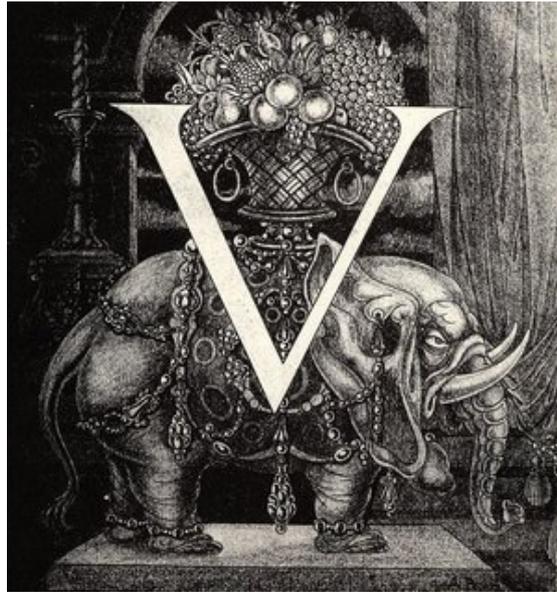


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Volume 7, Issue 2, Winter 2024

Yellow Book Women

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Preface

When John Lane published the first volume of *The Yellow Book* just over 130 years ago in April 1894, no one could have predicted how groundbreaking the periodical would be, not only as a bridge between traditional and modern notions of visual art and literature and a springboard for the career of Aubrey Beardsley, but particularly as an outlet for women writers and artists. This current issue of *Volupté*, guest-edited by Lucy Ella Rose and Louise Wenman-James (and coming hot on the heels of our last redundancy-delayed issue on neo-Victorian decadence), turns the spotlight on the contributions made by women, ‘drawing out their networks and communities, and exploring how *The Yellow Book* represented a cornerstone of their careers’ (p. ii).

This is the second special issue devoted to women writers. In 2019, following an international conference at the University of Oxford the previous year, we published a special issue of *Volupté* titled ‘Women Writing Decadence’, which, as Melanie Hawthorne pointed out in her Guest-Editorial Introduction, highlighted the existence of European-wide networks ‘linking entire coteries of writers as well as lone maverick individuals’ (volupte.gold.ac.uk/wwd). In the past five years there have been conferences, symposiums, and online talks about decadent women writers and artists, and it is becoming increasingly clear that some of these women operated in informal communities arguing for greater equality and softer boundaries between the private and public spheres.

Jad Adams reveals the wealth of female talent associated with the *Yellow Book* in his recent book *Decadent Women: Yellow Book Lives* (Reaktion, 2023), and he opens this issue of *Volupté* with a piece that questions why the women of the *Yellow Book* have been critically neglected for so long. It derives from his research for *Decadent Women* and explores the inhibitions and restrictions on publishing women’s work at the fin de siècle, particularly when women wanted to criticize the heteronormative status quo. Kate Krueger draws on Sara Ahmed’s feminist thinking to compare the treatment of domestic disappointment in the short fiction of Ella D’Arcy, Evelyn Sharp, and Ada Leveson, and we begin to see a sororal interconnectedness that becomes a theme in the articles that follow. Lucy Ella Rose discusses the *Yellow Book* ‘sisterhood’ including Netta and Nellie Syrett, Sharp, Nora Hopper [Chesson], and Edith Nesbit, who went on to collaborate on children’s fiction in the twentieth century, and Valerie Fehlbaum focuses on the sisters Ella and Marion Hepworth Dixon who contributed short stories based on their own lives and experience. Netta Syrett takes shrewd centre-stage in Margaret Stetz’s article which looks at the adaptation of Syrett’s novel *Portrait of a Rebel* (1929) into the Hollywood film screenplay *A Woman Rebels* (1936, dir. Mark Sandrich), starring Katharine Hepburn. Jane Spirit investigates the significance of darker London and its publishing scene in the selected writings of D’Arcy, George Egerton, Charlotte Mew, and Netta Syrett, and a play by John Oliver Hobbes, and Denae Dyck considers the spiritual and sensual ‘New Woman poetics’ of Rosamund Marriott Watson, Nesbit, Chesson, Olive Custance, and Eva Gore-Booth.

As these articles show, the landscape of women’s writing at the fin de siècle is still in the process of being fully understood, but what emerges from the research underpinning this issue is that women writers and artists constituted a fluid and transformational community whose publishing careers were facilitated by the phenomenon of decadence and its embrace of conservative ideals and avant-garde critique. The *Yellow Book* gave its community of women writers and artists the opportunity (and freedom) to expose, criticize, and indict Victorian double standards, which, as Stetz reminds us, ‘still resonates uncomfortably today in the era of #MeToo’ (p. 91). As we head into a geo-politically volatile 2025, where the freedoms of women in some parts of the world are diminished or violently disappeared, 130 years doesn’t seem so long ago.

Jane Desmarais
Editor-in-Chief
31 December 2024

Yellow Book Women
Guest Editors' Introduction

Lucy Ella Rose and Louise Wenman-James

University of Surrey

In Spring 2022, the British Association of Decadence Studies together with the University of Surrey hosted a series of *Jendis* talks on women whose work intersected with the iconic fin-de-siècle quarterly periodical *The Yellow Book* (1894-1897). Although many women of *The Yellow Book* are gradually receiving increasing critical attention, these seminars provided the first opportunity for a multidisciplinary discussion of the lives and works of women who contributed in various ways to the periodical. The *Jendis* sessions encouraged a consideration of the connections and dialogues between these women, drawing out their networks and communities, and exploring how *The Yellow Book* represented a cornerstone of their careers.

The first *Jendi* featured two keynote talks that showcased groundbreaking recent projects on *Yellow Book* women. Firstly, Jad Adams addressed the lacuna in biographical information on select women contributors to *The Yellow Book* and outlined his methodological approach to researching them for his book *Decadent Women: Yellow Book Lives*.¹ Following this, Lorraine Janzen Kooistra offered insights into the *Yellow Nineties* project: an open-access scholarly resource for the study of several 1890s magazines including *The Yellow Book*.² Kooistra presented on the project's origins, development, cultural value and contribution to decadence studies. The second *Jendi* brought together five scholars across established and early career stages: Kate Krueger, Michelle Reynolds, Catia Rodrigues, Heather Marcovitch, and Sarah Parker. Each delivered papers on *Yellow Book* partnerships, collaborations, sisterhood, conflict, and dialogues, drawing out the networks and communities within which these women operated. This special issue of *Volupté* contains articles that developed from presentations and discussions at the *Jendis* events with the aim of providing a fertile space for continued academic conversations around these critically neglected women writers and artists who are now being duly reappraised by scholars. The editors are

delighted that Adams and Krueger have contributed to this issue, and welcome additional contributions from Denae Dyck, Valerie Fehlbaum, Lucy Ella Rose, Jane Spirit, and Margaret Stetz.

Our *Jendis* marked a new opportunity to see the *Yellow Book* women afresh as a non-homogenous collective, questioning what brings them together and how their experiences may have aligned or differed from one another. This shifts the focus from the androcentric history of the periodical to focus on female authorship, artistry and collaboration, and the place of women in its content, style and daring reputation. In 1960, Katherine Lyon Mix offered insights into the *Yellow Book* world with her book *A Study in Yellow: The Yellow Book and Its Contributors* (1960).³ Mix's text contains recollections of personal relationships with many contributors. Several scholars have explored aspects of the periodical and its impact since Mix's work, but there was no other significant study of *Yellow Book* contributors, particularly women, until Adams's 2023 book *Decadent Women: Yellow Book Lives*. Adams tells 'the story of the cohort of [women] who assailed the gates of literature in the late Victorian and the Edwardian periods'.⁴ Adams's composite biography of over ten lesser-known *Yellow Book* women provides a holistic and encompassing view of what it meant to be a woman who interacted with *The Yellow Book*. This special issue continues the *Yellow Book* moment we find ourselves in, and delves further into the works of these women to explore how their multifaceted experiences are reflected in their art. Articles herein focus not only on critically neglected individuals who made significant contributions to fin-de-siècle literary, visual and periodical culture but also on little-known relationships between *Yellow Book* women, exploring a 'sisterhood' involving familial bonds, creative collaborations, and feminist alliances.

Despite the developed focus on *Yellow Book* networks, communities, and shared experiences being relatively recent, interest in women writing decadence has been burgeoning for several decades. In the introduction to her seminal collection *Daughters of Decadence* (1993), Elaine Showalter asserts that 'the Decadent artist was invariably male, and Decadence, as a hyper-aesthetic movement, defined itself against the feminine and the biological creativity of women'.⁵ Since

Daughters of Decadence was published, key texts such as Schaffer's *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes* (2000) and digital resources like *The Yellow Nineties Online* have continued the discussion of women in these movements, and significant research has been conducted to expand the decadent canon.⁶

Despite this, Joseph Bristow argues that

Female Decadence [...] is a term that remains comparatively unused in modern literary histories of the 1890s. In part, the reason has much to do with the shape of these authors' careers, since several of them had professional lives that were either cut short or suffered delay.⁷

Bristow uses *The Yellow Book* as a focal point for his article, stating that 'the female authors who appeared in *The Yellow Book*' made 'this journal look as if it were the quintessential organ of these ubiquitously decadent times'.⁸ He begins by exploring George Egerton's (1859-1945) 'A Cross Line' (1893) and her *Yellow Book* story 'A Lost Masterpiece' (1894), arguing that her 'distinctive voice' strives to 'champion heterosexual women's erotic and intellectual modernity'.⁹ Bristow goes on to discuss Charlotte Mew (1869-1928), Mérie Muriel Dowie (1866-1945), and Victoria Cross (1868-1952), concluding that '*The Yellow Book* was the main venue where different styles of decadence became manifest among an emergent generation of gifted writers in their twenties and thirties'.¹⁰ Bristow's methodology can be extended to explore how women beyond their twenties and thirties – who identified as not only writers but also as artists, readers, editors, and more – strategically utilised *The Yellow Book* as a career-enabling space.

In the introduction to 'Women Writing Decadence', a 2019 special issue of *Volupté*, Melanie Hawthorne ponders 'the shift in perspective that occurs when women are put not on the margins, as an afterthought, but at the centre of *fin-de-siècle* literary activity, as nodes in networks that stretch across time and space linking entire coteries of writers as well as lone maverick individuals'.¹¹ Although these women may have been geographically dispersed, they were united in their ability to 'negotiate affiliations without being constrained by them', resisting stereotypes such as New Women. The cultural moment of morphing identities in the 1890s 'forms the backdrop to women's participation in Decadent movements'.¹² Our special issue continues this focus on

women engaging with decadence, with a specific focus on how they negotiate their affiliation with *The Yellow Book* without being constrained by it. From the outset, *The Yellow Book* offered an alternative publication space for work that challenged social mores. In March 1894 the prospectus for the first volume of *The Yellow Book* claimed that the periodical would ‘prove the most interesting, unusual, and important publication of its kind that has ever been undertaken’.¹³

The Yellow Book would be, in the words of the ‘Publishers and Editors’, ‘nearly as perfect as it can be made’, having both ‘courage’ and ‘modernness’, and providing its contributors with a ‘freer hand than the limitations of the old-fashioned periodical can permit’.¹⁴ Such grand statements encapsulate a desire to break away from norms and to challenge aspects of the 1890s literary marketplace. Holbrook Jackson’s ‘interpretive’ study of 1890s ‘art and ideas’ considers an element of ‘curiosity’ present at this time; he argues that the nineties saw the ‘realisation of a possibility’ and embodied an ‘epoch of experiment’.¹⁵ In this era of experimentation, *The Yellow Book* demonstrates such curiosity:

in the spring of 1894 everyone was talking about the new woman (even if that talk was often mockery). There was a new readership of women who were earning their own livings; and in the burgeoning market of the printed word, women were coming to the fore as never before, both in literature and in journalism.¹⁶

From the original prospectus, *The Yellow Book* positioned itself as being different from the mainstream; the promise of the ‘fresh, brilliant, varied, and diverting table of contents’ offered an alternative to the ‘tiresome “choppy” effect of so many magazines’ which included serials and content that was more restricted.¹⁷ An aim to achieve something outside or beyond the norm meant that across its three-year run *The Yellow Book* provided a space for women writers to negotiate decadence. As Talia Schaffer notes, ‘over one-third of the pieces in the *Yellow Book* were by women [and] the *Yellow Book* ran an article on women’s fiction in each of its first three issues. This editorial decision positioned women’s writing as an integral part of aestheticism’.¹⁸ Sally Ledger’s article ‘Wilde Women and *The Yellow Book*: The Sexual Politics of Aestheticism and Decadence’ further explores women’s writing in the periodical:

Ella D'Arcy, George Egerton, Netta Syrett, Victoria Cross, Olive Custance, Charlotte Mew, Ada Leverson, and numerous other women writers all had their literary careers advanced by their work for *The Yellow Book* as they simultaneously interrogated and embraced its multivalent cultural politics.¹⁹

Linda K. Hughes, in her 2004 article 'Women Poets and Contested Spaces in *The Yellow Book*', notes researchers' approaches to the periodical in term of an 'historical divide': 'before and after the trial of Oscar Wilde'.²⁰ Whilst this resulted in the association of *The Yellow Book* with (then illegal) sodomy in the media, and the departure of Aubrey Beardsley as the periodical's Art Editor, it also generated new opportunities for women to assert themselves in *The Yellow Book* with increased contributions, expressive freedoms, and contestation of gender politics. In this tumultuous time, as women's lives shifted drastically and within this 'epoch of experiment', the growing publishing industry was a catalyst for the shift in women's roles as professional writers and artists.²¹ In *Women, Periodicals, and Print Culture in Britain, 1830s – 1900s* (2019), Alexis Easley, Clare Gill, and Beth Rodgers note that there was a 'highly stratified periodicals marketplace' that allowed women to strategically utilise particular magazines to pursue a literary or artistic career and to explore the world around them in their work;²² this issue explores and unpicks how *The Yellow Book* formed a significant part of their creative endeavours.

