

Mary Coleridge

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Selected Poems

of

Mary Coleridge

**selected and edited by
Simon Avery**

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Introduction

The poetry of the late-Victorian writer Mary Coleridge is often startling and idiosyncratic, challenging and disturbing. Over the course of a quarter of a century, Coleridge wrote nearly 250 poems—lyrics, ballads, dramatic monologues, sonnets, elegies and occasional verse—which engage with issues as wide ranging as the politics of relationships and the position of women, religious doubt and spiritual experience, nature and the urban space, history, war, art and creativity. Whilst the choice of diction and stanza form can appear deceptively simple at times, the poems are written with poise and control and their arguments are often intricate, elliptical and full of unresolved tensions. Clearly suggesting the influence of poets such as Robert Browning, Emily Brontë and Christina Rossetti, and paralleling the techniques of more modern poets like Thomas Hardy, Charlotte Mew and D.H. Lawrence, Coleridge's poems have much to tell us about the shifting nature of poetry and poetics in the Victorian *fin-de-siècle* and early twentieth century. Certainly, they deserve to be more widely known than they currently are.

Born in London in 1861, Mary Elizabeth Coleridge was descended from one of nineteenth-century Britain's most famous literary families with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the major Romantic poet and critic, as her great-great uncle, and Sara Coleridge, the acclaimed translator, editor and novelist, as her great-aunt. It was an incredible ancestry and Mary was keen to follow in the family line from an early age. To this end, she was clearly supported and encouraged by her parents, both of whom were great lovers and patrons of the arts. Her father, Arthur Duke Coleridge, worked in law all his life as a Clerk of the Assize on the Midland Circuit, but he was also a talented singer who twice performed with the famous Swedish soprano, Jenny Lind, at her request, and who helped found the London Bach Choir in 1875. Her mother, Anna Jameson, was also an accomplished amateur singer and between them,

Coleridge's parents established the family home on Cromwell Road, South Kensington, as a regular meeting place for many of the key literary and artistic figures of the day. Frequent visitors included the art critic John Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelite painters John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt, the animal and landscape painter Edward Landseer, the composer Charles Stanford, the actress Fanny Kemble, and, of particular interest to Mary, the major poets of the period, Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning. Coleridge always admired Tennyson's poetry and her family spent considerable time with the Laureate both in London and elsewhere,¹ but it was Browning who undoubtedly attracted her the most. She would always speak of Browning in terms of revered hero-worship—in her semi-autobiographical essay, 'The Drawing Room', for example, she called him 'the greatest man in the world'²—and her copies of his poems were read over and over and heavily annotated (she was particularly drawn to *The Ring and the Book*, his complex epic based on a seventeenth-century murder). Certainly, Browning's influence can be felt in many of her own poems with their experiments in multiple voices and perspectives, their use of the uncanny and the grotesque, and their concern with the intricate workings of the mind.

Like her great female poetic predecessor, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Coleridge always believed education to be the key to both personal and artistic development. A keen student and autodidact, she read widely in literature and history—she had a particular love of Malory, Shakespeare, the Elizabethan dramatists and Walter Scott which can be felt in the language and dramatic scenes of a number of her poems—and she was also an accomplished linguist, fluent in French, German and Italian at an early age and persuading her father to teach her Hebrew when she was just twelve years old because she was

¹ See, for example, Ella Coltman's account of the Coleridges and Tennyson on the Isle of Wight. Reprinted by Michael Millgate as 'Table-Rapping With Tennyson', *Literary Imagination* 8.1 (2006), 1–17.

² *Non Sequitur* (London: James Nisbet, 1900), p.201.

The Selected Poems

of

Mary Coleridge

The Other Side of a Mirror

I sat before my glass one day,
And conjured up a vision bare,
Unlike the aspects glad and gay,
That erst were found reflected there—
The vision of a woman, wild
With more than womanly despair.

Her hair stood back on either side
A face bereft of loveliness.
It had no envy now to hide
What once no man on earth could guess.
It formed the thorny aureole
Of hard, unsanctified distress.

