

PROLOGUE

A recent article in the *Guardian* lists the ten bestselling writers in the United States from the year 1900 – a list it describes as ‘ghostly’ – and asks the pertinent question of what happened to these books, challenging its readers to have heard of them, let alone read them.¹ But in the spring of 1900 the same newspaper, like so many others, was hotly debating the sensational success both in England and America of one of them, Mary Cholmondeley’s *Red Pottage*.²

Her name itself – pronounced Chumlee – is a trap for the unwary, and it is now largely unknown, but her bestselling novel, currently out of print and read only by academics and English literature students, was one of the best loved scandals of 1899 – ‘Have you read Pottage?’ ran the joke in literary circles.³ The story begins with adultery and a terrifying scheme of revenge, as one character is forced into an agreement that he will end his own life within a period of five months. His subsequent love for another woman as the time starts to run out provides much of the suspense of the novel. But the most memorable passages are those in which the writer heroine Hester Gresley insists on her independent right to work, even at the cost of her own steadily dwindling health, and to the fury of her narrow-minded clergyman brother, who insists on interpreting her writing as immoral. More than one reader took this as an attack on the Church, and while Cholmondeley was publicly defended in St Paul’s Cathedral, there was a storm of protest from more conservative readers and she was denounced by name from at least one pulpit.⁴

The unmarried daughter of a Shropshire rector, Cholmondeley was often presented in the press as an unworldly spinster in the tradition of the Brontë sisters, and the myth of her secluded existence (largely perpetuated by herself) doubtless added something of its own to the fascination with her novel – by the early years of the twentieth century accounts in the press tended to focus on her having written her first novels while living in rural isolation, occluding the rather less romantic fact of her move to London in 1896.⁵ In fact this reclusive spinster, as the familiar myth would have her, had been spending much of her time in London from the 1880s onwards, and was by the late 1890s the friend of such celebrated figures as Henry James, Mary Braddon and Howard Sturgis;

she knew various political luminaries, including both Asquith and Churchill, and received a warm tribute on her bestseller from James Barrie, the creator of Peter Pan. She was rumoured to have won over Queen Victoria with this her most scandalous novel,⁶ and her books would be read in more than one war zone before she died.

Her life itself spanned the most extraordinary period. Born into a world thrown into uncertainty by the challenges of scientific debate to biblical literalism, most recently Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in the year she was born, she was still writing in the years immediately after the First World War. A controversial and mysterious figure, she was reticent both in her dealings with journalists and in her private life. Nonetheless for later readers there was the titillating knowledge that she had written a series of private journals which disappeared from sight shortly after her death in 1925, but the published extracts from which hinted at a tragic love affair and a deep determination, in an age when women had, as she said herself, 'few incentives to perseverance'.⁷

In many ways her story is the familiar myth of the Victorian heroine as modern, feminist-orientated readers have reformulated it. The unmarried eldest daughter denied an education comparable to her brothers' and predestined instead to live at home and care for her ageing parents, Mary battled her own illness, the incessant demands of a large household and eventually her long-dreaded addiction to the painkiller morphia (an opium derivative), in order to fulfill what she saw as a heaven-sent vocation. Admired by many, she was derided by others, and she knew herself that even if she had been able to marry, it would have brought an end to her own ambitions. But if this was the cost of her writing, she knew that it was a price she was willing to pay. The worst disaster she could conceive, as her semi-autobiographical masterpiece devastatingly conveys, was not personal unhappiness but the permanent loss of a writer's best work.