The seven articles in this special issue all discuss women whose careers intersected in some way with *The Yellow Book*. They build on existing scholarship and dialogise (directly and indirectly) with one another in productive and enlightening ways, offering fresh approaches to – and perspectives on – women's relationships to *The Yellow Book*, to aestheticism and decadence, to each other and to their male contemporaries, and to literary and visual culture at the fin de siècle and beyond. The authors expertly analyse a rich variety of genres – short stories, novels, poems, screenplays, and illustrations – as they trace *Yellow Book* women's navigation of male-dominated spaces and (competing) fin-de-siècle identities: politically-engaged New Woman; 'high art' female aesthete; and commercially-successful writer.

Jad Adams's article asks, and offers possible answers to, the pertinent question, 'how were the *Yellow Book* women lost?' Adams points, for example, to competitive attitudes (among women and men), scarcity of biographical material, women's exclusion from male 'Clubland' (to use Elaine Showalter's term), and female diffidence. His article offers fascinating insights into the lives and careers of little-known *Yellow Book* writers including Dolf Wyllarde (1871-1950), whilst considering the cultural amnesia that has necessitated this special issue's reappraisal of such women. Denae Dyck's article notes that much has been done by recent scholarship to ensure these women are no longer forgotten, herself focusing on *Yellow Book* women poets and specifically the 'New Woman poetics' of Rosamund Marriott Watson (1860-1911), Edith Nesbit (1858-1924), and Nora Hopper [Chesson] (1871-1906) as well as Olive Custance (1874-1944), and Eva Gore-Booth (1870-1926). Interested in fluid movements and processes of transformation, Dyck considers (the relationship between) religion, spiritualism, paganism and feminism in poetry by *Yellow Book* women, revealing their processes of anti-misogynistic 'revisionist mythmaking' and reclamation of female sexuality.

A consideration of women's places and spaces in *The Yellow Book* pervades this special issue. Jane Spirit discusses representations of London in, and the London publishing context of, early *Yellow Book* women's writing: stories by Ella D'Arcy, George Egerton, Charlotte Mew, and Netta Syrett, and a play by John Oliver Hobbes. London, the birthplace of *The Yellow Book* and its set, facilitated women's careers with its transport links and networking opportunities, drawing them to the metropolis. Spirit discusses these writers' preoccupations with London in *The Yellow Book's* first issue, drawing original connections between them in their shared focus on the city as a bleak, unsettling, phantasmagorical or sensual place to explore (thwarted) creative impulses and to experiment with psychological realism.

Articles in this issue focus on the afterlives as well as the origins of *The Yellow Book*. Margaret Stetz discusses the 'astonishing' adaptation of Netta Syrett's novel *Portrait of a Rebel* (1929), set in the late nineteenth century, into the Hollywood film screenplay *A Woman Rebels* (1936) starring Katharine Hepburn. Drawing on archival research, Stetz argues that Syrett shrewdly

read and responded to critical reviews (provided by the press cutting industry) of her novels in order to ensure their commercial appeal to mainstream and transatlantic audiences despite their more subversive feminist elements, carefully ‘walking the line between political protest and propriety’. Other articles in this special issue illustrate how *Yellow Book* women walked this line to different extents and in various ways, revealing an array of fin-de-siècle feminisms.

Drawing on the *Jeudis*’ theme of creative sorority, Valerie Fehlbauer’s article focuses on the Hepworth Dixon sisters – Ella and her lesser-known sibling Marion – who both contributed autobiographically-inflected stories to *The Yellow Book*. Fehlbauer considers the sisters’ relationship to decadence and their approach to sorority in terms of broader female solidarity, suggesting their creative influence on each other and analysing the ways in which their ‘resilient’ female protagonists challenge stereotypes and critique sexual politics. Speaking to Fehlbauer’s piece, Lucy Ella Rose’s article posits a *Yellow Book* sisterhood comprised of family members (Netta and Nellie Syrett) and friends (Evelyn Sharp, Nora Chesson, Edith Nesbit) who contributed in word and image to *The Yellow Book* in the 1890s, and collaborated on children’s fiction in the twentieth century, revealing the endurance of a rich, productive female network even after the demise of decadence. Manifestations of familial, creative and political sisterhood resurface in this special issue, drawing on the iconographic vocabulary of sorority at the fin de siècle.

Some women engaged more directly with contentious debates about gender roles in *The Yellow Book*. Kate Krueger’s article considers the ‘marriage question’ in the work of *Yellow Book* writers Ella D’Arcy, Evelyn Sharp, and Ada Leverson, and in the context of late nineteenth-century legal reforms. Informed by Sara Ahmed’s much more recent work, Krueger’s article shows how these authors all depict ‘bad romances’ (‘romantic or marital disasters’ and disappointments) in order to develop a politically-charged ‘aesthetic of unhappiness’. These writers strategically ‘rode a wave of interest’ in how New Women could reconcile themselves to men and masculinist institutions whilst ‘tearing down the marriage plot’. Krueger’s analysis of these women’s *Yellow Book* stories show how they rewrite, frustrate or mock heteronormative marriage – but crucially,

in order to make way for ‘other happinesses’ brought by a new century that saw (for example) female enfranchisement in 1918 and 1928.

The dialogues between these articles testify to the endurance of *The Yellow Book* as a discursive space that continues to incite debate and inspire new readings. This special issue goes some way towards bringing critically neglected *Yellow Book* women and their works to light, and drawing new connections between them, whilst highlighting important lacunae in figures’ biographies, œuvres, partnerships, and networks ripe for further study. The articles in this issue demonstrate that there are still aspects of work that remain under-represented in decadence studies, and the more we explore *Yellow Book* networks, the more questions we uncover. This special issue begins to answer the question of ‘Why was *The Yellow Book* so integral for women writers and artists in the 1890s?’ Although the articles here provide thorough and exciting responses to this question, they form part of an ongoing conversation that we hope this issue contributes to. Going forwards, we hope this special issue of *Volupté* opens further avenues of enquiry and looks towards an era of *Yellow Book* scholarship with women artists and writers at the centre of the conversation.

¹ Jad Adams, *Decadent Women: Yellow Book Lives* (Reaktion Books, 2023).

² Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, Open Access Scholarly Resource, 2023, <https://1890s.ca/> [accessed 30 July 2024].

³ Katherine Lyon Mix, *A Study in Yellow: The “Yellow Book” and its Contributors* (University of Kansas Press, 1960).

⁴ Adams, p. 7.

⁵ Elaine Showalter, *Daughters of Decadence* (Virago Press, 1993), p. x.

⁶ Talia Schaffer, *Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (University Press of Virginia, 2000); *Yellow Nineties 2.0*.

⁷ Joseph Bristow, ‘Female Decadence’, in *The History of British Women’s Writing, 1880-1920*, ed. by Holly A. Laird (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 85-96 (p. 94).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁹ George Egerton, ‘A Cross Line’, *Keynotes* (Elkin Matthews and John Lane, 1893), pp. 9-44; George Egerton, ‘A Lost Masterpiece’, *The Yellow Book*, I (1894), pp. 189-98; Bristow, p. 89.

¹⁰ Bristow, p. 95.

¹¹ Melanie Hawthorne, ‘Women Writing Decadence: An Introduction’, *Volupté*, 2.1 (2019), pp. 1-15 (p. 1).

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

¹³ Unknown Author, *Prospectus to Volume I* (The Bodley Head, 1894), reprint at: <https://archive.org/details/TheYellowBookProspectusToVolume1/page/n1/mode/2up> [accessed 23 February 2023], p. 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

- ¹⁵ Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties; a review of art and ideas at the close of the nineteenth century*, 2nd edn (Grant Richards, 1922), pp. 13-14.
- ¹⁶ Jad Adams, 'The 1890s Woman', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Fin de Siècle Literature, Culture and the Arts*, ed. by Josephine M. Guy (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 283-399 (p. 286).
- ¹⁷ Unknown Author, p. 2.
- ¹⁸ Schaffer, p. 23.
- ¹⁹ Sally Ledger, 'Wilde Women and *The Yellow Book*: The Sexual Politics of Aestheticism and Decadence', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 50.1 (2007), pp. 5-26 (pp. 23-24).
- ²⁰ Linda K. Hughes, 'Women Poets and Contested Spaces in "The Yellow Book"', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 2004, 44.4, pp. 849-72 (pp. 856, 859).
- ²¹ Jackson, p. 14.
- ²² Alexis Easley, Clare Gill, and Beth Rodgers, *Women, Periodicals, and Print Culture, 1830s-1900s. The Victorian Period* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), p. 3.

How were the *Yellow Book* women lost?

Jad Adams

Independent Scholar

Virginia Woolf did not appear a comfortable figure as she addressed the students of Newnham College on a bright but windy October day in 1928. The 200 young women in Clough Hall saw a tall, sad-eyed, long-faced woman.¹ She sat on a stage in a hall at a table illuminated by a reading light, alert and ‘sensitively nervous’, speaking of the loss to literature of female exclusion in history.² She famously called up the image of Shakespeare’s sister who had all the attributes of her brother but was female, and so instead of gaining riches and lasting fame by her pen, came to grief. Woolf formulated the main problem as a power imbalance between femaleness and maleness, of the comparative denial of income and privacy between women and men. She proposed a counter-history of women and the interior life, suggesting it as if it were a recent literary discovery, while praising selected women writers of the past. As Talia Schaffer notes, Woolf’s lecture, later expanded into *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), ignored the recent generation of women writers altogether; ‘her feminist historiography leaps from Charlotte Brontë straight to her own contemporaries’.³

Woolf overlooks the fact that a third of *The Yellow Book*’s literary contributors were women (47 of 137 writers). They were published and some sold at the same rate as men; *Keynotes* (1893) by George Egerton (1859-1945) sold 6,000 copies in the first year, was translated into seven languages, and also had the largest sales of any short story collection in the US, with the exception of those of Kipling.⁴ However, by the 1920s, books looking back to the 1890s and commentators like Woolf ignored them or relegated their presence to a single sentence. Why did the *Yellow Book* women disappear so comprehensively, even in Woolf’s prodigious reading? Woolf was evidently no stranger to modern fiction, as shown by the critique in her talk about *Love’s Creation*, a 1928 novel by Marie Stopes (published under her first two names, Marie Carmichael). The 1890s were

at most three decades behind her, which is not very long in literary terms; many of the *Yellow Book* writers were still alive and working. Nevertheless, the only one of them Woolf mentioned was Vernon Lee (1856-1935), and only then in the context of her art criticism.⁵

In *Daughters of Decadence* (1993), Elaine Showalter declares that New Woman writers are ‘the missing link between the great women writers of the Victorian novel and the modern fiction of Mansfield, Woolf and Stein’.⁶ They were such a hope for fiction at the end of the Victorian period, so what happened to them to render them invisible to future generations? One answer is mere competitiveness. Woolf in 1928 was newly famous, having had six novels published over the previous thirteen years, with her most commercially successful novel *Orlando* (1928) published in the month of her Cambridge lecture. She was still apparently insecure of her position, however, and seems to have wanted to see herself in a literature of her own – where she was a pre-eminent priestess of modernism with no predecessors. The inclusion of unquestionably modernist innovators such as Egerton and Ethel Colburn Mayne (1865-1941) in her historiography would disrupt the trajectory of this narrative which moves much more smoothly if their achievements and sacrifices are simply ignored.

