Rosamund Marriott Watson, Poems
Rosamund Marriott Watson, originally born Rosamund Ball, was born in London, England. She lived in a struggling middle class family and was the youngest of four siblings. She had two older brothers and an older sister. At the age of thirteen, her mother died and she was the only woman in the household since her older sister had married and had her own children by then. There is no evidence that Rosamund had a formal education, however, she did read often and was interested in poetry at a young age. She wrote her own verses and might have even compared them with her father, who was also a poet.

Just shy of nineteen, she married George Armitage, who was a well off Australian man. Shortly after she had her first child, a daughter Eulalie. During this time she became very interested in fashion and even wrote article titled “Modern Dress” for the *Forthnightly Review*. Later on she became pregnant again with her second daughter, Daphne. At this time however, she was not even living in the same household as her husband.

Her marriage to George was beginning to falter now that she became so committed to her writings. She worked closely with her publisher and released her first volume of poetry, titled *Tares*, which sold twenty-eight out the five hundred copies printed.

The two filed for separation and Rosamund lived in her own home and was given an allowance as long as she lived a pious life. Custody of the children was given to George; however, she was allowed to keep Daphne for a while because she was nursing. Rosamund’s relationships with her daughters are not entirely known of since she was absent from the majority of their lives.

Rosamund continued to write and although she was still the legal wife of George, she took up a lover, Arthur Graham Tomson. Arthur was a painter and in comparison to Rosamund, he was often labeled “uninteresting and dull.” Three months after the affair elicited, the two eloped which granted her a divorce from George and resulted in her no longer having access to her daughters. In order to be granted freedom from him, she also had to publically admit she was an adulterer, which caused her to lose a lot of respect.

She took up the name Graham R. Tomson and begun anew, her work first debuting under this name on December 9, 1886. Her separation from her husband sparked creativity in her and she began to write frivolously. She put herself in the company of “learned men” and even gathered a following as her work began to gain recognition.

It took years for her divorce with George to finalize and when it did, she and Arthur had a legal marriage. Rosamund was actually eight months pregnant at their wedding with their first child, a son they named Graham Tomson but nicknamed him “Tommy”. With her old life behind her, she moved forward with her new family and resided in London.

Her poetry was highly regarded and was considered so well written that many people assumed she was a man. She submitted many poems to various magazines and her work was praised. She made quite an entrance into the literary circle. It was not until she published “The Ballad of the Bird-Bride” in *Harpers* when she began the search for a publisher. As her volume prepared to publish, she took an interest in journalism. At twenty-eight, she had a signed copies of her volume produced and she was claimed to be a “literary genius”. Rosamund and Arthur also hosted events at their home and were most notably close with the Pennell family, of which Elizabeth Brown Pennell was said to be Rosamund’s closest friend.

In 1891, her second signed volume of poetry, *A Summer Night* was released and put her as a “young generation poet of great significance.” It was also said that “The Ballad of the Were-Wolf” was one of the best poems to be published this year.”

During this time she was most ferociously busy with her own publication, *Sylvia’s Journal*, but still managed to attend the weekly events held by her friend Elizabeth Pennell. There, she met H.B. Marriott Watson, a handsome Australian journalist and novelist. The two saw each other often and remained in contact, but just as friends for a few years. One day, they simply became aflame with desire for one another and this was the start of their affair. Her marriage to Arthur was quickly deterioring but she managed to keep up appearances until the day she fled from him, leaving no explanation. She stayed with her close friend Elizabeth till the family’s allegiance to Arthur made the Pennell family force her out the door.

Arthur finally filed for divorce, most likely due to hearing the news of Rosamund’s pregnancy. Even after the divorce was finalized, Rosamund never married Marriott, although it is known that out of the three men, she had the best relationship with him. She gave birth to a son on her thirty-fifth birthday and named him Richard Brereton Marriott Watson, “Dick” for short. The welcoming of a son into her life brought happiness to Rosamund once more although her literary career was struggling. Years later Rosamund was diagnosed with terminal cancer and underwent three surgeries. She still managed to write although she was very sick. Unfortunately, on December 29, 1911 Rosamund Marriott Watson passed away at the age of fifty-one.

