

Conversation Pieces  
Volume 20

Voices From Fairyland:  
The Fantastical Poems of  
Mary Coleridge, Charlotte Mew, and  
Sylvia Townsend Warner

Edited and With Poems by  
Theodora Goss





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For Terri Windling, who has done so much  
to support contemporary women writing  
fantastical poetry.

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## Introduction

When L. Timmel Duchamp suggested that I edit an anthology of fantastical poetry by women for Aqueduct Press, I said, “That sounds wonderful! Let’s include Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and let’s also include the poets who are no longer read, like Dora Sigerson Shorter, Lizette Woodworth Reese, and Rosamund Marriott Watson, and...”

Timmi said, “Yes, but we’ll need to make it short, and we should include some of your own poems.”

This book is the result.

As you have already noticed, it does not include the poets I listed above. But they are well worth seeking out. You are probably already familiar with Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market,” which is taught in so many college classes. If I were editing an anthology of fantastical poetry by women that made any claims to comprehensiveness, I would begin with Christina Rossetti. But I would certainly also include Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “A Musical Instrument,” Dora Sigerson Shorter’s “The Watcher in the Wood,” Lizette Woodworth Reese’s “The Singer,” and Rosamund Marriott Watson’s “The Ballad of the Bird-Bride.”<sup>1</sup> Watson’s poem, in particular, reflects one of the themes that runs throughout fantastical poetry by women: the woman who belongs elsewhere. A hunter sees one of the gray gulls that fly around the Arctic circle, perched upon the ice in the shape of a woman. He captures her and takes her home to be his wife. They

have children together and lead a seemingly contented married life, but he forgets his promise to her, never to harm the great gray gulls. When she sees that he has broken his promise,

She beat her arms, and she cried full fain

As she swayed and wavered there.

“Fetch me feathers, my children three,

Feathers and plumes for you and me,

Bonny gray wings to wear!”

They ran to her side, our children three,

With the plumage black and grey;

Then she bent her down and drew them near,

She laid the plumes on our children dear,

Mid the snow and the salt sea-spray.

“Babes of mine, of the wild wind’s kin,

Feather ye quick, nor stay.

Oh, oho! but the wild winds blow!

Babes of mine, it is time to go:

Up, dear hearts, and away!”<sup>2</sup>

Certainly, if I were editing a comprehensive anthology of fantastical poetry by women, I would include Watson’s poem.

This book has a narrower purpose. In this book I have chosen to focus on poems by Mary Coleridge, Charlotte Mew, and Sylvia Townsend Warner because of all the poets I could have included, they are the ones who I think have been most unjustly neglected—the most talented among those whose talents have gone largely unrecognized. They are also the ones I most love, but I think that unjust neglect is a part of my love for them. I feel protective toward them, and also fierce in promot-

ing their work. I do not have to worry about arguing for Christina Rossetti's relevance; she is, as I have mentioned, taught everywhere. But I feel that I have to argue for Warner because, although attention has been paid to her prose, almost nothing has been written about her poetry. While I was working on this anthology, a friend asked me why I was working on it rather than on a story, or even a novel. I said, "If I don't do it, who will?" It felt like an obligation toward three women writers who have influenced me deeply.

But Coleridge, Mew, and Warner are only three examples of what I consider a broader phenomenon, the rest of the ice that must be present, underwater, when we see icebergs floating on a northern sea. That underwater ice is the tradition of women writing fantastical poetry. I will show you what I mean by focusing on one theme. Over and over again, women have written about witches. In "Witch-Wife," Edna St. Vincent Millay describes a woman whose "voice is a string of coloured beads, / Or steps leading into the sea" who "was not made for any man,"<sup>3</sup> not even the narrator, to whom she is married. The witch in Anne Sexton's "Her Kind" is fiercer and stronger. She tells us,

I have found the warm caves in the woods,  
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,  
closets, silks, innumerable goods;  
fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves:  
whining, rearranging the disaligned.<sup>4</sup>

She creates a domestic space for herself in a place that is decidedly undomestic, that is wild, feeding worms and elves rather than the children that the women who are not witches presumably feed. "A woman like that is misunderstood," Sexton tell us, and we can certainly

understand why, if her voice is a string of colored beads or those mysterious steps. She must speak differently, in a language that we cannot quite understand. And here is Emily Dickinson:

Witchcraft was hung, in History,  
But History and I  
Find all the Witchcraft that we need  
Around us, every Day—<sup>5</sup>

Whatever you do, she implies, you cannot eradicate witchcraft. It is part of the world around us, always present. And we—History and Emily Dickinson—need witchcraft. I wonder what they need it for exactly, but Emily Dickinson, always her enigmatic self, does not tell us.