Woolf was very much concerned with the material wealth of writers, or the lack of it. She asked the questions, ‘Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor? What effect has poverty on fiction?’⁷ By the standards of many *Yellow Book* writers, Woolf always lived in luxury; her concept of poverty was living in a smaller house, not living in one rented room and dying in a workhouse hospital as did Ella D’Arcy (1856/7-1937). Woolf’s frame of reference for wealth may be skewed but there is no question that it was more challenging to be a writer when poor than when comfortable. However, for many women as well as men, the need to earn money was a motivation. This is notable in the case of Egerton who wrote *Keynotes*, her most successful book, when threatened with homelessness.⁸

A more general economic impetus spurred on the *Yellow Book* writers. Regardless of their particular family circumstances, the larger economic picture was an increasing expectation that

women would earn their keep independently if they did not marry and rely on a husband's income. George Greenwood, writing as 'A Woman' in *The Yellow Book* Volume III, addressed 'the leaping, bounding new womanhood', but the phenomenon was presented as a social problem because of 'the too rapid growth of the female population [...] the redundant female birth-rate which threatens more revolution than all the forces of the Anarchists in active combination'.⁹ The jocular portent referred to a genuine social phenomenon of the preponderance of women over men in the UK, disclosed in the 1891 census as 19,400,00 women and 18,300,000 men.¹⁰ Women could no longer expect male relatives to support them entirely even if this had been an attractive option for them (though for many it was odious).

Therefore, in the mid-1890s, Netta Syrett (1865-1943), Evelyn Sharp (1869-1955), D'Arcy, Mayne, and many others left home to try their luck in London. Women with sharp wits but few resources, such as Egerton and Gabriela Cunninghame Graham (1859-1906) had ventured out earlier. It was this great leap from the security of the family which was innovative, not their poverty which was something shared by many male writers who, like George Gissing (1857-1903), scraped a living writing literature. Gissing and H. G. Wells (1866-1946) each wrote a piece for *The Yellow Book* in Volume VIII, but they went on to become canonical writers as none of *The Yellow Book* women did.¹¹ Payment for inclusion in *The Yellow Book* was largely by literary form and length: £5 to £10 for prose pieces and a varying price for poetry depending on the celebrity of the writer and the length of the work. Olive Custance (1874-1944) received a guinea (£1.1s) for the sixteen-line 'Twilight'; John Davidson (1857-1909) received six guineas (£6.6s) for the 156-line 'Ballad of a Nun'.¹²

The Disappearing Women

If Woolf, the leading women's writer of the early part of the twentieth century, ignored the *Yellow Book* women, they had scant support from other critics either. Ann Ardis asks why 'uproar in the 1880 and 1890s about the New Woman was followed by such a resounding silence'.¹³ In response,

Ardis has indicated how Ezra Pound and others deliberately ignored women writers and favoured men (though his support of Charlotte Mew [1869-1928] is an exception to this). Similarly W. B. Yeats, in compiling an influential anthology of 'all good poets who have lived or died from three years before the death of Tennyson to the present moment', largely ignored women including his *Yellow Book* contemporaries.¹⁴ There is no Custance, Mew, or Rosamund Marriott Watson (1860-1911) in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, with few women overall.

If these male creative artists felt this way about their female contemporaries, male literary critics were no more thoughtful where women were concerned. A casual reader of books about the 1890s published in the first decades of the twentieth century might be forgiven for assuming women played a reticent role in literary society with only occasional distinguished service. Books such as Bernard Muddiman's *The Men of the Nineties* (1920) and Max Beerbohm's comic parody *Seven Men* (1919) demonstrate in their titles a gender hegemony which is also to be found in works such as Holbrook Jackson's *The Eighteen Nineties* (1913) and Osbert Burdett's *The Beardsley Period* (1925) with no mention of the New Woman or even complete paragraphs devoted to women. A small number of women active in literature in the 1890s, notably Egerton and John Oliver Hobbes (1867-1906) are mentioned approvingly; most are simply ignored. It may be coincidence that these women with male pseudonyms are allotted a place in primarily male environments while undisguised female writers of importance such as M^énie Muriel Dowie (1867-1945) receive a mere mention and often not even that.

One cause of this neglect is the excessive emphasis on Oscar Wilde in works on the 1890s which has tilted attention towards maleness (if not masculinity) and helped solidify a set of clichés about the 1890s artistic sensibility which is represented as effete.¹⁵ This limp-wristed aesthetic caricature excludes such robust realist writers as D'Arcy or the sexual insights of Dowie, the social observations of Sharp and Syrett, and the modernism of Mew, Egerton, and Mayne. It should be said that 1890s women did not have an obvious stand-out figure of enduring literary genius for

their generation of young women, like George Eliot, whose presence might have encouraged others.

An expectation of diffidence on the part of 1890s women in their own times did the *Yellow Book* cohort no good. As Susan Winslow Waterman comments about Mayne, ‘the instinct to shun attention and disdain for self-promotion may have played a key role in [her] undeserved obscurity today’.¹⁶ Mayne was an influential modernist writer but she did not ally herself to others or espouse theories, which has limited critical appreciation of her work. A letter from a kind editor, Lovat Dixon from Macmillan, gives an indication of the way Mayne approached the business of publishing. He wrote to her, ‘because you said that you did not want the manuscript submitted if there was any chance of it being refused, I wanted to read it myself first before showing it to the directors.’¹⁷ Any male writer might have been so sensitive to rejection; it is an excessively common trait in the 1890s woman. Mayne’s nemesis D’Arcy, though eager to promote herself in person as a woman as Mayne was not, was still so diffident that a single rejection of one of her manuscripts led her to stop submitting it and put it in a drawer.¹⁸ Even a woman as assured as D’Arcy was used to being treated as inferior; it seems she had internalized the misogyny. Even when writing to a publisher, D’Arcy undermined the credibility of her own work:

I send the MS today by book-post, and I send it with many misgivings, for while I still think the two first portions of the story fairly good, I am beginning to fear that the third portion is violent and crude [...]. Probably the subject – a difficult one – is altogether beyond my capacity, and I have rushed in like the fool where wiser men have forborne to tread.¹⁹

It is difficult to imagine a man making such a statement. Predictably, the book was rejected.²⁰

Egerton, no shrinking violet in person, was typical in that she disdained publicity.

When Clement Shorter wrote to her asking to feature her in his magazine *The Sphere*, she replied,

Mr Lane told me some weeks ago that you would like to have a portrait and if possible an interview. I have a very strong dislike to interviews, in fact I have refused many applications. I do not desire to be anything but “George Egerton” to the public.²¹

So much of a nineteenth-century woman’s life was supposed to be private that it was challenging for her to promote herself in the public gaze. Commentators such as Eliza Lynn Linton

condemned the sort of public woman who occupied male spaces: ‘She smokes after dinner with the men; in railway carriages; in public rooms – where she is allowed. She thinks she is thereby vindicating her independence and honouring her emancipated womanhood’.²² It took a strong personal belief to be able to resist the sort of social opprobrium attracted by a public woman. With a single theatrical success (that of one performance), Netta Syrett attracted the attention of a male critic who insinuated her play about an adulterous woman had some relation to her own life. Syrett, who worked as a teacher, was summoned into the headmistress’s office and summarily dismissed.²³

Obscurity over time is also to some extent a function of the lack of resources. Schaffer laments ‘the absence of even the most basic biographical information’ on many late-Victorian women writers.²⁴ This was less true as the twenty-first century progressed, with the advent of such online sources as the *Yellow Nineties 2.0* and numerous Wikipedia entries, but it was still possible in 2023 for the present writer to publish *Decadent Women: Yellow Book Lives* where a condition for extensive inclusion was that the *Yellow Book* women represented ‘should not have had a biography written about them before the project started’.²⁵ Sometimes the lack of biographical data was deliberate: Dixon sabotaged biographical study by destroying all her papers and writing a memoir, *Sketches of People I Have Met on the Way* (1930), which is largely accounts of famous men she encountered.²⁶ Valerie Felhlbaum has discussed female autobiography and the tendency of women to concentrate on their professional or public achievements, while men, having become known in a public sphere, use their autobiographies to discuss the personal.²⁷ Netta Syrett ordered her personal papers to be destroyed but at least wrote memoirs and personal pieces which supply biographical information. Mew seemed to regard the destruction of her papers as amusing, knowing it would frustrate later curiosity.²⁸ At least some of D’Arcy’s papers were preserved but have subsequently been lost, though her letters were preserved by the recipients. Ethel Colburn Mayne’s letters, similarly, have been preserved but very little other biographical material exists.

A shortage of biographical information is an impediment to detailed study but not an insuperable one: the works of the *Yellow Book* women could stand on their own for criticism or

public appreciation. They had to be remembered to be valued, however, and most suffered neglect in the new century. Some had done their best work by 1900; some like D'Arcy struggled to be published. Others like Egerton moved in a new direction and had new battles with, in her case, theatre managements. Netta Syrett and Sharp kept producing work which kept them in the public eye. Syrett wrote at least thirty-five novels in addition to plays, books for children, non-fiction works, and short stories. Mabel Dearmer (1872-1915) took another path from the illustrations she had contributed to the *Yellow Book* and had modest success in writing books. Dowie passed from being one of the best-known women writers of the 1890s through scandal to obscurity. After coming to grief when she adopted the same attitude to sexual morality as the men in her circle and having an affair which led to divorce, she retreated into farming, no longer making promotional appearances or even writing fiction.

Impediments to Progress

Childbirth interrupted some careers: 'Marriage, Motherhood and Writing are each whole time jobs', wrote Egerton.²⁹ The work of *Yellow Book* writers Dollie Radford (1858-1920) and Nora Chesson (1871-1906) undoubtedly suffered because of family responsibilities. For some, however, the reverse happened; Edith Nesbit (1858-1924) was markedly prolific as a result of having to maintain a family, a home, and a feckless husband on her own efforts.³⁰ Like Dearmer, she used her children for her novels so they were a net gain, rather than a hindrance, in literary terms.

There were factors affecting 1890s women which were impediments to success: diffidence; the self-sabotage of personal information which could have been used in biography; and the reluctance to see themselves as a 'movement' with the reinforcement of each other which that would have brought. The 1890s writers are sometimes accused of drawing from a limited range of experiences and it is certainly the case that many had little experience excepting their own lives, though like Jane Austen, some made up in depth for what they lacked in breadth. Mayne felt her limited experience as the spinster daughter of an Irish magistrate had limited her scope as a writer,

as she wrote to Mary Butts, 'I cannot see myself ever writing anything of my own again and it kills me. It's not because I am too old, too out of the movement (such as it is) – no, it's that my experience has not been rich enough, it has only been of what I may not now write of – the emotional life, the life of the sense and the spirit. It's not enough.'³¹ Such limited life experience was not the case with men who had been able (in far greater numbers) to travel and live alone away from parents. However, some, notably Sharp, Graham, and Dowie, were travellers of considerable experience. Egerton had sufficient romantic adventures to fill several books. Mayne may be also over-stating her isolation; she went to London to work on *The Yellow Book* in 1896 and later moved there permanently, fitting in with Violet Hunt's set at Campden Hill.³²

An enduring question is: if the women were so talented, why are they not better remembered? What explains the success of the Georges – Gissing, Meredith, and Moore – who have achieved canonical status with work no better appreciated than that of women writers? The simplistic answer would be quality: the women were by virtue of their gender, or (more benignly) because of insufficient training in the craft of letters, less worthy of respect than their male counterparts, and the men therefore were pre-eminent in the literary survival of the fittest. It is more likely, however, that the failure of posterity to recognize women lies in the way in which women were treated in the literary world. Through occasional mistakes where women are accidentally regarded as men a different standard is exposed. The publisher John Lane, for example, was anxious to make the acquaintance of a writer with the first name Evelyn, who he assumed to be male. Sharp recounted she had received an invitation for 'Mr Evelyn Sharp to a smoking evening at the Bodley Head. I think the occasion was a meeting of the Odd Volumes literary society of which Mr John Lane was at that time president'.³³ She politely explained her feminine status, which duly disqualified her from the event and whatever bookish networking was taking place.³⁴

Similarly, an editor's frank statements to Egerton about a manuscript were later withdrawn with the comment, 'it never once dawned on me that the author of those virile sketches was not

one of my own sex or I would never for a moment have written as I did'.³⁵ The mask had slipped and he had addressed a woman with the honesty he would have used to a man. Such errors indicate how the drawing-room niceties of Victorian Britain were a serious constraint on candid discussion in the literary world, and how much was concealed from women writers even in direct discourse. Women were paternalistically excluded from conversations which might be thought 'indecent', limiting their access to discourse about modern writing and the literary marketplace.

