“WHENEVER THE TIME SHALL COME”

NEGATIVE CAPABILITY AND WOMEN’S TIMELESS TRANSFORMATION OF ACADEMIC SPACES

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Dedication

To my Father, who taught me adventures are always worth chasing.

Acknowledgements

Moberly and Jourdain begin their book, *An Adventure* by saying, “It was a great venture to speak openly of a personal experience”, and I cannot echo this sentiment enough (Moberly & Jourdain, 1911). When this research idea of *An Adventure* struck me, I was hesitant to pursue studying what some might take as a mere ghost story. I was pleasantly surprised to be met with continued support and interest. To Dr. Aliya Khalid: I cannot thank you enough for your support - and especially for allowing me to be one of the first academic researchers of *An Adventure* who did not need to begin with a disclaimer that I do not believe in ghosts, or in the supernatural. Moberly and Jourdain wrote *An Adventure* in hopes that a time would come when the story was met with more than mere scepticism; and I can wholeheartedly say, in my experience, this time has finally come. It was wonderful to have full academic freedom and the opportunity to explore inexplicable phenomena within academia. I am so inspired by the work towards epistemic justice that the Education Department at the University of Oxford undertakes, and I cannot wait to see its great accomplishments in the future.

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Speaking of the best, Mom – as soon as I could speak, I couldn't wait to run to you and tell you what I was thinking. Twenty years later, nothing has changed. Thank you for listening. Thank you for everything. You make *everything* I do worth it.

I mention in my thesis how, when one grows older, all the magic and fascination take a back seat; but my father never once allowed this to happen. He encouraged me to research the unknown with a twinkle in his eye, and I'll never forget that. I open the book and pick up the pen for him, always. I miss you more than words can express, Dad – and I dedicate this to you.

To my readers, family, and friends, thank you for your curiosity. If there is one thing to take from this thesis, I hope it is to share your stories and chase your questions relentlessly, even if by all measures of rationality, it doesn't make sense — what we define as sense is just as misconstrued. Keep thinking of impossible things before breakfast. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the work of Moberly, Jourdain, and all of the individuals whose claims to epistemic credibility have been denied. It is my sincere hope that this thesis serves as a form of recognition for the beauty in the work you create. You too have a place in knowledge creation. You are seen, and your efforts will never be forgotten. **Believe me.**

Abstract

To claim knowledge, one must first be believed capable of it. This has never been a straightforward matter for those denied epistemic credibility, and the case in point for my study is women: even as they historically gained access to education, they were required to prove themselves worthy of what they knew, and worthier still of what they claimed to have discovered. This dissertation asks what happens to knowledge in the space before belief is granted, and more specifically aims to uncover what can be revealed about the conditions under which epistemic credibility is granted or withheld. The primary research question is: "How do women rest in and reach beyond uncertainty when their claims to knowledge are not naturally granted credibility?" While feminist scholarship has examined women's exclusion from formal knowledge production, less attention has been paid to what happens within the space of uncertainty itself.

This dissertation pursues that question through the case of *An Adventure* (1911), a book written by Charlotte Anne Moberly and Eleanor Jourdain, both academics at the University of Oxford, concerning a haunting or time-slip which they both experienced in Versailles in 1901. Essentially, they experienced something inexplicable, and they spent the following decade attempting to render it intelligible through historical and archival investigation despite the risk to their reputation socially and academically. *An Adventure* is the result of their research. While their account of a potential time slip at Versailles has often been dismissed as either a supernatural curiosity or a psychological anomaly, this research reframes the text as a significant pedagogical and epistemological contribution. *An Adventure* offers a lens onto broader problems: women's contested claims to reason, the conditions under which a claim to know is examined, and the conditions under which it is dismissed before examination begins.

The dissertation situates this case within early twentieth-century Oxford, where the boundaries of legitimate knowledge were being drawn and institutionally policed and where women's admission to the university was only recently and partially secured. In terms of investigating theories of uncertainty, this dissertation focuses on the concept of Negative Capability - John Keats's 1817 formulation of the idea that resting in uncertainty, without reaching for reason, is the mark of genuine achievement. However, this research argues that Negative Capability assumes uncertainty to be a space equally available to all knowers, overlooking the socially produced nature of epistemic space and the unequal conditions under which credibility is extended.

In response, I propose **Productive Negation**: a conceptual framework describing the conditions under which those historically denied epistemic legitimacy render uncertainty intelligible, rather than simply inhabit it, for their knowledge claims to be recognised. Productive Negation serves as an extension to Negative Capability and holds specifically for knowers whose credibility is not automatically assumed. This is not a generalist description of uncertainty, but it names a recurring condition of legitimation that *An Adventure* makes clearly visible. By repositioning *An Adventure* as an educational text concerned with knowledge creation, this dissertation contributes a conceptual framework, grounded in feminist epistemology and Lefebvre's theory of social space, for understanding epistemic legitimacy within educational research.

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Foreword

I could begin this dissertation as many others have that discuss *An Adventure* (1911): with the reassurance that I am not defending a ghost story, or a belief in the occult, but undertaking a scientific study. Instead, this research questions why such reassurance is required at all. There are remarkably few areas of research that require an apology before they are allowed to begin. We rarely ask philosophers to defend uncertainty, or physicists to explain why the impossible might deserve investigation. Yet some questions seem to demand credibility before evidence has even been considered, and the question which sparks this research is *why?* Before reading further, I wanted to acquaint the reader with the words of Charlotte Anne Moberly and Eleanor Jourdain themselves.[1] As will be explained, the veil between mystery and investigation is quite thin, and I urge the reader to approach the following with an open mind.

The Letters

> "The impression returned to me at intervals during the week that followed…It was not till three months later, when I was staying with her, that Miss Morison casually mentioned the lady, and almost refused to believe that I had not seen her. How that happened was quite inexplicable to me, for I believed myself to be looking about on all sides, and it was not so much that I did not remember her as that I could have said no one was there. But as she said it, I remembered my impression at the moment of there being more people than I could see, though I did not tell her this. The same evening, November 10th, 1901, I returned to my school near London. Curiously enough, the next morning I had to give one of a set of lessons on the French Revolution for the Higher Certificate, and it struck me for the first time with great interest that the 10th of August had a special significance in French history, and that

[1] Charlotte Anne Moberly used the pen name "Elizabeth Morison" and Eleanor Jourdain used "Frances Lamont".

we had been at Trianon on the anniversary of the day… Immediately afterwards, I wrote and told this to Miss Morison.

\- F.L."

Eleanor Jourdain, 1901.

"On receiving Miss Lamont's letter, I turned to my diary to see on what Saturday in August it was that we had visited Versailles and looked up the history to find out to what event she alluded. On August 10th, 1792, the Tuileries was sacked. The royal family escaped in the early morning to the Hall of the Assembly, where they were penned up for many hours hearing themselves deposed, and within sound of the massacre of their servants and of the Swiss guards at the Tuileries. From the Hall, the King and Queen were taken to the Temple. We wondered whether we had inadvertently entered within an act of the Queen's memory when alive, and whether this explained our curious sensation of being completely shut in and oppressed… I told the story to my brother, and we heartily agreed that, as a rule, such stories made no impression at all upon us, because we always believed that, if only the persons involved would take the trouble to investigate them thoroughly and honestly for themselves, they could be quite naturally explained. We agreed that such a story as ours had very little value without more proof of reality than it had, but that as there were one or two interesting points in it, it would be best to sift the matter quietly, lest others should make more of them than they deserved…My brother also enquired whether we were quite sure that the last man we had seen (who came out of the side building), as well as the wedding party, were all real persons. I assured him with great amusement that we had not the smallest doubt as to the reality of them all. As Miss Lamont was going to Paris for the Christmas holidays, I wrote and asked her to take

any opportunity she might have to see the place again, and to make a plan of the paths and the buildings; for the guidebooks spoke of the Temple de l'Amour and the Belvédère, and I thought one of them might prove to be our kiosk.

- E.M."

Charlotte Anne Moberly. 1901

Introduction

I had grown up with the story of Miss Moberly and Miss Jourdain and their incident in Versailles. My father was always fascinated by mysteries and the unknown, and this was something I inherited. As a young girl, their time slip was a story I would look forward to my father retelling– what they had gone through was always some form of greatness to me; I marvelled at the possibility of going back in time, seeing ghosts, or describing a space that had no logical explanation for existing. Psychology and pedagogy point to the conclusion that narratives mean *everything* to a young child, and this is something I can personally attest to. But as expected with the coming of age, ‘facts’ take priority over ‘fiction’, and the so-called fairytales, mysteries, and their fascination begin to fade away.

As I grew up, a faint awareness of Moberly and Jourdain’s story was all I could truly claim to have. The story, like waves, would ebb and flow in moments throughout my life; I recounted it while working with children, where I watched the same glee and familiar line of questioning emerge; during each of my three visits to Versailles and the Petit Trianon; and later, as my own research turned towards women's history, I found myself reflecting on the remarkable confidence with which the two women published *An Adventure* in an era when women's intellectual authority was widely questioned.

The most unexpected moment came when I was completing some background research on my college placement before arriving at Oxford for studies, and I recognised the name of the first Principal of St. Hugh’s College, “Miss Annie Moberly”, instantly. I quickly did some further exploration and found that she was exactly the Miss Moberly I had known from the Versailles incident, who I felt acquainted with since my childhood. My father had said *An Adventure* was about a teacher and principal of a “girls' school”, omitting, or perhaps unaware of the fact that they were both professors at Oxford University, at the very same college I now happen to attend, five years after his passing.

In this sense, researching *An Adventure* has been its very own adventure for me. I took time to sit at the gravesite of the two women who had woven threads throughout my childhood, and I was struck with the idea of timelessness and how a legacy can persist for a century, even an ocean away. I could hardly believe that I was studying the same story I had heard since I was a child, in the very same spaces the women had written it a hundred years before I was born. I was dwelling in the mystery of things still unknown and my seemingly unending curiosity with it all. Theories of mystery, space, time, and legacy all seemed to come together with *An Adventure,* and the result is this dissertation.

My positioning is therefore not incidental to the analysis, but rather at the heart of it. Occupying these spaces as a woman at Oxford University, a century after Moberly and Jourdain occupied them, I have directly felt that these halls were not built with women in mind, and that occupying them regardless carries a continual pressure to prove that one belongs in a space before one is permitted to simply *think* in it. I recognised something within their decade-long pursuit of evidence that a researcher without that same recognition might have read as merely thorough; I recognised the labour required to be *believed at all.*

This thesis therefore focuses on uncertainty and its relationship to knowledge creation. It begins with a broader question: if research exists to investigate the unknown, why are certain unknowns considered worthy of inquiry while others are dismissed before investigation even begins? This question is explored through John Keats' theory of Negative Capability and the experiences of Moberly and Jourdain.

Negative Capability is a term coined by the poet John Keats, describing the capacity to remain in "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Keats, 1817). Keats considered this the quality that separated a "Man of Achievement" from everyone else; the willingness to rest within not-knowing, rather than resolve it prematurely, is, in his theory, the source of greatness. It would apply almost exactly

to Moberly and Jourdain's *An Adventure* without the caveat that Keats rejects any "irritable reaching" for reason or for fact (Keats, 1817)

My primary research question is: how do women rest in and reach beyond uncertainty when their claims to knowledge are not naturally granted credibility? Three sub-questions follow from this central concern and structure the chapters that follow.

1. How were women's claims to knowledge specifically contested in early twentieth-century academic institutions, and on what grounds? (Chapter 1)
2. What does the reception of *An Adventure,* which was investigated and then dismissed, by the Society for Psychical Research, reveal about the conditions under which a knowledge claim was granted or denied credibility? (Chapter 2)
3. How does attending to those conditions require us to rethink Negative Capability as a theory of uncertainty and achievement? (Chapters 3 & 4)

Read together, these three questions trace the movement the primary research question asks about: establishing the conditions that make resting in uncertainty unequally available (Chapter One), through a case where reaching for reason was met with dismissal despite the effort (Chapter Two), to what this requires us to rethink in Negative Capability itself (Chapters Three and Four). This dissertation aims to point to the fact that the lasting contribution of *An Adventure* does not lie in the defence of a belief in ghosts inhabiting Versailles, but rather in the spirit of research itself.