This book contains Mary Coleridge's "The Witch," and Sylvia Townsend Warner also wrote about a witch in her most famous novel *Lolly Willowes*. The poem and novel give us opposite visions of the witch. Coleridge's witch comes into civilization and destroys the house that was, for the Victorians, the central image of civilized life. *Lolly Willowes* leaves London and her brother's household, which represent to her the conformity and oppression of civilized life, for a rural village in the Chilterns. There, wanting only to be left alone, she almost inadvertently makes a pact with the Devil and becomes a witch. Near the end of the novel, after various adventures that include meeting the Devil himself, she tells him,

When I think of witches, I seem to see all over  
England, all over Europe, women living and  
growing old, as common as blackberries, and  
as unregarded. I see them, wives and sisters  
of respectable men, chapel members, and  
blacksmiths, and small farmers, and Puritans. In  
places like Bedfordshire, the sort of country one

sees from the train. You know. Well, there they were, there they are, child-rearing, house-keeping, hanging washed dishcloths on currant bushes; and for diversion each other's silly conversation, and listening to men talk together in the way men talk and women listen. Quite different to the way women talk, and men listen, if they listen at all. And all the time being thrust further down into dullness when the one thing all women hate is to be thought dull.<sup>6</sup>

Lolly's speech reminds me of a speech in *Jane Eyre*, that famously controversial speech in which Jane says, "Women are supposed to be very calm generally; but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags." Jane's speech contains an implicit threat: "It is in vain to say that human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it."<sup>7</sup> If they cannot find it, they will become revolutionaries. They will pull down the barricades.

Lolly, a more modern woman, gives us a more modern image for women's revolutionary potential. She says to the Devil, who unlike the men she has met, is indeed listening to her,

Is it true that you can poke the fire with a stick of dynamite in perfect safety? I used to take my nieces to scientific lectures, and I believe I

heard it then. Anyhow, even if it isn't true of dynamite, it's true of women. But they know they are dynamite, and long for the concussion that may justify them. Some may get religion, and then they're all right, I expect. But for the others, for so many, what can there be but witchcraft? That strikes them real. Even if other people still find them safe and usual, and go on poking with them, they know in their hearts how dangerous, how incalculable, how extraordinary they are. Even if they never do anything with their witchcraft, they know it's there—ready!<sup>8</sup>

Lolly's dynamite is a technologically advanced form of what witches have always been associated with: fire. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane's double, the self that she has repressed and that must therefore come back into the narrative, is the madwoman Bertha Rochester. It is when Jane thinks her subversive thoughts that she hears Bertha's laughter, up on the third story of Thornfield Hall, and it is when she begins to feel an attraction toward Edward Rochester that Bertha burns his bed. Bertha expresses, in literal form, the passionate and violent impulses that Jane cannot express. She is, finally, the revolutionary force of the novel, the one who destroys by fire. She is presented explicitly as a witch, "prompted by her familiar to burn people in their beds at night,"<sup>9</sup> and like a witch, like Sexton's witch, for example, she is finally burned. It is not surprising, somehow, that after Rochester discovers his bed on fire, he accuses Jane of being a witch as well.<sup>10</sup> Lolly's final sentence makes me wonder, as Dickinson's poem made me wonder: ready for what? Lolly says, "One doesn't become a witch to run round being harmful, or to run round being helpful either, a district visitor

on a broomstick. It's to escape all that—to have a life of one's own."<sup>11</sup> As Millay, Sexton, and Brontë imply, for women, having a life of one's own is, in and of itself, a subversive and revolutionary act. Perhaps that is why Dickinson needed witchcraft. Certainly, history could have used more of it.

So, why witches? I think Lolly's speech helps us to understand why the witch is such a central figure in many women writers' imaginations. We define things by what they are not. A witch is what a woman is not supposed to be. In reclaiming the witch, women writers are reclaiming the parts of themselves that they are not supposed to show in polite society: their independence, their strength, their wickedness—their ability to destabilize patriarchal structures if they do not comply with the categories and imperatives that keep those structures standing. Their inner Bertha Rochesters. The witch is a woman outside of patriarchal social constructs such as the state, the church, and the family, as these institutions were conceived at least through the late twentieth century, and often still are today. She is a woman who, in the outsider status given to her by society, in her cottage or cave in the woods, can begin to define herself. In the Chilterns, Lolly can begin to understand who she is, undisturbed by the constant expectations of others. The witch is a creative space in which women can begin to discover who they are.<sup>12</sup>

