



Margaret Louisa Woods (née Bradley) (1855 – 1945)

On August 6th, 1927, a slightly puzzled reviewer in *The Nation and Athenaeum* wrote of Margaret L. Woods: “[w]e do not know if the authoress is to be called primarily a novelist who writes poetry or a poetess who dabbles in novels” (613). Indeed, though largely forgotten now, Woods succeeded in both poetry and fiction throughout the course of her life and, in ballads and poetic dramas, would often combine the two. Her poem “By the Sea” appeared in *The Pageant* in 1896 at the height of her creative output. The same year she published two collections of poetry as well as the poetic drama, *Wild Justice*, which fuses various verse forms into a gothic fiction set in a fishing community. This drama became one of Woods’s most significant projects and can be read as an extension of the mood, setting, and poetic techniques that she laid out in her *Pageant* poem. Woods was, as well, a tireless public figure. Her reviewers might have added noted conversationalist and correspondent, charity worker, critic, public intellectual, and member of the Academic Committee of the Royal Society of Literature to their description and would sooner exhaust their readers than her catalogue of roles and accomplishments.

Margaret L. Woods was born in Rugby, Warwickshire, on the 20th of November, 1855, to Marian Bradley (1831-1910) and George Granville Bradley (1821-1903). The family was socially ascendant, moving through England’s late-century intelligentsia. Within three years of Margaret’s birth, George Bradley rose from an assistant master at Rugby to

Headmaster of Marlborough College. In 1870, he accepted the position of Master of University College, Oxford. Margaret, known always as Daisy within her family, was fifteen at the time and the move began her nearly three-decade long sojourn among the Oxford elite. Her father, however, would carry on his trajectory; in 1881, he was appointed the Dean of Westminster Abbey. The religious site would come to serve as a familial fascination. *The Times* reported in her obituary that Margaret was “apt to speak of the Abbey as of a private family chapel” (6). As a celebrated family of writers, scholars, poets, and religious figures, the Bradleys can be viewed in striking parallel to the now more famous Benson family, yet another dynasty that married theological authority, social standing, and a devotion to the written word. Each family was anchored by a high-ranking ecclesiastical figure. While George Granville Bradley served his term as Dean of Westminster, Edward White Benson worked as Archbishop of Canterbury. Each family produced a set of sibling authors. In the year that Margaret’s poem appeared in the *Pageant*, Arthur Christopher Benson’s poetry appeared in *The Yellow Book*. Indeed, later in life, Margaret would help oversee the distribution of the Royal Society of Literature’s Benson Medal. Where the Bensons are remembered primarily for their poetry, comedy, and ghost stories, however, the Bradleys presented a more scholastic and less popular version of a writerly family. In particular, Margaret’s younger sister, Emily Tennyson Bradley (1862-1946), became a significant scholar of Westminster Abbey’s history. She co-authored with her sister Mabel the *Westminster Abbey Official Guide*, which remained in print through multiple editions for nearly a century. Mabel herself would later publish three books of fictional sketches and stories. Margaret’s brother, Arthur Granville Bradley, became a prolific and noted historian of the period. None, however, sustained the artistic success and influence of their sister Margaret.

In his wry but ultimately positive review of *The Collected Poems of Margaret L. Woods*, the celebrated American critic Stuart P. Sherman remarked:

So far as the new poetry-reading public is concerned, Mrs. Woods has nearly everything against her. Daughter of a late Dean of Westminster, and wife of a sometime president of Trinity College, Oxford, she responds to the august appeal of great traditions with

a loyalty of spirit which involves a certain fine exclusiveness of thought and feeling. (523)