Rather than abandoning mystery for rationality, Moberly and Jourdain remained within it, undertaking a decade of investigation in an effort to render their experience intelligible. In this sense, I question what the function of uncertainty, mystery, and doubt is, if not to inspire the pursuit of understanding. It is exactly this productive movement, from uncertainty toward intelligibility, that Negative Capability leaves underdeveloped and the extension I make to Negative Capability throughout this dissertation, developed fully in

chapter four: for those denied epistemic legitimacy, resting in uncertainty is not, on its own, sufficient. Rather, they reach to make uncertainty intelligible in a powerful way that transforms the boundaries of accepted knowledge. I define this process as *Productive Negation.*

Overview of Thesis

The primary research question: how do women rest in and reach beyond uncertainty when their claims to knowledge are not naturally granted credibility? - is twofold. First, it requires establishing that recognition as a 'knower' is not equally distributed, and second, the thesis considers what happens when women occupy uncertainty while navigating these unequal conditions of knowledge production, examining a case where credibility was denied despite reasoned pursuit, what Negative Capability itself fails to account for as a result, and what this requires us to build in its place.

Before examining a theoretical reach beyond uncertainty, it is necessary to begin with understanding the historical conditions that shaped both the women who produced *An Adventure* and the ways in which their experience was received. Context is everything, and the story of *An Adventure* is certainly no exception. A literature review, placing women in academia within their historical context is the aim of the first chapter "Oxford Before a Thunderstorm". It asks how women's claims to knowledge were contested within early twentieth-century academic institutions, in this case, Oxford, and the grounds on which their credibility was questioned. This section explores two dominant frameworks through which Jourdain and Moberly's experience was interpreted and challenged:

I. Women, Reason, and "the Rules of the Game" investigates the Gendered Boundaries of Intellectual Authority

II. In Defence of Knowledge: Truth and Persistence investigates the hierarchy of knowledge that determines what forms of understanding were considered legitimate

Achievement and timelessness held different weight for women in early twentieth-century England. This is specifically relevant at a time when, because of one's sex, the very name and identity of women were destined to change if they wanted to be taken seriously in society. Moberly and Jourdain were not only facing opposition due to their sex, but also due to rigid conceptualisations of what was considered scientific knowledge (Schwartz, 2017). This hierarchy is one that has been under-recognized; much of what is considered pedagogically valuable has become intertwined with scientific research: the measured, verified, and empirically demonstrated facts (Unterhalter, 2017). However, this has a tendency to negate the importance of less tangible forms of knowledge such as the curiosity and uncertainty that arise from dwelling in the mystery of not knowing. Negative Capability offers a lens to explore this theoretical space, which, after developing the context, is the focus of the subsequent chapters.

Second, the thesis considers what happens when women occupy uncertainty while navigating these unequal conditions of knowledge production. The second chapter, “Not to Mention Mind and Matter,” examines the reception of *An Adventure* by the Society for Psychical Research, asking what its investigation and subsequent dismissal reveal about the conditions under which a knowledge claim is granted or denied credibility. The search for truth which Moberly and Jourdain embarked on within such strict boundaries is a commendable one, but not one certain to yield results, yet Moberly and Jourdain persevered against all odds. Their narrative has been admired, investigated, and scrutinised time and time again; it has popularised the concept of ‘time slips’ and has inspired a substantial body of scholarship and creative works (Schwartz, 2017). Rather than focusing solely on their

experience as part of their value and contribution to research, I present a new reading of *An Adventure*, one of enduring pedagogic value through its ability to unsettle conventional understandings of knowledge and meaning making.

The third chapter, 'Beauty and "Every Other Consideration"' is a theoretical analysis of the concept of Negative Capability, interrogating the underlying assumptions of reason (chapter 1) and establishing legitimacy and credibility (chapter 2) in the concept, to women's now understood state of oppression in society. This chapter asks specifically what Negative Capability fails to account for when it is applied to those who were never granted epistemic credibility in the first place. Keats's theory, as I argue, addresses reason but is silent on oppression, and this silence is not incidental; it is precisely what makes the theory, as it stands, unable to explain a case like Moberly and Jourdain's. This chapter therefore brings together the two threads I have been building throughout the dissertation, reason and oppression, in order to ask how women rest in and reach beyond uncertainty when resting itself was never a neutral or freely available act to begin with.

Having now established what Negative Capability leaves unaccounted for, the fourth chapter, "No More Than a Narrative," then develops *Productive Negation*, combining temporal and spatial theory, particularly Henri Lefebvre's account of space and rhythm, to explain how uncertainty can be rendered intelligible – directly connecting to the reaching beyond than simply resting within. This chapter asks: after attending to what has been learned about knowledge claims and those denied epistemic credibility, what can account for how women navigate spaces of uncertainty? It argues Negative Capability must account for the labour of rendering uncertainty intelligible as well as the capacity to rest within it. As this subject deals extensively with space and belonging, this chapter establishes space as socially situated. It combines temporal and spatial theory for an explanation of Productive Negation and its potential in reshaping mainstream ideas of space, achievement, and transformation.

Finally, this dissertation will conclude with a chapter entitled “Believe me”. This chapter recounts the main themes that were discussed throughout this thesis and reconnects with education, the importance of staying in spaces of questioning, and recognize that no matter how much we may pretend otherwise, there are many questions we do not have the answers for that are just as important to teach as those which we do.

Conceptual Framework

In December of 1817, the famous poet John Keats wrote a letter to his brothers in which he theorised a concept of Negative Capability. This theory has had influences far beyond literature and poetry and has been used throughout time as an argument for acting beyond preconceived boundaries that rationality imposes on us. Not only does Negative Capability change our outlook on things, but moreover it leads to “achievement” and greatness. Below is an excerpt of the letter which scholars point to as the only time Keats mentions Negative Capability (Mercer, 2017).

> “Brown & Dilke walked with me & back from the Christmas pantomime. I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability**,** that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason… that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.”

This theory of Negative Capability has gained significant traction within literary studies (Hamad, 2025; Muir, 1987) psychoanalysis, the medical field (Speyer et al, 2026; Coulehan, 2017), and leadership studies (French, et al, 2009; von Bülow & Simpson, 2022). While Negative Capability has often been framed as a concept of epistemic importance, its political

and pedagogical assumptions remain under-examined specifically within the field of education (Unterhalter, 2017; Clarke, 2016). This is not only a theoretical concept, but empirical educational research has shown the importance of presenting uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts. Curiosity has actively been linked to creativity, deeper academic engagement, and achievement but oftentimes classrooms do not promote it effectively (Evans et al, 2023; Evans & Jirout, 2023). This thesis develops a feminist reconceptualization of Negative Capability through the concept of *Productive Negation*: the process through which uncertainty becomes a generative space for inquiry, transformation, and alternative forms of knowledge production.

As a researcher of women's history, I am aware that women have long inhabited spaces of uncertainty as they struggled to expand the social, political, and epistemic boundaries of their time, this space of uncertainty, mystery, and doubt referenced by Keats is something I refer to as negative space (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1967; Beauvoir, 1952). Yet remaining in such spaces for women was rarely sufficient. To be recognized, they were repeatedly required to render their experiences intelligible through claims to reason and credibility—a social reality left largely unaccounted for in Keats's formulation of Negative Capability.

Another term frequently used throughout this thesis is ‘reason’ which can be used harmoniously with possessing knowledge or intelligibility. ‘Reason’ is a social concept that has roots in feminist political theory where it was tied to the oppression of women and supplied reasoning for men's autonomy and role in society (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1967). Men’s authority was based on this ‘reason’ or their rationality. It allowed them to be seen as ‘reasonable’ to come to knowledgeable conclusions based on sense and science. Women, on the other hand, possessed sentimentality, considered an opposing force to reason and rational thought (Runciman, 2020). This largely kept women outside of the public sphere, because

they were considered sentimental and not thought to act on reason (Runciman, 2020). People who had ‘reason’ were given decision making power in society because they had the right to possess knowledge, while those marginalized in society were intentionally kept out of these spheres (Code, 2018). Expanding women’s education allowed women to extend their horizons and have the opportunity to become more than what society expected of them. Reason as such was for quite some time something women longed for.

Timelessness and Education

Any idea of “achievement”, legacy, or timeless work, cannot be considered as separate from education. It is a simple fact of life that nothing is everlasting. Change, no matter how uncomfortable, with time, becomes something with rhythm – with consistency, but ‘a predestined forever’ continues to be something humanity strives for, and education is one of the primary means through which that pursuit is realized (Di Paolantonio, 2016). This begins to present the paradox of pedagogy: Do we impose utopias on children or provide them with skills, agency, and knowledge to shape their own futures (Arendt, 1954: Sinha, 2025)?

The “crisis of education” has been referred to as the continued political domain in which education is situated; in authoritarian and right-wing governments, the first and often the starkest reforms are seen in education, and this is not surprising since shaping the minds of children is the surest route to permeability (Arendt, 1954; Apple, 2017). Education policy often presents this tension between the best route for the child and the best for a collectively assumed future that children themselves have no say in (Arendt, 1954). The crisis of education has highlighted that most often we rest with the latter, but there is a need for reform (Arendt, 1954; Apple, 2017). In any case, education is unique in that it continues to have a connection to the future, and as such, studies which concern themselves with permeability, achievement, and timelessness, have a direct relevance with education. If there were a

formula for remaining timeless, focused on the success of the child rather than imposed ideologies, there is no doubt it would change the outlook and empowering qualities of education (Arendt, 1954)

I analyse Keats' concept of ‘achievement’ through this idea of remaining timeless, one that carries weight from Keats’ own words, as he very much did remain timeless (Jackson, 2015). Negative Capability as a tool for timeless achievement illuminates a new definition of success, one that is established through resting in uncertainties, of being willing to accept the answer that we simply do not have all of the answers. This is incredibly transformative for learning; mysteries which inspire fascination and cultivate imagination have correlated with children’s ability to be critical thinkers (Caiman & Lundegård, 2018). In a classroom setting, this would mean inspiring questioning rather than providing answers, and in math, taking time to dwell in the space of an equals sign. Allowing space for questioning and *alternative answers* creates a space where the long-established hierarchies of knowledge creation can be unsettled. Rather than simply reproducing inherited understandings, this revolutionary space invites and trusts learners to provide their own answers and take control of their own futures. Moberly and Jourdain had so deeply wished that one day there would be an answer to what they had experienced on August 10th, 1901 (Moberly & Jourdain, 1911), but this thesis argues that it is not only the not knowing but also the continued questioning that has preserved the story and its enduring relevance.

Methods & Materials

Research Design

This dissertation undertakes a qualitative, interpretive research design that combines historical and archival analysis with conceptual theorisation. The case considers women's epistemic authority in the early twentieth century, of which the reception of *An Adventure* is

one exceptionally well-documented instance. *An Adventure* was selected as this case for three reasons:

Firstly, its authors, Moberly and Jourdain, were not marginal figures but academics at the University of Oxford at the turn of the twentieth century. As such, this research examines the contestation of women's credibility under the most ideal conditions of epistemic involvement available to women at the time. This specifically makes the case a close test of women's claim to reason and closely situates it within the epistemic authority women were granted, considering their involvement in spaces which hold academic authority.

Secondly, the case is incredibly well known and archived: Moberly and Jourdain's own diaries, their correspondence, their notes, and the formal record of their engagement with the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) allow for the process of credibility and belief to be traced in great detail.

Thirdly, and somewhat connected to the second point, the case's public reception was documented extensively and through multiple different voices, with archival materials available spanning both supportive and sceptical responses. This full representation of the case allows for this research to examine a wide variation in how the women's claim was received rather than a biased or single verdict. While this variation in reception is incredibly helpful, it must be noted that this case cannot be taken to represent the experience of all women denied epistemic legitimacy in this period. Ultimately, most women in the twentieth century did not have Moberly and Jourdain's institutional standing. However, it is quite telling that credibility had to be earned, even under advantaged conditions.

