

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 4
Issue 10 *May*

Article 5

May 1957

A Victorian Controversy: William Sharp's Letters on "Motherhood"

John J. Iorio

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 4, no.10, May 1957, p.178-184

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

178 Colby Library Quarterly

appeared in two installments in the *Revue Politique et Littéraire* (the "Revue Bleue") in Paris, October 19 and 26, 1912. This gift of Mrs. Krolik adds to the Hardy Collection at Colby a previously unrecorded item, for until this gift was received we had always supposed that Bazile's translation first appeared in 1918, as the second issue of *Les Cahiers d'Aujourd'hui*. This *Cahier* is the only Bazile entry in our centennial bibliography of Hardiana, *The First Hundred Years of Thomas Hardy* (Colby College Library, 1942, page 42), and we are grateful to the Feinberg Foundation for pushing back our knowledge of "Une Femme Imaginative" by six years, as well as for this copy of the text. Hardy's story first appeared in the *Pall Mall Magazine*, London, April 1894. Its first book appearance was in *Wessex Tales*—not the Macmillan edition, London 1888, but the 1896 London edition issued by the firm of James R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co. In 1912 Hardy transferred this story from *Wessex Tales* to *Life's Little Ironies*, and it was perhaps this transfer, or this appearance as a "Little Irony," that directed Georges Bazile's attention to the story and led to its appearance in the "Revue Bleue."



A VICTORIAN CONTROVERSY

William Sharp's Letters on "Motherhood"

By JOHN J. IORIO

IN 1882 William Sharp, the Victorian poet and critic who was to astound the literary world at the end of his career by the disclosure that he had also been "Fiona Macleod," poet of the Celtic movement, published his first book of poems, *The Human Inheritance*. One of the poems, "Motherhood," provoked immediate controversy, revealing at once some of the tensions and problems of the Vic-

Colby Library Quarterly 179

torian mind. Although the poem brought swift praise from William Butler Yeats, Walter Pater, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, other readers were equally swift in challenging its propriety, attacking its intentions, and scoring its dullness. Among the adverse critics were two of Sharp's friends, Violet Paget ("Vernon Lee") and her elder half brother, Eugene Lee-Hamilton, poet.

The negative ascriptions to "Motherhood" moved Sharp to a defense of it in a series of letters now in the Colby College Library. Written to Miss Paget and Lee-Hamilton, the letters reveal Sharp's forceful response to the criticism of his poem. In a letter to Lee-Hamilton dated Christmas, 1880, Sharp, recognizing the unusualness of his subject and anticipating misinterpretations, found it necessary to explain his poem:

"My cousin told me she had read one or two verses from a poem of mine called "Motherhood" with which you were pleased. Thinking that the complete poem might interest you, I now send a copy of it by the same post as this. I took great care in the working out of it, as the subject was extremely difficult to evolve without on the one hand falling into the Scylla of the "Fleshly School" or on the other into the Charybdis of "Mysticism." It was written from a deep sense of the beauty & sacredness of Motherhood in *itself*, in whatever form and under all circumstances. So I took three typical instances: A tigress, as exemplifying the brute creation—an Australian native, as exemplifying the lowest human savage—and a high souled, pure hearted girl as exemplifying the highest level of cultural civilization."

Sharp's wife, Elizabeth, expressed these apprehensions more explicitly in a letter to Miss Paget dated February 21, 1881. This letter, also in the Colby College Library, reads in part:

180 Colby Library Quarterly

I wonder sometimes what effect a poem such as "Motherhood" or rather perhaps "The Dead Bridegroom" will have on those who do not see his meaning—whether it be possible it could have the very opposite effect to that which he intends . . .

As adverse criticism mounted, Sharp's anxiety gave way to elaborate explanation and justification. Far too long to publish here in its entirety, a letter written to Miss Paget in March, 1881, leads us into the interior of Sharp's mind, revealing his personal mysticism, his speculations on poetic composition, and his receptivity to the divergent forces of his day. He begins by freeing himself from the taint of all schools of poetry:

"You begin by saying 'I have been thinking a good deal, of late, of the School to which that poem *Motherhood* belongs, and of the desirability of a young poet like Mr. Sharp joining it.'

In the first place, your thoughts have found an anchoring place where neither myself nor my poetical & critical friends have yet done: in other words, 'Motherhood' never seemed to me or them to belong to any school at all. It certainly could not be spoken of as belonging to the Fleshly School, nor could it as to the Transcendental, or the Philosophic pure & simple, or the Didactic, or the Narrative, or the Lyric, or the Dramatic, or the Psychologic, or any other "ic" that men have fashioned unto themselves. It is nearer the Philosophic, or the Natural, than any other . . ."

He continues the attack on the Fleshly School:

"As to the latter part of the sentence—'the desirability of Mr. Sharp's joining it' (the Fleshly School) I can honestly assure you that it is the last school of Art to which I shall render my efforts, that I have little sympathy with its present phase, and that I believe both it and mock-Aestheticism will, sooner or later, die a twin and heaven-to-be-praised death."

Colby Library Quarterly 181

He goes on with a relentless condemnation of the Fleshly School, being at the same time careful to rescue Walt Whitman and Rossetti from its influence:

“With all his faults—poetic and artistic—Walt Whitman is a noble and truly great fleshly or natural poet—but I can imagine no great contemporary writer having a greater contempt for what is called the Fleshly School, or more utter repudiation of its habits of expression. Again, Gabriel Rossetti is frequently spoken of as if at the head of this School: no greater mistake could get abroad. He is intensely spiritual and refined, and so far removed both in spirit and work from the crass materialism of such poets as form this School as Milton or Dante. It is a materialism that is weighing down an already weary and over-burdened nation—materialism everywhere, & most of all alas! in the hearts of a rising generation of young men and women—not so much materialism that overlooks the soul, as materialism that has practically no soul. . . . And it is to this materialism—above all to this *intellectual* materialism—that the Fleshly School owes its rise.”

