The enigma of Katharine de Mattos: reflections on her life and writings

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Katharine de Mattos, née Stevenson, remains a relatively obscure figure in the Robert Louis Stevenson saga, despite being the dedicatee of *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, as well as the unwitting catalyst of the celebrated 1888 quarrel between him and his friend William Ernest Henley. She features but slightly in his correspondence and few of her letters to him appear to have survived, whether by accident or design. Only one portrait of her, a watercolour done in later life, exists in the public domain, and no photographs whatever. She flits in and out of the Stevenson biographies, disappearing almost completely after 1888, and the recent study of Katharine by Jeremy Hodges, which centers on her supposed role in the genesis of *Jekyll and Hyde*, is marred by a lack of references and a propensity to invent where sources fail, so that she emerges as her cousin’s neglected muse and innocent victim in a way that obscures the real interest of her long and troubled life. Here I shall try to bring some perspective to that life and the forces that shaped it, drawing not only on the scattered references in Louis’s letters and poems, but also on Katharine’s own poetry and stories, almost the only direct evidence of her own distinctive voice.

**Prologue: Family Tragedy**

Katharine Elizabeth Alan Stevenson, the youngest child of Alan Stevenson (1807-65) and his wife, was born in 1851 into unpropitious circumstances. Alan, the oldest of the surviving sons of Robert Stevenson, was a classical scholar, poet, and somewhat reluctant but brilliant engineer who built the most famous of the family’s great lighthouses, Skerryvore. Alan’s marriage to Margaret Jones (a love match delayed for eleven years by her
Welsh father’s opposition) took place in 1844, and from 1846 to 1851 they produced four children, three girls and one boy, Robert Alan Mowbray Stevenson or Bob (1847-1900). But Alan’s life, and his family’s, was overshadowed from around 1844 by his ever worsening health, not just the colds, fevers and exhaustion incident on terrible working conditions, but more serious symptoms described variously as rheumatism, crippling lumbago, pain and aching joints, although with intermittent spells of seeming recovery. His worsening pains and “paraplegia” (paralysis of the lower limbs) finally disabled him from work in 1853, but were compounded in 1852 by a “severe nervous affliction,” with guilty religious melancholia, all of which led inexorably to his death in 1865.

Alan’s illness was unidentified then, but his symptoms are consistent with multiple sclerosis (MS), an occasionally remitting but progressive neuro-degenerative disease that can be accompanied by mood swings and depression. The impact on his family must have been immense, and not only in practical, financial terms, due to loss of income and the cost of his expensive, useless spa treatments, but also psychologically, as any hopes of his recovery were repeatedly dashed. Katharine can hardly have known her father in anything like a normal state, and her mother’s emotional energies would have been increasingly absorbed by his care. The brightest spark in the gloom was probably the imaginative, scatter-brained Bob, who at least had the prolonged escapes of school. How much formal education the sisters got is unknown, though Katharine was evidently a reader and acquired a good knowledge of French through some period of residence in France, where Alan had many connections. And there were happier summers when the extended family met up; Katharine recalled playing on North Berwick sands with Bob and Louis, and the three of them riding their ponies headlong through the waters of the Tweed near Innerleithen.
Marriage, writing, and struggle

Though there were family rumours of a teenaged crush between Katharine and her cousin Louis, and Hodges assumes that Katharine always pined for him, there is no certain evidence of it. A child whose parents are emotionally unavailable often makes their closest bond with an older sibling (which in turn may influence their later loves), and for Katharine this was clearly with her brilliant and adored brother. It could have been through him that she met William Sydney de Mattos, who was a Cambridge contemporary of Bob’s and like him a free-thinking atheist. He must also have been a ladies’ man, for he was described in later life as a ‘serial seducer’ and ‘satyromaniac’. To the inexperienced Katharine he could have offered an alluring escape from her blighted family, and so (perhaps echoing her mother’s struggle against her own family) she braved the Stevensons’ collective disapproval to marry him.

Shortly before her wedding, in June 1874, Katharine and her sister Dora visited Louis in on a glorious sunlit day in Swanston, where, with his Balfour cousin Maggie, they lay close together on a shawl in the garden, and ‘half pretended, half felt, we had all lost our individualities and became merged and mixed up in a quadruple existence’. There is an erotic quality to this ‘half wanton’ fantasy, which for Katharine could have anticipated wedded bliss, for Louis quotes her as saying ‘the heaven seemed to be dropping oil upon us, or honeydew’. She might well have been echoing the ecstatic closing lines of ‘Kubla Khan’, ‘For he on honey-dew hath fed, | And drunk the milk of Paradise’ – but without their earlier warning, ‘Beware! Beware!’