The Corpus

This research draws on the following corpus, held across the Bodleian Library and St Hugh's College Archive, Oxford:

- Two diaries, one kept by Moberly and one by Jourdain, deposited in the archives and organised chronologically by date. Both were read in full, from late July 1901 onwards.
- 173 letters written to Moberly and/or Jourdain concerning *An Adventure*, spanning 1905 to 1925: 73 letters from 1905, 57 letters from 1906–1910, and 43 letters from 1911–1925.
- 8 newspaper clippings, drawn from the *Morning Post*, the *Church Family Newspaper*, the *Manchester Guardian*, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and *Le Figaro*.
- Documents from the Conservateur de la Bibliothèque Publique, Versailles, relevant to the historical research Moberly and Jourdain undertook.
- 76 documents from the Society for Psychical Research, dated 1911–1913, including correspondence and a formal report.
- First edition copies of *An Adventure*

Selection Criteria

This research reviewed the complete set of archival material relevant to Moberly and Jourdain's Versailles experience and its reception held at the Bodleian Library Archives and St. Hugh's College Archives rather than a sample drawn from a larger, unbounded collection. The corpus was bounded by what these archives (Bodleian and St. Hugh's) held on the case; no further selection was required, and no relevant material that I was able to identify within these collections was excluded.

Analytic Procedure

All of the archival material was read in full, and, where early twentieth-century handwriting required it, it was transcribed to text. This was a process that in itself demanded a close, repeated engagement with individual documents. The material was read specifically for evidence of belief and credibility. This included: the women's own stated confidence or doubt

regarding their experience,[2] correspondents' expressed opinions of the case, and the reasoning offered on either side. Afterwards, these readings were brought into dialogue with the conceptual framework of Negative Capability, with particular attention paid to moments where the women's pursuit of evidence diverged from Keats's formulation of resting, unresolved, within uncertainty.

Scholarly Formation

After my archival research, I sat with the theory of Negative Capability for quite some time, understanding its uses and its context, which took me to the archives of Harvard University's Houghton Library to access Keats' letters and to learn what little exists of the original theory of Negative Capability. My literature review consisted of understanding Negative Capability in scholarly literature and within context. Along with the archival corpus described above, this research was also shaped by direct engagement with the source of the theoretical framework. I also attended a two-day symposium at the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford ("The Good, The Beautiful and The True," featuring Iain McGilchrist, Martin Shaw, Jude Currivan, and Angie Hobbs), which greatly helped inform my understanding of Negative Capability within contemporary philosophical discussion. This engagement does not form part of the analysed corpus but constitutes the scholarly formation through which the conceptual framework of this dissertation was developed.

Archival and Conceptual Work

The archival and conceptual strands of this research are interwoven throughout this thesis. The archival findings directly led to questions about the ability to rest in uncertainty, especially considering how little of that was occurring within the archival documents and manuscripts. This directly shaped which elements of Negative Capability required extension, and my developing theory of Productive Negation shaped which archival material was read

[2] the sheer amount of documentation collected by Moberly contained quite a bit of information concerning this.

as significant. As an example, the SPR's rejection of Moberly and Jourdain's evidence went beyond simply a historical fact to be reported, but instead was the material occasion for asking what standard Negative Capability implicitly assumes, and for whom it is met by default.

Positionality and Reflexivity

This being one of the few works to bring a feminist theoretical critique to Negative Capability, feminist research method grounded every element of my thesis. As pointed out by Nencel (2014), feminist research methodology must create spaces for self-representation. Feminist research places relevance on the personal, where other fields often disregard it. What is research, history, or political movements, but a collection of personal dreams, ambitions, and goals? A hermeneutic focus is essential. I deeply value the importance of reflexivity in the work I produce, acknowledging that one's positioning is critical to recognising the power relations that exist in knowledge creation, a central point throughout this dissertation (England, 1994; Krystalli, 2023). When working with historical figures, the representation issue is paramount; they are no longer here to interview, comment, or to oppose what has been written about them and their experience, so a question I consistently ask of myself is: how can this be done rightfully, specifically within historical research? Essentially, how can one be sure that the research we create represents the subject and how she would portray herself accurately (Scott, 1991; Nencel, 2014)?

Scholarly work has highlighted that the key is to disclose this by making the distinction apparent by placing oneself within the work. Interpretation is always shaped by a researcher's own framework (Krystalli, 2023; Scott, 1991; Pillow, 2003). By the time Moberly and Jourdain’s narrative reaches this research, it is shaped by a retelling, through their own documents, and through the accounts of others. My interpretation, of course, creates a particular representation of them, but I was mindful in researching the two women

and the adventure very dear to their hearts to ensure as much of their original narrative was conveyed as possible. Throughout my research, I kept a research journal including my initial reaction to certain documents. I have tried to remain mindful of this, and my positioning as a researcher, outlined in the introduction, is part of how I have approached that responsibility, not incidental to it. I have researched them, yes, but I have also taken the time to frequent the places they did, cultivating my own historical imaginings through my understanding of space and belonging as a woman in the grand halls and libraries of Oxford; I have visited Versailles, and I have taken time to sit by their graves. After all, we were all women in the same space, merely separated by time. In this thesis, I have thoroughly analysed the conditions through which a person becomes knowable (i.e. achievement in Negative Capability) and have presented you with my findings of *An Adventure* (Scott, 1991). This is the basis of my conceptual theorisation.

Judging the Quality of Interpretations

Interpretive quality was pursued throughout this research in several ways. Archival material was read alongside contextual information the archives themselves preserved about correspondents, including their identity and their relationship to Moberly and Jourdain. A student writing to her college principal operates within different power relations and has different evidentiary weight for their claim than nobility. Correspondence in the archives contained both and this asymmetry was taken into account throughout. Findings were also triangulated across sources, so that the women's own account, third-party correspondence, and the SPR's formal record were read against one another rather than any single source being treated as authoritative. Finally, developing a biographical understanding of Moberly and Jourdain over the course of this research allowed their correspondence to be read as they intended it to be understood, as researchers, rather than through the lens which later speculation imposed upon them. Notes recording these contextual and biographical

judgements were kept throughout the archival research and directly informed the interpretations offered in this dissertation.

Ethical Considerations

This research raises a specific ethical difficulty with historical work: its subjects cannot consent to, correct, or contest their representation. Moberly and Jourdain are not present to confirm, qualify, or object to the interpretation offered here, and the imbalance of power this creates, between a living researcher and a subject who cannot answer back, sits uneasily alongside a dissertation whose central argument concerns exactly this kind of imbalance: who is granted the standing to speak influence knowledge and who is spoken for. Throughout my research I have attempted to hold true to this tension rather than resolve it. Where possible, I have privileged Moberly and Jourdain's own words over paraphrase or inference. All four chapters of my thesis are titled with direct quotes from my archival study in relation to *An Adventure*. I have treated moments where their intentions are genuinely unrecoverable as such, rather than filling the gap with any sort of reading that better serves my argument.

A related consideration concerns the archive. The papers held at the Bodleian were deposited by Moberly herself, which means the record available to this research is not a neutral trace of events but a selection she herself made, decades after the fact, of what she wished to be known. Rather than treating this as a limitation to be apologised for, I have treated it as itself a form of evidence: an archive curated by its own subject reveals something about what she believed she needed to prove, and to whom, under conditions of public doubt. This does not resolve the ethical difficulty of representing her without her consent, but it does mean the difficulty is, in part, the object of study rather than only a constraint upon it.

Finally, because feminist research foregrounds the personal and the positioned (Nencel, 2014; England, 1994), I have disclosed my own relationship to this material

throughout on the understanding that reflexive transparency about one's own position is itself part of the ethical practice of representing historical subjects responsibly, rather than an afterthought.

Limitations and Preliminary Notes

This dissertation ultimately focuses on the lives of two middle-class English women in the early-20th century, and how they pushed boundaries through resting in a state of uncertainty and opposing institutional hierarchies. My account holds for women with institutional proximity to academic authority; however, these mechanisms may work differently for those with none. It is important to keep in mind the racial and societal restrictions of the time. Women belonging to marginalized groups, specifically racial, disabled and / or poor women did not have the same economic, educational and leisure opportunities, nor the social standing required to achieve the same autonomy as wealthier women of the middle and upper classes.

In this narrative there is much unsaid for all of those who would never have the opportunity to have their knowledge or experiences even spoken about. The absence of comparable archives for racialised, poorer, or disabled women is in itself evidence of the argument for who is permitted to leave a record, and this has excluded many women from the conclusions of the study. This thesis offers potential for extension on ideas of knowledge hierarchies and can present findings for other groups. I offer merely the beginning of the conversation; there is much still to be done. There will always be experiences that cannot be explained through conventional knowledge systems, it is merely the question whether research and pedagogy value the unknown enough to open the gated community, allowing for the expansion of knowledge and minds.

In terms of Negative Capability, practically nothing exists in its original form. The letter written by Keats only exists through a transcript written by the second husband to his

sister-in-law: John Jeffrey (Mercer, 2017). The original has been lost or destroyed to time (Mercer, 2017). While the contents are considered to be accurate, Jeffrey would sometimes underline or provide emphasis to words which Keats seldom used (Rejack, 2017). Negative Capability was underlined in the letter, but it is unsure whether Keats himself placed such an uncharacteristic emphasis on the term or if that was done afterwards. In any case, the relevance of the theory still applies, but much of the context surrounding the letter including any responses have been lost (Rejack, 2017).

As a final note, it may be questioned why I choose to analyse *An Adventure* alongside romantic literary theory rather than analysing the numerous letters, documents, maps, as they are contributing to other very convincing evidence of the case, but exploring the narrative is exactly the point – science is no longer separate from storytelling but interwoven with it, opening the field of research to different approaches to knowing and learning, away from Eurocentric domination (Krystalli, 2023). Education is itself a practice of transformation, expanding what we consider knowledge also includes stepping outside the norm with methods of analysis. Much like Moberly and Jourdain's encounter with the ghosts of Versailles, I, as a researcher, am also embarking on a journey of the unknown – narratives speak for themselves, like science, what is taken for truth is entirely up to the discretion of the reader.

"Oxford Just Before a Thunderstorm"

Moberly once described the beginning of her adventure as "Oxford just before a thunderstorm" (Ragg, 1957). Following this metaphor, this is a fitting place for the dissertation to begin: situating The University of Oxford at the beginning of the twentieth century to understand academic institutions and women's role within them. The following chapter acts as a literature review and situates *An Adventure* within its historical and intellectual context, reviewing the philosophical and institutional traditions through which

women's claims to reason were constructed and contested. It provides the historical and intellectual foundation for the conceptual framework of Productive Negation and answers the first sub-question guiding this dissertation: how were women's claims to knowledge specifically contested in early twentieth-century academic institutions, and on what grounds?

I. Women, Reason and "the Rules of the Game"

The University of Oxford had always been nervous about women on its premises (Sutherland, 1988). It would not have been difficult in early 20th-century England to feel left out of the "city of dreaming spires" when it was evident those dreams, libraries, and gated colleges were not meant for you (Sutherland, 1988). This was the reality for women for nearly 90% of the University's history – over 800 years (Howarth, 2000). Oxford, since its beginnings, was an institution that revelled in tradition. Changing or switching those traditions was quite another matter entirely (Sutherland, 1988). To understand the lives of the women who attended Oxbridge, or taught at one of the halls, it was necessary to understand the fierce debate of what it actually meant to *be* a woman (Schwartz, 2011).

To understand the misguided ideological doctrine that led to women being left out of the realm of academia leads one into a history of rationality and reason – the problem of who could lay claim to reason and who could not. Knowledge is power, and as such, politics has long been involved in the business of education (Dearden et al, 1972). It is traceable back to Plato with ideas of Philosopher Kings ruling societies (Kotsonis, 2020), Ibn Khaldun on the importance of religious science (Alatas, 2013), or the Machiavellian idea of the 'good man' securing his legacy and future through the education of others (Ahrensdorf, 2022). The ability to become educated and possess reason became a way of setting people apart and creating the 'other' (Longino, 2005). As a social phenomenon, reason restricted the capabilities of individuals deemed lacking in rationality, thereby providing an incredibly convenient justification for oppression (Dearden et al, 1972).

Women's considered lack of reason can be found to have roots throughout intellectual history. Aristotle foundationally said that the male was naturally superior; Locke referenced the man's superiority in marriage; and Rousseau believed that women's education should be relative to men's, to benefit and be of service to them and nothing more (Dawson et al, 2020; Rousseau, 1974). Rousseau set strict ideological boundaries on what would be best for women, or in this case the "other" and how rational they were deemed to be. This included ideas of women remaining in the countryside to have children rather than moving to the city where they were at risk for becoming aware of what the world held and did not offer them (Fellows, 2014; Rousseau, 1974). He believed the differences in rationality to be so severe and so ingrained in systems of education in the 1700s that he once made comments to "Educate women as men for the more they resemble our sex the less power they will have over us" (Fellows, 2014; Wollstonecraft, 1792/1967). There was moreover a strategic element in play – the education of women creates the opportunity to see that women and men are indeed intellectually equal, and they deserve equal opportunities in the eyes of the nation and the law (Fellows, 2014). The argument of withholding knowledge and education from women would be used to fuel and promote the suffrage movement as well as women's undiscovered intellect and potential (Dawson et al, 2020). Education could work as a rebellion against the misogynistic societal depiction of women.