Her lips were open—not a sound
Came through the parted lines of red.
Whate'er it was, the hideous wound
In silence and in secret bled.
No sigh relieved her speechless woe,
She had no voice to speak her dread.

And in her lurid eyes there shone
The dying flame of life's desire,
Made mad because its hope was gone,
And kindled at the leaping fire
Of jealousy, and fierce revenge,
And strength that could not change nor tire.

Shade of a shadow in the glass,
O set the crystal surface free!
Pass—as the fairer visions pass—
Nor ever more return, to be
The ghost of a distracted hour,
That heard me whisper: —'I am she!'

The White Women*

Where dwell the lovely, wild white women folk,
Mortal to man?
They never bowed their necks beneath the yoke,
They dwelt alone when the first morning broke
And Time began.

Taller are they than man, and very fair,
Their cheeks are pale,
At sight of them the tiger in his lair,
The falcon hanging in the azure air,
The eagles quail.

The deadly shafts their nervous hands let fly
Are stronger than our strongest—in their form
Larger, more beauteous, carved amazingly,
And when they fight, the wild white women cry
The war-cry of the storm.

Their words are not as ours. If man might go
Among the waves of Ocean when they break
And hear them—hear the language of the snow
Falling on torrents—he might also know
The tongue they speak.

Pure are they as the light; they never sinned,
But when the rays of the eternal fire
Kindle the West, their tresses they unbind
And fling their girdles to the Western wind,
Swept by desire.

Lo, maidens to the maidens then are born,
Strong children of the maidens and the breeze,
Dreams are not—in the glory of the morn,
Seen through the gates of ivory and horn—
More fair than these.

And none may find their dwelling. In the shade
 Primeval of the forest oaks they hide.
One of our race, lost in an awful glade,
Saw with his human eyes a wild white maid,
 And gazing, died.

* From a legend of Malay, told by Hugh Clifford [Coleridge's note]

The Witch

I have walked a great while over the snow,
And I am not tall nor strong.
My clothes are wet, and my teeth are set,
And the way was hard and long.
I have wandered over the fruitless earth,
But I never came here before.
O lift me over the threshold, and let me in at the door!

The cutting wind is a cruel foe.
I dare not stand in the blast.
My hands are stone, and my voice a groan,
And the worst of death is past.
I am but a little maiden still,
My little white feet are sore.
O lift me over the threshold, and let me in at the door!

Her voice was the voice that women have,
Who plead for their heart's desire.
She came—she came—and the quivering flame
Sank and died in the fire.
It never was lit again on my hearth
Since I hurried across the floor,
To lift her over the threshold, and let her in at the door.

Master and Guest

There came a man across the moor,
Fell and foul of face was he.
He left the path by the cross-roads three,
And stood in the shadow of the door.

I asked him in to bed and board.
I never hated any man so.
He said he could not say me No.
He sat in the seat of my own dear lord.

'Now sit you by my side!' he said,
'Else may I neither eat nor drink.
You would not have me starve, I think.'
He ate the offerings of the dead.

'I'll light you to your bed,' quoth I.
'My bed is yours—but light the way!'
I might not turn aside nor stay;
I showed him where we twain did lie.

The cock was trumpeting the morn.
He said: 'Sweet love, a long farewell!
You have kissed a citizen of Hell,
And a soul was doomed when you were born.

Mourn, mourn no longer for your dear!
Him may you never meet above.
The gifts that Love hath given to Love,
Love gives away again to Fear.'

Regina

My Queen her sceptre did lay down,
She took from her head the golden crown
Worn by right of her royal birth.
Her purple robe she cast aside,
And the scarlet vestures of her pride,
That was the pride of the earth.
In her nakedness was she
Queen of the world, herself and me.

My Queen took up her sceptre bright,
Her crown more radiant than the light,
The rubies gleaming out of the gold.
She donned her robe of purple rare,
And did a deed that none may dare,
That makes the blood run cold.
And in her bravery is she
Queen of herself, the world and me.