Along with ending her second marriage, Rosamund ended her literary career. She lost her close friends, public standing and her honor. After she moved in with H.B. Marriott Watson, she decided to change her name from Graham R. Tomson to Rosamund Marriott Watson; however, she failed to notify her followers, which resulted in a loss of her literary merit. The couple was ostracized and Rosamund was attacked for her extreme sexuality and affairs. She continued to write, but struggled to find publishers. When her work was published, it was stated that none of her new works were able to successfully exceed what she had done as Graham R. Tomson. Rosamund became more dependent on Marriott. Because of her quick name change and her scandal, her career began to decline at the time her husband’s was rising. Nowadays, the collective works of Rosamund Marriott Watson are only known to a handful of scholars.\(^1\)
Themes

Aggression in Marriage:

Watson utilizes her poems as an outlet for her own struggles with marriage and one of the most prominent themes in her poetry is aggression in marriage. The Ballad of the Bird-Bride, which supposedly originates from an Eskimo tale, tells the story of a man who falls in love with a woman and forces her into marriage. Once a swan, the new bride struggles to contain her natural wild side and follow through with her domestic obligations. It is not only till she births a child that her “wandering glances sank to rest”. Still, it is evident that the bird-bride is not happy in her marriage and might only remain because of her children.

Further on in the poem, the husband breaks the only promise he made to his wife – never to slay another member of her family. Due to starvation, the husband breaks the promise and shoots for gulls, which represents the frailty of vows and even relationships. The four gulls can also represent the bird-bride and her three children, signaling the end of the marriage as soon as they are shot down. The bird-bride’s anger is viewed through color symbolism of the setting, for instance, “The sun hung red in the sky’s dull breast, the snow was wet and red…”

We receive the viewpoint through the man’s perspective, which could mean for us to sympathize with the husband and his loneliness. Or, it can also help the reader see his jealousy and possession of his family members. Either way, we are exposed to the man’s aggressiveness and we sense how he treats his family – like property. The poem displays violence, literally and figuratively, with the actual killing of the gulls and the bird-bride’s wound inflicted by the husband. At the end of the poem, the bird-bride flees with her children “with the plumage in black and grey” while her husband still cries for their domestic ties.

A Ballad of the Were-Wolf further extends violence and aggression in a marriage in the way it presents the power struggle. The wife is compliant and domestic by day, yet by night, she becomes an attacker wandering the land. This shows the wildness that is underneath a domestic exterior. Also, when confronted by her husband, instead of being imprisoned or seized, she directly confronts the man and the two battle; exposing the violent undercurrents of Victorian marriages. The wife/wolf is intent on revenge and wants to kill her husband and in this moment, he recognizes that is partner and enemy are one in the same.

This ballad shows the ferocity of women, which is rare. It lets lose the wild instinct of women are her werewolf transformation is a defiance of a traditional, feminine body. Watson makes marriage seem like a trap for women. Both ballads suggest fragility of marriage along with the pain a broken family experiences and the emotional and physical violence.

Identity Struggles:

Part of what makes Watson so interesting, both as a writer and as an individual, is how she identified with her sexuality and acted upon it (as apparent from her multiple marriages). The traditional Victorian marriage consisted of the obedient wife who, regardless of how good or bad the marriage was, had to obey certain conventions to maintain an ostensibly pure image of matrimony. In one essay, Hughes describes her sexuality by suggesting, “she was also the beast who took her body seriously enough to act out her sexual desires and defy norms of domestic and maternal ideology.” The multiple identities she invoked in her poetry are seen in the bird-bride and the were-wolf, where the transformation takes place specifically with the woman, and usually the wife. Because of these elusive transformations, it is hard to place a fixed identity on the women in Watson’s poetry.

“A Ballad of the Were-Wolf”

It is worth considering the etymology of the were-wolf: derived from Old-English, the word wer translates as “man”, and wolf meaning “beast.” In this ballad, the were-wolf is the woman, thus further obscuring the identity of the wife.

The identity struggle in this poem takes place between the “gudewife”, who we can deem obedient solely from her ubiquitous title as “gudewife”, and the defiant monster who has stolen their “bairies twa”. Since the poem is told from the male perspective, it is hard for the reader to identify the woman as she sees herself, whether as wife or werewolf. Therefore, her identity remains ambiguous.

It is not until the “gudeman” has cut off the “fore-paw” of the werewolf that a retransformation takes place back to the gudewife, and the paw appears as a bloody human hand.

“Yet naught they saw o’ the grey wolf’s paw, For a bludy hand lay there.”

When the cut off paw transforms into a hand, the reader sympathizes for the woman who has become the subsequent victim of domestic violence due to a mistaken identity. Cutting off the hand is seen as the mutilation of the female to establish male dominance in this poem. By emasculating the wife, she is no longer able to identify herself as a woman, but only a monster.

“The Ballad of the Bird-Bride”

Once again, the ballad is told from a male perspective, which leaves the female identity ambivalent between animal and human.
The transformation occurs quite suddenly: 
"And Straight they were changed, that fleet bird-folk,  
To women young and fair."