Female philosophers, as such, were quick to emphasise the importance of education for emancipation and empowerment. Mary Astell (1666-1731) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759 - 1797), oftentimes considered the founders of modern-day feminism (Dawson et al, 2020), were incredibly critical of the idea that men possessed reason and women did not (Runciman, 2020; Landes, 2003).[3] They pointed out that women confined themselves to

[3] Although feminism was a term coined in 1837, I use it here to create modern meaning. Perhaps the word did not exist to explain the concept. But this did not mean that the concept itself did not exist.

beauty and sentimentality with claim to little else, and were not even in a position to understand their lack of knowledge to even recognise the predicament they were in (Astell, 1695; Wollstonecraft, 1792/1967). Mary Astell wrote in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* "What a pity it is that whilst your Beauty casts a lustre all around you, your Souls which are infinitely more bright and radiant should [suffer]" (Astell, 1695).

Astell, like many of her successors, would quote women's stationary situation as an entrapment compared to what they were truly capable of: "We will therefore enquire what it is that stops your flight, that keeps you groveling here below, like *Domitian* catching Flies when you should be busied in obtaining Empires" (Astell, 1695). In 1792, Wollstonecraft said women had the fate of being "confined [in] cages like the feathered race, they have nothing to do but plume themselves, and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch" (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1967, p.98). While with time suffrage was ultimately won, women held space in academic institutions and had a voice in matters of the state, elements of society were remarkably slow to change (Sutherland, 1988). Simone de Beauvoir's analogy well over a century later, in 1949 that "woman is shut up in a kitchen or in a boudoir, and astonishment is expressed that her horizon is limited. Her wings are clipped, and it is found deplorable that she cannot fly" was all that is needed to showcase that women in Europe were still far from reaching equality (Beauvoir, 1952, p.672). With only beauty and sentimentality for women to lay claim to, they became objects to either admire or quite easily come to despise. In any case, women were not considered rational human beings with thoughts and ideas of their own (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1967). Through these quotations of early feminist theory, it can be seen that escapism from conditions that insisted they remain stationary was at the heart of an ideal for women. Beauvoir's quote continues with "Let but the future be opened to her and she will no longer be compelled to linger in the present" (Beauvoir, 1952), highlighting that granting women an open future that they could have control over was the key to liberation.

The way this seemed to be achieved was through educating women, writing to them and addressing them. This was a theme throughout the feminist theory quotes, flying away and breaking boundaries seemed to evidently be a better alternative to women's resting state in society.

Moreover, Beauvoir, Wollstonecraft, and Astell were all grappling with an empty legacy, all quite aware that if their situation in society was not readily changed, they, like all of the women before them, would fall into time, nameless, and unknown:

> "In short, if it be not considered as the history of man; and not of particular men, who filled a niche in the temple of fame, and dropped into the black rolling steam of time, that silently sweeps all before it, into the shapeless void called- eternity. For shape, can it be called, "that shape hath none"?"
>
> (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1967, p.222)

Essentially, *An Adventure* was the product of a society where women were accustomed to being written *out* of history rather than having the opportunity to become a moving force within it. To reach a form of greatness or achievement simply required more for women at the turn of the 20th century than it ever would have meant for a man who was already donned with reason.

Reason and rationality were not something easily granted to women even in one of the world's most prestigious educational institutions, which holds an extensive history of male exclusivity even in this very private sphere – one symbolic of intellect (Sutherland, 1988). At the time of Moberly and Jourdain's Adventure, St. Hugh's was still in the early days of its existence. This was at a time when women's education at Oxford was critiqued and college reputation in the early days mattered significantly (Schwartz, 2017).[4] As an example, In

[4] Women were only allowed to matriculate from Oxford University in the 1920s, prior to this instead of graduating they would receive a certificate from the Local Examiners Delegacy for passing examinations. The first women's colleges had been Lady Margaret Hall (1878), and St. Hugh's Hall was established in 1886.

1884, five years after the first women's college at the University had been established Dean Burgon gave a sermon to the women of New College Oxford titled "To educate young women like young men and with young men – a thing inexpedient and immodest" (Baigent, 2020), in which he inferred to woman as being "Inferior to us [men] God made you, and our inferiors to the end of time you will remain." (Baigent, 2020). While this was rather an extremity, it was not an understatement to say all eyes were on the women's colleges of Oxford (Ingram, 2020; Schwartz, 2017).

Elizabeth Wordsworth founded St. Hugh's College in 1886, as an independent private venture to supply women with education who could not easily afford the higher fees of other women's colleges (Schwartz, 2017; Ingram, 2020). Charlotte Anne (Annie) Moberly, a daughter of the Bishop of Salisbury was appointed as principal in 1886, likely through her connections to Wordsworth, when her brother succeeded the post of Moberly's father as Bishop of Salisbury (Ingram, 2020). Wordsworth had intended the post to be more of a 'housekeeper' for the "small home-like house' for young women who wished to study in Oxford but who found 'the charges at the present Halls at Oxford and Cambridge…beyond their means.". But Moberly, it was clear to anyone, saw herself as the principal of a college, even if it was at that point, a small hall (Ingram, 2020).

Moberly did not have a university education, but she had multiple publications and could read Hebrew and Greek (Schwartz, 2017). Her fierce loyalty to her family and their religious principals overall recommended her to the post, and this very same loyalty extended to her college, for It was under her leadership in 1911, that the Hall became St. Hugh's College, Oxford (Howarth, 2000; Schwartz, 2017; Ingram, 2020). Beyond her fierce loyalty, she was described by contemporaries as being a striking individual with an exactitude in her phrasing so as to ensure the absolute truth in every conversation, and to the surprise of others "had a real sense of humour usually concealed by her inhibiting sense of propriety." (Ragg,

1957, p.183). Moberly eventually revealed their identity in 1931 after the death of Jourdain. She continued to research and defend their experience for the rest of her life (Schwartz, 2017).

Figure 1

Charlotte Anne Elizabeth ("Annie") Moberly, Principal of St Hugh's College (1886–1915).



Note. Photograph from the St Hugh's College Archival Photos collection, Oxford. Reproduced by kind permission of the Principal and Fellows of St Hugh's College, Oxford

Eleanor Frances Jourdain (1863-1924) was also the daughter of a clergyman, she had been one of the first students at Lady Margaret Hall receiving an undergraduate degree in Modern History, and her sister one of the first four students at St. Hugh's taught by Moberly (Schwartz, 2017; Ragg, 1957). By the time she was appointed as vice principal of St. Hugh's College, she had obtained a doctorate from the University of Paris and was the headmistress of two girls' schools (Schwartz, 2017). Jourdain was described as an ambitious woman but was nearly 20 years younger than Moberly and at the beginning of her career in 1901.

However, after *An Adventure* her character had suffered the most as rumours of her sanity had become common gossip (Ragg, 1957). She passed away in 1924 at the age of 60, the stress of her role of Principal having caused a heart attack, it was said she was "incapable of adjusting herself to the limitations imposed on the Head of the College" (Ingram, 2020; Ragg, 1957)

Figure 2

Eleanor Jourdain, Principal, 1915-1924.



Note. Photograph from the St Hugh's College Archival Photos collection, Oxford. Reproduced by kind permission of the Principal and Fellows of St Hugh's College, Oxford

Moberly was 55 and Jourdain was 37 when they went to Versailles. Ultimately St. Hugh's had two very respectable women with good reputations at its helm. They supported women's rights and suffrage but above all Moberly and Jourdain were committed to creating a college that would last, ensuring that the next generation of women would be able to earn their own living (Schwartz, 2017).

Figures suggest that in 1930 (a few decades after *An Adventure* was published), about 410 of the academics in England were women,[5] and out of these 410, a total of 30 existed at the University of Oxford and Cambridge (Perrone, 1994). Academia was a fierce competition for women, and it has been theorized that many of the women Moberly and Jourdain encountered when researching *An Adventure* would deliberately place a greater scepticism on the case, when they too were "striving for acceptance within the Oxbridge academy" (Schwartz, 2017, p.314). This would mean that any woman who had secured such a position occupied an extraordinarily precarious space: rare enough to be visible, and yet, visible enough that any association with a discredited or embarrassing claim carried a very real professional risk (Schwartz, 2017).

The suggestion that Schwartz makes, that women within the Society for Psychical Research may have judged Moberly and Jourdain's case more harshly exactly because their own positions depended on being seen as rigorous, points to a mechanism this dissertation argues is central to how epistemic legitimacy operates – in a reinforcing cycle: when credibility is scarcely granted, those who hold it become incentivised to police its strict boundaries rather than extend them (Schwartz, 2017). Extending credibility, or really any boundaries, when one is oppressed or marginalised, could far too easily risk being read as a lapse in one's own judgement, and therefore one's own legitimacy, which they had worked incredibly hard for despite all opposition. Essentially, women would not want to risk losing what they had worked to gain (Sutherland, 1988). Scarcity in this sense, does not only limit who can claim to know; it has also turned women who have gained precarious entry into gatekeepers against other women seeking the same recognition. This complicates any simple narrative of women in this period as a unified group excluded by men alone. The conditions under which Moberly and Jourdain's claim was judged were shaped not only by patriarchal

[5] This is 10% of the overall figure of 3857 all over the country (Perrone, 1994).

institutions, but by other women whose own tenuous claim to authority left them least able to afford generosity toward an uncertain one.

In answering how were women's claims to knowledge specifically contested in early twentieth-century academic institutions, and on what grounds? This section offers two important conclusions: the first being that reason itself was philosophically coded as male, which has been seen through Aristotle, Locke, and Rousseau and secondly that institutional standing was routed through family/clerical proximity to male authority rather than earned credentials, and even when women were granted earned credentials, it was far too easily lost. It was far riskier extending boundaries than policing them. This section has shown that the exclusion of women from reason was never incidental but built into the very intellectual foundations Oxford stood upon and reinforced institutionally. One of the most intriguing aspects of *An Adventure* is that despite all of the adherence to tradition, the women did perhaps the furthest thing aligned with their character, the success of the college, and their reputations: they published an experience they could not explain in an era where rationality was a luxury when afforded to women that could not, under systems of knowledge, claim to be rational.

Figure 3

Moberly and Jourdain St. Hugh's College 1904



Note. Photograph from the St Hugh's College Archival Photos collection, Oxford. Reproduced by kind permission of the Principal and Fellows of St Hugh's College, Oxford

II. In Defence of Knowledge: Truth and Persistence

"There must be some truth behind all the absurdity… of occult science, or it could not be as universal and persistent as it is."

- *Miss Grace Hadow, letter written to Moberly*

While their sex certainly made it more difficult for women to claim rationality within the walls of Oxford, claiming to have knowledge and to then set out to find the truth in a paranormal experience was quite another matter altogether. This raises a more fundamental question: what does the search for knowledge truly entail? If research exists to investigate the unknown, why are certain unknowns considered worthy of inquiry while others are dismissed before the investigation has even begun? Negative Capability is a term which suggests dwelling in the unknown leads to greatness, yet contemporary research paradigms often appear less concerned with exploring the unknown than with extending and refining what is already accepted as legitimate knowledge (Lakatos, 1978). While Negative Capability points

towards the importance of remaining open to possibilities beyond disciplinary or social constraints, the boundaries surrounding knowledge creation reveal that not all forms of uncertainty are afforded equal legitimacy.