I believe there is a tradition of women writing fantastical poetry, and that if we could read the poets who are no longer read, like Shorter, Reese, and Watson, we could begin to trace that tradition. I hope I have begun to trace it in this book. The way in which women writers use witches reveals two fundamental components of

that tradition, and indeed of all fantasy writing: repetition and revision. I certainly do not claim that repetition and revision are unique to fantasy. They are fundamental to literature itself, in which every poem, every story, every novel is a repetition and revision of what has come before.<sup>13</sup> But they are particularly important to fantasy, as we can see in the long tradition of fairy-tale retellings. Even *Jane Eyre* begins as a Cinderella story, nods along the way to Bluebeard, and ends with Beauty and the Beast. The poems and novels I have mentioned above repeat the image of the witch, but they all use that image in different ways, to say different things. I hope that my own poem “The Witch” is a worthy addition to this tradition. It is certainly, as the poem implies, a daughter of this tradition, of women writing the witch. I think you can see repetition and revision in the tradition of fantastical poetry by women. If you look closely at the poems included in this anthology, you will see common images and themes—the mysterious call that summons you from all you have known; the house that has been abandoned, and to which you will not return; the woman who belongs elsewhere, as in Watson’s poem—used in ways that are similar but also different. Watson’s bird-bride, for example, is related to, but also one step removed from, the witch. She is the woman who belongs elsewhere—and has the power to go. The witch, who may instinctively feel that she belongs elsewhere, has no wings to put on. She must find a broomstick to fly with, make a decision to move into those caves in the woods. Compared with the magical departure of the bird-bride, Lolly’s move to the Chilterns is a relatively pedestrian way to find freedom. When they dream, what do witch-



es dream of? I think they dream of soaring like bird-brides.<sup>14</sup>

Someday, perhaps, I will be able to edit that longer anthology of fantastical poetry by women and show you repetition and revision in all of its variety. In the meantime, I hope that you will enjoy the poems in this anthology. They are like the tips of icebergs, floating somewhere around the Arctic circle. Imagine the ice beneath.

## Notes

1. These poems can be found in two of my favorite anthologies of poetry by women writers. "Goblin Market," "A Musical Instrument," and "The Ballad of the Bird Bride" are reprinted in *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology*, edited by Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds. "The Watcher in the Wood" and "The Singer" are reprinted in *Sound the Deep Waters: Women's Romantic Poetry in the Victorian Age*, edited by Pamela Norris.
2. Watson, pp. 584-5.
3. Millay, p. 46.
4. Sexton, "Her Kind," p. 16.
5. Dickinson, p. 656.
6. Warner, *Lolly Willowses*, pp. 126-7.
7. Brontë, pp. 129-30.
8. Warner, *Lolly Willowses*, p. 128.
9. Brontë, p. 347.
10. Brontë, p. 174.
11. Warner, *Lolly Willowses*, p.129.

12. And also to write. In Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora's cousin says of a book she has written, "I saw at once the thing had witchcraft in't, / Whereof the reading calls up dangerous spirits: I rather bring it to the witch" (Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, p. 94), meaning of course Aurora herself. Although her cousin attempts to convince her that women should not be poets, she chooses poetry—symbolic witchcraft. Sexton connects the witch to writing in a more positive way. At the beginning of her poetry collection *Transformations*, in which she revises the fairy tales that we know from childhood, she writes, "The speaker in this case / is a middle-aged witch, me—" with "my face in a book / and my mouth wide, / ready to tell you a story or two (Sexton, "The Gold Key," p. 223). The witch is the one who tells stories. She is also the one who changes how the stories are told.
13. John Paul Riquelme, with whom I have written about two women writers, Mary Shelley and Octavia Butler, who also wrote fantasy, although we call it science fiction, taught me to think of repetition and revision in terms of two fantastical figures: Narcissus and Echo. Narcissus represents the exactness of repetition. Echo, who repeats what is said to her, but never exactly, represents revision, the creative reworking of what others have said before. She is also, therefore, a figure for the poet, who both repeats and creates something new, as in that old poetic form called Echo Verse, in which a word echoed at the end of a line carries a different meaning. But really, one could call all poetry Echo. It seems appropriate to me, in this anthology, to identify poetry with a fantastical female figure.
14. In *Aurora Leigh*, when her cousin attempts to convince her to give up poetry, Aurora looks at him "As a falcon set on falconer's finger may" look at the

falconer, “With sidelong head, and startled, braving  
eye, / Which means, ‘You’ll see—you’ll see! I’ll soon  
take flight, / You shall not hinder’” (Browning, *Aurora  
Leigh*, p. 95). Symbolically, the witch becomes a bird-  
bride.



MARY COLERIDGE  
(1861-1907)

Unwelcome

The Other Side of a Mirror

The White Women

The Witch

Master and Guest

The Witches' Wood

The Lady of Trees

Nonsense

A Day-Dream

Veneta

Wilderspin

The Deserted House

## Unwelcome

We were young, we were merry, we were very very wise,  
And the door stood open at our feast,  
When there passed us a woman with the West in her eyes,  
And a man with his back to the East.

O, still grew the hearts that were beating so fast,  
The loudest voice was still.  
The jest died away on our lips as they passed,  
And the rays of July struck chill.

The cups of red wine turned pale on the board,  
The white bread black as soot.  
The hound forgot the hand of her lord,  
She fell down at his foot.

Low let me lie, where the dead dog lies,  
Ere I sit me down again at a feast,  
When there passes a woman with the West in her eyes,  
And a man with his back to the East.

## 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!"