Virginia Blain, Victorian Women Poets (Harlow, England: Pearson, 2001), 257-59.

ROSAMUND MARRIOTT WATSON (1860–1911)

Rosamund Marriott Watson, also known as Graham R. Tomson, underwent a number of name changes during her writing career which may have served to track her marital adventures but did no service to the consolidation of a literary career. Hence her work disappeared from view very quickly after her death. Born in a suburb of London as Rosamund Ball, youngest daughter of an accountant and his wife, she was encouraged to read widely while growing up and began writing at an early age. Her father, a book-lover with an extensive private library, also wrote verse. Her mother died of uterine cancer in 1874 when Rosamund was 13; her father died in 1883. Her first publications (verse and journalism), signed 'Mrs G. Armytage', came after her marriage in 1879 to George Armytage, an attractive and wealthy Australian. The 19-year-old Rosamund was herself a stunningly attractive as well as highly intelligent woman. In 1884, when this early marriage was already showing signs of strain, she published her first volume of poetry, *Tares*, anonymously. When this marriage ended in divorce in 1887, she lost custody of her two daughters along with her husband. She then married the artist Arthur Graham Tomson, two months later had a son she called Graham, and began to publish under the pseudonym 'Graham R. Tomson'.

This period marked the high point in her literary career. She became well known in literary circles, and her work was favourably reviewed. *The Bird-Bride: A Volume of Ballads and Sonnets* came out in 1889, *A Summer Night and Other Poems* in 1891, with a frontispiece by Arthur Tomson. She produced other works besides her own poetry – anthologies, designed for the marketplace, of border ballads, of translations from the Greek, of cat poems (illustrated by her husband). Presumably they were in need of money, and her new name was by now well enough known to assure publishers of good sales. As well as male editors, publishers and writers, among whom she was very popular (Henry James, H. G. Wells and Thomas Hardy all admired her), she also moved in circles of women writers. These included Amy Levy, Mathilde Blind, Alice Meynell (poet and essayist), Mona Caird (novelist) and the Americans Elizabeth Pennell (who became a close friend) and Louise Chandler Moulton.

In 1894, however, she left the melancholic Tomson (and her young son) for another handsome energetic Australian, H. B. Marriott Watson, also a writer, with whom she had a son, and lived happily for the rest of her life. Although they did not marry, Rosamund took the name Marriott Watson for all her publications from 1895. After her death from cancer in 1911, her *de facto* husband produced her posthumous collected *Poems of Rosamund Marriott Watson* (1912), which he had desperately tried to get through the press before she died.

In telling contrast with the pattern suggested by this outline of a life – a woman seemingly determined to seek her own sexual fulfilment at any price, and apparently succeeding – much of her poetry is underwritten by a piercing sense of grief, anger, and loss, especially, as might be expected, the loss of children. No woman at

this period who was divorced on the grounds of her adultery would have been able to keep her children. Even for an exceptionally talented woman living late in the century and inhabiting artistic, even bohemian, circles as she did, with friends as influential as novelist and poet Thomas Hardy, scholar and writer Andrew Lang,[1] literary editor W. E. Henley and 'nineties' publisher John Lane, both society and the law would have taken their toll, and it is scarcely surprising that she eschewed marriage in her last relationship. Even the tolerant circle of writers for John Lane's famous *Yellow Book*, with whom she had mixed most comfortably, while accepting her first divorce well enough, found it hard to swallow her second.

Watson's poetry is variable in quality, which is not surprising for one who published five volumes of poetry in the six years from 1898. Her best work, however, is marked by a clarity of insight married to a fine technical discipline, which gives it its uniquely haunting quality. Looking for a *métier* in which she can evoke emotion without over-personalising it, she often draws for her subject-matter on myth and legend (for example, 'Ballad of the Bird-bride' [see p. 260 below], 'A Ballad of the Were-wolf' [p. 271], and 'The Moor Girl's Well' [p. 268)]. As a result, archetypes rather than individuals inhabit her verse, which lends it a detachment that seems to imprint the emotional intensity all the more deeply upon the mind of the reader. At the same time, her feminist revisions of traditional mythic subject-matter lend her work a freshness that is still striking to the modern reader. The ballad form – very fashionable in the 1880s and 1890s – was clearly a favourite (she published a selection of north country ballads in 1888[2]); the primitive force of the chilling tale or bloodthirsty story with a twist, couched in a mock-medieval style or Scottish dialect, provided an outlet from social 'niceness' that must have been welcome. Under the cover of apparently traditional forms, she was able to articulate the sense of torn loyalties surrounding subjects like marital breakdown and divorce, and the ensuing loss of children. Had she written of such subjects more directly, they would scarcely have been as acceptable. Less bloody and more melancholic than the ballads is her haunting and mysterious poem 'Vespertilia' (see p. 273), named for a creature of the twilight, a kind of bat, but also carrying the idea of a ghost returning from the dead. In it, Watson explores a theme that seems to be largely autobiographical, and is based on the idea of regret for lost love which, when it returns to us after all, we turn away from and reject, only to mourn the loss bitterly when it is finally too late.