Understanding knowledge boundaries also begins with a focus on the context. The early 20th century was a society in rapid change; the revolutionary ideas of Darwin and Freud had rather accelerated the importance of scientific knowledge in developing truth (Owen, 2004; Oppenheim, 1985). Darwin's ideas of evolution had shaken traditional religious beliefs, emancipatory social movements were beginning to take hold, and the change of the class system had led Winston Churchill to note that the 1880s marked “the end of an epoch” (Owen, 2004; Luckhurst, 2023). There was a general sense of apocalyptic belief, of things changing socially, culturally, and politically (Luckhurst, 2023). Rationality became more intertwined with scientific belief, and it began to overturn so much that the late Victorians had stood for; subsequently a rather reactionary group of the intellectual avant-garde developed, which Owen (2004) points to as a result of a life stripped of meaningful spiritual components. There was a hold of things from the past on this diminishing social movement, and religion coincided with credibility (Owen, 2004; Oppenheim, 1985). As we well know, enough credibility for daughters whose fathers held prominent clerical positions to take leading positions in women’s colleges (Schwartz, 2017). Women experienced this shift to modernity even more severely as public intellectual spaces were not fully open and available to them (Wolff, 1985). Experiences such as Moberly and Jourdain’s encounter at Versailles emerged within this broader cultural negotiation of uncertainty, where individuals would search for meaning outside of accepted knowledge (Schwartz, 2017; Oppenheim, 1985). Essentially, the rise of modern science did not eliminate the desire for mystery and alternative forms of knowledge, but rather the uncertainties created by modern science helped produce new forms of spiritual inquiry that attempted to explore the boundaries of human knowledge,

one example is the later revisited Society for Psychical Research (Oppenheim, 1985; Luckhurst, 2023). However, like many movements, this “irrational occultism” sat at the edge of what was considered accepted in a society with strict boundaries (Owen, 2004). Rational knowledge, and the modern scientific revolution still upheld strict boundaries of what would dictate research and the unknown (Owen, 2004; Oppenheim, 1985).

Oppression was not necessarily the culprit for various types of knowledge being considered more important than others, at least not in the same way the women faced oppression due to their sex; it is more so the idea that certainty has always been considered more reliable and predictable than any degree of uncertainty (Davidson & Dahl, 2025). This idea of resistance to change was not only historically and culturally constructed but also psychologically reinforced. Research into the human brain explains that humans are creatures of pattern recognition (Davidson & Dahl, 2025). Largely because in our evolutionary past, uncertainty meant danger, and this is something we tend to stray away from (Davidson & Dahl, 2025). The human brain is consistently preoccupied with creating a future reality, and this is done through a process of predictive coding (Davidson & Dahl, 2025). In terms of knowledge, and for the relevance of my dissertation, this means that certainty and predictability are favoured, even if the predictability ultimately leads to the incorrect conclusion. Our brains are evolutionarily adapted for survival, not necessarily personal success or achievement (Davidson & Dahl, 2025).

Predictability is reinforced through “factual” knowledge that can be proved, repeated, and remains scientific in all forms of nature. Martin et al, (2012) explain that Western forms of knowledge are gained through vision; seeing is considered the origin of knowing and then writing becomes its reproduction and transmission. This framing, which has built our strict epistemologies and prioritised our sensory experience, has however, narrowed our view. Take, for example, the concept of negative numbers and the century-long resistance by

European knowledge systems refusing to entertain the existence of something that cannot be seen, and therefore becomes incomprehensible, regardless of its subsistence (Miller, 1935; Sinkevich, 2020).

There is no doubt that language shapes epistemological boundaries, and it becomes very difficult to convince someone of something when the concept simply does not exist (McGilchrist, 2026). In almost every other language Iain McGilchrist begins, there are two distinctive words for knowing, one that is experiential and one that is factual (McGilchrist, 2026). In French, there are “Connaître” and “Savoir”, in German, there are “Kennen” and “Wissen”. In English, however, there is just to know and all that it supposedly encompasses – which leaves quite a lot up for debate (McGilchrist, 2026). “Connaître” and “Kennen” imply learning through one's individual experience, and it is not something that can be easily transmitted; it is rather an experience that is felt. This is where the oppression of knowledge sources presents itself. Naturally, considering the division between rationality and sentimentality, sentimentality or feeling has been disregarded in much of what has become epistemological discussion, favoured instead by rationality, reason, and scientific proof, no matter how many other ways of knowing it leaves in its wake (McGilchrist, 2026; Haraway, 1988). Moreover, when one does talk about the nature of reality through experience, it does very little at all to overturn ideological underpinnings that provide the epistemological framework and framing of knowledge as a construct based on our preferences and beliefs; ontological, axiological or epistemological (Martin et al, 2012). Regardless of how we conceptualise uncertainty, it continues to exist. Knowledge is ultimately a reflection of how open-minded our world can become. As stated by Alcoff & Potter (2015)

> “There is no doubt that a discovery of necessary and sufficient conditions that offered a response to the skeptic would count as a major epistemological breakthrough. But once one seriously entertains the hypothesis that knowledge is a construct produced

> by cognitive agents within social practices and acknowledges the variability of agents and practices across social groups, the possible scope even of "definitive" justificatory strategies…reveals itself to be very narrow indeed."

A paradigm shift in this direction has yet to occur. But various academics have spoken in defence of imagination, curiosity, and fascination as opposed to the measurable and 'factual' illusion of scientific research (Unterhalter, 2017). For what truly is philosophy, one of the highest regarded theoretical sciences, but the narration of imagination (Haraway, 1988)?

This idea of expanding boundaries and dwelling in the unknown is entirely what Keats referred to in his idea of Negative Capability. Although there exists very little besides the transcribed letter of Negative Capability, we can see through much of what remains of his life through poetry and letters that Keats seemed to emphasise and remain very sceptical of how much scientific research could truly point to for a true representation of life (Shermer, 2024). In his poem, "Lamia" (Figure 4), he points to how explaining away things by scientific reasoning destroys the poetry and beauty that exists within; that *not* having all of the answers is exactly what inspires passion, fascination and curiosity (Bernstein, 1979; Hoagwood, 1989).

Figure 4

Excerpt of *Lamia* by Keats.

Lamia

By John Keats (1795-1821)

Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
We know her woof, her texture; she is given
In the dull catalogue of common things.
Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine --
Unweave a rainbow, as it erstwhile made
The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade.
[229-238]

This sentiment is perhaps nowhere better expressed than in letters written after the "Immortal Dinner" of 1817. The painter and critic Benjamin Haydon introduced John Keats to the poets William Wordsworth and Charles Lamb, and there were also other attendees from the English literary circle. Here, Keats explained that Newton "had destroyed all the poetry of a rainbow, by reducing it to the prismatic colours" (Dawkins, 2016). A vital element in negative capability is preserving the wonder in science and the beauty that comes from resting in a space without a constant need for reason. This is not a sentiment that has been novel, Einstein himself pointed to the importance of dwelling in mystery calling it "the most beautiful thing we can experience" and the "source of all true art and science" (Dawkins, 2016). More recently, in *Homo Deus,* Harari points to the study of history often attempting to be predictive, but instead, its most important feature is to make us aware of possibilities we would not normally consider (Harari, 2017). He highlights that "science is not just about predicting the future", rather "scholars in all fields seek to broaden horizons". However, ensuring that horizons are broadened requires a serious inquiry into how open these epistemological frameworks are. Researchers, even when practising forms of reflexivity, seem to be at odds with laying their philosophical assumptions bare to the reader. Perhaps it is because of doubts about the relevance or necessity of personal philosophical underpinnings (feelings) to research, or because it is very difficult for anyone to be able to give an accurate account or even be fully aware of the beliefs that shape them (Patai, 1994; Haraway, 1988).

Summary

Essentially, no matter how much I may have wanted to present readers with the "truth" of what Moberly and Jourdain had seen in the summer of 1901, my point remains fixed that *no research,* scientific or otherwise, is completely objective or can point to an ultimate truth. Knowledge is a construct, and knowledge frameworks are shaped by axiologies, epistemologies, and ontologies, oftentimes without a moment of consideration for

the mystery and grey area that lies within each and every hypothesis if extended enough. That grey area for Moberly and Jourdain is simply of greater concern and easier to critique, whereas the pillars of knowledge creation have been long established. I do hope through this chapter it is evident that women's claims to knowledge were always contested less on their content than on structural grounds, preserving ideas of who was permitted to reason, whose institutional standing counted, and which forms of knowledge were legible as knowledge at all.

Before the publication of *An Adventure*, Oxford existed within this tension: an institution devoted to reason and tradition yet surrounded by emerging challenges of the early 20th century questioning the very boundaries through which knowledge was defined. Oxford was slow to change until society moulded around it. Moberly and Jourdain's experience would therefore not merely become a question of what they saw at Versailles, but of what was allowed to be recognised as knowledge creation. What becomes clear, then, is that the hierarchy of knowledge Moberly and Jourdain were facing was not just a matter of their sex, but also a deeply psychologically rooted preference for certainty over uncertainty, for the measurable over the felt. Negative Capability was always in some tension with this hierarchy, but as I go on to argue, it is a tension that plays out very differently depending on who rests within it. Before 1901, Oxford stood at exactly this crossing point, an institution devoted to reason and tradition, yet already surrounded by the very uncertainties it could not quite hold at bay. Imagining Oxford before 1901, one could almost predict an eerie sort of calm before the storm, that upon further gaze reveals that something is brewing, about to upturn everything, and very much about to begin.

"Not to Mention Mind and Matter"

"No work of our age, perhaps, has caused amateurs to speculate so freely on the rather recondite problems of Space and Time, not to mention Mind and Matter"
- *Andrew Lang, "Adventure or Misadventure" Morning Post, 1911.*

Well, begin it certainly did. Moberly and Jourdain had the Adventure that would define the rest of their lives on the 10th of August of 1901, when after travelling to Versailles they experienced something inexplicable. Jourdain and Moberly experienced a sudden depressive sentiment of oppression falling upon them while walking near the Petit Trianon. Jourdain explained she had felt as though she were walking in her sleep (Moberly & Jourdain, 1911). They encountered people who spoke French with an Austrian accent, and Moberly saw a woman sketching in a fancy dress who she assumed to be a tourist. Only later were they understood to be apparitions of Marie Antoinette and members of her court. After returning to Versailles, on several occasions Moberly and Jourdain were unable to retrace the path they had originally taken. Landmarks such as the bridge and the kiosk were missing, and the grounds were filled with tourists. They initially thought they may have stumbled upon a private party, but after checking with all reliable sources found nothing was scheduled and the garden was opened as usual that day — nothing could explain their experience (Moberly & Jourdain, 1911).

The more they researched, the more peculiar the incident became; the attire and accents of the people they had encountered at the gardens seemed to coincide with Marie Antoinette's guards. In 1903, a map from the late 1700s was found referencing the exact bridge that they had claimed to have crossed (Moberly & Jourdain, 1911). After nearly a decade of extensive research in the French National Archives, Moberly and Jourdain came to the conclusion that they had experienced the Petit Trianon precisely as it had existed in the year 1789 (Moberly & Jourdain, 1911). The event that they were certain to have experienced was something that, based on science, could not have occurred. Instead of remaining private with their research as they had initially been advised and intended to do, they published *An*

Adventure in 1911, under the pseudonyms Frances Lamont (Jourdain) and Elizabeth Morison (Moberly), in hopes that this incident "may be considered whenever the time shall come when a true explanation of the story may become possible" (Moberly & Jourdain, 1955). This framing of an adventure highlights that the adventure is not something concerning the event that they had experienced in 1901, but one that endures, as long as the research and willingness to understand the event does. *An Adventure* is much more about the research undertaken after their experience and the discovery that what had happened in 1901 really was something truly remarkable.

Moberly and Jourdain certainly did not disregard science in any element of their research, and before they published their book, they submitted their experience to The Society for Psychical Research (SPR). The society was heavily involved with the University of Cambridge, with the aim "to approach 'varied problems' without prejudice or prepossession of any kind, and in the same spirit of exact and unimpassioned enquiry which has enabled science to solve so many problems, once not less obscure nor less hotly debated." (Collins, n.d). Essentially, the society aimed to investigate psychic phenomena with scientific rigour. They argued for an expanded science, one that worked to understand the complexity of the human experience (Resende et al, 2023). With the creation of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), one could even suggest that there was no better time for *An Adventure* to take place than when there were institutions at reputable universities devoted to discovering and finding truth in the unknown. The society at first seemed very eager to discuss the experience with Moberly and Jourdain but found that there was not enough substance in the early drafts to launch an entire investigation. This led to Moberly and Jourdain collecting as much evidence as they could, conducting empirical independent historical research (Castle, 1991). In 1911, shortly before publication, their publisher, Macmillan, requested that the Society officially review the manuscript (Schwartz, 2017). However, it quickly became a

scenario where the SPR became intrigued by the extensive research completed by Moberly and Jourdain, most of which would fall under the role of the society to “investigate psychic phenomena” (Resende et al, 2023). While Jourdain and Moberly had presented various sketches, maps, letters, and all sorts of evidence, the Society's Research Officer, Alice Johnson, was highly sceptical of the research and concluded that the experience could not be verified due to confirmation bias, that the research they had completed had caused the women to simply misremember or misinterpret normal events (Schwartz, 2017).