Although the change occurs suddenly, and the balladeer identifies her as a woman, she still holds onto her animalistic instincts. As one passage suggests (after she is transformed into a woman), 
"She would beat her long white arms anew,  
And her eyes glanced quick and wild."

Because of this, the man is never able to understand the true nature of the bird-bride. Similar to Watson's own identity struggles, the bird-bride finds comfort in her children:

"Her wandering glances sank to rest  
When she held a babe to her fair, warm breast"

Watson was also famous for being beautiful and desired by many men during her time. Similarly, the bird-bride is desired for her beauty and not for her nature, which the husband confuses.

It is also interesting to note the multiple names that Watson had acquired over the years, and her poetry is a testament to the notion of a constantly changing identity.

Animal Imagery:
Watson's poetry is largely accompanied by animal images. In the ballad of the Bird-Bride and also in the Ballad of the Were-Wolfe she uses animal imagery to the point that both of the female subjects of the poem have been metamorphosed into animal creatures themselves to various degrees and with various outcomes.

The Bird-Bride of the poem herself is described as a seagull who took on human form. The husband attempts to tame the wild spirit of the Bird-Bride and seems to "cage" her through marriage. However the woman is shown to still have a wild spirit that shows through whenever the winds pick up. "And yet, whenever the shrill winds blew, she would beat her long white arms anew, and her eyes glanced quick and wild" (23-5).

The animal imagery is reinforced on the Bird-Bride after she decides to leave her husband. In order for her to escape the husband with her children, she has the children gather the feathers of the slaughtered gulls and cover themselves with them. "Babes of mine, of the wild wind's kin, feather ye quick, nor stay" (66-7). She first has to transform her children with the feathers of their fallen brethren before they can flee. In a way, she must bring the children back to their animalistic roots.

The Were-Wolf seems to have a similar but opposite feeling of animal imagery. While the Bird-Bride's animal nature was used for a non violent escape, the Were-Wolf's animal side comes out to battle with her husband and possibly kill her own children. The Were-Wolf herself is only hinted at until the end of the poem where she is revealed, though she is described early on, "Wi' the red licht in your e'e" (8). The red animalistic and dangerous eye also seems to be the first in a set of images of intensity and blood which can also be tied back to the wife's darker animal nature in the poem. The red light appears a second time in line 30 near the end in the exact same wording as in line 8. This seems to imply that the wife has been sitting unchanged through the poem and unaffected by everything her husband has told her. It also grounds her in animalistic intensity of purpose or perhaps can be viewed as not caring or as if he has been talking to an unintelligent beast. The white bandages then transform as she unwraps them from an innocent white to a blood drenched red, echoing her crimson eyes; "The first was white,  
an' the last was red; and the fresh blood dripped adorn." (35-36)

While the animal women in both poems seems to rebel against the customs of marriage and their husbands, both do so in an opposite way and in a nature befitting the creature they are likened to. The Bird-Bride stays trapped in a metaphorical cage until her husband breaks his word to her and she flees with her children. To the contrary, the Were-Wolf rebels against her marriage by killing her children and directly opposing and battling her husband.

Form is Content

"The Ballad of the Bird-Bride"

Rosamund Marriott Watson’s the “Ballad of the Bird-Bride”, veers away from traditional form by using five line stanzas with an A, B, C, B rhyme scheme as opposed to the "common meter" that uses four line stanzas with an A, B, C, B rhyme scheme. However, "The Ballad of the Bird-Bride" exhibits traditional ballad characteristics by using enjambment to highlight the main points in the narrative:

Swift I sprang from my hiding-place  
And held the fairest fast; (16-7)
The use of enjambment in these lines emphasizes that the man narrating this story has *captured* the fairest gull against her will and forced her to be his wife. It is important to remember this fact while reading the rest of "The Ballad of the Bird-Bride" because the wife in this poem never consented to a domestic life with the narrator, once again alluding to the repressive nature of Victorian marriages.

Together we tracked the fox and the seal,

And at her behest I swore

That bird and beast my bow might slay

For meant and for raiment, day by day,

But never a grey gull more. (31-35)

The use of enjambment here stresses the central and *only* agreement that was made between the captured bird-bride and her husband: That he was never to kill another grey gull. This is important to note because once the narrator broke this vow the bird-bride gathered her children and left her husband, which is also highlighted with the use of enjambment:

She beat her arms, and she cried full fain

As she swayed and wavered there.

