

“The Secret” and “Lily Hart” by Charlotte Brontë  
Verdopolis [Haworth], 1833

Gift of Evelyn Wadsworth Symington

This tiny manuscript is one of Special Collections’ most important treasures, and its background contains all the elements of a good story – a famous author, a lost manuscript, and a seemingly miraculous recovery.

Charlotte Brontë handwrote these stories as a seventeen-year-old girl, and the early imaginative experiences they record were important for Charlotte’s development as a writer. Charlotte and her brother Branwell practiced their literary skills by writing many stories and poems about an imaginary land they called Angria, which centered on twelve toy soldiers, their individual kingdoms, and a great glass town the children called “Verdopolis.” These “plays,” as Charlotte called them, provided a welcome escape from their difficult and lonely home life at Haworth parsonage.

Charlotte and Branwell Brontë wrote many of their stories of Angria on tiny sheets of paper in microscopic handwriting. This particular example consists of four sheets of notepaper folded into sixteen pages. The individual sheets are approximately 4 ½ inches long and 3 5/8 inches wide, and the entire text contains about nineteen thousand words. The minute script, almost impossible to read without the aid of a magnifying glass, is a characteristic of the Brontë juvenilia and was used by both Charlotte and Branwell.

The manuscript was first documented by Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte’s biographer, who probably saw it just after her death. The first page of “The Secret” was reproduced in her *Life of Charlotte Bronte*, which was published in 1857. The manuscript was most likely sold as a literary curiosity in 1895, and it may have been sold again in New York in 1915. No information is available on the manuscript’s whereabouts between 1915 and 1973, and it was presumed lost or destroyed. However, the manuscript was rediscovered among the personal papers of Evelyn Wadsworth Symington, wife of United States Senator Stuart Symington, after her death in 1973. The senator presented the manuscript to the University of Missouri Libraries in 1975.