Johnson's conclusion did not dispute that Moberly and Jourdain had conducted extensive historical research, nor did it allege fabrication; rather, it reframed their evidence itself as a product of the investigation, arguing that the women's *research* had retrospectively shaped, and therefore contaminated, their memory of the original experience. This is a strikingly specific evidentiary standard when one considers Johnson treating over a decade of sustained, careful inquiry as grounds for suspicion rather than credibility, whereas a shorter, less investigated account had been dismissed as insufficiently substantiated. The standard applied to Moberly and Jourdain is notable, since it appears to penalise the specific response to uncertainty. Moberly and Jourdain were both shocked and critical of the decision of the SPR, Moberly made claims that she felt a decision had been made before they had even met her, prompting a series of letters signed off “Believe me.” and subsequent reviews from members of the SPR referencing the interesting elements of the case. Moberly had collected various testimonies about her experience and her character and denied having made anything up. While it would, be impossible to know the SPR's true deliberations with certainty, it is clear that Moberly and Jourdain's case was evaluated under conditions in which scepticism carried less institutional risk than credulity.

After the disagreements with the SPR, and her concerns for being accurately assessed, Moberly was willing to be proved fake under the right pretences, but she was not willing to accept anything less than the truth of her experience being represented.

> "I find myself faced with a theory strongly insisted upon by you [SPR] which was, to my mind, so wide off the mark that it could afford no opportunity for equal discussion and of itself closed the subject. I therefore come away feeling that no evidence could make any difference where the case was so evidently prejudged" (Moberly, 1911).

The search for acceptance is a great one indeed.

However, despite the conclusions of the SPR, the Adventure story immediately became a sensation as anthropologist Andrew Lang stated, "No work of our age, perhaps, has caused amateurs to speculate so freely on the rather recondite problems of Space and Time, not to mention Mind and Matter", especially for women who never seemed to be interested in the matter (Lang, 1911). Moberly and Jourdain's identity remained an open secret in Oxford, a letter from Miss Mammatt Vice Principal of St. Hugh's (1901-1902) described that "I was most interested when early new year 1911 a friend who was staying with me here began to read a review out loud from the *Daily Telegraph* of this book "*An Adventure*" before she had read much I stopped her and said I knew the whole story – that I was sure I knew the authors" (Mammatt, 1911). Remarkably, they were rather well respected for their story at the time (Schwartz, 2017). While it was clear to anyone who read the book that a serious amount of research went into *An Adventure*, those who knew the women's identity led to quite an interesting line of questioning at Oxford and beyond. One letter addressed to Moberly by Miss Grace Hadow says, "I have always had such a horror of the ordinary "spiritualist" manipulation that I have never seriously thought of them as a possible avenue to any truth, but this is on a different level altogether." Miss. Hadow continues to say, "there must be some truth behind all the absurdity… of occult science, or it could not be as universal and

persistent as it is." (Hadow, 1907). Sir Oliver Lodge, a well-known English physicist, noted after reading *An Adventure* that "impressions of past events and obsolete arrangements in association with places are by no means unknown in our records. They constitute a definite group of phenomena which require explanation" (Lodge, n.d.).

Summary

These records of correspondence and publications are all in varying ways receptive to *An Adventure*, complicating what could have been a straightforward path to dismissal. Yet, somehow, it was very much not dismissed even after the case by the SPR was. It was still discussed and remains in public memory today, over a century later.[6] Something within *An Adventure* was appealing to audiences, and readers trusted Moberly and Jourdain as narrators, but the SPR would not trust them as investigators. This is rather interesting considering three quarters of *An Adventure* is entirely about the research conducted, ironically, it is not at first glance what one would assume to be a narrative. The SPR's dismissal, I argue, reveals something quite telling that credibility was not a question of the evidence assembled, but of the interpretive standing granted to those who assembled it. Moberly and Jourdain's decade of archival labour was not met with counterevidence based on their research, rather it was met with a prior assumption about what two women researching their own extraordinary experience could reliably be trusted to have perceived. *An Adventure,* was very clearly a case situated directly between this boundary of the potential for expanding scientific knowledge and bringing a touch of reason to occultism; it seemed to stir a fascination whenever it was discussed – a fascination that seemed to mirror exactly what Keats referred to as Negative Capability

[6] *An Adventure* has inspired multiple works including the movie "Miss Morison's Ghosts" (1981) produced by *Anglia Television.* The Opera "*The Ghosts of Versailles"* in 1983, composed by John Corigliano and in 2004 and 2015 the BBC aired major 90-minute audio adaptations exploring the psychological and supernatural mystery of the event.

Beauty and "Every Other Consideration"

Weaving together negative capability and *An Adventure* was very much like tracing the threads of a spiderweb; it becomes difficult to see where to begin and where to end, for the more I happened to research the case of *An Adventure* and the more time I took understanding Negative Capability, the more it seemed to be one in the same - serving to turn mind and matter very much off of its balance. However, I begin this section with the following question: What happens when you cannot exist in a certain space *as you are?* This question has been alluded to throughout this dissertation: in the theories of women's rights, where escapism was preferred – advocating for a flight: towards freedom or away from their reality, and in the consistently changing society of the early 20th century. In the two centuries following the theoretical creation of negative capability, there has been little sustained feminist work on redefining the theory itself, which bears consequences of applying negative capability and boundary extension to leadership and epistemic debates without recognising the risks (French, et al, 2009; von Bülow & Simpson, 2022).

There are two relevant points that I have been building throughout this thesis which I now aim to bring together: reason and oppression. As has been seen, reason and oppression were always highly intertwined, from claiming *who* can contribute to knowledge, and what *kind* of knowledge counts. Negative Capability, as explained by Keats addresses one; reason, but fails to mention the other; oppression.

Negative Capability: Achievement & Reason

Negative Capability, he explains, is the quality that forms a "Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously… that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." (Keats, 1817). Disregarding the gendered language for a moment, which would have been conventional of his time, Keats mentions that achievement is created through

resting in these uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts, which is counterintuitive to what would have been assumed a space of capability, doing something with the knowledge one has – hence why the term refers to *Negative* Capability. Keats's formulation evokes what I conceptualize as a form of "negative space": a willingness to remain within uncertainty, mystery, and doubt without prematurely resolving them (Keats, 1817). This negative space, or the chaos of negating this capability is what actually in Keats' view leads to achievement (Keats, 1817; Bate 1992).

Achievement, however, can be defined in many ways. The mentioning of Shakespeare ultimately connects achievement to an idea of remaining timeless or building a legacy, which Keats was himself quite preoccupied with (Jackson, 2015). Philosophical, literary, or scientific theories are not entirely separate from the person who produces them and this serves as an example; Keats passed away at the age of 25, painfully aware of his own mortality with the diagnosis of tuberculosis and once lamented that his name would only be "writ in water" (Rizvi, 2025). He was trained as a medical doctor, and his ill health coupled with the deep understanding that science did not always deliver wonder, beauty, or happiness could be his very reason for his distaste of science and creating Negative Capability to be so withdrawn from reason (Homans, 1990).

Why is Keats an authority on achievement? While his poetry books did not sell well in his lifetime, and often led to financial and emotional stress, he built a modern-day legacy as one of the best loved English poets of all time, and his work has credited to be a masterpiece alongside many other contemporaries, whose work was more popular but did not prove the test of time (Jackson, 2015). There is certainly something to be investigated about what Keats discovered as being the key to achievement. Remaining in ideas of uncertainty, mystery, and doubt, is remarkably similar to the publishing of *An Adventure,* but Moberly and Jourdain did reach for reason, for ten years, despite a world built on strict boundaries.

Negative Capability: Oppression & "Men of Achievement"

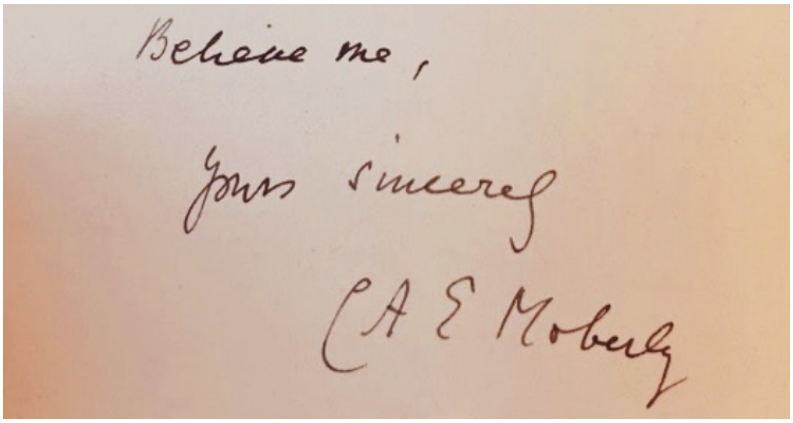
Moreover, many women who inhabited spaces of uncertainty, mystery, and doubt had never become the "men of achievement" Keats infers, but were instead erased (Owens et al, 2022). This is exactly the point where things do not align in accordance with the theory for most women throughout history. Returning to the gendered element here is significant. Keats did not have a very high regard for women, as he explained in a letter to his brother, "the generality of women . . . appear to me as children to whom I would rather give a Sugar Plum than my time." (Homans, 1990). Achievement was certainly gendered throughout history, at a time when women were using pseudonyms to conceal their identity and have their work sold without risking their reputation. When rationality was never afforded to them, and when feminist theorists from the 1600s onwards were concerned with preserving not only their achievement, but the very legacy of women.

Virginia Woolf, in her captivating essay "A Room of One's Own", asks the reader to partake in a thought experiment to imagine Shakespeare's sister, "Judith" whom she gifted with equal talent to Shakespeare. However, because she was a woman, and given what little society afforded to women, she was denied the conditions in which her gift would become realised, she faces tragedy upon tragedy and is driven to suicide, a stark contrast to the success of Shakespeare (Woolf, 1929/2020). Essentially, her thought experiment is one about absence, what becomes of genius when none of the conditions for its recognition exist. When this is read alongside Moberly and Jourdain, however, there is a notable contrast. Moberly and Jourdain were not women who lacked education, institutional position, social respectability, or rigour. They were Oxford academics, financially independent, and willing and able to spend a decade in pursuit of evidence. These were precisely the conditions Woolf identifies as denied to Judith Shakespeare, but even with having all of that, Moberly and Jourdain were still not afforded credibility. While this cannot be proved on concrete terms,

many had speculated that the strain *An Adventure* took on Jourdain's health was entirely related to her heart attack, if this were to be the case, Eleanor Jourdain's fate was not entirely dissimilar to the fate of Judith Shakespeare (Ragg, 1957). In any case, this exclusion Woolf dramatizes through absence for Moberly and Jourdain operated by a further mechanism even in its presence: access to the apparent conditions of legitimacy for women did not, on its own, secure legitimacy itself. Moberly and Jourdain's case indicate that credibility for women was not simply a threshold that could be crossed through existing in a space women were suddenly privy to – instead, there had to be concrete change, one of acceptance through legitimacy, credibility or *belief* in society. This is something Moberly would consistently emphasize in her correspondence.

Figure 5:

Longing for Belief



Note. Photograph taken by author. CAE Moberly's correspondence with the SPR, Bodleian Library. May 2026.

Woolf does, however, end on a positive note to mention that Judith's spirit still lives on, "for great poets do not die", but her presence waits for the "opportunity to walk among us in the flesh" (Woolf, 1929/2020, p.93), and for this, she will be born again only:

> "If we face the fact that, for it is a fact, that there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women, then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's

> sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down." (Woolf, 1929/2020, pg.93).

Essentially, Woolf emphasised, as has been throughout this research, that achievement looked different for women, and this had a direct influence on how they became timeless - or lack thereof. Once, and only once, these *actual* gendered boundaries are removed, and women have what they need to succeed in life – not merely be privy to the spaces but be granted legitimacy and credibility – can they too reach a level of achievement that Keats references in Negative Capability.