Katharine went to live with de Mattos in London, where he was studying law, leaving her mother and Dora in Portobello. She dreamed of becoming a writer herself and was soon sending her efforts to Louis for criticism (Letters 2:44). But by October disappointment had set in, as evidenced in her ‘paper’ about a dismal village whose name had inspired her fancy but which turned out
to be wretchedly disillusioning when she got there. How she felt about Louis’s trenchant critique of her ‘woolly, hard to follow, and disorderly’ style and muddled metaphors we don’t know, though his advice to persevere and ‘learn to write with the quick of your fingers’ was encouraging. But he did catch her mood, saying: ‘I know the place; it is called [...] the village of Hope-deferred, and near it goes the river of the Shadow of Suicide’ (*Letters* 2: 61-63).

His follow-up letter contained further advice, but this time submerged in a litany of his own miseries that left little room for hers. In another merging fantasy Louis now saw Katharine as a ‘very small jar’ and himself a ‘very large jar’, of botched pottery, imagining them reduced to potsherds and ending up in the crucible of all matter whence new, radiant forms will emerge (an image borrowed from Gautier’s ‘Affinités secrètes’) (*Letters* 2:79-81). Such condescension and fluidity of boundaries may not have augured well for their future relationship.

By December Katharine’s marriage was deeply troubled. Now pregnant and short of money, she wrote to Louis, one of the trustees of her marriage settlement, to ask his help in finding paying work.¹¹ His reply is lost, but to Fanny Sitwell he claimed that he would get Katharine some book reviewing for a newspaper and essentially ghost-write her efforts (*Letters* 2:89-90). To Bob he said merely that he could fix up whatever ‘rubbish’ she produced, but he also betrayed annoyance: ‘Tell me [what Katharine wants] because I am damnable puzzled what to do on her vague hints’ (*Letters* 2:91). Whether Louis’s patronizing good intentions came to anything is doubtful, although it seems he helped out with cash when he could.¹² In the long run it was Henley, with his alleged crush on Katharine, who did more to help her find work and see that she got paid for it, especially after he became editor of *London* in 1877, and later the *Magazine of Art*, in the 1880s. Meanwhile Katharine had a daughter, Helen (Snoodie), in 1875, and a son, Richard, in 1877,¹³ and somehow got by, possibly aided by her mother who, after Dora married in 1876, took a house in
Chelsea, where Katharine and the children later lived with her.

After September 1876 Louis’s attentions were increasingly absorbed by his frustrating pursuit of Fanny Osbourne, although Katharine could never be ignored because of his responsibilities as one of her trustees. His feelings about her seem to have become a mix of sympathy and occasional irritation, especially after the murky episode in September 1878 (after Fanny had returned to California). Katharine, with her daughter, had left de Mattos to travel in France, where they met Louis at the start of his Cévennes travels (Masson, p. 13). Louis, while concealing any contact with her, did comply with her husband’s angry requests to send her money but complained to Charles Baxter about Katharine’s ‘singularly futile delicacy’ in waiting till the last minute to let him know she was ‘cleaned out’, and about Sydney’s failure to provide financially (Letters 2:290-291). Yet he rose to Katharine’s defence in April 1879, when Alec Thomson, soon-to-be ex-husband of her oldest sister, Mab, started spreading scandal about her (Letters 2:317). All the sisters made bad marriages, but Louis, raised in relative affluence, did not seem to wonder whether Katharine’s reticence might be due in part to shame over her marital failure and her perennial status as poor relation. Even Henley was often in the dark, for in a letter to Louis (in San Francisco) in January 1880, he said that he rarely saw Katharine: ‘I’ve occasional letters from her – vague, exclamatory, interrogative – but in the art of affording no kind of information she yields to none, or, if anyone, then to you only’.

The dynamics of Louis’s circle were drastically altered after August 1880 when he returned from the USA now married to Fanny. Katharine was one of the people Fanny set out to win over, with extravagant praise, and even patronage, as when in 1881 she claimed to have rewritten a ‘paper’ of Katharine’s in an effort to ‘place it’ for her in an American magazine. Late that year Katharine finally left her husband, and Louis, with Charles Baxter’s help, pressured her to obtain a legal separation (Letters
This move apparently incurred some social disapproval, for in April 1882, concerning his and Fanny’s forthcoming visit to England, Louis wrote jokingly to Katharine: ‘I hope you know that we both loathe, deprecate, detest and sicken at the thought of you [...] Can Fanny get rooms beside you? This is the attraction of repulsion’ (Letters 3:327). Yet his elaborate jest, which he remorsefully begged Katharine not to take seriously, was hardly kind. In December 1883, after finally yielding to Henley’s plea that he and Fanny praise ‘poor Katharine’ for her début article, ‘Flowers and flower painters’ in The Magazine of Art, he ended his letter on another note of apologetic reassurance: ‘you must never think that silence is more than selfishness on our part. For I believe my wife loves and admires you, and I know I do from my heart’ (Letters 4:227).

Katharine’s elusiveness may be reflected in the two oddly contrasting poems Louis wrote for her in 1883. The shorter one depicts a sprite of wavering, unstable moods, who is hard to know or get close to:

We see you as we see a face
That trembles in a forest place
Upon the mirror of a pool
Forever quiet, clear and cool;
And in the wayward glass, appears
To hover between smiles and tears,
Elfin and human, airy and true,
And backed by the reflected blue.

