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Mathilde Blind, *Selected Fin-de-Siècle Poetry and Prose*, ed. by James Diedrick
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Mathilde Blind's writings, lectures, and intellectual interests make her a decadent and New Woman figure of the fin de siècle. Born in Mannheim, she was exiled from Germany, France, and Belgium after her stepfather Karl Blind took part in the Baden Revolution; the family settled in London, where they received visits from Giuseppe Mazzini, Karl Marx, and others. She wrote poems that criticized both the sexism of Darwinian sexual selection and the trope of the fallen woman, published in the Pre-Raphaelite journal *The Dark Blue*, and formed friendships with Amy Levy, Vernon Lee, Arthur Symons, Mona Caird, and other late nineteenth-century writers. Her corpus includes not only a wide range of poems – among them epic poems, dramatic monologues, and ballads – but also lectures, critical reviews, biographies, translations, and a novel.

While much of Blind's work is available digitally, for example, through the *Victorian Women Writers' Project*, there has not been, to my knowledge, an edited collection of Blind's work since Symons's *The Poetical Works of Mathilde Blind* in 1900. James Diedrick's *Mathilde Blind: Selected Fin-de-Siècle Poetry and Prose*, the sixth volume in the MHRA's Jewelled Tortoise series, collects and annotates her three major volumes of verse: *The Ascent of Man* (1889), *Dramas in Miniature* (1891), and *Birds of Paradise: Songs of the Orient and Occident* (1895), bookended by two standalone poems, 'Nocturne' (1872) and 'Sea-Music' (1896). The volume will be of strong interest to students of decadence, the New Woman, and fin de siècle literary culture.

The volume begins with a critical introduction that establishes Blind as a secular, cosmopolitan freethinker and committed feminist whose work challenges gender norms and reflects a pan-European sensibility (p. 6). Diedrick discusses Blind's multiple identities as 'a Jewish woman, a sexual nonconformist, a political radical, and an expatriate' (p. 5), and her

contemporaries' tendency to assign her outsider status. The introduction surveys Blind's 'intellectual apprenticeship' (p. 1) as it informed her writing of the 1870s and 1880s, including her indebtedness to Enlightenment ideas, her translations of David Strauss and Marie Bashkirtseff, and her biographies of George Eliot and Madame Roland. Diedrick also provides helpful biographical contexts, such as her grief at the suicide of her brother Ferdinand following his failed attempt to assassinate Otto von Bismarck, and her friendships with fellow nonconformists Lee and Caird, including the sensual descriptions of Caird in Blind's *Commonplace Book*. Subsections address relevant contexts for the subsequent volumes of Blind's poetry, including her knowledge of evolutionary science, her challenge to gender norms through the form of the dramatic monologue, and the coexistence of both anticolonial and imperial and Orientalist strains in her work.

The contextual introduction sets up the first volume of Blind's poetry, *The Ascent of Man*, an ambitious evolutionary epic that gallops across broad swathes of human and planetary history. Readers will appreciate Diedrick's annotations to this highly allusive long poem, with its shifting rhyme schemes and references ranging across Greek philosophy, Hindu mythology, the French Revolution, and nineteenth-century industrialism. Blind's feminist revision of Darwinian struggle can also be usefully paired with her 1886 lecture to the Shelley Society on 'Shelley's View of Nature Contrasted with Darwin's', which the volume reproduces in full. Here, Blind finds in post-Darwinian nature 'the power of evil from which the poet's sensitive soul shrank with such horror – lust, hunger, rapine, cruelty' (p. 241). The essay and the poem will be of interest to scholars of both evolution and ecocriticism alike, as well as those interested in the afterlives of Romanticism. Less well known in Blind's oeuvre are her 'Poems of the Open Air' that follow *The Ascent*, which include her two sonnets on the 1883 Krakatoa eruption, 'Red Sunsets'. These intriguing sonnets, according to Diedrick, 'combine both the generalized end-of-the-world foreboding prevalent during the *fin de siècle* and Blind's dream of a socialist future' (p. 118, n. 104).

Many of the poems in the next volume, *Dramas in Miniature*, address late-Victorian gender relations. Both ‘The Message’ and ‘The Battle of Flowers’ are about sex workers, and feature unrepentant subjects and moments of intergenerational contact with other women. In ‘The Message’, for example, a young girl gives flowers to a dying prostitute, which transports her back to memories of a childhood with her beloved mother. The volume also reproduces Ford Madox Brown’s frontispiece illustration of this moment, in which the sufferer receives the blossoms and falls into reverie. ‘A Mother’s Dream’ further criticizes unequal gender dynamics with its story of a woman who has been seduced and abandoned by an English gentleman. ‘The Russian Student’s Tale’ exposes male arrogance, and might, like the other poems in the volume, be usefully paired in the classroom with dramatic monologues by D. G. Rossetti, Robert Browning, Augusta Webster, and others.

