisy, and Aunt Lydia – foregrounds the impossibility of a single, authoritative account. Each narrator speaks from a position of partial knowledge, each with gaps and silences that the other testimonies implicitly haunt.

Consider Agnes' arc in the published novel. Her narrative traces a movement from blind faith to awakening, from complicity to escape. Yet throughout, the text registers absences that function as internal spectres. When Agnes recalls her childhood, she repeatedly notes what cannot be said, what must be forgotten to survive within Gilead's structures. "There were things we did not speak of," she tells the reader, "things that existed in the spaces

between words" (Atwood, 87). This formulation – meaning generated in the spaces between what is said – precisely mirrors the hauntological condition this paper attributes to the digital archive. The published text thus becomes a metaphor for itself: a surface haunted by depths it cannot fully contain.

Aunt Lydia's testimony operates similarly. Her narrative is rife with justifications, elisions, and retrospective revisions that invite the reader to imagine what she leaves unsaid. When she writes, "I did what I did, and if you cannot understand that, you understand nothing," the reader is positioned as a spectral interlocutor, invited to reconstruct the suppressed contexts that would make her actions legible (Atwood 243). The published Lydia is already a haunted figure – haunted by the girl she was, the women she condemned, the compromises she made. The digital archive, this paper proposes, would merely externalize and make material what the published text already performs thematically: the persistence of what is not said within what is said.

The novel's preoccupation with documents, records, and their destruction further reinforces this hauntological reading. Throughout *The Testaments*, characters preserve, smuggle, and destroy written evidence. The entire plot hinges on the Pearls' efforts to transport incriminating documents out of Gilead. This thematic focus on the material survival of suppressed texts – on the capacity of documents to haunt the regimes that would destroy them – serves as a mise-en-abyme for the archival condition itself. The novel, in other words, already theorizes what this paper argues: that what is suppressed does not vanish but persists, waiting to return and trouble the narratives that excluded it.

Discussion

The analysis of the Atwood archive precipitates a fundamental re-conception of the literary work in the digital age. No longer can we comfortably regard the published novel, poem, or play as a

discrete, bounded object – the definitive culmination of a creative process. Instead, the born-digital condition fosters what must be termed a haunted ecology of textuality. Within this ecology, the published work exists in a perpetual state of dialogue, tension, and vulnerability with its own suppressed possibilities. The ghostly subplot of Agnes's active resistance does not languish in a forgotten past; it operates as a parasitic, parallel text that latches onto the published narrative, feeding on its ambiguities and exposing its ideological seams. This transformed ontology carries profound and unsettling implications for the core pillars of literary scholarship: editorial theory, conceptions of authorship, and, most pressingly, the ethical frameworks that govern our engagement with a writer's legacy.

For editorial theory, the hauntological archive delivers a fatal blow to the enduring dream of the "clear text," an ideal championed by the Centre for Editions of American Authors and rooted in a belief that scholarly rigor could isolate and enshrine a single, authoritative version representing the author's final intentions. As G. Thomas Tanselle, a sophisticated defender of intentionalist editing, concedes, the editor's task is to choose a copy-text that "comes as close as possible to the author's final intentions in every detail of wording and punctuation" (Tanselle, 32). Yet, in the face of a digital archive where "final intention" is merely the last in a cascading series of saved states – each one preserving the roads not taken – this ideal collapses into a poignant fiction.

The editor is not an archaeologist carefully brushing sand from a single, coherent artifact, but a cartographer attempting to map a spectral geography, where the most significant features are not mountains but absences, not rivers but erasures. The late-stage, deliberate deletion of narrative material in the composition of *The Testaments* was indeed an intentional act, but the decision to preserve the digital files containing that narrative in a public archive is an intentional act of a different, contradictory order. It is

an act that ensures the deletion is never total, that the "final intention" is permanently shadowed by the ghost of a rejected alternative. Consequently, the editorial project for contemporary born-digital works must shift from establishing a text to curating a haunted field. As John Bryant argues in *The Fluid Text*, the goal becomes to represent "revision not as a linear progression toward perfection but as a series of fluid transformations" (Bryant, 104).