The other poem, harking back to their shared Scottish roots, portrays her romantically as ‘A lover of the moorland bare’ and of all the forces of nature: winds, rain, brook, dew, frost, mountains, fire and seas, and ‘the high-riding, virgin moon’. But the middle stanza offers a harsher image, one of blight, anger, perhaps thwarted sexuality, and flight:
And as the berry, pale and sharp,
Springs on some ditch’s counterscarp
In our ungenial, native north –
You put your frosted wildings forth,
And on the heath, afar from man,
A strong and bitter virgin ran.¹⁶

After Louis and Fanny settled in Bournemouth in July 1884 Katharine and Snoodie became frequent visitors (oddly, Richard is never mentioned). This was a dismal period, marred by Thomas Stevenson’s mental decline and Louis’s own ill-health and depression, exacerbated by the exhausting process of writing plays with Henley. Fanny could by now pose as a literary expert and fiction writer, whereas Katharine wrote from necessity, mainly journalistic essays and reviews. Her three essays in *The Magazine of Art* (edited by Henley 1881-1886) reveal her to be by now a competent and highly literate professional who was capable of satirical flashes, especially in ‘The artist in fiction’ (1884). Here she mocks the romantic stereotype of the moody, velveteen jacketed painter who requires support from one of two types of woman, either the simple ‘rustic Maiden’ or ‘an Early Broughtonese or Late Braddonesque young woman [...] rude, red-haired, passionate, detestable’, who, after succumbing to his passion, tends to end badly.¹⁷ One might detect a sly dig at family members here, Bob and Louis included, and a variation on this theme was to surface later in Katharine’s own fiction.

Not long after a trip to see Thomas Hardy, in September 1885, Louis had the nightmare that gave him the germ of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and soon told it to Katharine (Masson, p. 13). He had suffered a ‘dreadful hemorrhage’ on that trip, when Katharine was also present, but there is nothing to support Hodges’s claim that she could have influenced both dream and story by reading Poe’s tales to him during his convalescence, still less that she
could have shown him the MS of a Poe-inspired story of her own (Hodges, p. 54; *Letters* 5:125-129). The question remains, why Louis, who had grown up between two strong mother figures and had a history of tactlessness in relation to rival women in his life, should have dedicated his story to Katharine rather than to Fanny, who had some claim to credit over its reshaping. Clues can be found both in his nostalgic dedicatory poem and in the letter he sent with the book on January 1st, 1886. The poem was part of one Louis had given Katharine earlier that year at his and Fanny’s wedding anniversary dinner. It celebrated their shared Scottish childhood, but its first line, ‘It’s ill to loose the bands that God decreed to bind’, seems to imply a risk of estrangement. The poem was part of one Louis had given Katharine earlier that year at his and Fanny’s wedding anniversary dinner. It celebrated their shared Scottish childhood, but its first line, ‘It’s ill to loose the bands that God decreed to bind’, seems to imply a risk of estrangement.\(^\text{18}\)

And in the letter he again insists: ‘You know very well that I love you dearly, and that I always will’, but ends by saying that the story is sent by ‘the one that loves you – Jekyll, and not Hyde’ (Letters 5:168). So maybe the Hyde side of him did not love her so well, and the dedication was supposed to atone for that.

But contrast all this with Louis’s letter to Katharine a month later, when all his frustrations, like Mr Hyde, came roaring back.

> My dear Katharine, ’Tis the most complete *blague* and folly to write to you; you never answer and, even when you do, your letters crackle under the teeth like ashes; containing nothing, as they do, but unseasonable japes and a great cloudy vagueness as of the realms of chaos. In this I know well they are like mine, and it becomes me well to write such – but not you – for reasons too obvious to mention. [...] Of your views, state, finances, etc., etc., I know nothing.

He ends, in part: ‘How do you like letters of this kind? It is your kind. They mean nothing; they are blankly insignificant; and impudently put one in the wrong’ (Letters 5:189). Despite the joking tone the last phrase is ominous, suggesting a sensitivity that would be further wounded two years later.
Rupture
The quarrel that erupted in 1888 between Henley and Louis must have derived at least in part from the latent but unequal rivalry between Katharine and the ever-jealous and ambitious Fanny, the former under Henley’s patronage, the latter always relying on her husband to promote her fiction writing. Fanny might not have liked it when Henley in 1886 persistently urged Louis to promote Katharine’s writing a Zola-esque comic nouvelle about daily life in Bournemouth, deriving from their joint letters (Letters 5:309-310; Henley Letters pp. 320, 322), and so when Katharine announced her first venture into fiction, ‘The Watersprite’, it could have exacerbated the tensions. When Henley failed to get it published, Fanny nagged Katharine into letting her rewrite the story to see if she could do better with it (Letters 6:163-165). Katharine’s story (now lost) was about a young man on a train who meets a girl escaped from a lunatic asylum, whereas Fanny turned the protagonist into a real ‘nixie’ who lures the hero into a boat trip up the river, away from his stuffy fiancée, and almost drowns him at the end of it. I have explored the implications of this elsewhere, but the plot does resemble aspects of Katharine’s later story, ‘The Old River House’, which also features a river boating excursion that ends at dusk with the hero’s devastating rejection by an idolized woman.

