

CHARLOTTE MEW

(15 November 1869–24 March 1928)

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The life of turn-of-the-twentieth-century English writer Charlotte Mew, whose slender but remarkable body of work spans the cusp between Victorian poetry and Modernism, was full of tragedy from beginning to end. And that is reflected in her poetry. Some of her poems are passionate discussions of faith and the possibility of belief in God; others are proto-modernist in form and atmosphere; many, such as “Ken” and “On the Asylum Road,” probe mental illness. But whatever the subject or point of view, most of her poems are about outcast, liminal, or other marginal figures, as in “The Fête,” which centers on a sixteen-year-old boy who tells about the life-altering experience he had of spending a night with a circus performer.



Charlotte Mew

Charlotte Mew was born in 1869 in Bloomsbury, London, the eldest daughter and second-born of seven children, to the architect Frederick Mew, who designed Hampstead town hall, and Anna Kendall, a domineering mother insistent on keeping up appearances at any cost. Charlotte, nicknamed “Lotti” by her family, attended Gower Street School, where she became infatuated with the school’s headmistress, Lucy Harrison—perhaps the first evidence of her lesbian proclivities—and also attended lectures at University College London. There was a reason why during much of her life Mew was determined not to provide anyone with even the briefest material for biographical speculation. Beginning in 1898, she had every reason to identify with the luckless creatures she brought into being. In that year her father died, leaving the family in financial straits and putting them in the embarrassing position of having to rent out the top floor of the family home. But poverty was not the only thing that the family (at the particular insistence of the mother) had to hide. While Charlotte was still a child, three of her brothers died. Later, her brother Henry and then her sister Freda, still in their early twenties, both developed schizophrenia (known at the time as “dementia praecox”) and were committed to mental hospitals where they would spend the rest of their lives, the heavy expense of the private asylums on which their image-conscious mother insisted only exacerbating the family’s financial distress. It was not long before Charlotte developed a fear of discovering madness in herself, as she alludes to in “The Quiet House,” where the speaker describes answering the door on a drizzly night, only to find that no one is there, except perhaps her own self, calling for her. Both Mew and her sister Anne, because of the history of mental illness in their family, decided never to marry so they would not pass the traits on to their children. The traumatic issues Mew grappled with during her childhood—death, mental illness, loneliness, and disillusionment—became frequent themes in her poetry and stories.

Her literary career came slowly. In 1894, in her mid-twenties, Mew published her first piece, the short story “Passed”—about the miseries of a prostitute, inspired by Mew’s volunteer social work—in the avant-garde *The Yellow Book*, one of the premier literary magazines of the late-19th century, and she continued to publish her short fiction in various literary journals but only intermittently over the next 15 years. Mew wrote

relatively little poetry in the nineties—she wrote the body of her poetry between 1909 and 1916—but did publish several poems before gaining her first real attention as a poet with the 1912 appearance in the *Nation* of “The Farmer’s Bride,” about a farmer determined to win the love of his hesitant young wife but becoming increasingly lonely and isolated from her. The poem’s dramatic tension and the musicality of its vivid, naturalistic speech rhythms has a dizzying effect—insistent full rhymes repeat over a short space, reverberating like a military cadence, and the strong, four-beat lines expand at the last moment into a longer, final line. Though she never seems to have written free verse, she was unafraid to mix meters and experiment with different line-lengths. She asked that the poems in her first collection be typeset sideways, so as to accommodate those with unusually long lines. Such innovation is a daring, even excessive, approach. As a portrayal of speech, it should not work, but the farmer’s voice is conjured with such boldness that we do not think to question its authenticity. Mew sometimes accentuated such stylistic daring by having a character speak in an Isle-of-Wight dialect, which she learned from her childhood summer holidays but was forbidden to speak by her mother; in these cases, the dialect tumbles instead from the mouths of her characters, as in the magical eight-line lyric “Sea Love,” in which a speaker returns to the same stretch of shore where she recently stood with her sweetheart when they both believed—to borrow W. H. Auden’s phrase—“Love has no ending,” only to find it has weakened into the ephemeral flutter of the wind.

After the publication of the poem “The Farmer’s Bride,” Mew began to be asked to participate in readings; and her initiation into a circle of writers inspired the most prolific period of poetry writing in her career. Her first collection of poems *The Farmer’s Bride*, published in 1916 in chapbook format, was groundbreaking and well-received. In the United States this collection was published in 1921 by Macmillan under the title *Saturday Market*. Once introduced to influential people in the London literary community, she was quick to gain attention and friends, partly because of her head-turning unusual style and mannerisms. Writer Catherine Dawson Scott described Mew as “an imp with brains,” going on to reflect that the then 43-year-old poet, whom she had only recently met, is “tiny, like a French Marquise, uses amazing slang, and has ungainly movements”—all of which struck her as “a queer mixture.” Mew was certainly doll-like in stature and unorthodox: she was a tiny woman (she wore size-two boots) who through most of her life she assumed a persona traditionally seen as masculine, keeping her hair short, wearing tailored men’s clothing, traveling alone (unchaperoned), smoking her own hand-rolled cigarettes, using strong language, nearly always carrying a black umbrella, and generally adopting the appearance of a dandy.