'Think me the feather, my children three,

Feathers and plumes for you and me,

Bonny grey wings to wear! (56-60)

"The Ballad of the Bird-Bride" also uses the traditional ballad characteristic of incremental repetition by rephrasing the same line in the first and last stanzas of the poem:

They never come back, though I loved them well;

I watch the south in vain;

The snow-bound skies are clear and grey, (1-3)

Mine, wherever your wild wings go,

While shrill winds whistle across the snow

And the skies are clear and grey. (83-5)

The last stanza of the poem also uses enjambment; perhaps to bring the reader's attention to the last repeated line.

The phrase "She beat her arms" is also repeated in three different ways:

And yet, whenever the shrill winds blew,

She would beat her long white arms anew,

And her eyes glanced quick and wild. (23-5)

Her voice shrilled out in a woeful cry,

She beat her long white arms on high,

'The hour is here,' she said. (53-55)

She beat her arms, and she cried full fain

And she swayed and wavered there. (56-7)

"Ballad of the Bird-Bride" also uses alliteration in the following stanza:

Dear, will you never relent, come back?

I loved you long and true.

O Winged white wife, and our children three,

Of the wild wind's kin though ye surely be,

Are ye not of my kin too? (76-80)

The use of repetition and alliteration in this poem emphasizes that the narrator's wife *is* an animal, and though he loved her well, he cannot repress her true nature as a gull.
Rosumand Marriott Watson uses the traditional ballad form in "A Ballad of the Were-Wolf," which centers on a domestic struggle between a husband and wife, and can be thought of as a "primitive ballad". There are three instances of enjambment in "A Ballad of the Were-Wolf" that highlight important developments in the narrative:

For I hae scotched yon great great wolf
   That took our bairnies twa. (11-2)

This use of enjambment highlights two key points in the narrative: First that a wolf has stolen the couple’s children and second that the husband has been engaging in a physical struggle with the wolf for dominance. The second point becomes especially important later in the narrative when the reader learns the wolf is also the wife, meaning the power struggle in this ballad is between a husband and a wife, rather than between a man and a beast.

Fu’ fast she went out-owre the bent
   Wi’outen her right for-paw. (19-20)

This use of enjambment highlights the significance of the wolf losing its right paw. The last stanza of "A Ballad of the Were-Wolf" reads:

She stretchit him out her lang right arm,
   An’ caud as the deid stude he.

The flames louped bricht i’ the gloamin’ licht-
   There was nae hand there to see! (37-40)

The loss of the wife’s right hand is what connects her to the were-wolf, making it essential to the narrative:

Till she stude but a span frae the auld gudeman
   Whiles never a word spak she. (31-2)

This use of enjambment emphasizes the festering anger growing within the wife. The two lines prior read, “O hooly, hooly rose she up, / Wi’ the red licht in her e’e” (29-30).

"A Ballad of the Were-Wolf" uses repeated imagery to highlight important elements of the narrative with the color red:

Sae dour ye luik i’ the chimney-neuk,
   Wi’ the red licht in your e’e! (7-8)

The first was white, an’ the last was red;
   And the fresh bluid dreeped adown. (35-6)

The "red light" in the wife’s eye can be read as the suppression of female power and aggression in Victorian marriages, because even though the wife remains silent throughout the poem, her primal nature still shines through the red light in her eyes.

"A Ballad of the Were-Wolf" also uses internal rhymes and dialogue to enhance the language of the poem:

The rain fa’s chill, and the win’ ca’s shrill (3)

Sae dour ye luik, i’ the chimney-neuk (8)

’Twas a sair, sair strife for my very life (15)

But I’ll hae her heart or e’er we part (18)

The flames louped bricht i’ the gloamin’ licht (39)
Rosamund Marriott Watson

Born: October 6, 1860
Died: December 29, 1911 (Age 51)
Hometown: London, England
Spouse(s):
  • George Armytage (1879 - 1885)
  • Arthur Graham Tomson (1887 - 1895)
  • H.B. Marriott Watson (1895 - Till death)
Children:
  • Eulalie Brown-Hovelt (née Armytage)
  • Daphne Mockford (née Armytage)
  • Graham Tomson
  • Richard Marriott Watson

Collective Works

Volumes of Poetry

- Tares (1884)
- The Bird-Bride (1889)
- A Summer Night (1891)
- Vespertilia (1895)
- After Sunset (1903)
- The Lamp and the Lute (1912)

Other Works

- The Art of the House (1897)
- Old Books, Fresh Flowers (1899)
- An Island Rose (1900)
- The Patchwork Quilt (1900)
- The Heart of a Garden (1906)
The Ballad as a Poetic Form

The Ballad is a poem that recounts a story, and typically exhibits the following eight features:

1. Simple Stanzas
2. Abrupt transitions between stanzas
3. Refrains
4. Stock descriptive phrases
5. Incremental repetition
6. Dialogue
7. Minimal characterization
8. An impersonal narrator