The quarrel exploded in March 1888 after publication of Fanny’s “The Nixie”, when Henley yet again, chivalrously and tactlessly, stepped in to protect Katharine’s literary and financial interests, thereby betraying his longstanding animus against Fanny. Louis’s self-righteous outrage at this insult to his wife and himself blinded him to his own complicity, given that he himself had recommended Fanny’s story to Scribner’s and was well aware (as he later admitted) that Katharine had consented unwillingly to its appropriation (Letters 6: 67,172). Katharine soon got caught in the ensuing transatlantic crossfire, and her awkward efforts to defend herself only made things worse. Years
later she told Sidney Colvin that Henley had acted unbeknownst to her after she had already written to Fanny, on first seeing the story in print, to say that it was ‘well managed’, and that she had said the same to their mutual friends. ‘I did in fact – though in pain – just what [Louis] would have desired and expected from a friend and cousin. I had no idea that Mr Henley had grudges of his own or that his action was not prompted by wrong-headed kindness to me [...]’

But Louis, on receipt of Katharine’s few letters with their ‘radically different view of the facts’ began to see the whole affair as a conspiracy orchestrated by her, and to exculpate Henley: ‘[...] it was all packed into him by an angry woman whom he admires’ (Letters 6:172).

In short, anything that Katharine said or did seems only to have hardened Louis’s resolve (despite some misgivings), to cut through his ambivalence and cast her off forever (Letters 6:194). Henley he still loved and needed; Katharine was expendable, a scapegoat who could be burdened with the faults of deviousness and spite of which he could never accuse Fanny, or even Henley. For Katharine it may have proved how dangerous it was finally to speak less vaguely and betray her justifiable anger and deep hurt. In her dignified final letter she wrote:

I know this can never get better, but perhaps nothing can make it worse. So do listen when I once more assure you of my entire ignorance that Mr Henley was writing [...] I was maddened with despair when I read your letter which taxed me with a dreadful preconceived plot. [...] How deeply sorry I am it is useless to try to say and impossible not to remember all your past kindness which has now turned into lifelong distrust of me.’ (Letters 6, 204; emphasis in original).
From now on Katharine was effectively banished from Louis’s life, except as regards inheritance. Under the terms of his father’s will Louis was required to ‘remember’ his uncle Alan’s family (Letters 5:414), and despite Fanny’s opposition did in his own will endow an annuity for Katharine’s daughter, who had ‘done no ill’ (Letters 6:181), but this was to come out of Katharine’s own share which was to be further reduced in favour of his stepson, Lloyd Osbourne (Letters 6: 192-193). In November 1891 Louis took steps to be released from Katharine’s marriage trust and that of her sister Dora Fowke (who had unhappily married an alcoholic and bigamist) (Letters 7:191). He did continue to correspond intermittently with Bob (who had covertly supported his sister throughout the quarrel), and kept his promise to remember Bob and his sisters in his final will of 1893.

**Afterlife and writing**

Thus concluded the third catastrophe of Katharine de Mattos’s life: first the slow wasting away and death of her father; then the protracted collapse of her marriage with all its hardships, financial and emotional; and now the abrupt, devastating rejection by her admired and idealized cousin. Her subsequent state of mind can only be guessed at from her later writings, but possibly the need to go on working to support her family (mainly by reviewing, and occasional translation) helped her cope. Henley after leaving The Magazine of Art in 1886 had recommended her to The Saturday Review and at some point in that year she was taken on by the more prestigious Athenaeum, where she eventually became one of their major (anonymous) fiction reviewers.21 Katharine’s relationship with Henley was also damaged by the quarrel; she told Colvin in 1902 (NLS MS 9895) that they had had a ‘dreadful scene’ in which she accused him of dishonourable conduct and Henley said she would be betraying him if she ‘vindicated Louis and Fanny in the matter’. Thereafter they met ‘seldom’ and ‘never cordially’.
Katharine could imply that Henley’s professional help was also at an end, but the fact that on September 27, 1890 she published a poem in the *Scots Observer*, now edited by him, and that this was paired with one of Henley’s own, rather suggests the contrary. Her poem, ‘A pauper playground (Chelsea)’ begins: “The river of life goes roaring on, Long is the road and hard’ and then describes a charity inmate wandering in a blooming ‘graveyard garden’, where she smiles dreamily ‘o’er the sleeping dead.’ It ends:

Do far days haunt her, vanished sighs,  
Old insults gone and past?  
Or the fair lawns of Paradise  
Where paupers rest at last?