Despite the success she achieved and acclaim she garnered, her writing did not earn Mew enough money to live on. The home where she lived with her mother and sister was soon condemned, dislocating the Mew women. Because of her constant financial difficulties, she did manage to obtain in 1923 a Civil List pension of £75 per year, owing largely to the aid of Hardy, Sydney Cockerell (director of Oxford’s Fitzwilliam Museum), John Masefield, and Walter de la Mare. In 1926 sister Anne was diagnosed with cancer, and Charlotte took on duties of nursing her nearly full time until her sister died the following year. The last remaining member of her once large family, and especially close to Anne, Charlotte gradually descended into a deep depression. Becoming delusional, she entered a Baker Street nursing home for treatment in 1928, but ended up committing

suicide there by drinking Lysol later the same year. Ironically, the small notice in a local paper described the poet, of whom Siegfried Sassoon predicted, “Many will be on the rubbish heap when Charlotte’s star is at the zenith, where it will remain,” as “Charlotte New, said to be a writer.” Mew is buried in the northern part of Hampstead Cemetery, outside of London. After Mew’s death, her friend Alida Monroe (wife of Harold Monroe, who released Mew’s first book) collected and edited Mew’s poetry for publication. *The Rambling Sailor* appeared in 1929 and brings together her early work with her more mature and successful poetry from her teens and twenties.

The palpable sensuality of Mew’s poetry, as with the poetry of William Blake, unites materialism with the spiritual, often pivoting on death that intensifies the paradoxical dynamic of life. In the experience of the living, life penetrates death (as in hair that continues to grow although the person is dead), and death penetrates life (as in the living morphing into something terrible in the face of death). Fallen flesh, its arms full of broken things, has questions that God does not answer. The fractured world exposes life’s beauty as well as its cruelty, yet the beauty passes like the shadows of leaves on growing grass. This paradoxical quality is perhaps never clearer than in her love poetry. While Mew did not write poetry with overt lesbian themes, preferring to keep the speaker ambiguous or male, she clearly loved and preferred women. She never married, but her romantic life was as full of misfortune as her family life. She never seemed to connect with a lesbian community of her time, leaving her feeling isolated and disappointed. She fell in love with Ella D’Arcy, the short-fiction writer and assistant editor of *The Yellow Book*, but while D’Arcy returned Mew’s overtures of friendship, she was strictly heterosexual and refused anything more. Around 1913 Mew developed a passionate but also unrequited love for novelist May Sinclair. While Sinclair initially pursued Mew with notes and requests for their meeting, when the latter expressed her love, Sinclair became cruelly gossipy, even writing to Rebecca West to describe a lurid scene where Sinclair literally had to leap over a bed to get away from Mew. Perhaps not surprisingly, Mew’s love poems do not close with fulfillment or joy, but are bleak and without hope, reflecting the frustration of her personal life, where she loved but was not loved in return. Her poems frequently track many of her diffuse anxieties: her romantic failures, her struggle with her sexuality, the burden of having to conceal madness in the family, the fear of incipient madness in herself, and the pressure of being a clever and ambitious woman when it wasn’t seemly for a woman of her background to be either. This seminal duality of being is reflected obliquely in many of her poems, including “The Changeling,” a children’s poem (1912/1913), where the fairy call of nature draws the child away from the noise and urbanity of the nursery.

The specter of madness is never far off in Mew’s writing, although it is often softened or romanticized, “obscur[ing] the tragic side by a gentleness of treatment.” There are similarities of form between her pictures of madmen (as in “Ken”) and her pictures of fairies (as in “The Changeling”), just as there is between her depiction of mad people and people and cultures in contact with nature. Madness sometimes appears as another world cut off from sanity by clouded glass, or one’s own being. More often, sanity and madness are shown to be two worlds between which we pass, just as we pass from the nursery floor



Mew, Watercolor by
Hawksley 1926

to fantasy worlds. The word *faerie* is often used for the mythical land of fays (fairies), its inhabitants, and its enchantment. When Charlotte Mew was writing, the theosophists were drawing on many religions and mythologies to create their own world vision; their sources included belief in faerie forces or spirits of the elements, from which races of humans and gods could have evolved. Mew herself published in *The Theosophist* a story about a woman with supernatural communication. This theme of changing being and changing consciousness—what Baring-Gould would have called a “radical” (motif)—runs through much of Mew’s writing, symbolized most directly perhaps in the figure of the changeling. “The Changeling” was published at the same time as “Men and Trees,” which finishes with Joan of Arc, as a child, dancing around a fairy tree.

Mew won unusual praise from several literary figures, notably Sassoon, Sara Teasdale, Ezra Pound, and Thomas Hardy, who called her “far and away the best living woman poet, who will be read when others are forgotten,” as well as the notoriously critical Virginia Woolf, who said Mew was “the greatest living poetess” and “very good and interesting and quite unlike anyone else.” Critic W. S. Braithwaite wrote in the *Boston Transcript*, “The very tight intellectual web of these poems takes nothing from the beautiful and impressive imagery with which they are packed. This expanded edition . . . is precious with the freight of a promise that is going to make the arrival of genius.”

The spirit that animates Charlotte Mew’s poetry is accessible to agnostic and believer alike, and disturbing to the preconceptions of both. It has an unsettling facility for inhabiting the minds and voices of others; so often she speaks through the mouths of the disappointed, the deranged and the desolate. Such subjects expressed Mew’s feelings of alienation and center around loneliness, disillusionment, sexual longing, and fear. It is no mistake that she wrote so many dramatic monologues: the form is the perfect vehicle for such a lonely cast of souls, in that the addressee never replies to the speaker (dramatic monologues are always addressed to a silent other). In Mew’s poems, that addressee is often absent in any case: a vanished sweetheart, a buried loved one, a distant, unreachable God. Sassoon wrote to (and of) Charlotte Mew that poets “carry the world on their shoulders. . . . And in their eyes the future of civilisation struggles to survive.” Mew, he said, was “intensely” aware of her “responsibility” and sustained it “nobly.” The world depicted in her writing is the material world of flesh and death, of life and grief, of desire and reverence. The spirit that animates it is “Everything there is to hear in the heart of hidden things.”