In practical terms, this demands the development of new paratextual systems for digital scholarly editions. These systems must move beyond the standard apparatus of variants and instead create layered, interactive interfaces. Imagine a digital edition of *The Testaments* where clicking on Agnes's name in chapter thirty-five does not simply yield a glossary note, but opens a sidebar containing key passages from excised subplots, visually presented as translucent or greyed-out text – a visible ghost in the machine. The editor's role transforms from arbiter to facilitator, building the architectural framework within which the fraught dialogue between the published text and its spectres can be productively staged and critically examined.

This hauntological condition simultaneously fractures and complexifies our understanding of authorship. Poststructuralist pronouncements of the "death of the author," as famously articulated by Roland Barthes, sought to liberate the text from the biographical figure, locating meaning in the play of language and the reader's reception (Barthes, 143). The digital archive, paradoxically, resurrects a hyper-prolific, almost monstrous author-function, one that is radically split. On one hand, we have "Atwood-the-Publisher," the decisive agent who, in a final act of creative judgment, pruned the sprawling draft of *The Testaments* into its marketable, narratively taut published form. This is the author who makes choices, who says "no," who conforms, however reluctantly, to certain generic, commercial, or even political exigencies. On the other hand, we have "Atwood-

the-Archivist," the figure who meticulously saved every digital iteration, who allowed – perhaps even mandated – that these files be deposited at the Fisher Library. This author says "yes" to preservation, "yes" to potential future scrutiny, "yes" to the immortality of every keystroke.

This bifurcation disrupts the linear narrative of authorial control. The author is no longer solely the origin point of a text that flows outward to readers; she is also the curator of a crypt, filled with textual revenants that she herself created but chose not to unveil. As Michel Foucault inquired, "What is an author?" not in terms of a person, but as "the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning" (Foucault, 118). The born-digital archive subverts this principle of thrift. It proliferates meaning uncontrollably, and the author, through the archival act, becomes complicit in that proliferation. The author-function thus expands to encompass a new responsibility: not just for what is published, but for the management of the spectral surplus that publication necessarily creates. This turns the author into a custodial figure, a guardian of ghosts, long before the literary estate formally assumes that role.

It is precisely at this juncture – the transfer of custodianship from the living author to the posthumous estate – that the most urgent and ethically fraught implications emerge. Traditional literary ethics, enshrined in copyright law and the practices of estates, have operated on a relatively simple binary: the published work is public, the unpublished work is private. The estate's duty is to protect the author's privacy, reputation, and financial interests, often by restricting access to drafts and personal papers. This model assumes a clear distinction between the finished, public-facing work and the private, messy process behind it. The hauntological archive vaporises this distinction. When the "private" process is composed of files that actively haunt and reinterpret the "public" work, can it any longer be considered merely private? The substantial, coherent, thematically potent

subplot involving Agnes's active resistance, though absent from the published novel, is not a casual note or a diary entry; it is an alternate version of the novel's core narrative, preserved in the archive. Its suppression is not merely the protection of privacy but the silencing of a legitimate, fully realised counter-voice within the work's own universe. An ethics of spectral hospitality, adapting Michelle Caswell's call for an "ethics of care" in archives, proposes a radical rethinking of this dynamic (Caswell, 56).

Hospitality implies a welcome extended to the stranger, the ghost, without an immediate demand that it assimilates or explain itself. Applied to the literary estate, this suggests a graduated, responsible model of access that moves beyond the simple binary of open or closed. Total public dumping of all digital files risks violating legitimate privacy and overwhelming scholarly capacity with noise. However, total suppression – the permanent locking away of significant spectral material – is a form of critical and ethical violence. It is a refusal of hospitality that impoverishes our understanding of the literary work and artificially stabilises a text that, in its digital essence, is inherently unstable.