Furthermore, women were literally not in the same place for much literary business. Egerton explained in a letter to Clement Shorter about a misunderstanding between them, ending: 'Now I hope I have made my peace with you – a woman is always handicapped, if I were a man I should have run across you long ago and have had the opportunity of saying this.'³⁶ She simply was not in the same spaces as an equivalent male writer would have been to sell her wares and deal with any impediment to that. When seeking a contributor for a periodical an editor might literally look around his club, as Lane and Henry Harland did while planning *The Yellow Book* in January 1894. Arthur Waugh was lunching at the National Liberal Club at 1 Whitehall Gardens when Harland and Lane came in to tell Edmund Gosse all about their new project and Waugh joined them. They went through a list of men who might contribute.³⁷ No women were, it seems, mentioned at this seminal gathering and as a gentlemen's club there were no women present, nor would they be members for another 80 years.

In *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894), Dixon tells of the gruelling trudge around the corridors of Fleet Street trying to sell her work. Her character, Mary, witnesses the camaraderie of male companionship between the editor she is waiting to see and a young male contributor, both smoking and laughing. She waits before the editor's visitor departs, promising to 'See you at the club tonight' – a club in which Mary will never set foot.³⁸ Men might also meet for literary business discussion at a bar like the Crown in Charing Cross Road, a haunt of influential men but where respectable women could not be present; or he would think of people he knew from his all-male public school or all-male Oxbridge college. He may not have been intending to exclude women,

but that is what he did. There may even have been a conscious choice to include some work by ‘the fairer sex’ in a display of gallantry; or an acceptance that fiction-reading audiences were substantially female; or even a predatory eagerness to offer literary favours in exchange for sexual ones (Lane’s fondness for women writers was such that he became known as ‘Petticoat Lane’).³⁹ Whatever the motives, women became secondary contributors; women were rarely so close to the source of patronage as were men.

There were always some women who were, by virtue of their male relatives, able to move to some extent in male spaces, such as Dixon, the daughter of an editor (William Hepworth Dixon) whose name gave her access to editorial offices if not the male friendships inside them. Dowie’s relation to her celebrated grandfather Robert Chambers helped her in the early days, while Syrett’s relative Grant Allen gave her access to literary circles. It was certainly D’Arcy’s view that some women advanced their literary career by feminine wiles and achieved publication they would not have done on merit; women used what they could for their own advancement. The important point about these means of access is that they were not reinforced by other factors. Once their physical presence was absent, the women disappeared in the memories of the powerful, unlike those of the men whose positions were strengthened by the club, pub, school, college, and work network that reinforced male bonding.

Such neglect, or deliberate exclusion, of women continued throughout their careers and thereafter. Academic and antiquarian bookselling circles, which might have given kudos to writing of an earlier century, were similarly male endeavours for most of the twentieth century, and relegated women writers. Privilege favours those in closest proximity. Male privilege, like any other kind, can be exclusive and could deliberately exclude women. Undoubtedly that occurred, but privilege is much more likely to be determinedly *inclusive* of everyone else who has similar privilege, with occasional invitations to outsiders for variation. The act of including colleagues of the same sex, with similar backgrounds and experiences, necessarily excluded those who did not fit the criteria.

Dolf Wyllarde and ‘*Nous Autres*’

One of the neglected was Dolf Wyllarde (1871-1950), a *Yellow Book* writer who has left little trace despite her prolific output of over forty volumes of poetry and novels written between 1897 and 1939. Some of her novels were very successful and a film of Wyllarde’s 1916 book *Exile: An Outcast of the Empire* was made by Maurice Tourner in 1917 as *Exile*. She has left almost no biographical information despite being sufficiently well known to be included in *Who Was Who* of 1952, though the editors did not know her birth date or her birth name.⁴⁰ In a 1906 novel, *The Pathway of the Pioneer*, she wrote of the struggles of women in the arts in the first years of the twentieth century. She describes seven women who meet as a club called *Nous Autres* [We Others]: a journalist, a writer, an actress, a teacher, a telephonist, a typist, and a musician. They find mutual support in a bare room with nothing for furniture except seven unmatched chairs and three packing cases; on one of these, in a setting reminiscent of a gentlemen’s club, stand a syphon of soda water, a bottle of cheap claret, and half a bottle of whiskey, with cigarettes and matches on the mantelshelf.

Nous Autres are young women of some refinement but not the income to justify it, being ‘professional men’s’ daughters without the private means of what they call ‘Real Girls’ who do not have to work for a living. By day they do grinding jobs which drain their strength while bringing in minimum income; they have ‘too much delicacy for the fight before them’.⁴¹ They talk about daily trials such as trying to keep clean in London (wearing dark colours which will not show the dirt), cooking their own meals with the cheapest ingredients possible, and darning their own clothes. Life is an unequal struggle where women are expected to maintain the same pace of work as men (but for less money): ‘When we have ended our male day in the office, we have to go home and begin our female day – unless we have lost the sense of feminine decency and go in rags.’⁴² Men were generally better equipped to live roughly and would accept less refinement in their living spaces. One of the friends remarks, ‘A kind of rage came over me when I thought what a fight we

had, and how everything is made easy for men, and then they run us down for even trying to make our own living.⁷⁴³

The women in Wyllarde's novel dodge sexual advances at work which are so frequent they treat any show of assistance or friendship from male colleagues with suspicion. *Nous Autres* are so used to sexual harassment that when a man proposes marriage to one of them in a roundabout way, she interprets it as an improper suggestion and rejects it. Professional advancement is slight for any of them and interviews for new work are a humiliation. An expectation of feminine restraint limits their self-promotion while their male colleagues have no such inhibitions. The lack of professional contacts curses such women, in a way that shows just how valuable were the 'at homes' of Aline and Henry Harland and the tea parties of Lane. In these the *Yellow Book* writers had not only been mixing with other writers, but with a publisher and editor who could commission their work. Clubs like The Lyceum, set up in 1909 for women working in literature, journalism, art, science and medicine, were all-female networking spaces which therefore did not provide a forum for women to access power in those worlds when power was almost exclusively in the hands of men.⁴⁴ Wyllarde's strongest depictions are of

the great murderous world of journalism, which grinds and spares not, and asks impossible work of its victims, and dismisses without reason, and is bought and sold by interest behind the scenes. It is part of the everyday business of Fleet Street to break hearts. The stage is cruel, the musical world crushes and hammers the soul out of all endeavour into a grey monotony of form; but literature and journalism torture first and kill slowly – very slowly – by inches of a disease which, once caught, shall never be healed again.⁴⁵

Wyllarde gives the most detailed description of Flair Chaldecott with her difficult personality, physical weakness and fondness for cats. Flair, who lives in two little rooms at the top of a gaunt building off Duncannon Street, Strand, is described as a writer or 'fictionist, freelance journalist, reporter, literary hack of all kinds, who lived on whatever work she could get, and had neither illusions nor ideals left from eight years of honest work.⁷⁴⁶ She is generous and giving to her friends but her long-term prospects are bleak and 'her possessions, when she died, amounted to twenty

pounds in the post office (which buried her) and certain trifling profits from two volumes of short stories'.⁴⁷ The profession of letters had given her much hard work for little reward.

The chief problem for the *Yellow Book* women was a lack of influential contacts and the absence of a network which supported them and included them outside of their own friendship group. Mutual support was all very well, but no match for a voice in the courts of favouritism that were publishers. Men without contacts were to suffer also, but they had many more opportunities to enter a discourse which was overwhelmingly male and held in male spaces. As the novelist Constance Smedley (known to the *Yellow Book* women) wrote, 'the sense of being at a disadvantage in all their communications with the world, business or social, was an impediment to success'.⁴⁸ This led to a dwindling of women's influence as the years passed while male networks reinforced each other. Periodicals predicated on male bonding, like *The Yellow Book*, effectively made women secondary contributors.

Much of the later neglect was the product of the lack of opportunities which women experienced in the 1890s. Women had been inhibited from promoting their literary wares at the same level as men, being reluctant to promote themselves. Not being brought up to be in the public sphere, they were continually at a disadvantage from men who took display and self-promotion as natural. The tradition of male spaces for business also militated against them; the pubs, clubs and 'smoking evenings' which were denied to them meant they did not have the contacts while in their prime, but also that they lacked the network of publishers, memoirists and anthologists to reinforce their value in later decades. In the twenty-first century, however, considerably more scholarly attention has been focused on women in the 1890s: conferences at Goldsmiths, University of London, on such subjects as 'Decadent Bodies' (2022) and 'Women Writing Decadence – European Perspectives' at the University of Oxford (2018); *The Latchkey, Journal of New Woman Studies* was founded in 2009; *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies* was established in 2018, and the British Association of Decadence Studies the same year. UK Universities of Goldsmiths, Surrey, Exeter, Loughborough, Durham, and Kings College London

have courses led by notable decadence scholars as do Stanford, the University of Delaware, and the University of California at Los Angeles in the USA. The study of *Yellow Book* women is therefore no longer outside the mainstream. The lives and work of these women are finally being appreciated anew, as the publication of *Decadent Women: Yellow Book Lives* (2023) and this special issue of *Volupté* demonstrates.

¹ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (Vintage, 1997), p. 564.

² Lee, *Woolf*, p. 566.

³ Talia Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades, *Women and British Aestheticism* (University of Virginia Press, 2000), p. 13.

⁴ See Jad Adams, *Decadent Women: Yellow Book Lives* (Reaktion, 2023), pp. 15, 74; and George Egerton *A Leaf from the Yellow Book: The Correspondence of George Egerton*, ed. by Terence de Vere White (Richards Press, 1958), p. 51.

⁵ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own, and Three Guineas* (OUP, 2008), p. 103. Though not in *A Room of One's Own*, Charlotte Mew was the one *Yellow Book* woman writer Woolf took to herself (as a poet, not a fiction writer).

⁶ Elaine Showalter, *Daughters of Decadence* (Virago, 1993), p. viii.

⁷ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 32.

⁸ George Egerton, 'A Keynote to Keynotes', in *10 Contemporaries*, ed. by John Gawsworth (Ernest Benn, 1932), p. 58.

⁹ *The Yellow Book*, vol. 3, October 1894, p. 12.

¹⁰ www.histpop.org. By the next census of 1901, the figures were 21,300,000 women and 20,100,000 men (all figures rounded).

¹¹ George Gissing, 'The Foolish Virgin', *The Yellow Book*, vol. 8, January 1896, pp. 11-38,

https://1890s.ca/YBV8_gissing_foolish/, and H. G. Wells, 'A Slip under the Microscope', *The Yellow Book*, vol. 8, January 1896, pp. 229-85, https://1890s.ca/YBV8_wells_microscope/. Both at *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, ed. by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities, 2010-2020.

¹² Margaret Stetz and Mark Samuels Lasner, *The Yellow Book: A Centenary Exhibition* (Houghton Library, 1994), pp. 21-23. See Olive Custance, 'Twilight', *The Yellow Book*, vol. 3, October 1894, pp. 134-35,

https://1890s.ca/YBV3_custance_twilight/, and John Davidson, 'The Ballad of a Nun', *The Yellow Book*, vol. 3, October 1894, pp. 273-79, https://1890s.ca/YBV3_davidson_ballad/; both at *Yellow Book Digital Edition*.

¹³ Ann Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 2.

¹⁴ W. B. Yeats, *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935* (OUP, 1936), p. v.

¹⁵ Jad Adams further discusses this in 'The 1890s Woman', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Fin-de-Siècle Literature, Culture and the Arts*, ed. by Josephine M. Guy (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 283-300.

¹⁶ Susan Winslow Waterman, 'Ethel Colburn Mayne', *Dictionary of Literary Biography 197 Late-Victorian and Edwardian British Novelists*, ed. by George M. Johnson (Gale, 1999), p. 201.

¹⁷ Lovat Dixon to Ethel Colburn Mayne, 19 February 1940, Macmillan Letterbook 463, Reading. The book was *Sentence of Life*.