The overarching motif of birds in flight structures the last poetry volume included here, *Birds of Passage: Songs of the Orient and Occident*. The first section, ‘Songs of the Orient’, inspired by Blind’s travels to Egypt, evidences the stance of the ‘belated traveler’, Ali Behdad’s term for someone whose perception of the Orient is already shaped by colonialism and the tourist industry (quoted on p. 38). As Diedrick observes in the introductory headnote, some poems in the volume demonstrate an anticolonial perspective, such as ‘The Beautiful Beshareen Boy’, which is about a sixteen-year-old boy who is taken from Egypt to The World’s Columbian Exposition to be put on display. This anticolonial perspective is, however, not as strong or robust as that of *The Heather on Fire*, Blind’s protest of the Highland Land Clearances (published in 1886, and not included in this volume) (p. 39). The imperial gaze of Blind’s feminism, for example, is evident in ‘Mourning Women’, a poem that associates Muslim women with abjection (p. 210). ‘Nuit’ merges Egyptian mythology with decadent tropes, imagining the primaeval night of Egyptian myth as ‘a kind of Decadent femme fatale on a cosmic scale’ (p. 193, n. 45).

The second section, ‘Songs of the Occident’, contains poems on Rome, Paris, and St. Gotthard in the Alps, including meditations on a broken Cupid sculpture and on Roman fountains

that will interest scholars of late nineteenth-century visual culture. ‘Shakespeare Sonnets’ are poems inspired by Blind’s trip to Stratford-upon-Avon, including two on Anne Hathaway that Blind sent to Richard Garnett for feedback; Diedrick’s annotations quote from their correspondence and show how Garnett’s edits worked to ‘diminish both the status of Anne and the erotic charge of the poem itself’ (p. 225, n. 113).

Diedrick’s arrangement of these three volumes and two poems makes new themes and relationships evident across Blind’s work. Some of these, like androgyny, polymorphous sexuality, and the femme fatale, are addressed by Diedrick in the notes. Others will arise as readers encounter the juxtaposition of poems included here. I was struck, for example, by how Blind emerges, like her friend Algernon Swinburne, as an ardent poet of the sea. In the opening ‘Nocturne’, which appeared in *The Dark Blue*, the speaker describes boating with a beloved over sea waves that ‘Bosomlike heaving with languid sighs, | Lifted, and tumbled, and broke with desire, | Licked, and fawned on her with tongues of fire’ (ll. 18-20). We might read the later discovery of the lover’s death, ‘Icily beautiful! terribly fair!’ (l. 65), her hair twining seductively around the bereaved lover, as a decadent echo and possible queering of Tennyson’s ‘The Lady of Shalott’, with its imagery of the floating, alluring dead. The sea motif continues in *The Ascent of Man*, with its invocation of rude life ‘multiplying in the ocean’ (I.II. l. 19), and in ‘Nuit’, where the primeval night unfolds, through internal rhyme that mimics the repetition of waves, ‘In wild commotion, | Out of the ocean, | With moan and motion’ (ll. 17-19). The poetry section of the volume closes, fittingly, with ‘Sea-Music’, which commemorates the ‘unearthly harmony’ of the water (l. 10).

In addition to these poetry volumes, Diedrick also includes selected works of Blind’s reviews of poetry, as well as contemporary reviews of her own work. The selections from Blind’s reviews establish her wide-ranging and critical eye, with pieces on William Morris’ use of alliterative measure, Arthur O’Shaughnessy’s lyric poetry, and Augusta Webster’s *Yu-Pe-Ya’s Lute. A Chinese Tale, in English Verse*. Selected responses to Blind’s own poetry offer an instructive lesson in the gendered politics of reviewing. Blind earns high praise as a lyric poet from multiple reviewers, but

is criticized, by H. F. Wilson, for lacking a ‘sense of restraint’ (p. 262), while Arthur Symons calls her work ‘careless and unfinished’ (p. 269). Diedrick’s introduction notes that Blind was likely unaware of Symons’s identity in his anonymous *Athenaeum* reviews, and would probably have taken offence by some of the editorial decisions he made in the editions of her work he brought out after her death in his role as Blind’s literary executor (p. 45). Diedrick also includes a selection from Louise Chandler Moulton’s review of *The Ascent of Man* in the Boston paper *The Sunday Herald*, which gives a sense of how Blind’s work may have reached audiences in America.

The volume also includes a table of contents, chronology of Blind’s life, and select bibliography. It is well organized and accessible, although the addition of line numbers, for some of the longer poems especially, might aid in ease of reading and discussion in the classroom for subsequent editions. As noted above, Diedrick provides helpful notes, quotations and insights drawn from Blind’s Commonplace Book and correspondence, archival documents which, to my knowledge, are not available digitally and so will offer welcome glimpses into Blind’s biography. This book will be an indispensable new resource for students and scholars of Victorian women’s poetry, travel writing, decadence, Aestheticism, the New Woman, queer and feminist literature, and literature and science.