His cursory summary of Woods's cultural context is illuminating but it cannot convey the immense accomplishment of the Bradley family. Nor does it suggest the wider firmament of *fin-de-siècle* intellectuals, artists, and various luminaries that those loyal responses to great tradition would consistently bring into her orbit. Margaret was from an early age surrounded by England's intellectual and artistic elite. Margaret's uncle was the influential Idealist philosopher, Francis Herbert Bradley (1846-1924). Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was a fixture of her childhood, being a close family friend and Emily Bradley's godfather, and a significant influence on Margaret's later output. Matthew Arnold, a former student of her father's at Rugby, had a similar influence on the fledgling author. At Oxford, Margaret's social and artistic spheres expanded. She became a fixture at [Oscar Wilde's](#) "Beauty Parties." Her friend Mary Augusta Arnold (1851-1920) encouraged her writing at this time. Mary was Matthew Arnold's niece and would later achieve her own literary celebrity as Mrs. Humphry Ward; both authors, Margaret and Mary, remained strong advocates for the other's writing in the coming decades. In 1879, Margaret married Reverend Henry G. Woods (1842-1915), the bursar of Trinity College, Oxford, a man who was to follow in her father's footsteps as both a scholarly and ecclesiastical success. The marriage brought her into the community of writers centered on the Daniel Press, a private press run by Charles Henry Daniel (1836-1919) that specialized in small-run artistic editions. These writers included notables such as Lewis Carroll (1832-1898), [Walter Pater](#) (1839-1894), and [Edmund Gosse](#) (1849-1928). However, her introduction through this community to the work of Robert Bridges (1844-1930), a poet working to revitalize and loosen poetic rhythms, proved particularly important to Woods's own poetic career. In 1881, Daniel collected a poem by Woods into *The Garland of Rachel*, an anthology to celebrate his daughter's birthday. The volume is now considered a turning point in the late-century revival of Victorian fine and art printing. Gosse, Bridges, Carroll, John Addington Symonds (1840-1893), and Andrew Lang (1844-1912), all had poetry featured in the same collection.

Woods gained her first success as a prose writer through the admiration of Rhoda Broughton (1840-1920), the Welsh novelist now perhaps best remembered for her

novel, *Belinda* (1883), and for her ghost fiction. Broughton was a long-time supporter and friend of Woods and suggested that the firm Richard Bentley and Son publish Woods's debut novel, *A Village Tragedy* (1887). The book proved to be a modest success. It received multiple editions and generally warm reviews. Most notably [Oscar Wilde](#), in *The Woman's World*, compared Woods to Fyodor Dostoevsky and Guy de Maupassant, writing "she has not a little of their fierce intensity, their terrible concentration, their passionless yet poignant objectivity" (117). That said, Louise Chandler Moulton's review in *Belford's Magazine* best represented the general critical consensus when she wrote:

I do not recommend "A Village Tragedy" as the amusement of an idle hour; for it is as sad a book as pen ever wrote; but if you would know some of the possibilities of peasant life in England – if you would understand what a fine though uncultured soul may suffer in a rude and uncomprehending neighbourhood – if you would be taught compassion by means of the pitiless analysis of suffering – you may well turn to "A Village Tragedy," with its sad and terrible gospel. (54)

Woods's husband marked his own career milestone in the same year, becoming President of Trinity College. Henry Woods's new position brought increased demands on Margaret as a hostess within the exacting social side of Oxford's scholastic community. Nevertheless, the following year she published a collection of poetry entitled *Lyrics* (1887) through the Daniel Press. Though the original edition had a small run of 125 copies, its success allowed Bentley and Son to publish an extended collection, *Lyrics and Ballads*, in 1889. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (1863-1944) would include a sonnet from this edition, "Genius Loci," in his *Oxford Book of English Verse 1250-1900* (1900). Two novels followed in the proceeding years, *Esther Vanhomrigh* in 1891 and *The Vagabonds* in 1894. At this time, Woods regularly published in periodicals for middle class audiences, and her work was popular with a wide variety of publications from the more conservative *Cornhill Magazine* (1860-1975) to the liberal, artistically minded *Fortnightly Review* (1865-1954). In these, she would publish everything from essays and personal opinion to early drafts and studies of later pieces. "Ballad of the Dead Mother," for example, first appeared in the *Fortnightly* before it was repurposed