¹⁸ Arnold Bennett, *The Journal of Arnold Bennett 1896-1910* (Cassell, 1932), 12 December 1910. Bennett does not specify but this was probably her novel about the life of Shelley.

¹⁹ Ella D'Arcy to Richard Watson Gilder, 22 December 1899, NYPL Century Collection.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ George Egerton to Clement Shorter, 20 January 1894, Harlan O'Connell Collection, Princeton.

²² Eliza Lynn Linton, 'The Wild Women as Social Insurgents', *Nineteenth Century*, 30 (October 1891), pp. 596-605 (p. 597).

²³ Netta Syrett, *The Sheltering Tree* (Geoffrey Bles, 1939), pp. 125-26.

²⁴ Schaffer, *Forgotten*, p. 30.

²⁵ Adams, *Decadent Women*, p. 337.

²⁶ Ella Hepworth Dixon, '*As I knew Them*': *Sketches of People I have Met on the Way* (Hutchinson, 1930).

Jad Adams discusses this in 'Feminist Solidarity in the Life and Work of Ella Hepworth Dixon', *The Latchkey: Journal of New Woman Studies*, www.thelatchkey.org/Latchkey5/essay/Adams.htm.

²⁷ Valerie Felhlbaum, *Ella Hepworth Dixon: The Story of a Modern Woman* (Ashgate, 2005), pp. 6-8.

²⁸ Alida Monroe, 'Charlotte Mew: A Memoir', in *Collected Poems of Charlotte Mew* (Duckworth, 1953), p. xx.

- ²⁹ George Egerton, 'A Keynote to Keynotes', in John Gawsworth, *Ten Contemporaries* (Ernest Benn, 1932), p. 57.
- ³⁰ See Eleanor Fitzgerald, *The Life and Loves of E. Nesbit* (Duckworth, 2019).
- ³¹ Ethel Colburn Mayne to Mary Butts, 14 June 1932, Gen MSS 487 Mary Butts Papers, Box 1, Folder 32, Beinecke Library, Yale.
- ³² Joan Hardwick, *An Immodest Violet* (Andre Deutsch, 1990), p. 69.
- ³³ Evelyn Sharp letter to R. A. Walker, 14 April 1919, Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library, Museums and Press.
- ³⁴ Lewis May, *John Lane* (John Lane, 1936), pp. 208-09 gives a partial list of the attendees, all male.
- ³⁵ Thomas P. Gill to George Egerton in *A Leaf from the Yellow Book*, p. 26.
- ³⁶ George Egerton to Clement Shorter, 7 July 1894, O'Connell collection, Princeton.
- ³⁷ Waugh, *One Man*, pp. 252-53.
- ³⁸ Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (Heinemann, 1894), p. 112.
- ³⁹ J. Lewis May, *John Lane and the Nineties* (Bodley Head, 1936), p. 150.
- ⁴⁰ 'Dolf Wyllarde', in *Who Was Who Vol IV 1941-1950* (A & C Black, 1952), p. 1271. Her birth name was Dorothy Margarette Selby Lowndes, and her date of birth was 3 April 1871.
- ⁴¹ Dolf Wyllarde, *The Pathway of the Pioneer* (Methuen, 1906), p. 8.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, *Pathway*, p. 138.
- ⁴⁴ Jad Adams, 'Netta Syrett: A Yellow Book survivor', *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920*, 62.2 (2019), pp. 206-43 (p. 236).
- ⁴⁵ Wyllarde, *Pathway*, p. 12.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- ⁴⁸ Constance Smedley, *Crusaders: The Reminiscences of Constance Smedley* (Duckworth, 1929), p. 54.

The End of the ‘Marriage Question’:
Bad Romance in the *Yellow Book* Stories of Ella D’Arcy, Evelyn Sharp, and
Ada Leverson

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By the end of the nineteenth century, a wave of legal reforms had passed into law in England, illustrating the way in which reality often failed to live up to the ideal of companionate marriage lauded in conduct books. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 permitted a woman to sue for divorce on the grounds of adultery and desertion or brutality (a husband could sue for divorce based solely on adultery); it was amended in 1878 to permit a woman to seek a legal separation if her husband was convicted of assaulting her. The Married Women’s Property Act of 1870 allowed women to keep their earnings after marriage and inheritances or gifts up to £200, and the Married Women’s Property Act of 1882 updated this to grant every married woman sole possession of all her earnings and inheritances. In 1886, the Maintenance in Case of Desertion Act expanded causes for separation to include desertion and neglect; in 1895 persistent cruelty was added to the list of causes for formal separation, and the law no longer required prior conviction and jailing of the husband.¹ All of these laws echoed broader cultural debates about the ways in which the realities of marriage often harboured violence, economic inequality, and a lack of mutual love, respect, and understanding, despite the pervasive idea – registered in popular fiction – that marriage was a route to happiness.

This article explores various romantic and marital disasters in *Yellow Book* fiction by Ella D’Arcy (1857-1937), Evelyn Sharp (1869-1955), and Ada Leverson (1862-1933). These writers offer complex depictions of romantic relationships that fail due to mutual misunderstandings. I use Sara Ahmed’s incisive work *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) alongside Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (2011) to frame the connection that binds women to conceptions of romantic contentment as a social norm. Ahmed articulates how ‘happiness is used to redescribe social norms

as social goods' so that a happy marriage simultaneously indicates and replicates acceptance and compliance.² Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* is conversant with Ahmed; she explains that 'cruel optimism exists when something you desire is an obstacle to your flourishing'.³ While Ahmed and Berlant's projects differ, they both examine the fantasy and construction of 'the good life',⁴ which for women in the nineteenth century was attached to marriage. Ahmed aptly demonstrates that the popular image of the family, hinging upon the housewife whose feelings and wishes align with her husband, is a myth and 'a powerful legislative device'.⁵ She argues that the Victorian *bildungsroman* often aligns a female protagonist's consciousness of injustice with the cause of unhappiness.⁶ That is, to become aware of inequity in marriage or in access to education, financial freedom, or autonomy is to become the source of unhappiness and the catalyst of tragedy.

I rely upon Ahmed's articulation of the ways in which happiness in nineteenth-century narratives are shaped by these myths as well as Berlant's interrogation of the breakdown of the 'good-life' fantasy. I analyse how these *Yellow Book* stories undercut assumptions regarding marital happiness and the good life at the end of the century through depictions of bad romances. D'Arcy, Sharp, and Leveson developed their own aesthetic of unhappiness particularly inflected by gender and sexuality. In numerous works of New Woman fiction, romantic breakdowns or breakups are grounded in the failures of men as well as women. These writers played out the potential economic, romantic, sexual, and social consequences of investment in the fantasy of the happy housewife.

In the 1890s, conceptions of womanhood entered a markedly new phase. The term New Woman was coined after an 1894 article by Sarah Grand, who stated in 'A New Aspect of the Woman Question' that the 'new woman' was distinguished from the 'cow-woman and the scum-woman' by her awakening to suffering and her declaration of what was wrong with 'Home-is-the-woman's Sphere,' arguing that 'The Woman Question is the Marriage Question'.⁷ Grand and other reformers argued that gender roles, naturalised in traditional conceptions of marriage and the family, were in fact cultural and therefore could be changed. The New Woman subsequently became a broad label in the popular press for women who pursued education and independence,

who valued a public life of work and leisure, and who rejected an ideology of separate spheres. As insult or compliment, the label was applied to a variety of women writers in the period who, by virtue of their professional endeavours and the topics they chose to portray, became part of a moment that enmeshed these broader debates about romance, companionate marriage, and motherhood with their own creative innovations in the literary marketplace.

The Yellow Book capitalized on the New Woman. It first launched in 1894, embracing ‘the courage of its modernness’ and refusing to ‘tremble at the frown of Mrs. Grundy’, thus overtly defining itself against that conventional figure of respectability and censoriousness.⁸ *The Yellow Book* profited from debates about womanhood by promoting and publishing New Woman writers, whether they lay claim to the term or not. Sally Ledger describes the ‘discursive and aesthetic resonance between aestheticism, the Decadence and the New Woman writing’ within *The Yellow Book*. These strains helped to define the periodical as an inclusive avant-garde cultural project in which women were valued producers of art that engaged with the cultural conflicts that played out in its pages.⁹ Ledger outlines an aesthetic dialogue that is more complex than Winnie Chan’s characterisation of a pervasive ‘anxiety’ amongst male contributors who depict fictional male artists as ‘the victims of women, New and otherwise’.¹⁰ I build upon Ledger’s important work, highlighting *Yellow Book* women writers as valuable co-creators in the periodical’s ‘multivalent cultural politics’.¹¹ This approach promotes a reconsideration of *The Yellow Book* not solely as a venue that capitalised on cultural anxiety, but one that held up those anxieties to examination: a periodical wherein numerous New Women writers called out the misogyny inherent in narratives of male victimisation even as they critiqued outdated tropes regarding romance as a path to happiness. The innovative women writers of *The Yellow Book* rode a wave of interest in considering how modern women would remake their relationships with men and with the old institution of marriage at the end of the century and in the birth of the next.

While the aesthetic of *The Yellow Book* was never monolithic, writers often coalesced around prevalent themes. One of these was a focus on bad romance, which by the end of the century was

a rather overwrought topic. The sheer variety of voices within *The Yellow Book* brought new life to a topic that might otherwise have been considered commonplace. Over the course of thirteen issues, writers D’Arcy, Sharp, and Leveson reframed courtship and marriage through the failure of the ‘happiness narrative’. These fin-de-siècle women’s short stories grapple with distinct varieties of unhappiness, playing with the consequences of this long-developing denaturalisation of gender and marriage. Together, these three writers establish a trend in *Yellow Book* fiction, but they were by no means uniform. They are particularly interesting because their stories all very clearly pivot around the disintegration of fantasies of marriage or romance as a path to the good life, and yet their formal techniques are uniquely their own. While each writer had a distinct style, together their corroborating testimonies stripped away the assumption that to be productive, to be useful, to be happy, a woman should seek marriage or the approval of a man. They offer warnings to both men and women that old romantic patterns do not deliver on the promise of authentic companionship. Together, their stories are a significant component of *The Yellow Book’s* contribution to the ongoing cultural debates about marriage and unhappiness.

Ella D’Arcy’s Disastrous Coercions

D’Arcy was one of the writers most highly involved in *The Yellow Book*. Her short story ‘Irremediable’,¹² published in the first volume, struck editor Henry Harland as ‘remarkable’¹³ and she was a valued contributor of short fiction throughout *The Yellow Book’s* run. She published eleven short stories and also served as sub-editor for the first nine volumes, until she was removed from the position for making editorial decisions without Harland’s approval.¹⁴ While her labour was highly valued, her independent action was not. Given the content of her *Yellow Book* stories, it perhaps should not have been surprising to Harland that D’Arcy acted outside of his dictation of her duties. Several of her short stories dramatize the unpleasant revelations that men experience when women diverge from the expectations that are projected upon them.

D'Arcy's *Yellow Book* short stories are profoundly disruptive; they offer variations on the theme of failure, regret, and unhappiness. She uses male narrators to expose the deep flaws in their perceptions of women and marriage. While critics such as Jad Adams have argued that her stories feature 'sensitive, humane men dominated by conniving women',¹⁵ in fact they are more complex in their indictments of both men and women. D'Arcy makes the most of third-person narration, penning plot-based stories with twist endings that shock and entertain. Stephanie Eggermont and Elke D'hoker observe that D'Arcy capitalised upon the expanding magazine market, using the twist ending of the short story as a way for D'Arcy to provide 'an uncompromising Flaubertian dissection of failed marriages'¹⁶ with unsatisfying endings that refuse to deliver happiness. This became a notable D'Arcian technique. Adams acknowledges that 'D'Arcy presents a sour view of women that is rather more complex than that proposed by the feminists such as Mona Caird, who were battling against male domination in marriage'.¹⁷ Though D'Arcy's means are different, the ends of her indictment are similar. Men in D'Arcy's stories are miserable because they are not obeyed. There is no possibility of equality or companionship. While none of her characters are angelic, it is clear that D'Arcy is not championing men; she is tearing down the marriage plot.

