



the yellow nineties online

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GRAHAM R. TOMSON [Rosamund Marriott Watson] (1860-1911)



Graham R. Tomson. 1912. Photograph. The Poems of Rosamund Marriott Watson. John Lane, London. Frontispiece.

This poet, aesthete, woman of letters and serial divorcée was born Rosamond Ball, daughter of an accountant, in the London borough of Hackney. Informally educated, she read freely in the library of her father, a bibliophile and amateur poet. Later, she claimed she could not remember a time when she did not read or rhyme. She counted Algernon Swinburne, William Morris, Christina Rossetti, and D. G. Rossetti among her early influences.

At nineteen she married the wealthy Australian George Francis Armytage (1853-1921), who had attended Cambridge University, where he was a member of the winning university boat team, and with whom she had two daughters. Her first

poems, *Tares*, a volume of melancholy lyrics about love's transience with epigraphs from François Villon and D. G. Rossetti, appeared anonymously in 1884.

By late 1884 she was legally separated from Armytage, and in October 1886 she eloped with painter Arthur Tomson (1859-1905), later a member of the New English Art Club. Armytage promptly divorced Rosamond, and she married

Arthur in September 1887; less than six weeks later their son Graham [“Tommy”] was born. Well before then she had taken to calling herself Graham R. Tomson. The pseudonym was her lifeline to publishing success and her eventual appearance in *The Yellow Book*. Though she had placed several poems in magazines as R. Armytage, that poet was not well known, and she could veil her identity as a divorcée—even as a woman—under the signature “Graham R. Tomson.” Andrew Lang thought he was promoting a rising young man when he announced a new poet in *Longman’s Magazine* in July 1887, and from that time she quickly entered key publishing networks and venues of the 1890s. Oscar Wilde as well as Lang and W. E. Henley were friends, along with Katharine Tynan, Alice Meynell, Violet Hunt, and above all Elizabeth Pennell. Most likely through her brother Wilfred Ball (1853-1917), another painter, she also became acquainted with John Lane, Wilfrid’s “brother” in Ye Sette of Odd Volumes, the literary men’s club to which both belonged.

Tomson’s *The Bird-Bride: A Volume of Ballads and Sonnets* (1889) is aligned with aestheticism in its emphasis on ballads and sonnets and with new women in its exploration of marriage themes, as in the title poem. *A Summer Night* (1891) is suggestive of decadence in its turn to literary impressionism and its recurring representation of female desire. By 1892 Tomson had become poetry critic for the *Academy*, art critic for the *Morning Leader*, President of the Literary Ladies, and the newly appointed editor of *Sylvia’s Journal*. In 1893 she joined Meynell, Hunt, and others as regular contributors to the “Wares of Autolycus” column in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, which provided the basis for her later book on interior decoration, *The Art of the House* (1897).

Tomson’s life and career took another radical turn when she began an affair with one of Henley’s protégés on the staff of the *National Observer*, Australian-born H. B. Marriott Watson (1863-1921). In June 1894 she left Arthur and their son Tommy and moved in with Marriott Watson. In April 1894 she had contacted John Lane with a poem for *The Yellow Book*; perhaps Lane took satisfaction in printing the decadent “Vespertilia,” about a seductive female vampire, next to

Marriott Watson's "The House of Shame" in Volume 4 (January 1895). Though "Vespertilia" appeared under the signature of Graham R. Tomson, its author had renamed herself Rosamund Marriott Watson six months earlier, her substitute for a marriage ceremony. (Though Tomson divorced her in 1895, she never remarried.) Richard Marriott Watson was born in October 1895, the same month that *Vespertilia, and Other Verses*, by Rosamond Marriott Watson, was published by John Lane The Bodley Head. Lane always stood by her as poet and friend, but she never recovered the prominence enjoyed by Graham R. Tomson. If *Vespertilia* contains some of her best poems, her work as a whole, like her reputation, declined after this volume, as did her health from 1903 onward. She died of uterine cancer on 29 December 1911.

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- [Armytage, Rosamond.] *Tares*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, and Trübner, 1884.
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---. *The Art of the House*. London: G. Bell and Sons, 1897.
---. *After Sunset*. London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1904.
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- Schaffer, Talia. *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late Victorian England*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2000.
- Vadillo, Ana Parejo. *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity*. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.