If this captures Katharine’s own bereft and fatalistic mood in the wake of the quarrel, then Henley’s ‘Pageant’, which celebrates the dancing play of seagulls, may echo its intimations of mortality at the end:

Gulls in an aëry morrice  
Frolicking float and fade...  
And life is a lapse the nearer  
The immitigable shade.

(In his later collected poems those final lines read: ‘O, the way of a bird in the sunshine, | The way of a man with a maid!’, so perhaps the old flame was still secretly alive.)

A few months later, on February 21, 1891, Katharine published another poem in what was now the *National Observer* but still edited by Henley. ‘Spring and the wayfarer’ describes a woman’s journey through life, alone and unheeded, and apparently exiled from its joys, and ends:
Love and the Spring lie close together,
   Telling their tales to each wind that blows;
One heart, perchance, they both pass over
   Nobody cares for, nobody knows.
The earth is throbbing, the stars are swaying –
Death and the dark look on not staying.

Regardless of its literary merit, the poem is poignantly expressive of sadness amid the world’s indifference.

Perhaps to avoid risks of further self-revelation, Katharine in 1892 chose to publish her two stories under the name Theodor Hertz-Garten, in T. Fisher Unwin’s Pseudonym Library. The first, ‘Through the red-litten windows’, takes its title from Poe’s ‘The fall of the house of Usher’, but Hodges’s idea (pp. 54, 57), that Katharine might somehow have inspired Jekyll and Hyde by discussing it with Louis in 1885, seems fanciful and leads him to overlook its real significance. There is no clue as to when she wrote it and its companion, ‘The Old River House’, but both probably have deep roots in the sorrows of her own life, as is suggested by her pseudonym. ‘Theodor’ means ‘God-given’ and ‘Hertz-Garten’, ‘heart’s garden’, implies something of very personal significance.

The eponymous quotation, ‘Through the red-litten windows’, comes from the ballad ‘The haunted palace’, a mise-en abîme within Poe’s tale, ‘The fall of the house of Usher’, which depicts the doomed relationship of a twin brother and sister, the last of their line, who die in a ghastly Liebestod as their decaying mansion collapses about them. The ballad, improvised by the demented brother, Roderick, describes a glorious kingdom ruled by a wise monarch, which falls in ruin when invaded by ‘evil things in robes of sorrow’ whose ‘vast forms’ are now all that can be seen through the palace’s ‘red-litten windows’. Roderick himself is in the terrifying grip of a ‘constitutional and family evil’
and prey to a ‘morbid acuteness of the senses’; he dreads the loss of his mortally ill sister Madeleine who, a week after her lingering death, bursts from her vault and kills him in her ‘now final death agonies’. The fissured house, which inspires only ‘insufferable gloom’ and ‘utter depression of soul’ in the narrator, then collapses into the dark and gloomy waters of the surrounding tarn. This Gothic scenario resonates with Katharine’s own family tragedy: the once brilliant father doomed by inexplicable physical and mental decline; and the close-knit brother and sister whose lives were irreversibly damaged.

Katharine’s story, unlike Jekyll and Hyde, is not about the struggle between good and evil in one man, but rather depicts one person’s shaky identity being invaded by a sinister, undead other. The hapless narrator is a young man who has fled the evil brother-in-law who cheated him yet ‘contrived to put [him] in the wrong’. Wandering aimlessly at night he meets a beautiful but cold and heartless woman who recruits him to help someone who lies close to death, and takes him to wait in an eerily silent, brightly lit house. Here in a drugged trance he witnesses a limp human form being lowered through a widening ‘fissure’ in the ceiling above and propped up on a stand. After a scene involving various phials and electrical paraphernalia, there is an explosion, a mirror shatters, and the man’s body vanishes, apparently leaving the narrator to take its place. Alone and helpless in the house he feels ‘haunted’ by the faceless and unknowable other; his own ‘identity, career and personality’ seem annihilated, and he is afraid to seek help lest he sound like a lunatic. In this ‘pallid and intolerable existence’ which he shares with the dead, his only comfort is a little blind girl who is brought to visit him. But she is at first shocked by the sound of his voice: ‘[…] who are you? You are not he […] my friend, the good little father whom without seeing I loved […] where is he?’ But the girl is taken away from him by the cruel and beautiful stranger, perhaps her mother, leaving him alone ‘once more in that accursed place, the home of fiends...
and “evil things in robes of sorrow” who mock and whisper’ at him. After trying vainly to pursue them he ends up raving, near death, in a hospital.

On the surface this bizarre tale, despite its gender disguises, might express some of Katharine’s dumb horror at feeling helplessly incriminated and robbed of her old identity in the life of the cousin she had loved; at feeling herself the victim of a ‘dreadful preconceived plot’ by an ‘in-law’ and a treacherous woman. But the dreamlike atmosphere of the inescapable house suggests a deeper theme. If the early home, according to Gaston Bachelard, constitutes the topography of our most intimate being, and is repeated in dream and fantasy long after we have left it, then the protagonist’s gradual paralysis of spirit, and possession by the unknown, invalid man who met his inexplicable end there, may also reflect Katharine’s lifelong haunting by the father whose progressive ruin pervaded all their dwellings until his death, and beyond. The narrator’s efforts to understand ‘what this man had been, if a fiend in human shape, or one who had known something of the joys and graces of life’ are futile, and he can only, in despair, try to strangle the increasingly alien image he sees in the mirror. And the shock of the little blind girl at the altered voice of the ‘good little father whom I loved’ suggests his children’s bafflement at the stranger whom no childish act of love could rescue and whose afflicted, dying spirit was destined to haunt them all in turn.