Magic and nature are heavily entwined in her verses, which can lend them a mannerist feel, especially when she utilises a high-flown vocabulary studded with archaisms and poeticisms. 'The Moor Girl's Well' suffers a little from this style: 'thy loathly hold', 'the steely deep'; but it can be argued that such phrases are a

[1] Lang (1844–1912), poet, classical scholar, anthropologist, journalist, and Scottish historian, who became fascinated with the origins of folk tales, was a lively and original thinker and witty verse-writer, who popularised a revival of old French verse forms, like the ballade, rondeau, triolet, etc. He was particularly influential for a number of younger women poets, including Levy, Kendall, Webster and Watson.

[2] *Ballads of the North Countrie*, ed. with intro. and notes by Graham R. Tomson (London: Walter Scott, 1888), reissued later that year as *Border Ballads*.

necessary signal to the reader of the poem's kind. Influenced no doubt by Keats's well-known poem about a snake-woman sexual temptress, 'Lamia', it may well be following in that tradition for its language. Watson's snake-woman differs markedly from Keats's, however, in the sympathy with which her plight of enchantment is portrayed and the failure of love delineated. Another poem which reads like an answer to an earlier male poet is 'An Enchanted Princess' (see p. 267). Here the starting-point is surely the Tennysonian ideal of the passive 'feminine' woman, worshipped as a princess by all of nature. Unlike Tennyson's 'Mariana', however, in which the refrain urges a masochistic finale onto the heroine (who endlessly wishes she were dead), Watson's poem gives a sharper and grimmer view of unrequited love. But others of her poems veer right away from literary language, and have a stark dramatic quality using a speaking voice ('Old Pauline', p. 260 below, for example). Yet others show evidence of a lively sense of humour – 'Betty Barnes, the Book-burner' (p. 264) gives a witty catalogue of the destruction wreaked by an ignorant woman on the works of learned men, and one that is not without an undercurrent of revenge. She also writes some striking poems about the (sub)urban environment of London, marking a shift towards a use of cityscape that was to become one of the hallmarks of early modernism: 'Of the Earth, Earthy' (p. 265) celebrates the 'Charm of the motley' on the 'dun, dim pavement trod by myriad feet'. 'Aubade' (p. 266) is another example, and with its uneven line-lengths and run-on lines, as well as its persistent striding rhythm and almost total lack of metaphor, has a disruptive force and adventurous spareness of form which is very modern. By contrast, some of Watson's later poems appear to be seeking a more traditional simplicity of form coupled with a certain sense of nostalgia for lost innocence and for the predictability of regular verse patterns: 'A Ruined Altar' (p. 280) and 'The White Lady' (p. 281) are examples of this more resigned sadness in her work, which contrasts strongly with the wild restlessness of some of her earlier pieces. This probably means that the earlier work will be more valued by modern readers, simply because of its unique perspective on the troubled and torturous underside of the Victorian domestic ideal, written by one who, unusually for a Victorian woman poet, had chosen to plunge herself into a string of heterosexual relationships, producing a total of four children, at the same time as projecting herself with a strong sense of ambition into the literary marketplace.

The American critic Linda K. Hughes has produced a number of articles on this poet, and her work has been a major source for the information about Watson's life contained in this note.

Text: Poems chosen are from *Tares* (1884),[3] *The Bird-Bride: A Volume of Ballads and Sonnets* (1889), *A Summer Night and Other Poems* (1891), *Vespertilia* (1895) and *After Sunset* (1904). Dates of first publication in volume form are shown in square brackets at the foot of each poem. The copy-text used is *The Poems of Rosamund Marriott Watson* (1912).

[3] Tares are weeds in a cornfield. The title of the volume is self-deprecating, alluding to the parable of the tares as the image of evil sown among the wheat by the Devil (Matthew 13: 24–30).