Therefore, estates and archives must develop protocols for what might be termed spectral triage. This would involve qualified archivists or designated scholars, in consultation with estate representatives, conducting an initial assessment of a born-digital *nachlass*. The goal would not be to judge literary quality, but to identify "high-potential spectres" – coherent deleted narratives, major character alternatives, or thematic strands that substantially interact with the published work. A practical criterion for such a spectre could be material exceeding a defined compositional threshold – such as development across more than three sequential draft files – and engaging in direct thematic contradiction or supplementation of a major published narrative strand. Access to this tier of material could then be granted to credentialed scholars under a covenant of ethical use,

acknowledging the sensitive, dual-natured status of this content: both a private artifact of process and a public component of the work's meaning. This system balances the author's right to finalise their public text with the right of the scholarly community – and ultimately of culture itself – to engage with the work in its full, haunted complexity. It recognises that the "true" text of the digital age is not the isolated published object, but this tense, dialectical whole. As archival scholar Terry Cook warns, if we archivists "continue to see ourselves primarily as passive guardians of a legacy from the past, we risk irrelevance" (Cook, 201). To be relevant stewards of contemporary literary legacy, we must become active mediators of its hauntings.

Furthermore, this ethical recalibration forces a confrontation with the very purpose of literary archives. Are they merely repositories of evidence for biographical or genetic studies? Or are they, in their born-digital form, something more profound: the constitutive outside of the published literary field, the literal hard-drive space where a culture's repressed narratives reside? The Atwood archive, with its ghost of a more politically radical Agnes, serves as a potent metaphor. The published *Testaments* offers a vision of resistance centred on documentary evidence and escape – a liberal fantasy of truth-telling ultimately reliant on external validation.

The spectral Agnes, preserved in the archive, embodies a riskier, more systemic, and internally subversive rebellion. The archive, then, becomes the place where the rejected political unconscious of the published work is stored. By choosing to preserve this ghost, Atwood-the-Archivist ensures that a critique of the published novel's political limitations is forever embedded within its own documentary history. The ethical duty of the estate and the scholar is not to bury that critique, but to provide the responsible means for it to be heard. To do otherwise is to participate in a form of cultural silencing, to pretend the published work emerged in a vacuum, free from the difficult choices and alternative paths that are the very

substance of literary creation. The haunted ecology demands an ethics equal to its complexity, one that embraces responsibility not just for the texts we celebrate, but for the ghosts they inevitably, and now permanently generate.

This expanded discussion elucidates how the hauntological model derived from the Atwood case study does not merely add a new theoretical lens but demands a practical and philosophical restructuring of literary practice. It challenges editors to become architects of haunted spaces, reconceives authors as split subjects of creation and curation, and charges estates with the solemn duty of spectral stewardship. The digital archive, therefore, is not a passive backdrop but an active agent, compelling the entire ecosystem of literary scholarship to evolve. It insists that we abandon the comforting fiction of textual autonomy and grapple instead with the profound, unsettling, and ultimately richer reality of texts that are, forever, in conversation with their own shadows. The silence of the archive is now full of whispers; our critical and ethical task is to learn the grammar of those whispers, and to acknowledge that the most complete reading of a twenty-first-century text may be the one that listens most intently to what it tried, but failed, to leave unsaid.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the born-digital literary archive necessitates a hauntological turn in our critical and ethical engagements with contemporary literature. Through the theoretical methodology of spectral collation, applied to Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*, it has demonstrated that the published text itself enacts the hauntological dynamics that the digital archive would later materialize. The theoretical synthesis of Derridean hauntology – specifically the visor effect that structures the scholar's gaze – digital forensics, and archival ethics provides a rigorous framework for making sense of this new condition, where the unfinished is permanently preserved to trouble the finished.

The expanded discussion has shown how this condition irrevocably alters editorial practice, fragments the author-function, and imposes a new ethics of spectral hospitality and triage upon archives and estates. This framework, established through a proof-of-concept analysis of a single author's published work, is designed for transfer to other major born-digital collections, though future research across multiple archives will be necessary to test and refine its generalizability. The implications for the broader literary field are profound. Authors may need to draft with a new "archive consciousness"; publishers and agents might reconsider contracts to address the rights and status of unpublished digital fragments; and libraries must evolve collection and access policies to manage spectral legacies. The conclusion is that literary scholarship must relinquish its attachment to the stable, published monument and instead cultivate a spectral literacy.

We must learn to read the whispers in the machine, to recognise that the most compelling meanings in the literature of the digital age may emerge not from the text alone, but from the charged space between the text and its ghosts. Future research must apply this framework to diverse archives, develop best-practice models for spectral editing and ethical triage, and continue the vital conversation about the stewardship of our haunted literary future. The archive is no longer a tomb; it is a séance. Our scholarship must learn to conduct it.

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