Katharine’s other, more naturalistic story, ‘The old river house’, foregrounds the house itself, based loosely on 16 St. Leonard’s Terrace in Chelsea, the home of Katharine’s widowed mother, ‘Aunt Alan’, and for a time of Katharine herself and her children. The scene is a fashionable tea party for clever, literary and artistic people, which has ‘broken in’ on the house’s ‘shadowy silence, metamorphosing it into the life and tumult of today’. Old Mrs Grey, the nominal hostess, has sunk into depressive apathy ever since the loss of her husband, who was long ago ‘alienated from
her, making shipwreck of what faith and hope she possessed’. In her ‘ominous calm’ and detachment she shows little interest in her guests or her two children, Leonard, the actual host, a brilliant but erratic composer, and Avis, a shy, withdrawn, musical girl who devotes her life entirely to her mother and brother. Also present are the society beauty Gwendolen Brook, with whom Leonard is infatuated and who tries in vain to ‘draw out’ Mrs Grey; and an older cousin of the family, Dick Shadwell, whose life is blighted by the madness of his once beautiful wife. He watches Avis at the piano as she sings sadly of her wish to sleep and be spared the world’s injustice and pain (a lament by Michelangelo by way of Madame de Stael), while she in turn watches her brother’s bewitchment by Miss Brook. Avis’s white gown and the flame-coloured flowers nearby are reflected together in the polished surface of the piano, an old-fashioned upright that had belonged to her unhappy father, ‘who had found no better refuge than music from the monotony of his fate’. Then daylight fades and Avis’s brief spell is broken.

The river itself, from spring to bleak autumn, runs through the story, and is the setting for the fateful boating party when Leonard finally declares his love to the avoidant Gwendolen, while a thrush sings amid the ‘rare scent of green and growing life’. She is cold to his pleas, the thrush falls silent: ‘[...] the sunset pageant was passed, the tender colours had left the sky; already the clouds were like inky banners fringed with tarnished gold. The river lay very pale at their feet, all the charm washed out of it. The people in the boats, impatient to be gone, called to them to hasten, and their voices sounded thin and clear in the vast and gathering gloom’. The mood and setting resemble those at the climax of Fanny’s ‘Nixie’, except that this story continues. The distraught Leonard, unable to bear pain or find consolation in his art, is caught up in ‘unconscious perversity and selfishness’, as well as opium addiction, and the house, which ‘should have been a pleasant and restful place’ offers no refuge, since it ‘had
never been aught but sorrowful and shadowy to most of its dwellers’, and shadows ‘are the real owners, the others but shadows’. Eventually, after one despairing, cataclysmic session at the piano, Leonard shoots himself, while ‘the pianoforte seemed to take all so pitilessly, giving back – what?’

Thereafter the mother sinks back further into her habitual apathy, while Avis’s life ‘withers at the source’ without him who had given meaning to it. She even renounces her old solace, the piano, which remains locked and eerily shrouded; Dick imagines ‘the keys of the piano as great teeth smiling beneath the shroud, a monstrous threatening smile at those who thought to master it’. But one day he hears its voice again as Avis plays a last, spellbinding song of grief, and then dies, but not before telling Dick she had always loved him. In the aftermath Dick accompanies Mrs Grey on silent visits to her children’s neglected graves in Brompton Cemetery. ‘Sluggish and impassive she had been in her children’s life, so she remained, so – he mused – she probably would remain till swept into the universal waste-heap, where even habit loses its dread force’.

Katharine’s book received a few brief, polite notices, though that in the Catholic World called the stories ‘more strange and peculiar than interesting’, and ‘subjective to a degree that becomes wearisome […] in spite of their undeniably charming style’.26 Perhaps that subjectivity was one reason Katharine chose pseudonymity, fearing what outsiders might conclude from the second story in particular, given the clear family references. Leonard’s ‘wild, ill-regulated imagination and weak will’ is a transparent portrait of Bob Stevenson, whom Fanny once described as ‘fascinating’ but a ‘physical, moral and mental coward’ who ‘gave like putty’.27 Avis, with her devotion to her brother and the music they share, presumably draws on Katharine herself, while Dick, with his mad wife, may represent aspects of Louis and Fanny, the so-called ‘Bedlamite’, though Dick is depicted more like one of Henry James’s concerned but ineffect-
tual onlookers, who witnesses but cannot prevent the tragedies. The house itself, mournful and shadowy, is haunted at every turn by the mysteriously dead father, whose embodiment, the sinister piano, is the instrument of art and death alike. Omnipresent, and more chilling, is the astonishing portrayal of a mother not only crushed by the inexplicable ‘alienation’ of her husband, but morbidly immersed in dreary scenes of her ‘listless girlhood’, where ‘no heart could reach hers, no human hand soothe a trouble so deeply rooted and obscure’. It uncannily anticipates what the psychoanalyst André Green has called the ‘dead mother syndrome’, where a mother is so devastated by earlier emotional loss that she becomes psychically ‘dead’ for her living children, who in turn can suffer depression and loss of meaning in life. 28 How far that was true of the real ‘Aunt Alan’ we cannot know, but perhaps Katharine intuited, and even shared, the desolation at her bereaved mother’s heart. And both stories together convey something of the strange atmosphere of the family she and her brother grew up in, full of talent and promise but forever smothered in despair by the slow extinction of their doomed father.