'Irremediable' introduces Willoughby, a bank clerk on vacation in the countryside who encounters a young woman, Esther, a working-class girl who is recovering from exhaustion due to labouring in tailoring workrooms in London.¹⁸ Despite his misgivings, he kisses her, but when he tries to break off the connection, she cries and claims that her father beats her. When Willoughby hears this, he proposes marriage.¹⁹ His romantic ideals of courtship quickly shift to the realities of a grossly ill-matched marriage. Esther does not employ any of the skills he expects of her to maintain their home, leaving the house filthy with food scraps, the fire untended, and the furniture and household untidy.²⁰ She hates books, she does not allow him to write, she interrupts or laughs when he attempts to read; he is irritated by her way of standing, walking, sitting, and folding her hands.²¹ Driven initially by his vanity, in the end he is consumed by regret. It is telling that D'Arcy's twist ending is the revelation of domestic misery rather than domestic bliss. He

experiences a sense of inescapable entrapment because Esther does not have the skills and demeanour that he had expected of a wife. Although she had never exhibited these traits at any point in their speedy courtship, Willoughby foolishly expected her to step into that role and to serve his own domestic comfort. Ahmed explains how troublemakers are not simply flawed individuals: ‘the troublemaker is the one who violates the fragile conditions of peace’.²² Esther is the one who violates a domestic peace defined entirely by and for Willoughby. Esther is the disruptor because domestic happiness is equivalent to the man’s happiness in this domestic space.

D’Arcy exposes the way in which collective marital contentment is often framed through male happiness. Her fictional husbands expect marriage to be about their pleasure and comfort. The emotional shock occurs when men realise that their wives are real people who do not live up to those ideals. D’Arcy’s later contribution to *The Yellow Book*, ‘A Marriage’, highlights a woman as a consummate performer of the role expected of her, up to the point of marriage, when security provides her with the freedom to behave differently. Unlike Esther, Nettie Hooper is subservient, attentive, and apparently devoted to Catterson, the man who has fathered her child out of wedlock.²³ Catterson praises her to his friend West as he explains his decision to marry her, complimenting her shy temperament, household economy, cooking, appearance, sewing ability, devotion, and unselfishness. She is the consummate domestic partner, and expresses ‘no opinions, or only those universal ones which every woman may express without danger of self-revelation’.²⁴ She defers to Catterson in all things, and he is delighted, saying, ‘It’s always my wishes that guide her. She never does anything without asking my opinion and advice. I don’t know how a man could have a better wife.’²⁵ She is a cipher and a reflection of all of Catterson’s wishes.

Several years later, Mrs Catterson sets significant demands upon her husband simply because she can; she has legitimacy, financial security, and standing as his wife. When Catterson’s friend West visits their home again Catterson bemoans in private:

You remember Nettie before I married her? Did she not appear the gentlest, the sweetest, the most docile girl in the world? Who would ever have imagined she could have learned to bully her husband and insult his friends like this? But the moment her position was

assured she changed [...]. Marriage is the metamorphosis of women, the Circe wand which changes back all these smiling, gentle, tractable, little girls into their true forms.²⁶

While Catterson undoubtedly suffers, he ignores his own role in coercing her performance. She must please him when she is entirely dependent upon him for food, for housing, for legitimacy, and for the support of her child.²⁷ If a woman cannot earn a living on her own, but is dependent upon a man for legitimacy, she cannot be blamed for becoming whatever a man would like her to be until she has security in marriage.

Catterson defines happiness in marriage as Nettie's willingness to continue to defer to him and to make his own happiness the source of her own; she should continue to behave only to please him. As Ahmed explains, 'happiness involves reciprocal forms of aspiration' including the expectation that a woman is happy if her husband is happy. But, that language of reciprocity is a form of coercion in which one person's happiness 'is made conditional not only on another person's happiness but on that person's willingness to be made happy by the same things'.²⁸ Nettie violates that code. She makes her own domestic contentment irrespective of his emotional and physical state. Ahmed states that 'if my happiness is dependent upon your happiness, then you have the power to determine my happiness'.²⁹ What is so powerful about D'Arcy's women is their refusal of that reciprocity. Severing that mutual happiness (which in essence is equivalent to male happiness) is profoundly liberating for the female characters and deeply troubling for the men. If D'Arcy's women in 'Irremediable' and 'A Marriage' are characterised by critics as working-class schemers who trick their middle-class husbands into unfulfilling marriages, then those readers fail to understand the epiphanies that both male protagonists undergo: their wives do not exist to fulfil men's happiness. Esther and Nettie have entered into a contract to secure a home for themselves. The belated enlightenment of the husbands in both of these stories serve as a warning to readers who may yet be able to avoid similar assumptions that their wives are unquestionably in service to their own domestic comfort.

D’Arcy’s personal attitude toward the New Woman and feminism was ambivalent at best. She once lamented in a letter to John Lane that she was moving to a boarding house where the fellow women ‘have all been dragged up at Newnham or Girton and are earnest advocates of Women’s Rights’.³⁰ Despite her dread of her housemates, D’Arcy’s own works were more at home in that arena than she was willing to admit. Her *Yellow Book* stories offer a striking commentary on outdated Victorian attitudes toward marriage. Generally, D’Arcy’s stories explore human weakness and the way in which self-absorption and manipulation lead to misery. Her biting critiques of the cruel assumptions that underpin social relations, packaged in cleverly-plotted short stories, remain an exemplar of the periodical, the period and the genre.

Evelyn Sharp’s Romantic Disappointments

Sharp, who later became known as a suffragist and writer of fairy tales, also began her career with *The Yellow Book*. Her contributions to *The Yellow Book* expanded the magazine’s preoccupation with disrupting the romance plot. Like D’Arcy, Sharp penned *Yellow Book* short stories with subversive endings, but Sharp uses a lighter touch. Her stories generally end in her characters’ acceptance of their disappointments. D’hoker and Eggermont point out that Sharp is a notable 1890s writer of ‘elaborately plotted stories’ that open *in medias res* and regularly resist romantic closure or resolution.³¹ These romantic encounters, modernisations of Victorian marriage plots, are predicated on courtship rituals disrupted by the unexpected ways in which modern women encounter men, and the way in which these characters grapple with increasingly dated tropes. Sharp’s depictions of disappointment presage Berlant’s description of the possible consequences of cruel optimism. She explains that

fantasy is the means by which people hoard idealizing theories and tableaux about how they and the world ‘add up to something’. What happens when those fantasies start to fray – depression, dissociation, pragmatism, cynicism, optimism, activism, or an incoherent mash?³²

Sharp's protagonists face that very crisis; they first confront the disruption of their fantasies and then must decide how to move beyond them.

In Sharp's 'The End of an Episode', her first contribution to *The Yellow Book*,³³ a male writer who has recently gone blind is visited by tedious but well-meaning women of the neighbourhood who offer platitudes and suggestions of doctors and treatments. When he asks one visitor to tell him a story about herself, he interrupts and supplies the details for her, revealing that he recognises her from a past romantic fling. He shares his memory of her flirtation with him when he was an aspiring young writer after she was left alone for weeks by her unloving husband. Their illicit romance abruptly ended upon the husband's return and they had not been in contact since. In the end, she reveals that she is now widowed, and he admits that he had taken her advice about an eye doctor and he can now see again. But, despite the elimination of any impediment, they no longer care for one another. They face the reality of who they are rather than the fantasies of each other they had cultivated. Everilde, the widow, bitterly complains, 'I wonder who invented the ridiculous idea of two people marrying and living happily ever after. It must have been the first man who wrote for money.' When she asks Allan, the writer, why he kept the recovery of his eyesight a secret, he explains, 'You see, I thought that if I were blind and helpless and all that sort of thing, you might get to care a little, don't you see, and —'.³⁴ In a revision of the famous mid-century marriage plot of *Jane Eyre* (1847), which ends with Jane's deep love and nurturing of a maimed, blind, and dependent Rochester, here that mechanism falls flat. Despite every attempt, they cannot recover the love they felt for each other when their feelings were forbidden.

'The End of an Episode' acknowledges that the clichés of courtship and love cannot sustain authentic emotion over time. This is what Berlant describes as the 'dissolution of optimistic objects/scenarios that had once held the space open for the good-life fantasy'.³⁵ The failure of their romance plot hinges upon the freedom to marry, when they realise that they do not actually love each other. They are not playing parts; they begin to know each other as they really are, moving beyond a fantasy into a more precarious and less satisfying present reality. Their feelings

do not follow the narrative and normative patterns that are provided for them. The most profound loss of the story is that of the fantasy of forbidden love that had sustained them.

While they do come to disappointment, 'The End of an Episode' reaches a point of acceptance where the characters reject the narrative that they had tried to embody. However, it is 'In Dull Brown', published in January 1896 in *The Yellow Book*, in which Sharp offers her fullest indictment of the failure of the romance plot for modern women. Jean Moreen, a schoolteacher wearing an unusual russet brown dress, makes a spontaneous decision to ride atop an omnibus for her morning commute and a man strikes up a conversation with her. He asks her 'Why do you look so beastly happy . . .? Is it because you work so hard?' Jean is notable for her demeanour as much as her dress, and he assumes it is because she enjoys being occupied.³⁶ Because she is happy, she is attractive and interesting to him. But when he seeks her out on the morning commute the next day, and she is not happy, he is disappointed. When he teases her about work, she makes it clear that she works because she has to earn a living. He complains, 'You were quite different yesterday, weren't you?' And Jean bluntly points out the unstated assumptions that underpin his expectations of her:

'You speak as though my being one thing or another ought to depend on your pleasure [...] of course, you think like everybody else that a woman is only to be tolerated as long as she is cheerful. How can you be cheerful when the weather is dreary, and you are tired out with yesterday's work? You don't know what it is like. You should keep to the women who don't work; they will always look pretty, and smile sweetly and behave in a domesticated manner'.³⁷

He frames her happiness as an emotion that is in service to him, rather than realising that her own emotional state is changeable due to her own circumstances and influenced by the very real limitations of her financial situation. Ahmed explains this general expectation regarding the projection of female happiness as the 'false smile that sustains the psychic and political condition of unhappiness' so that it is a feminist act not to smile when a woman does not feel happy.³⁸ To perform happiness for a man is to contribute to gendered inequity and to stoke women's internal disquiet, both then and now.

Sharp, in this story, dramatizes the moment of Jean's consciousness-raising when she confronts the limitations of her life and, in doing so, becomes more unhappy. As Ahmed explains, 'you have to experience limitations as limitations; the act of noticing limitations can actually make life seem more rather than less limited'.³⁹ Though Ahmed's work of feminist criticism was published over a century after Sharp's story, her general description aligns very closely with the transformation that Jean undergoes. Jean's initial prediction that Tom, her suitor, would actually prefer a more conventional woman who does not work, who does not express independent emotions, and who does not exhibit cleverness or frustration or exhaustion, comes to pass. When he meets her at her home for the first time, she is late after being held at work, and she walks in to witness the tableau of Tom sitting alongside her beautiful, domesticated sister Nancy, who looks upon him adoringly. Jean is conscious that his affections have transferred to her sister, and Jean rejects him. Jean explains to her sister,

I suppose I shall get on. And to the end of days people will admire me from a distance, and talk about my talent and my determination, just as they talk about your beauty and your womanly ways. That is so like the world; it always associates us with a certain atmosphere and never admits the possibility of any other [...]. Nobody would think of falling in love with [me], and [I] don't even know how to be lovable.⁴⁰

Jean laments that they are both hemmed in by unfair expectations. She mourns the lost hope of having both work and the possibility of a companionate marriage, to be loved as herself. In both stories, Sharp's characters realize that they are more than what is expected of them. Failed courtships are catalysts for characters to awaken their desires and to acknowledge the limitations of the romantic roles they have been given. Sharp's stories provide lessons about the dangers of cruel optimism and these inadequate fantasies. Berlant explains that

the key here is not to see what happens to aesthetically mediated *characters* as equivalent to what happens to people but to see that in the affective scenarios of these works and discourses we can discern claims about the situation of contemporary life.⁴¹

It is in this way that Sharp offers a corrective and a path to enlightenment for her readers. She exposes the inadequacy of these fantasies through the disappointment of characters who surrender their hopes of romantic fulfilment due to the conditions of their everyday lives. In doing so, they

illustrate the profound gap between the roles they have been told they should aspire to enact and their much less romantic realities. There is no question of the survival and perseverance of these characters; they will go on despite the loss of their fantasies, after they have actively reordered their expectations of themselves and their relationships.

