



MATHILDE BLIND (1841-1896)

The career of the Anglo-German poet and woman-of-letters Mathilde Blind highlights the connections between mid-Victorian aestheticism and fin-de-siècle decadence. It also serves as an important corrective to the male-focused narratives that long dominated accounts of these movements. Blind rose to prominence in the early 1870s, both as an expert on and proponent of the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley, and as one of the few women writers published in the *Dark Blue* (1871-73), a short-lived but influential journal that published essays, tales, poems, and illustrations by Britain's leading Pre-Raphaelites and aesthetes. These included Ford Madox Brown, Edward Dowden, W.S. Gilbert, Andrew Lang, William Morris, Dante Gabriel and William Michael Rossetti, Simeon Solomon, and Algernon Charles Swinburne. Her ballads "The Song of the Willi" and "Nocturne," which appeared in the journal, share with the poems of Swinburne attitudes and themes that would come to define and dominate decadent poetry at the fin de siècle: a scorn for bourgeois values and norms; sexual nonconformity and transgression; and an interest in the obsessive, the morbid, the perverse.

By the early 1890s, when her reputation was near its peak, Blind had published five volumes of poetry, a novel, two translations, and two biographies for the *Eminent Women* series (on George Eliot and Madame Roland). Her essays and reviews had also appeared in the *Westminster Review*, *Fortnightly Review*, *National Review*, *Whitehall Review*, *New Quarterly Magazine*, *Examiner*, and *The Athenaeum*. Her 1890 translation of *The Journal of Marie Bashkirtseff* followed closely on her two-part essay on the Russian-born painter for *The Woman's World*, at the time edited by Oscar Wilde. This translation became a publishing sensation and intensified late-century debates concerning gender and sexual identity. It also outsold everything else she published, up until the 1985 Virago Press reissue. Blind had also established close associations and friendships with key figures of England's emergent decadent communities. These

included various gay, straight, or bisexual women and men such as Michael Field, Vernon Lee, Amy Levy, Edith Nesbit, Rosamund Marriott Watson, Wilde, and Arthur Symons. When her *Dramas in Miniature* appeared in 1891, she was fusing aestheticism and decadence so distinctively in her poetry that Symons evoked Charles Baudelaire in calling the dramatic monologues in the volume “flowers of evil” (660).

Blind was born in 1841 in Mannheim, then part of the Grand Duchy of Baden in southwestern Germany (Germany would not become a unified nation for another 30 years). She was the oldest child of a banker named Jacob Abraham Cohen and his second wife, born Friederike Ettlinger. Cohen died in 1848, and the same year Blind’s mother married Karl Blind. Mathilde’s mother had met Blind when both had become involved in agitation for a united and democratic Germany. He became one of the leaders of the Baden insurrections during the European revolutions of 1848. The suppression of this movement led to Mathilde’s step-father’s exile from Germany. By 1849, he and his new family had also been exiled from France, and in 1851 they were expelled from Belgium. Granted asylum in England, they settled in St. John’s Wood, just west of Regent’s Park. For the next 30 years their household was both a haven for Europe’s radical exiles and an influential intellectual salon.

During her teenage years, Mathilde Blind attended schools in London and Zurich. Her outlook was profoundly influenced by her parents’ literary and political affiliations, their allies, and their various visitors. The latter ranged from Swinburne to Karl Marx and the women’s suffrage advocate Caroline Ashurst Stansfield. In his 1900 “Memoir” of Blind, Richard Garnett (her long-time friend and correspondent) noted that, in the society of political refugees that formed in St. John’s Wood, “admiration must necessarily be reserved for audacity in enterprise, fortitude in adversity, [. . .] anything breathing unconquerable defiance of the powers that were” (3). Garnett reports that, by age 25, Mathilde’s militancy regarding the Woman Question was fully developed: “She was in favour of women following all callings, except the military and naval, and when invited by the present writer to consider the consequence of throwing a mass of cheap labour into occupations much overstocked, she rejoined, with decision, that the men might emigrate” (18). Blind emerged from this intellectual apprenticeship a committed freethinker, socialist, and feminist. All of her writing implicitly interrogates the masculinist assumptions of the male aesthetes and decadents among whom she moved.

Until recently, Blind’s association with the decadent movement derived primarily from “Sea Music,” the last poem she published in her lifetime. It appeared in the inaugural issue of *The Savoy* (January 1896), between two love poems by W. B. Yeats and the first part of Aubrey Beardsley’s unfinished erotic fantasy *Under the Hill*. A short-lived competitor to *The Yellow Book*, *The Savoy*’s literary editor was Arthur Symons, whose own poetry and criticism defined British decadence for generations of readers. Before

sending Symons her poem, Blind sought advice from Garnett, whose response reveals his own masculine anxieties and the reactionary climate engendered by Wilde's recent conviction and imprisonment. Although himself a contributor to *The Yellow Book*, Garnett told Blind he "detested" Symons's volume of poetry *London Nights*, noting that, while he admired "the erotic poetry of the ancients and the great moderns [...], he could not] stand the nauseous effeminacy of our decadents" (Garnett ALS to Blind, 8 November 1895, British Library). Blind was undeterred by Garnett's wariness, having recently offered her last volume of poetry, *Birds of Passage: Songs of the Occident and Orient* (1895), to *Yellow Book* publisher John Lane. It was ultimately published by Chatto & Windus. In publishing her valedictory poem with Symons, Blind was guided by the same "audacity in enterprise" (Garnett 3) that she demonstrated as a pioneering female aesthete at the beginning of her career. She died of uterine cancer on 26 November 1896.

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Selected Publications by Mathilde Blind

The Prophecy of St. Oran and Other Poems, Newman, 1881.

George Eliot. W.H. Allen, 1883.

Tarantella: A Romance. 2 vols, T. Fisher Unwin, 1885.

The Heather on Fire: A Tale of the Highland Clearances. Walter Scott, 1886.

Madame Roland. W.H. Allen, 1886.

The Ascent of Man. Chatto & Windus, 1889.

The Journal of Marie Bashkirtseff. Translated with an introduction by Mathilde Blind. 2 vols, Cassell, 1890.

Dramas in Miniature. Chatto & Windus, 1891.

Songs and Sonnets. Chatto and Windus, 1893.

Birds of Passage: Songs of the Orient and Occident. Chatto & Windus, 1895.

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A Selection from the Poems of Mathilde Blind. Edited by Arthur Symons, T. Fisher Unwin, 1897.

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Diedrick, James. “‘My Love is a Force That Will Force You to Care’: Subversive Sexuality in Mathilde Blind’s Dramatic Monologues.” *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2002, pp. 359-86.

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Vadillo, Ana Parejo. *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Wilhelm, Lindsay. "The Utopian Evolutionary Aestheticism of W. K. Clifford, Walter Pater, and Mathilde Blind." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 59 no.1, 2016, pp. 9-34.