Katharine de Mattos published no more fiction. Perhaps she had now expressed all she needed to say, and had no time or energy for more. She did however publish a few more poems, five of them in Sylvia’s Journal, which had become a progressive forum for women’s education and employment, and for the discussion of art and ideas. Of these, ‘By the embankment’ (1893), struck a distinctly ‘modern note’, 29 and well suggests the brief hopes and perhaps recurrent depressions of its author’s life, epitomized by the river she had come to know so well:

When Thames betwixt its prison walls,
    Brims strong and high,
Then with the current of its song,
    Up Hope doth fly,
Bursting her bonds.
Who may say why?
Grey mud-flats often span the course,
A thin dull thread,
And thought crawls on its level way,
Bitter yet dead:
A sluggish flow,
That moves like lead.

Given Katharine’s resolute guarding of her personal privacy, it is striking that in the following year she published a poem that directly engages with themes of female anonymity and secrecy. This was ‘In a Gallery: Portrait of a Lady (Unknown)’, which appeared in the second number of The Yellow Book, in July 1894, one of only two that marked the first appearance of female poets in that shrine to homosocial Decadence. Its narrator meets the searching glance of the long dead sitter, trying to divine her ‘unseen magic’: ‘to seek your riddle, dread or sweet, | and find it in the grave? [...] And you were hungry for the hour | When one should understand?’

Your jewelled fingers writhe and gleam
From out your sombre vest;
Am I the first of those who gaze,
Who may their meaning guess,
Yet dare not whisper lest the words
Pale even painted cheeks?

Here the female observer identifies with the portrait’s mute appeal for understanding, but declines to say what she infers, leaving the secrets of both intact.

**Epilogue**
Katharine de Mattos lived on until 1939 and became a real literary professional, one of the progressive ‘New Woman’ writers, making a modest but respectable living as a book reviewer and
occasional translator. At her busiest, in the 1890s, she reviewed in the *Athenaeum* on average over 70 novels a year, to a total of 1300 by 1908, after which she disappeared from its ‘marked’ files (Demoor, p. 92). She took on some major authors, like George Gissing, and Henry James, whose *What Maisie Knew* (1897) she instantly recognized as one of his most ‘remarkable’ productions, an ‘astonishing drama’ which depicts the mind of a child exposed to ‘the saddest, the most poignantly melancholy position [...] in which a forlorn childhood can be placed’, and yet emerging ‘unscathed and triumphantly through the ordeal’.  

But she never hesitated to castigate daring writers like Rhoda Broughton and Grant Allen, whose work she thought could lead young women astray by sanctioning relationships outside marriage.

Of Katharine’s social life in the London literary circles of the decadent 1890s frustratingly little is known, although from her obituary in *The Times* we learn that she was a ‘brilliant conversationalist’ who frequented some of the leading lights of the 1890s and beyond, including Aubrey Beardsley (who had championed her poem in *The Yellow Book*), the poet and essayist Alice Meynell, Louis’s old friends Sidney Colvin and Edmund Gosse, Andrew Lang, Henry James, and several painters, among them Whistler, Sargent and Charles Conder.

Katharine’s estranged husband, who became prominent in the Fabian Society working alongside George Bernard Shaw, even as his unsavoury sexual reputation became an embarrassment to them, emigrated to British Columbia in 1898 and died there in 1929. One of her greatest supports was always Bob, whose death in 1900 was a grievous blow, though Henley’s, in 1903, may have been less so. ‘She never spoke of the Henley-Stevenson quarrel [...] but was essentially unselfish and remained friends with both sides’ (*Times*), which may be why she could meet up finally with her erstwhile nemesis, Fanny Stevenson, who visited England in 1907. One late involvement in the RLS saga had been her correspondence with Sidney Colvin in 1902, com-
miserating over Henley’s acerbic review of Graham Balfour’s biography (NLS MS 9895). In 1911, when Henley’s widow and Charles Baxter conferred with Lord Guthrie about donating the entire correspondence relating to the quarrel, Colvin urged Guthrie to respect if possible Katharine’s need for privacy, since ‘for years her life was embittered by the consequences of Henley’s moves’. It seems she broke her public silence about her cousin only once, to Rosaline Masson in 1922, when, despite being ‘loath to write of intimate friends and personal matters’, she gave a few brief reminiscences of Louis, and Bob: ‘No other men nor other women were ever quite to me what these two were and remained.’ (Masson, p. 13). Katharine de Mattos’s final years were clouded by dementia; ‘having outlived her friends and her intelligence’ she died in London at 87, on 13 April 1939, and was laid to rest in the Stevenson family vault in Edinburgh.