Ada Levenson's Mockery of Marriage

When Levenson published her short story, 'Suggestion', in the fifth volume of *The Yellow Book* in 1895, she had already achieved some success as a comic writer with pieces in *Punch* and *Black and White*. 'Suggestion' and its successor 'The Quest of Sorrow' follow her satirical bent. She published both stories under the name Mrs Ernest Levenson. Such an act might seem to signal conventionality, foregrounding her husband's identity and her own marital status. However, Levenson's stories became known for their cynical depictions of marital life. Both *Yellow Book* stories follow the thoughts and actions of Cecil 'Cissy' Carington, a quintessential dandy who consistently makes a mockery of romance and plays up the hypocrisy inherent in upper class relationships.⁴² Cecil Carington is self-consciously aware of his performance of norms and is able to misalign bodies and desires, to bend or queer relationships. He exploits his performativity, ruthlessly exposing the constructed and artificial nature of courtship and marriage. The other characters believe that marriage is natural and something that is supposed to deliver happiness, security, and monogamy, but the institution does none of that. Cecil, aware of this, uses people and the marriage market for his own ends.

In 'Suggestion', the author establishes Cecil's character by explaining how he manipulated his father into marrying young Laura because he dislikes his father's love interest. After setting up Lady Winthrop, Cecil's father's more age-appropriate companion, to arrive late and improperly dressed to a dinner party, while sending flowers to young Laura under the pretence that they are from Cecil's father, the latter turns his attention to the pretty and doting Laura: 'While the world said that pretty Miss Egerton married old Carington for his money, she was really in love, or

thought herself in love, with our father. Poor girl! But, shortly after the wedding, Cecil's father resumes visits to a mistress. Cecil '[fears Laura] has had a disillusion'.⁴³

Her unhappiness is a disturbance in the relationship, possibly more so than Cecil's father's adultery. Ahmed explains that

the very expectation of happiness gives us a specific image of the future. This is why happiness provides the emotional setting for disappointment, even if happiness is not given [...]. The promise of happiness takes this form: if you [...] do this or do that, then happiness is what follows.⁴⁴

Laura has pursued a marriage with Cecil's father with the expectation that happiness would follow – that she would be valued and valuable as a wife. She has done 'the right thing'; she has married for love.⁴⁵ And yet disappointment follows. Cecil's concern belies his role as the orchestrator of her misery; he knows what his father is like and manipulated her into marriage in order to spite someone else. When his sister Marjorie confides that she is uninterested in marrying wealthy but boring Charlie Winthrop, and also suggests that they do something for Laura's spirits, Cecil works to set up Laura and Adrian Grant. This accomplishes two ends: he forces Marjorie to give up her interest in Adrian and accept Charlie Winthrop (her alliance with a rich man will indirectly benefit him) and he arranges for Laura to fall into an extramarital affair with Adrian in order to undercut the father he dislikes.⁴⁶ He is a puppet-master playing with all parties; because he understands the marriage market, romance, and class, he can play upon insecurities and desires to arrange the licit and illicit matches that he prefers. Levenson's story demonstrates the manipulation inherent in a multitude of desires – not solely lust, but also desire for happiness within a good life which, in this time period, was often synonymous with a good marriage. Cecil is able to manipulate others because he does not indulge in these fantasies of the good life, but instead encourages others to pursue theirs.

Although Cecil toys with romantic relationships as an elaborate game, critic William M. Harrison points out that 'Cissy hardly challenges the most reproductive aspect of "Suggestion", its marriage economy, for he is its genesis and driving force'. Harrison claims Levenson does this in

order to expose the marriage economy's 'masculine bias' and call into question 'the bourgeois family's foundations'.⁴⁷ While Cecil certainly could be considered the driving force of these particular matches, he is simply influencing romantic possibilities already in play. He does not create the economy; he capitalises on it. In doing so, he foregrounds the commodification of women. Leveson levels a critical eye toward Cecil as narcissistic dandy as well as his bourgeois father. In effect, both exert power over the women in their lives because of the financial and social inequalities inherent in the positions of men and women.

By the 1890s, the notion of an unstable bourgeois family was not particularly new or insightful. However, Leveson's emphasis on self-conscious performativity, her commitment to play, and her acceptance of the insincerity of romantic relationships provide her satire with a unique flavour. Leveson's portrayals eschew the overtly political arguments readers may have found in New Women novels; instead she focuses on demonstrating the way in which marriage and romance is always about role-playing; it is a construction, a narrative played out through certain artificial poses. Kristin Mahoney argues that 'Cecil might treat women as pawns, but he levels his greatest wrath at patriarchal privilege'.⁴⁸ While Cecil does consider himself as allied with his sister and young stepmother, and he resents his father, it is clear that he is always acting first and foremost for his own pleasure; thoughts of these women's needs or desires are secondary, and always subject to his direction.

This is all the more evident in Leveson's second short story for *The Yellow Book*, 'The Quest of Sorrow', in which Cecil decides to pursue romantic rejection in order to experience grief. He pretends love for Alice Sinclair, his friend Freddy's fiancée:

for I have a theory that if you make love to a woman long enough, and ardently enough, you are sure to get rather fond of her at last. I was progressing splendidly; I often felt almost sad, and very nearly succeeded at times in being a little jealous of Freddy.

He kisses her, and she later writes that she has broken off her engagement and returns his affection.

He reacts with exasperation:

What! was I never to get away from success – never to know the luxury of an unrequited attachment? Of course, I realised, now, that I had been deceiving myself; that I had only liked her enough to wish to make her care for me; that I had striven, unconsciously, to that end. The instant I knew she loved me all my interest was gone.⁴⁹

Throughout these moments Cecil reveals his inability to appreciate the real harm he does, lamenting only his self-deception rather than his falseness towards Alice. The last act of his performance plays out in a letter urging her to reconcile with Freddy, wherein he claims that he has chosen exile in France where he will nurture his devotion to both her and his friend (he had been planning on going to France in August for vacation anyway, so it is a convenient ploy). In the end, he gives up his quest, realising that he will just never be able to experience real unhappiness, and comforts himself by sunbathing in France. Obviously, this is a humorous and ironic concluding image, but Cecil's apparently destructive actions seem to have no negative consequences for him.

Through the vehicle of Cecil, the narcissistic dandy, Levenson strategically questions the equivalence of romantic marriage and happiness. The ease with which Cecil is able to manipulate desires in these structures exposes marriage as inherently inauthentic. Levenson's stories dramatise base motivations in romantic relationships that have little to do with the elevation of one's happiness and have more to do with social manipulation. Mahoney claims that this story 'works to undo conventional forms of power and desire' because they 'revel in the decadent's capacity to throw patriarchy into chaos and slip the noose of heteronormative control'.⁵⁰ While Cecil is certainly an agent of chaos who undermines patriarchy, he is not acting in any way that overtly champions women's autonomy as part of this destabilisation. Instead, Levenson levels her critique of convention through a man's demonstration of queer desire. Ahmed explains that queer desire is full

of bodies that desire 'in the wrong way' and are willing to give up access to the good life to follow their desire; queers can be alien by placing their hopes for happiness in the wrong objects, as well as being made unhappy by the conventional routes of happiness.⁵¹

Cecil's desires are placed outside of heteronormative courtship narratives. He exposes the way in which others' happiness lay in scripts that foolishly rely on enacting social norms rather than with authentic, reciprocal passion. Cecil rejects social norms through his pursuit of his own narcissistic desires; he seeks only his own pleasure even as he masterfully manipulates others *because* their happiness is normative. Ironically, his queer desire leads to satisfaction. Cecil's ending is the only happy one.

Levenson's *Yellow Book* stories are a snapshot of the 1890s, combining an ironic depiction of an admittedly charming and hilarious dandy with a critique of heteronormativity and the marriage market. Her own unhappy marriage became the material for her successful series of novels in the ensuing decades. Published beginning in 1908, the *Little Ottleys* trilogy follows the tribulations of a woman after marriage, who attempts to gain her own independence within marriage to a boorish man.⁵² Levenson's contributions to *The Yellow Book* in the 1890s were an early representation of her considerable comedic and critical skill; her presence was a valuable addition to the coterie of women exploring the possibilities and limitations of fin-de-siècle romantic life.

Conclusion

In 1897, Mona Caird published *The Morality of Marriage and Other Essays on the Status and Destiny of Women* with George Wedway after it had been rejected by John Lane for publication, partially on the recommendation of Evelyn Sharp, who stated in her reader's report,

If they have been published when some of them were written, in '92, they might have carried some weight with them. But to talk now of the slavery of woman, of her one destination being marriage, and of her physical growth being stunted and neglected [...] seems out of date if it is not absurd [...] it seems a pity to have written such long essays in order to tell people facts that are patent to everyone and are working out their own remedies every day.⁵³

In her plain language, Sharp encapsulated another shift in the cultural conversation, toward the new century and a different set of concerns. She acknowledged what the *Yellow Book* stories made

clear; the marriage question had become passé. Broader social and political agitation had displaced questions of personal happiness in the marriage plot.

The Yellow Book played a part in moving beyond that conversation. It was a deregulatory force of the 1890s, a periodical that upended expected narratives about the path to happiness and the good life, as the characters in the short stories here demonstrate again and again. D’Arcy’s crushing conclusions rewrite the happy ending that men could expect in marriage; Sharp uses her protagonists to articulate frustration with old scripts; and Leveson mocks disappointed love in a demonstration of the artificiality of these romantic performances. Whether as warning or jest, these *Yellow Book* stories dismantled the idea of the happy housewife and explored the notion that a reader may well be better served seeking solitude or a sunny beach in France. *The Yellow Book* folded in 1897 after its thirteenth issue. It led a wave of innovation in periodicals in the 1890s but could not maintain its cultural dominance at the end of the century.⁵⁴ We continue to study *The Yellow Book* for its outsized impact on the period. It upended readers’ expectations of periodical fiction and courted controversy in its content and its coterie of writers. D’Arcy, Sharp, and Leveson’s bad romance stories play upon narrative patterns of happy courtships and marriages and deliver disappointment instead. But, each disappointment demonstrates that the true failure lies within characters’ misplaced investment in romance and marriage; they purchased bad stock by committing to the idea of this institutional norm as a social and personal good. To destroy those expectations is to create the potential to imagine other happinesses, if not for the characters, for the adventurous *Yellow Book* readers. In 1897, Sharp modelled that expansive view as she looked past the New Woman and her productive dissatisfaction to the possibilities of a new century.

¹ For an overview of Victorian marriage, property, and child custody laws, see Jennifer Phegley, *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England* (Praeger, 2012), p. xvii.

² Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010), p. 2.

³ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵ Ahmed, p. 45.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