as a part of *Wild Justice*. “By the Sea,” published in *The Pageant* in 1896, is another poem that seems to aesthetically forecast her work on the long poetic drama. Woods filled 1896 with a remarkable output of published material: *Songs* through the Daniel Press, *Aeromancy, and Other Poems* through [Elkin Mathews](#)’s Shilling Garland Series (1895-1898), and *Wild Justice* through Smith, Elder and Co. These publications highlight the close symbiotic relation between Woods’s social circle, her writing, and her publication. Three years prior to the release of *Wild Justice*, Margaret’s sister Emily had married into the Smiths, the publishing dynasty behind Smith, Elder and Co. Emily was, herself, a writer for the *Dictionary of National Biography* (1885-1900), also published by Smith, Elder and Co. Later in Woods’s life, she would increasingly publish in *Cornhill Magazine*, a periodical owned by the house. Elkin Mathews (1851-1921), publisher of *Aëromancy* and joint-publisher of the first numbers of the [Yellow Book](#) in 1894, was a London bookseller who provided wealthy enthusiasts with books from the Daniel Press. He would have been familiar with Margaret L. Woods from her previous three appearances in Daniel’s printing efforts. More directly, however, the poet Laurence Binyon (1869-1943) edited the Shilling Garland series, which ran from 1895-1898. He specifically selected Woods for publication due to their previous acquaintance through her role as a Trinity College hostess. Indeed, Woods had a gravity in the Oxford community and young, talented individuals consistently found themselves in orbit around her; Laurence Binyon was one example, as was her close friend, the celebrated historian H.A.L. Fisher (1865-1940).

It was Robert Bridges, however, whose acquaintance exercised perhaps the greatest stylistic influence on Woods’s writing. As with Bridges, Woods was concerned with varied form, rhythm, and sound in poetry. Years later, in the preface to her second poetic drama, *The Princess of Hanover* (1902), she would cite Bridges as she laid out her own thoughts on line structure. Bridges argued that “[i]mmmediately English verse is written free from a numeration of syllables, it falls back on the number of stresses as a determining law” (qtd. in Woods vii). We can find a similar sensibility behind the hurrying, frequently irregular dactyls that build through each quintain of “By the Sea” to their own relentless, wave-pounding rhythm. Woods tended to build her poetry on rhythms and stresses rather than uniform syllabic patterns or regular rhyme. Woods,

Bridges, and Gerard Manley Hopkins (whose work Bridges would eventually compile) were all engaged at this time in new imaginations of the poetic line. While their innovations often appeared in parallel, this work was fraught and often emerged from differing engagements with and expectations of metre and sound. Woods's organization of the line stemmed from a belief in poetry's deep-seated musicality. In the same preface, she dismisses visual rhymes – “*rough* and *bough*,” for example (xiii) – as essentially false. She describes the “‘rhyme to the eye’ as absurd, as though one could talk of ‘music to the eye’” (xi). In her 1924 article “Poetry and the Prosaics,” Woods argued that a hypnotic quality lay behind poetry's more sonic techniques: repetition, rhythm, “rhyme, assonance, or alliteration” (814). “No actual trance of the superficial and rational Self is induced,” she wrote, “but it suffers a certain muting, which allows a message to get through to that mysterious Self, lurking and working so secretly and silently within us... poetry has its origin in the subliminal region” (814). By the early 1900s, Margaret's lines in pieces like “The Passing Bell” and “The Builders” were notably irregular. They were held together in sequence by an internal logic of often complex rhythm and deviation rather than by convention. Compared to this work, the earlier “By the Sea” remains relatively conservative. In its repetition and driving rhythm, however, it does achieve a trance-like cadence and provides a gothic reading experience.