**Conclusion**

Katharine de Mattos lived her early life in the shadow of men who might have protected her but failed to: her damaged father; her irresponsible, callous husband; her brilliant but self-absorbed cousin; and even her one-time literary mentor and champion. Only her beloved brother seems to have remained true, and his life was one of waywardness, failed promise and early death. Katharine’s response was apparently to safeguard her private life, her non-divorced status protecting her from any further marital mishaps. She probably relied most on her mother (who died in 1895), and on her daughter Helen and her family, although they abandoned her in 1912 by moving to British Columbia, while her sister Dora died in 1931. Her son Richard, who became a Catholic priest in the Midlands, outlived her and inherited her estate of some three thousand pounds, but it is not clear how intimate they ever were. Much about her, especially in the last thirty years of her life, remains unknown, and probably unknowable.
From Katharine’s writings, where even the most intimate spaces seem menaced, one might surmise a depressive cast to her personality, and in her life she seemed fated to repeat early traumas in later relationships. Yet she became an accomplished, professional writer who clearly heeded Louis’s advice to ‘learn to write with the quick of [her] fingers’, and in fiction her polished style was graced by some poignant turns of phrase and striking imagery. It may be that hardship and reticence inhibited her from developing her creative gifts to the full, but even so she had the energy and determination to maintain her independence through writing, to carve out a modest place in the London literary scene, and long outlive the scandals of her early life.

NOTES

1  I have to thank Neil Macara Brown for generous help with Canadian Census data, National Probate records and much other information on Katharine’s descendants; Caroline Rupprecht for perceptive comments; and members of the Richardson History of Psychiatry Section / Working Group on Humanities and Arts.

2  Katharine’s portrait, by Percy Anderson, is in the Writers’ Museum, Edinburgh. It is reproduced on the cover of Hodges (2017).


7  Susan Miles (Ursula Wyllie Roberts), Memoirs of a soldier’s daughter ([www.wyllie.org.nz/documents/memoirs_of_a_soldiers_daughter.doc](http://www.wyllie.org.nz/documents/memoirs_of_a_soldiers_daughter.doc)). Ursula Wyllie Roberts’s grandmother was the younger sister of Katharine’s mother.


9  *Bernard Shaw: Collected Letters 1874-1897*, ed. by Dan H. Laurence
Marital trusts were set up by affluent families to protect a married woman’s property from passing to her husband. Hodges, pp. 15, 21, assumes that the income from the trust would have been paid to de Mattos, but this seems doubtful, given that these settlements avoided common law requirements, whether in England or in Scotland. See Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage and the Law in Victorian England, 1850-1895* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 25, 68. It sounds as if de Mattos may have used the (possibly small) trust income as an excuse for not supporting Katharine herself. Under the Married Women’s Property Act of 1870, she would have had control over her own earnings however (ibid., p. 76).


According to Ernest Mehew (personal communication, 16 October 2009) there was another son, Louis, who ‘died young’ (dates unknown) but he did not specify his source.


Both first printed in *Underwoods* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1887).

*Magazine of Art*, 7 (Jan. 1884), 157-157 (pp. 158-159).

The original wording was either ‘We cannae break the bonds [...]’ or ‘It’s ill to break the bonds [...]. See *The Collected Poems of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. by Roger C. Louis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 583. The three variants may imply hesitation.


Marysa Demoor, *Their Fair Share: Women, Power and Criticism in the Athenaeum, from Millicent Garrett Fawcett to Katherine*
Mansfield, 1870-1920 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 90-102. She has identified many of Katharine’s reviews with the help of the Athenaeum’s ‘marked’ files.


26 Catholic World, 54 (Feb, 1892), p. 766.

27 Fanny Stevenson, letter to Graham Balfour. National Library of Scotland, Balfour Correspondence, MS 9896.


31 Athenaeum, 3654 (November 6, 1897), p. 629.


33 Patricia Pugh, Educate, Agitate, Organize: 100 Years of Fabian Socialism (London: Methuen, 1984), pp. 38-39; Shaw Letters (see note 9).

34 Katharine de Mattos, letter to Graham Balfour, July 1900. National Library of Scotland, Balfour Correspondence, MS 9895.


37 Sixth Census of Canada, 1921, British Columbia, District No. 13. Helen de Mattos in 1902 married Frederick William Dalton and had four
sons. ‘Fred’ was an engineer and cofounder in 1902 of a short-lived motor cycle company in the Midlands. [https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Frederick_William_Dalton](https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Frederick_William_Dalton)