Keats' understanding of Negative Capability hinges on a phrase little studied in his letter: that with Negative Capability and with the abandoning of reason, "the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration" (Keats, 1817). Through this, he places beauty above and beyond reason. As has been seen, this was evidently not the experience for women, in the reality created for them, beauty never accounted for any serious consideration, nor did it give them a role to play in society. Wollstonecraft stated that this superficial view caused women to be "deluded by hollow respect" and quite to the point of these arguments, women were "quickly scorn'd when not ador'd" (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1967, p.99). Beauty for women was considered an attribute to physicality rather than anything a woman could "achieve", it was also a method of social control (Bordo, 2003). Essentially, it was considered enough to keep women in their patriarchally defined 'role' in society to be beautiful, but it was never *enough for them.*

Beauty, without any rationality, functions the same way in Keats' Negative Capability, useful only to those who can see refinement in it and who have some claim to understand it, when that coincides with those who are oppressed, it becomes pointless. Negative Capability is historically contingent for those who already have a baseline of acceptance in society through reason and credibility. To Shakespeare or Keats, the negative

space and resisting the boundaries of society may be uncomfortable or chaotic but it is also manageable, transformative, and dare I say, beautiful. However, Shakespeare's sister or the boundless authors of anonymously written works could not say the same. The unknown becomes dangerous for those who have little claim to shape society as it is, where creating art, literature, or science in a negative space could lead to a loss of reputation or livelihoods (Haraway, 1988; Bourdieu & Johnson,1993; Woolf, 1929/2020).

Negative Capability an Extension: Reaching for Reason & Achievement

For some people, most particularly women in the early 20th century, it was simply not enough to step outside the boundaries set for them by a patriarchal society. If they wanted to change society, they had to prove themselves while doing it. It is interesting, of course, that when Moberly and Jourdain did use their pen names, they chose the names of two women – as two supporters of women's rights, this could very well have been their own rebellion (Times, 1937). However, this is exactly my case-in-point. There appears to be a fine line worth addressing between becoming a hero and becoming unspeakable, something that education, history curricula, and theories are quite adept at assessing and, in most cases, reinforcing if applied without taking into account the context of the time, and readapting it to fit modern-day standards (Popkewitz, 2011; Schär & Sperisen, 2010). Essentially, Negative Capability as it stands, is not universally available but is a privilege conditioned by social recognition. Once that recognition is secured, uncertainty can become genuinely *productive* as Keats suggests. Before that, the pursuit of reason is itself an act of opening a previously inaccessible intellectual horizon.

Summary

Did Keats intentionally create Negative Capability as a concept for achievement that was only applicable to those who could literally become "men of achievement"? Moberly and Jourdain did rest in spaces of uncertainty, mystery and doubt, but their story also became

timeless – and that, I argue, is because they did long for reason, something that they were not granted. Negative Capability is, in my view, ultimately a concept about breaking boundaries and resting in a negative space of uncertainty and ambiguity. However, if Moberly and Jourdain had succeeded in finding an explanation for their experience, the ghost story would have been explained, the negative space would have been resolved, and the case would have been closed. According to Keats, a reason would have erased the wonder. While I am also a proponent of dwelling in the space between an equals sign, this fails to account for creating all of the firsts that lead to follow-up questions (Daston, 1998). Newton explaining 'away' a rainbow to prismatic colours also allowed researchers to understand the chemical composition of the stars (Masters, 2009). These firsts are vital for people and knowledge systems that remain in a state of oppression; there is beauty in uncertainty, but there is also beauty in attaining reason itself; reaching for knowledge, understanding, and recognition in a world that has not yet accepted it – that too is interaction with a negative space.

"No More Than a Narrative"

Having established what Negative Capability leaves unaccounted for: the labour required, for those denied epistemic legitimacy, to render uncertainty intelligible rather than simply rest within it, this chapter turns to the question of how. If resting in uncertainty is not, on its own, sufficient, what does the reach beyond it actually look like, and what allows it to become productive rather than merely persistent? This chapter argues their significance lies in what they did with uncertainty while it remained unresolved: the decade of reaching for reason that neither dissolved the mystery nor abandoned it. Understanding that reach requires an understanding of uncertainty as something inhabited in space and time, not simply held in the abstract. This chapter therefore turns to Henri Lefebvre's account of the social production of space and rhythmanalysis to develop Productive Negation as an explanation of how uncertainty becomes intelligible and transformative for those denied epistemic legitimacy.

One letter, among the correspondence discussed in Chapter Two, captures the pattern this chapter examines with unusual clarity. In an exchange with Andrew Lang, president of the SPR, Moberly wrote to say, “we never meant them [accounts of the experience] to be looked upon as anything more than narratives.” I found this striking considering the effort that had been placed into the research; but I think we fail to account for the fact that narratives can mean *everything* (Bettelheim, 2011; Bruner, 2004). Education research has highlighted that narratives inspire imagination which has correlated with children’s ability to invent, anticipate, explore problems, and provide solutions (Caiman & Lundegård, 2018). When children create meaning there is no obvious line between fact and fiction or sense and nonsense, however, Roy (2005) emphasises the responsibility to draw attention to these connections because ‘nonsense’ might later lead to sense productions. This nonsense is the negative space that Negative Capability references, the idea that this can then lead to *sense* production is exactly my extension to the concept – something I call *productive negation*. This is not only relevant for children or to things we might colloquially call nonsense but is a core pillar to understanding spaces of uncertainty and applying Negative Capability to a broader audience who may not have the same social privileges as Shakespeare or Keats.

“Unveiling the Secrets”: Space and Rhythm

As established, Negative Capability implicitly assumes that the space of uncertainty is equal to everyone. This section argues that such an assumption entirely overlooks the social production of space itself. Henri Lefebvre brings about a main theory that space is a social product, relevant to each society and often operated as a tool for the ruling class (Lefebvre, 2014). "Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm." (Lefebvre, 2004, pg,15). While Lefebvre suggests that his theoretical analysis does not “unveil all the secrets” of society, it points to some very important elements in understanding Negative Capability and *An Adventure* (Lefebvre, 2004,

pg,15). In *Rhythmanalysis*, he develops a method for understanding by examining the relationship between space, time, and the expenditure of energy. Rhythms emerge through the interaction of bodies with their environments, essentially meaning that every space possesses its own temporal patterns and repetitions (Lefebvre, 2004). These rhythms then come to shape how spaces are experienced and reveal important connotations about the social, political, and historical forces through which they are produced (Lefebvre, 2004). Lefebvre cites many different cases of this, but the two most important for the purpose of this research are:

a. Eurhythmia, or rhythmic harmony, can be defined as a self-sustaining harmony, when natural rhythms match rhythms of spaces seamlessly. This leads to a perfect balance. Examples could be playing in an orchestra, or a modern commuter living in an urban city (Marcu, 2017)
b. Arrhythmia is the opposite; a state of discordance, disruption, or pathology occurring when rhythms clash, this could be when someone experiences fatigue, illness, or fast- paced rhythms disrupting natural biological time.

At first glance, Eurhythmia may seem to be preferred to the dissonance and friction that is experienced by Arrhythmia, however, resting in a state of Eurhythmia is not conducive to change (Davidson & Dahl, 2025). Rather it becomes dangerous because one does not question or recognize any dissonance or friction that exists in a space (Alhadeff-Jones, 2019). However, this can be a paradoxical situation as resting in a consistent state of Arrhythmia, is also not conducive to change, because oppression is difficult to see when in the midst of it (Beauvoir, 1975). Negative Capability, therefore, presents this state where one rests in negative space and creates change, but to find the catalyst for creating change one requires an understanding of the social conditions in which one exists within that negative space. I argue negative space is also socially created, and therefore not equally accessible.

Negative Capability, a theory about resting in negative space implies a baseline assumption that everyone can belong and rest in that space as they are. While this may have been a space of Arrhythmia favourable to creating achievement or timelessness, it is a reflection of how negative space existed for Keats, not accounting for the social boundaries in shaping it. As has been shown in “Not to Mention Mind and Matter” these social boundaries are incredibly relevant, resting in a state of uncertainty without longing for reason could not have been attainable for Moberly, Jourdain, or millions of other women, oppressed individuals, or marginalised groups willing to create change with credibility. Without a prior recognition of this boundary, Negative Capability, as it stands, completely disregards the social aspect which exists within a space, creating that space and affecting all of the interactions within it (Lefebvre, 2014). Reckoning with this concept will lead to a more accurate and inclusive understanding of space and time.[7]

Productive Negation: *An Adventure*

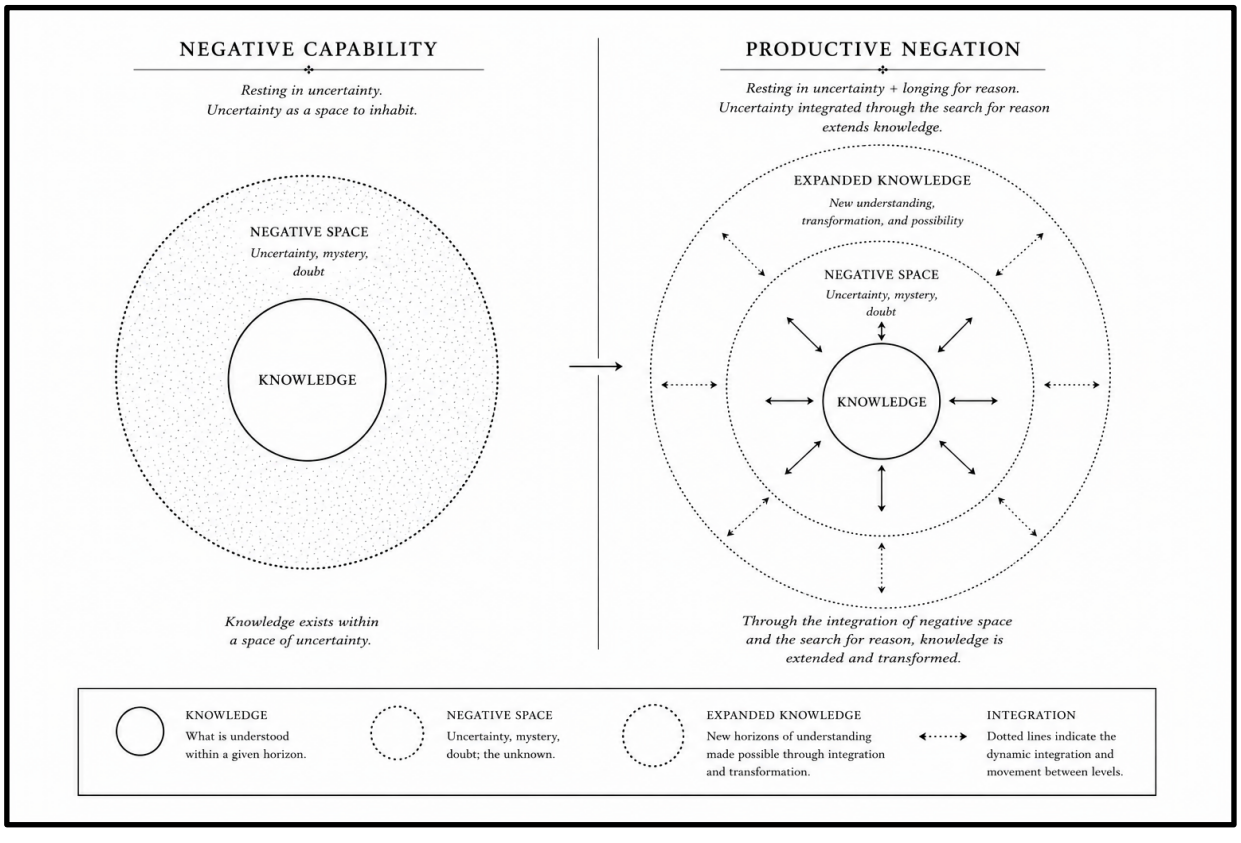
I therefore propose an extension to the concept of Negative Capability, that negative space must be considered within its historical context and the relevance of who can rest in that space. This case study of *An Adventure* has shown that to have any sort of credibility within a negative space women *must* have pursued intelligibility. This is not counterproductive or against the point of Negative Capability, but quite the contrary. As explained by Alhadeff-Jones (2019) "disorienting situations may also trigger learning and transformative processes" because people must adjust and adapt to the incongruence (p.173). Negative Capability advises of the importance of resting in a negative space, and when that uncertainty is then reacting to new boundaries that are being established through reason, one is no longer adapting to uncertainty, but the uncertainty is then adapted through the process of rendering uncertainty intelligible. This transformation consequently demands space as a

[7] By time here specifically I mean history - how space is interpreted through time.

social construct to adapt, boundaries are changed and the timelessness and achievement of *An Adventure* can be scientifically explained. This very extension to Negative Capability is what I call *Productive Negation*. By resting in uncertainty and pursuing intelligibility, this dissonance or Arrhythmia breaks the very understanding of the tight social structures that pertain to negative space and Negative Capability. By reaching for reason, this dissonance then becomes productive and works towards a societal transformation of *who* can lay claim to reason, and how those boundaries can henceforward extend through the exploration of the unknown, as expressed by Negative Capability. Productive Negation is not only resting in spaces of uncertainty, mystery, and doubt, but accounts for the productive transformation from seeing and advocating for the reason within it. Essentially, Productive Negation names the process by which those denied epistemic legitimacy transform uncertainty into a claim on knowledge. This is not done by resolving the uncertainty, and not by merely inhabiting it, but by the attempt to render it intelligible through a sustained, evidence-accountable pursuit of reason. Productive Negation treats the *pursuit* of reason itself as the site of transformation. For the marginalised, credibility was never given by default. It had to be built.