But, while Woods's time at Oxford set her on an innovative path of artistic expression, the difficult personalities and endless work of the university's social circle came to wear on Margaret. Her health declined due to a case of sciatica and, in 1897, Henry Woods resigned his position as president, citing her health. The family left Trinity College for Henry Woods to serve as reverend in North Wales, before moving on to a parish in Hertfordshire. The transition to a less pressured atmosphere allowed the family to spend more time abroad, particularly in Spain, a country they travelled to frequently and which figures consistently in both her prose and poetry. Woods wrote five more novels before her death in 1945. Three of these novels – *Sons of the Sword* (1901), *The King's Revoke* (1905), and *The Spanish Lady* (1927) – are historical fictions set in Spain and broadly centered on the Peninsular War and the Napoleonic Era. 1902 proved to be nearly as eventful a year as 1896 for Woods. She published her second poetic drama, *The Princess of Hanover*, which Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) included as his favourite

book of 1902 in a list in *Academy and Literature*. In August, due to his failing health, George Granville Bradley resigned from his duties at Westminster Abbey. In the same year, Emily Tennyson Smith published the *Roll Call of Westminster Abbey* while Woods published “The Builders.” The poem, which has a strongly memorial quality, and imagines the Abbey to still retain the spectral impressions of its devoted, long-dead builders. George Granville Bradley passed away on March 13th, 1903. In the following January, Margaret Woods published what is possibly her most accomplished poem, “The Passing Bell,” an elegy to her father that commemorates his impact upon Westminster Abbey and envisions his soul’s ascent from the building into heaven. Later in 1904, Henry Woods would be appointed to his own Royal Peculiar as Master of Temple Church leading to the Woods family’s move to Temple’s grounds in London.

Margaret L. Woods always had a gothic sense of the fantastic, one that arises occasionally in her ballads and can be felt strongly in “By the Sea” and *Wild Justice*. Her work brims with hauntings, histrionics, and histories, returned. In the titular poem of *Aëromancy*, spectral voices of Oxford’s dead scholars caution the living against a solely academic life. Beginning with “The Builders,” this interest in the spiritual became more prominent in her writing, achieving something of a climax in “On the Step,” a poetic ghost story Woods published in January 1925 in the *London Mercury*. Woods’s developing interest in history and fantasy is particularly apparent in *The Invader* (1907), perhaps her strangest fictional outing. The novel follows a young female scholar among the first wave of women students accepted by Oxford. Plagued by insomnia, she accepts a hypnotic treatment only to find that her body has become possessed by the spirit of an identical fore-bearer. Far more worldly and sexually adventurous than her host, the spirit periodically arises to wreak havoc on the student’s life for years. The novel’s subject, a female Oxford undergraduate, would have been personally familiar to Woods and quite possibly an emotionally weighted figure for an intellectual woman who had been born just too early for an Oxford education. While the novel is filled with poignant recollections, it also complicates its central character with science fiction, as well as tensions between the New Woman and more conservative fantasies of female agency.

In this novel's romantic treatment of history returned, we can recognize an organizing sensibility behind the topics and dramas Woods often chose to depict. As a writer, she was primarily interested in distant or slightly fanciful theatres of the imagination. Even in Woods's more socially interested writing – *A Village Tragedy*, *The Vagabonds*, and *Wild Justice*, for example – there is a fascinated indulgence in the miseries of the poor, a sightseer's empathy that at times drives poverty into the fantastic or operatic. Her fiction is largely a creative exercise in bridging a cultural or historical gap. Many of her later novels take place in previous centuries of continental European history and indulge in romanticized depictions of courtly life, politics, warfare, and travel. *Esther Vanhomrigh* and *A Poet's Youth* (1923), for example, each portray the authors of previous centuries – Jonathan Swift and William Wordsworth, respectively – and imagine them in the moment of their most famous romantic affairs. Indeed, when Margaret L. Woods passed away on December 1st, 1945, she was remembered in *The Times* for her poetry and for her influential family, certainly, but her obituary particularly singled out the quality of her imagination and the playful nature of her ballad-like fantasy. It imagined her, finally, as having returned to a more mannered, idyllic realm of Shakespearean knights and romantic deeds: “And so we leave her sleeping in no tomb but waving a white adieu to Sir Oliver du Bois as his steed clanks across the drawbridge” (6).

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