A major portion of the letter is assigned to a justification and defense of his selection of the subject of motherhood. In these efforts Sharp offers significant speculations on the genesis of his poem and on the processes of poetic composition. He writes:

“Permit me in turn to point out what seems to me an equally common confusion of ideas on the subject of how true poets write. A poet who is really a poet does not as a rule choose his subject at all—his subject chooses him. As Buxton Forman says in his critical work on Contemporary English Poetry—‘An artist whose ideas are cut as it were with a red hot blade on his very heart cannot always pick and choose his subject; he must often be chosen by his subject.’ and again, speaking of a well-known poem,—‘it is

182 Colby Library Quarterly

easy to see that neither the incidents nor the thread were arrived at by painful reasoning, or by any other process than by that real poetic intuition concerning the nature of which critics must be content to remain profoundly nescient.' I am very glad to see such a well known critic confessing this inability of *non*-poets to realise the part-intellectual, part-spiritual, part-emotional quality which is called poetic intuition."

And describing his own method, he points out:

"In like manner, *Motherhood* choose me, not I it as a subject. The idea took hold of me, enthralled me with its beauty and significance, possessed me till I gave it forth again in artistic expression. It was not till after the idea had seized my mind and imagination that I began to think of writing such a poem—and even then the whole details of it came in one intuitive flash, and I saw the poem from first to last as it now stands. . . . I had nothing to think of afterwards except the mere technical details and artistic presentment—such as glow & colour to the first part, weirdness to the second, dignity and moral beauty to the third."

Having given artistic justification for the selection of his subject, he goes on to refute the charge of indelicacy ascribed to the poem by both Violet Paget and Lee-Hamilton:

"As to the alleged impropriety of the subject of *Motherhood* I am at a loss to conceive upon what ground such a statement is put forward. I hope your brother does not still misunderstand me after my recent letter, but previously I know he had completely done so from one short sentence in his letter to me on this subject, where he says—'Besides, is not your type of civilized woman degraded by being associated with the savage and the wild beast?' This showed me that he, as I now see you have done also, looked at the

Colby Library Quarterly 183

poem and not at what *made* the poem: he looked at the external description, not at the soul-like animating idea. . . .

I see that both you & your brother have fallen into the mistake of thinking that *Motherhood* was a delineation of Passion, and written to sanctify such. Where the sexual feelings are referred to they are introduced as linked to and giving point to the idea, & never for a moment formed original *motifs*."

In his letter to Lee-Hamilton, dated October 3, 1881, Sharp advances his defense of the subject of motherhood, disclosing at the same time the evolutionary cast of his thought:

"Motherhood" was written from a deep conviction of the beauty in the state of motherhood itself, of the holy strangely similar bond of union it gave to all created things, & how it as it were forged the links whereby the chain of life reached unbroken from the polyp depths we do not see to the God whom we do not see. Looking at it as I did, I saw it transfigured to the Seal of Unity: I saw the bestial life touch the savage, and the latter's low existence edge complete nobility of womanhood, as in the spirit—I see this last again emerge into fuller spiritual periods beyond the present sphere of human life.

Despite his lengthy explanations, Sharp finally feels it necessary to summon Rossetti to a defense of "Motherhood." Sharp writes:

Under the circumstances you will not think it vain of me when I add that Rossetti,—who is now (what I and others have long believed) becoming recognized as not only one of the greatest poets of the XIX century but also one of the greatest since Shakespeare—considers "Motherhood" in the first order of work, both as regards execution (with one or two exceptions) and idea. He told me that this poem alone should enable me to take a foremost place amongst rising poets!

When we look at the letters in their entirety, we see Sharp as a complex individual, and as an individual very much of his own time—dogmatic, argumentative, mystical, imaginative, moral, and self-righteous. Whatever the

184 Colby Library Quarterly

merits of Sharp as a poet and critic may be, these letters present a vigorous and perceptive mind in an age of controversy. Long neglected, Sharp emerges as a poet deeply and conscientiously committed to his art, and as a man sensitive to the cross-currents of thought in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.



A MESSAGE FROM GARIBALDI

By *ERMANNIO F. COMPARETTI*

RECENT attempts in various Russian satellite nations to throw off their chains of bondage to Moscow remind the student of European history that these efforts to win political liberty very much resemble the efforts of Italian patriots in their long struggle for national independence and unification. After the collapse of the Napoleonic Empire in 1815, there were continual revolts in Italy against the foreign domination imposed by the Congress of Vienna. Among those in whose breasts the desire for liberty burned most intensely was the impetuous soldier, Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-1882). A letter of his, now in the Colby College Library, recalls those efforts of a century ago, when Italy rather than Hungary or Poland was the scene of action.

Garibaldi was involved, as early as 1834 (when he was only twenty-seven and a member of the secret society, *Giovane Italia*) in a revolt and escaped the firing squad only by fleeing to South America. In 1848 he returned to Savoy and offered his services to Charles Albert, King of Sardinia. In 1861, on the union of the Two Sicilies with Sardinia and the proclamation of Victor Emmanuel as King of Italy, Garibaldi retired to Caprera (Goat Island), and from there wrote the letter now in the Colby Library.