Figure 6

Productive Negation Visualised



Productive Negation is similar to but separate from a variety of different concepts in feminist epistemology namely: Standpoint theory, Situated Knowledge, and Testimonial injustice. Standpoint theory is a theory that occupying a marginalised social position can generate distinctive, and at times more accurate, knowledge of social relations than a dominant position allows (Hartsock, 1983; Harding, 1991; Collins, 2000). Productive Negation shares the same premise as standpoint theory's that position shapes what can be known but is concerned with a different question: not what marginalised knowers can see, but what they must additionally *do* to have what they see recognised as knowledge at all. It is a theory of legitimation, not primarily a theory of epistemic advantage. Situated Knowledge insists that all knowledge is partial, embodied, and positioned, against the fiction of a neutral view from 'nowhere' (Haraway, 1988). Productive Negation does use situational knowledge as a starting point but not its conclusion: if all knowledge is situated, the question this dissertation pursues is why some situated claims are extended credibility and others are not, and what those denied it must do in response. Lastly, the concept Productive Negation is most closely situated with is Testimonial Injustice. It describes the wrong done when identity-based prejudice causes a 'hearer' to give a 'speaker's' word less credibility than it deserves (Fricker, 2008). These concepts are intertwined, and again Productive Negation rests on Testimonial Injustice but the distinction is worth stating clearly: testimonial injustice names the wrong done to a speaker; Productive Negation is a concept which names the labour a speaker undertakes in response to the anticipation of that wrong. Moberly and Jourdain's decade of archival cross-referencing was, as this dissertation argues, produced by their anticipation that their word alone would not be believed – this is testimonial injustice. Productive Negation describes what marginalised knowers do when they already know, in advance, that resting in uncertainty will not be read as achievement but as unreliability.

Productive Negation is not to be misread that every conspiracy theory should be taken as fact, but it is a ground that the relation of these conspiracy theories and their reflection on society should be understood. As every mystery and its potential to be pursued through negative space tells us quite a bit about the boundaries of negative space itself. I believe each and every narrative is worthy of investigation as it has the potential to contribute to boundary expansion. Not necessarily with the aim to find a definitive solution but because it showcases a time where Negative Capability was needed, and a space where Productive Negation can be explored. Productive Negation as per my theory, requires three conditions: a knower situated outside the boundaries of default epistemic credibility; a sustained, evidence-accountable engagement with uncertainty, and thirdly, a resulting claim that could be falsified. Essentially, Productive Negation only applies when someone's pursuit of reason could have turned out to prove them wrong, it must not be a case based on bias designed so nothing ever could. Moberly and Jourdain's research meet this exact standard because their claim could be, and to some degree was, tested against verifiable historical record. A claim that treats scrutiny as evidence of persecution, does not qualify as an instance of Productive Negation, however marginalised its source may be. It remains within Negative Capability's resting in uncertainty, without ever reaching for a *reasoned intelligibility* that could transform expanded knowledge.

Moberly and Jourdain were essentially not only tackling the uncertainty of their experience, but also the danger of inhabiting uncertainty as women. They advocated for women’s claim to reason to be taken seriously in an era when it most certainly was not. Despite concealing their identity, in their pseudonyms they remained women, and this is perhaps one of the clearest signs of the boundary expansion of Productive Negation. In an era when a pen was assumed to be masculine, Productive Negation is the very idea behind the

books that for centuries were written to expand the pillars of knowledge through ideals or dreams that were signed “by a Lady”.[8]

Summary

This, then, is my answer to the question that has guided this dissertation from its very first page: how do women rest in and reach beyond uncertainty when their claims to knowledge are not naturally granted credibility? They do so, I argue, through Productive Negation, not by resting in the negative space Keats describes, but by reaching for more. Moberly and Jourdain's decade of archival labour was not a departure from uncertainty, nor a premature reaching after fact that Keats would have us dismiss as a failure of nerve; it was the very mechanism through which their negative space became productive, through which dissonance, or Arrhythmia, was transformed into a claim the world could not refuse to examine and is still discussed over a century later, a great mark of achievement. Science and rationality must be understood as no longer separate from storytelling but interwoven with it, a reflection of the people, time, and social constructions of space (Krystalli, 2023). “No more than a narrative” was never a way to sell *An Adventure* short, narratives truly do and have for the longest time meant everything, if one had just taken a look.

“Believe me.”

I began this thesis by explaining how researching *An Adventure* has been a personal as well as academic adventure for me and as I approach my concluding thoughts on the subject, I can only say, ‘believe me’, it was. Having traced this argument across four chapters, I want to return, directly, to the questions that sparked this dissertation. My first sub-question asked how women's claims to knowledge were specifically contested in early twentieth-century academic institutions, and on what grounds. As my analysis of reason and knowledge showed, this contestation was never about the content of what women claimed to know. It

[8] Examples include the works of Jane Austen “By a Lady” and Mary Astell “A Lover of Her Sex.”

was structural, built into centuries of philosophical tradition that coded reason itself as male, and knowledge as controlled certainty, and this was reinforced institutionally, down to the very terms on which women like Moberly and Jourdain were appointed to positions of academic authority. Credibility without having reason was withheld for women before any individual claim was ever examined.

My second sub-question asked what the reception of An Adventure by the Society for Psychical Research reveals about the conditions under which a knowledge claim is granted or denied credibility. My answer is that credibility was not entirely granted based on evidence. What determined the SPR's verdict was the interpretive standing granted, or in this case withheld, from the women who assembled it, a prior assumption about what they could reliably be trusted to have perceived, dressed in the language of confirmation bias.

My third sub-question asked how attending to these conditions requires us to rethink Negative Capability as a theory of uncertainty and achievement. Chapter Three's answer is that Negative Capability, as Keats left it, cannot simply be inherited by those it was never written to include. Resting in uncertainty was never, for Moberly and Jourdain, the neutral or freely available act it was for Keats, because reason was never in question for him in the way it was for them.

These three answers, together, are what allow me to return to my primary research question: how do women rest in and reach beyond uncertainty when their claims to knowledge are not naturally granted credibility? My answer, developed across Chapter Four, is Productive Negation. Women do not simply rest in negative space, as Keats's Negative Capability would have it, as they were not afforded the base legitimacy, credibility or reason to do so. But they also do not abandon uncertainty for reason prematurely. They render uncertainty intelligible through the sustained, often decade-long labour of reaching for reason, and it is this reaching, not the resting alone, that allows a claim once dismissed as "no

more than a narrative" to eventually be recognised, and in Moberly and Jourdain's case, remembered. Resting in uncertainty as Negative Capability suggests assumes a universality which cannot extend to all situations particularly those of marginalised groups which must lay claim to knowledge if they want to be heard. This search for reason, or sense in socially constructed ‘nonsense’, allows a change of negative space, becoming an area where boundaries can be expanded and transformation can occur. This is my theory of Productive Negation.

While this research is merely a beginning, this theory can provide meaningful contributions for how boundary extension can be accomplished for marginalised groups in a world where we recognise that space, even negative space, is socially constructed. In 1990, Karl Popper made the claim that science is built on the idea of falsifiability, refutability, or testability (Popper, 1990, Lakatos, 1978). This, framed in another way, means that the basis of all knowledge is a belief in human progress. This is quite an inspiring sentiment, until it is understood that we live in a system that sets boundaries around which people have enough claim to reason to generate knowledge that will lead to progress, and this is unfortunately heavily monitored and held to strict standards (Code, 2018). I have throughout my conceptual theorisation aimed to make the point that clinging to rationality must not be a loss for Negative Capability, if anything, it can provide a transformative anchor for our understanding.

What a dream it would be if we were not weary of being believed. Imagine all of the knowledge that people could create if there wasn’t a fear in trying to find sense in nonsense, if there weren’t these strict boundaries dictating what counts as knowledge and whose knowledge counts, of not only ‘imagining six impossible things before breakfast’ but questioning how they could become possible (McAra-McWilliam, 2007). This is what Productive Negation imagines. Much like the work of Negative Capability in educational

study, extensions to this theory could undoubtedly deliver valuable insights on the importance of imagination, critical thinking, and fascination. I refute the assumption in Negative Capability that reason cannot contribute to great achievement. Productive Negation illuminates the idea that the uncertainty is not what makes something appealing or great, but it is the longing for an answer within it that does.

Furthermore, having an answer does not necessarily mean that questioning ends, that a mystery has been solved, or that the answer is sufficient. Productive Negation inspires the critical thinking assumption that having an answer does not defeat curiosity, it accounts for the follow up questions, and the continued exploration for more. Moreover, I underscore the need for more answers from diverse perspectives – the value of remaining attentive to voices that have long been suppressed or viewed as merely adapting to a society. There is in fact a profound power that can reside within silence, reframing what was seen as simple navigation into an act of true transformation.

While it is beyond the scope of this research to speculate on what Moberly and Jourdain truly did experience in Versailles in 1901, I did want to mention two important contributions to the case and how this research responds to the Moberly's hope that "the time shall come when a true explanation of the story may become possible". The first point is that if we consider space, not only as the physical material matter surrounding us, and instead as a constant conversation with the demands of society through time – that is; a recognition of temporality beyond our own existence and connecting space to an ongoing legacy, the narrative of *An Adventure* is striking. In this framing, places such as Versailles are not merely physical settings but environments shaped by overlapping historical, social, and political contexts. Leading Versailles to be a particularly productive site through which competing temporalities would be commonplace. Secondly, the women remarkably held their ground for reason, amongst all odds. Allowing this intense dissonance to become a locus for profound

spatial transformation. It is a narrative that has remained timeless because of its very nature that *The* Adventure of searching for meaning, and reason is everlasting. Perhaps, the most relevant ghosts of *An Adventure* were not those who wandered the gardens of Versailles, but the *Zeitgeist* itself. Experiences that are unexplainable by modern science are not as rare as one might expect, even though Moberly and Jourdain have long since left the gates of Versailles, there will always be authors of adventures somewhere…waiting, asking for a pen and the autonomy to be able to use it.

The adventure of reading the accounts of Moberly and Jourdain is one of a growing awe-inspiring awareness of their attempts at proof, and the struggle to make their experience known despite the risk to their position in society. It is an adventure of peeling back the concealed layers of the narrative to find out that the authors happened to be two of the few female academics in England, and for anyone who picks up *An Adventure* with intention, it begins a potential journey of belief. What Moberly and Jourdain were denied was not evidence, nor rigour, nor persistence, all of which they had in abundance. They were denied the credibility owed to a speaker simply on the strength of their word. Despite all of the research behind this dissertation, Productive Negation came remarkably naturally. One could not doubt that through the enduring spirit of the work and the immense passion for knowledge that could be seen in every single archival document and letter, that the longing for reason itself is beautiful, and enduring. I still do not have answers to the ghost story, but this thesis does propose that the time has finally come where the epistemic haunting of *An Adventure*, itself has been realized. It is far from complete as the calls for belief are continuously echoed for those denied epistemic credibility. They too are afforded their transformation. To this end, I will leave you with the words of CAE Moberly herself:

"Believe me."

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