The traditional meter of the ballad, also known as "common meter", alternates lines of iambic tetrameter (four feet lines with eight syllables per line) and iambic trimeter (three feet lines with six syllables per line) and consists of quatrains (four-line stanzas) with an A,B,C,B rhyme scheme. Below is the breakdown of a traditional ballad stanza:

Line 1- Iambic tetrameter A
Line 2- Iambic trimeter B
Line 3- Iambic tetrameter C
Line 4: Iambic trimeter B

Although it may seem rigid, the ballad still allows for variation within the form, often drawing emphasis to significant lines with the use of enjambment and caesuras.
**Synopsis for "The Ballad of the Werewolf"**

Due to the difficulty of the language, many have found Rosamund Marriott Watson’s “A Ballad of the Werewolf” hard to understand. This section aims to provide the reader with a synopsis by highlighting the major events in the poem and some of the old English words as they are translated from their dialect.

The poem takes place in a cabin at night, during a cold and rainy storm. The ‘gudewife’ who is introduced in the first line of the poem, sits in the ‘chimney nook’ and watches the fire as she sits to keep warm. Her husband, coming in from the storm, enters the house when he notices his wife’s face is pale and asks why her cheek is so pale. He recognizes a transformation in his wife where she ‘glowers’ at him like a beast. This is when he notices a red light in her eye.

The Goodman goes on to tell his wife that she should welcome him more than any other night because he has crippled the great grey wolf that took their two children. He goes on to tell her that it was a sore rivalry that threatened his life as he wrestled the beast alone. The Goodman claims he will kill the beast if they ever meet again.

A sharp stroke of the goodman’s knife forced the hold of the beast away. And quickly, the wolf rushed out over towards the heath without her right paw. The Goodman tells his wife to tack the beasts foot on the wall and claims that the next time they meet that one of them shall be killed.

The Goodman flings his pouch onto the goodwife’s lap where the fire light shines brightly. But when they look to see the grey wolf’s paw, they in fact see a bloody, human hand. Without saying a word, the wife softly rises to her feet with the red light in her eye, until she stood ‘but a span’ from the Goodman.

She starts to unravel the clothes that are wrapped around her long right arm. The first pieces of clothing appear white, but as she takes off the layers of her clothes, they begin to show red, and reveal the fresh blood that drips down from her wounded right arm.

She stretches her wounded arm out toward to the Goodman, who stands there as cold as the dead. They both stare at the goodwife’s handless right arm where the flames from the fire loupe brighter and brighter.

**Dialects of English**

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Discussion Questions:

**The Ballad of the Bird-Bride:**

1. What are some thematic associations of the ballad form? Which of these are realized in this literary ballad?
2. What is added to the poem by its alleged origins in an Eskimo tale?
4. What are we to think of the act of capture? Was this a valid or well-omened marriage? What do you make of the bird’s unhappy wailing?
5. Is the bird-bride content with her human life?
6. What does she require of her husband? What causes him to violate his oath? Are we expected to feel sympathy for his act or to judge him?
7. What is the symbolism of his shooting of four gulls? Was the ending inevitable?
8. What is the effect of the fact that the poem’s last words are spoken by the grieving husband rather than by the wife? Was there a solution to the problem of the bird-bride’s dual origins?
9. What are some themes or meanings suggested by the poem?
10. Would you be surprised to learn that this poem was written by a woman who deserted her husband and children? Can the poem be seen as an apology? A self-defense? A thought experiment?

**A Ballad of the Were-Wolf:**

1. What is the point of this gruesome ballad? Is it more effective because told in northern/Scots dialect?
2. What are some ironies in the "goodman’s" attitude toward what he has done? Who is responsible for his error?
3. What happens at the end of the poem? Can it be said to conclude “in medias res”?

4. Does this poem resemble other RMW poems in theme? In its presentation of the mother’s relationship to her children?

5. What would the reader have assumed from this poem’s title? What can we surmise from the poem’s language, and from the setting in stanza one?

6. What seems ominous about the “goodman”’s speech and his wife’s implied response? By the brutal tale he recounts?

7. What is noted about the “goodwife”’s bearing as she confronts him? At what point do we realize her identity?

8. What do you make of the poem’s ending? What do you think happens next? Why do you think the poem denies its readers closure?

9. How do you interpret the poem’s latent themes? Does it help in interpreting this poem to know that Rosamund Marriott Watson was a thrice-married woman who by Victorian law lost access to her children by her first two marriages?

10. Whose view does the poem present—or is the tale presented neutrally?

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Bibliography


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