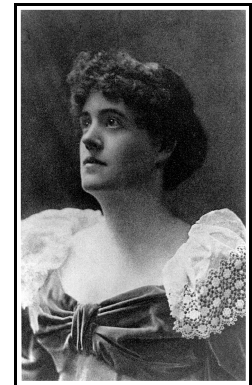


# GRAHAM R. TOMSON [ROSAMUND MARRIOTT WATSON]

(6 October 1860–29 December 1911)

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In the late 1880s and early 90s Graham R. Tomson/Rosamund Marriott Watson was considered by contemporaries as one of the most talented poets of her generation. She was a stunningly beautiful woman who lived a free and unconventional life. Her name changed a number of times during her writing career, tracking her marital (mis)adventures. She once stated that “every creator who aims at being more than a mere craftsman withholds more than he shows forth,” the artist’s “first duty” being “to create an atmosphere, to make an illusion.” Arthur Symons (1865–1945) praised her “masterly” poems and profiled her as one of thirty-three most distinguished *Poets of the Younger Generation* (1902), but he also may have been closer to expressing the perception of her critics (and perhaps his own prejudices) when he characterized her poetry as being situated between “absolute impersonality and tactless self-exposure.”



Tomson/Marriott  
Watson 1890s

Born in Hackney, a London suburb, Rosamund Ball was the youngest daughter of Benjamin Williams Ball (1816–83), a book-loving poet-writing accountant. Her mother Sylvia Good Ball (1858–74) died of uterine cancer when Rosamund was 13, and her father died some nine years later. At age 18 Rosamund married a wealthy and very good-looking Australian George Francis Armytage (1853–?) and, five years later, anonymously published her first volume of poems *Tares* (1884). In January 1885, after six years of a relatively happy marriage, she was legally separated from Armytage, who disapproved of her literary ambitions and social success. Her husband divorced her when in October 1886 she deserted the comfortable house he had allocated to her and went to live in Cornwall with the somewhat melancholically Romantic landscape painter and illustrator, Arthur Graham Tomson (1859–1905), whereupon she lost custody of her two daughters, Eulalie Georgina and Daphne. She married Tomson in September 1887 and, a month or two later, gave birth to a son, Graham (“Tommy”).

While with her second husband, she adopted the pseudonym “Graham R. Tomson, and in these years she won considerable social and literary renown, mostly deriving from her poetry, but she also published a variety of other types of work. Her work was much liked by even notorious picky writers like Henry James and Thomas Hardy. The publication of “Tomson’s” second volume, *The Bird-Bride* (1889), led to a friendship and flirtation with Hardy, in which, it seems, he was the disappointed partner. He later used her as the model for Mrs. Pine-Avon in *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*, whereupon Rosamund published two indiscreet articles about him in



G. R. Tomson 1890s

1894. During these years she was friendly with other talented and often bold women writers like Mathilde Blind (1841–96), Alice Meynell (1847–1922) (to whom she dedicated her fourth volume of poetry), Mona Caird (1854–1932), Edith Nesbit (1858–1924), Elizabeth Robins Pennell (1855–1936), and, briefly, Amy Levy (1861–89). From 1893 to 1894 she edited *Sylvia's Journal*, which encouraged new writing by women authors, edited several substantial anthologies, anonymously wrote a regular column on home furnishings in the *Pall Mall Gazette* under the heading “The Wares of Autolycus,” and contributed to many other journals, including the famous/notorious *The Yellow Book*.

In 1895 she met Henry Brereton Marriott Watson (1863–1921), a handsome young journalist, essayist, and aspiring novelist from New Zealand. She again left her husband, became pregnant, was served with divorce papers, and lost custody of yet another child, son Graham. She was very happy with Watson—and henceforth published under the name Marriott Watson, although they did not marry—but this second divorce divided the London literary circles in which she moved and was likely the cause of a rather precipitous social and literary downfall. Few showed the tolerance of E. C. Stedman, who wrote to Robert Bridges, “Well, a woman who can write such ballads has a right to be her own mistress.” Particularly painful was her split from the writer and feminist campaigner Elizabeth Robins Pennell, whose husband Joseph Pennell (1857–1926) banned any contact between the two women out of loyalty to Tomson [this, despite the fact that the Pennells were friends and champions of Aubrey Beardsley (1872–98) and James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) and other major figures in the liberal literary establishment].



Marriott Watson 1890s

Throughout this period of turmoil, Rosamund Marriott Watson continued to write prolifically, producing a large and generally distinguished body of poetry. Between 1904 and 1911 she was poetry editor of the *Athenaeum*, though by then her own reputation as a poet had waned. She died of cancer at the age of 51, having published seven volumes of verse, including most notably the 1891 *A Summer Night and Other Poems* (as “Graham R. Tomson”) and the 1895 *Vespertilia and Other Verses* (under the name Rosamund Marriott Watson).

Rosamund Marriott Watson’s poems show an interest in French verse forms and reflect the Aesthetic Movement in their direct, vivid images, impressionist technique, and evocative style. She lauded Alice Meynell’s poetry as “subtle,” evasive, ethereal, . . . strange and beautiful,” but those traits were also applied frequently to Marriott Watson’s own verse. Although her poems often evince a searing sense of passionate intensity, grief, and loss (particularly familial loss), she was surely best known in her own day for her ghostly, unnerving ballads, which frequently use the discourse of the fairy tale to tell stories of domestic violence, betrayal, and terror. In any case, her work depicts unknown destructive forces in women, which are associated with animal freedom and ferocity, and marriage is routinely besieged by them.