- ⁷ Sarah Grand, 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question', in *A New Woman Reader: Fiction, Articles, Drama of the 1890s*, ed. by Carolyn Christensen Nelson (Hertfordshire: Broadview Press, 2001), pp. 142, 146.
- ⁸ Aubrey Beardsley, 'Prospectus', in *The Yellow Book*, 1, 1894, *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, ed. by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, *The Yellow Nineties 2.0*, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities <<https://1890s.ca/yb1-prospectus-image/>> [accessed 4 January 2024].
- ⁹ Sally Ledger, 'Wilde Women and *The Yellow Book*: The Sexual Politics of Aestheticism and Decadence', *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, 50.1 (2007), pp. 5-26 (p. 7).
- ¹⁰ Winnie Chan, 'Morbidity, Masculinity, and the Misadventures of the New Woman in the *Yellow Book*'s Short Stories', *Nineteenth-Century Feminisms*, 4 (Spring/Summer 2001), pp. 35-46 (p. 35).
- ¹¹ Ledger, p. 24.
- ¹² Ella D'Arcy, 'Irremediable', *The Yellow Book*, 1 (April 1894).
- ¹³ Henry Harland, in Karl Beckson and Mark Samuels Lasner, eds, '*The Yellow Book* and Beyond: Selected Letters of Henry Harland to John Lane', *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, 42.4 (1999), pp. 401-32.
- ¹⁴ Anne M. Windholz, 'The Woman Who Would Be Editor: Ella D'Arcy and *The Yellow Book*', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 29.2 (1996), pp. 116-30 (p. 126). Jad Adams, in his analysis of the controversy surrounding D'Arcy's removal from her position as sub-editor, notes that she committed several fireable offenses, including rewriting her editor's words, usurping editor Henry Harland's authority, and bullying her temporary replacement, Ethyl Colburn Mayne. See Adams, 'Office Wars', in *Decadent Women: Yellow Book Lives* (Reaktion Books, 2023), pp. 131-49.
- ¹⁵ Adams, p. 23. In my recent chapter, 'The Decay of Marriage in Ella D'Arcy's Fiction', I provide a thorough examination of five of D'Arcy's 'bad marriage' stories and offer an overview of the way in which her work has been critically misread as misogynist. See *Extraordinary Aesthetes: Decadents, New Women, and Fin-de-Siècle Culture*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (University of Toronto Press, 2023), pp. 106-24.
- ¹⁶ Elke D'hoker and Stephanie Eggermont, 'Fin-de-Siècle Women Writers and the Modern Short Story', *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, 58.3 (2015), pp. 291-309 (p. 297).
- ¹⁷ Adams, p. 27.
- ¹⁸ Ella D'Arcy, 'Irremediable', *The Yellow Book*, 1 (April 1894), pp. 87-108 (p. 89).
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- ²² Ahmed, p. 61.
- ²³ Ella D'Arcy, 'A Marriage', *The Yellow Book*, 11 (October 1896), pp. 309-42 (pp. 311-12).
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 317.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 319.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 339.
- ²⁷ This is a 'mercenary marriage' that Mona Caird so harshly critiques in her indictment of marriage laws. Caird argues that the woman cannot be blamed for these kinds of marriages 'however degrading they may be [...]. We cannot ask every woman to be a heroine and choose a hard and thorny path when a comparatively smooth one (as it seems), offers itself' (Mona Caird, 'Marriage', in *A New Woman Reader*, p. 185).
- ²⁸ Ahmed, p. 91.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ Letter to John Lane, 5 April 1895. Cited in Heather Marcovitch, 'White Magic, Black Humour: Ella D'Arcy's Narrative Strategies', *Cahiers Victoriens & Édouardiens*, 96 (Autumn 2022), pp. 1-13 (p. 2).
- ³¹ D'hoker and Eggermont, pp. 299-300.
- ³² Berlant, p. 2.
- ³³ 'The End of an Episode', *The Yellow Book*, 4 (January 1895).
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 255-74 (p. 266).
- ³⁵ Berlant, p. 3.
- ³⁶ Evelyn Sharp, 'In Dull Brown', *The Yellow Book*, 8 (January 1896), pp. 180-204 (p. 184).
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 187.
- ³⁸ Ahmed, p. 69.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- ⁴⁰ Sharp, 'In Dull Brown', p. 199.
- ⁴¹ Berlant, p. 9.
- ⁴² Notably, Leveson is also known for her support of Oscar Wilde during the Queensberry trials of 1895 when she invited him to stay with her. Her character Cecil is a Wildean dandy, but it is not a personal indictment of Wilde. Wilde himself found her work amusing and considered her a loyal friend. She was the first to greet him when he was released from prison in 1897. Louise Wenman-Jones, 'Ada Leveson (1862-1933)', *Yellow Nineties 2.0* <https://1890s.ca/leveson_bio/> [accessed 28 November 2023].
- ⁴³ Ada Leveson, 'Suggestion', *The Yellow Book*, 5 (April 1895), pp. 249-57 (p. 251).
- ⁴⁴ Ahmed, p. 29.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ Leveson, pp. 253-54.

⁴⁷ William H. Harrison, 'Ada Levenson's Wild(e) *Yellow Book* Stories', *Victorian Newsletter*, 96 (Fall 1999), pp. 21-28 (p. 23).

⁴⁸ Kristin Mahoney, 'Dainty Malice: Ada Levenson and Post-Victorian Decadent Feminism', in *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, ed. by Kate Hext and Alex Murray (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), pp. 27-46 (p. 30). In her excellent article on Levenson's career, Mahoney explains that 'Levenson implemented fin-de-siècle methodologies in her representation of twentieth-century gender politics, speaking with "dainty malice" about the unhappiness of modern domestic arrangements during a particularly vexed moment of feminist agitation' (p. 32).

⁴⁹ Ada Levenson, 'The Quest of Sorrow', *The Yellow Book*, 8 (January 1896), pp. 325-35 (p. 333).

⁵⁰ Mahoney, p. 30.

⁵¹ Ahmed, p. 115.

⁵² Levenson, *Little Ottleys Trilogy*, W. W. Norton & Co., 1962. For more detailed information about Levenson's biography, see Louise Wenman-James, 'Ada Levenson (1862-1933)' *Y90s Biographies*, ed. by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, https://1890s.ca/leverson_bio/ [accessed 25 August 2024].

⁵³ Quoted in Adams, p. 226. Adams' deeply researched book has offered a trove of material, and I would like to acknowledge the benefit of reading his work to the development of my own argument.

⁵⁴ For an overview of the end of *The Yellow Book*'s publication, see Lorraine Janzen Kooistra and Dennis Denisoff, 'The *Yellow Book*: Introduction to Volume 13 (April 1897)', *The Yellow Book Digital Edition*, ed. by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, <<https://1890s.ca/b-v13-introduction/>> [accessed 14 January 2024].

Yellow Book Sisters in *The Dream Garden*: A New Woman Network

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In her autobiography *The Sheltering Tree* (1939), critically-neglected New Woman writer Netta Syrett (1865-1943) records her pride as editor of children's annual *The Dream Garden* (1905): 'I think I had a right to be proud of my Dream Garden, which by now should be a rarity worth the attention of book collectors, if only for the names of some of the contributors!'¹ In a further comment that is both self-effacing and self-congratulating, she writes, 'I marvel at my boldness in asking such distinguished people to contribute to a more or less private venture [...] only a limited number were published'.² The wealth of notable writers and artists boasted by the contents page offers insight into Netta's creative network and her esteemed place within it. While this list features well-known male writers including Laurence Housman and Arthur Ransome, the contributors are overwhelmingly female. They include artist, author and playwright Constance Smedley (1876-1941), who founded the International Lyceum Club for Women Artists and Writers in 1904 (of which Netta was chairwoman in 1906); Marion Wallace Dunlop (1864-1942), hailed as the first hunger-striking suffragette (in 1909); Slade-trained artist Alice Woodward (1862-1951), a founding member of the Women's Guild of Arts (1907); and feminist artist, writer, and editor Pamela Colman Smith (1878-1951). *The Dream Garden*, like Netta's autobiography, evidences her 'genius for friendship': that is, her ability to form mutually-beneficial career-enabling companionships and creative partnerships, where 'socialising becomes part of [her] artistry'.³ The volume illustrates the importance of networking and professional sociability for women (authors, artists, aesthetes, and activists) at a critical and especially productive time for women, as they carved out careers in male-dominated professions and as the women's suffrage movement gained momentum.

This article examines *The Dream Garden* for the first time, focusing specifically on its New Women contributors who previously contributed to the iconic literary and arts journal *The Yellow*

Book. These are: lesser-known sisters Netta and Nellie Syrett (1874-1970); prominent suffragette Evelyn Sharp (1869-1955); prolific late-Victorian children's literature author Edith Nesbit (1858-1924); and journalist and poet Nora [Eleanor] Chesson (née Hopper) (1871-1906). It was through her fortuitous friendship with Mabel Beardsley (with whom she taught at the Polytechnic School for Girls in Langham Place), that Netta met Aubrey Beardsley and Henry Harland. She was present when Harland first proposed the idea of *The Yellow Book*, and her autobiography documents her place not at the periphery but 'at the centre of the most exciting developments in art and literature'.⁴ Crucially, *The Yellow Book* – famously associated with 1890s aestheticism and decadence, and more often with a male coterie – welcomed work by women: both female aesthetes (participating in a 'high-art tradition') and New Women (participating in a 'political movement').⁵ Exemplifying the latter, the Syrett sisters, Sharp, Nesbit, and Chesson addressed feminist issues (female roles, marriage, education) and promoted female emancipation (to varying extents) in their lives and works. They all challenged Victorian gender conventions, and Nesbit was an archetypal 'New Woman' in her rejection of Victorian corsets, her short hair, heavy smoking, and feminist friendships.⁶ The Syrett sisters' collective involvement with *The Yellow Book* throughout its production years meant they knew – and attended the same parties as – many of its women contributors. Netta, Sharp and Nesbit all featured in the notorious Keynotes Series of avant-garde fiction published by John Lane, with book covers boasting designs by Beardsley. This ideologically-progressive series, opening with *Keynotes* (1893) by 'George Egerton' (the masculine pseudonym of Mary Chavelita Dunne), includes Sharp's first novel *At the Relton Arms* (1895), Netta's first novel *Nobody's Fault* (1896), and Nesbit's *In Homespun* (1896).

An understanding of the death of *The Yellow Book* is crucial to understanding the birth of *The Dream Garden*. In Netta's view, the *Yellow Book* phase of London literary life was 'killed by Oscar Wilde's tragedy'⁷ – when, after being arrested holding a yellow-backed novel, he was tried and convicted for sodomy and sent to Holloway Prison – and the subsequent departure of Beardsley as art editor. This symbolic demise of male decadence presented women with an

opportunity to redirect or develop their own creative careers, partnerships, networks and outputs. Jad Adams notes that although some ‘established writers eschewed the *Yellow Book* after the Wilde trial for fear of guilt by association, women writers hungry for publication showed no such disdain’, and women artists filled ‘the space left by [Beardsley] and his almost all-male commissioning process’; thereafter, more women contributed to the periodical and it became ‘a more woman-friendly publication’.⁸ While male contributors ‘erupted in a frenzy of hypermasculine’ writing in response to the association of decadence with ‘sodomy and yellow books’ established by press coverage of Wilde’s arrest, ‘women, already marginal, could more safely articulate thoughts that had become dangerous for men’; they could publish (still in accordance with Lane’s agenda) provocative material that voiced women’s own ‘ambitions and resistance to social norms’.⁹ The shifting role of women in *The Yellow Book*, I argue, facilitated and galvanised female creative partnerships at the fin de siècle. The Syrett sisters, all three of whom contributed to *The Yellow Book* after Wilde’s conviction in 1895, thereafter more actively worked together and with their female contemporaries on children’s fiction.

One of the constraints on New Women writers in the literary marketplace was their lack of ownership and editorship of periodicals, but their increasingly authoritative (but nonetheless collaborative) roles in illustrated periodicals at the turn of the century contested those limits. Colman Smith supported women’s creative networks and set a precedent as the first woman to edit, publish, and contribute to a magazine of her own, *The Green Sheaf* (1903-1904). This title likely influenced Netta, whose editorial role in *The Dream Garden* – affording her authority over its planning, compilation, and production – similarly marked a radical departure from *The Yellow Book*’s male editorship, showcasing a sorority that was biological (in the case of the Syretts), professional (sisters in art), and political (feminist sisterhood). Drawing on *The Yellow Book*’s collaborative origins and ‘communal impulse’,¹⁰ *The Dream Garden*’s foundation on female inclusivity and collectivity challenged women’s historical ‘position[s] of exclusion’.¹¹ Word and image, separated in *The Yellow Book*, are re-engaged in women’s co-production of illustrated texts

(stories, poems, and plays) in *The Dream Garden*, supporting their joint artistic enterprise. While *The Yellow Book* and *The Green Sheaf* indicate shifts to greater gender equity, *The Dream Garden* showcases an almost-exclusively female network. This was nurtured through the cultural, political, and publishing changes that took place in the intervening years (between *The Yellow Book*'s final issue in April 1897 and *The Dream Garden*'s publication in 1905): the development of the feminist fairy tale as a political tool; the collaboration of women artists and authors on children's books; and the growth in women's personal, professional, and political networks.

Marketed as a Christmas gift book, *The Dream-Garden* is now a little-known volume, partly due to the rarity of the collection. Although *The Dream Garden* was intended as an annual, it never became a serial, echoing the ephemerality of *The Yellow Book*. It was published by artist and art gallery owner John Baillie, who promoted his gallery in *The Green Sheaf* advertising pages, and who published the second issue of *The Venture: An Annual of Art and Literature* (1903, 1905) in the same year as *The Dream Garden*, also with the Arden Press. There was significant overlap between the annuals' artistic and literary contributors.¹² Comparable with the feminist agenda of *The Venture*, *The Dream Garden* promotes the achievements and contributions of New Women who, in Netta's view, 'had a special gift for interesting the younger generation' – and particularly a new generation of women.¹³ While a contemporary press review of *The Dream Garden* hails it the best children's book of the year 'which no nursery library should be without', it also acknowledges the collection's appeal to an culturally-engaged adult audience and New Woman book market appreciative of its 'literary quality' and respected, well-known 'writers and picture-makers': 'even when the children have gone to bed there will still be heads bent over this really artistic volume'.¹⁴ This article shows how the Syretts, Sharp, Nesbit, and Chesson use figures and spaces typical of children's fiction – dreamscapes, enchanted gardens, fairies, and angels – as vehicles for the exploration of New Woman themes suitable for an adolescent audience: rebellion and escapism; struggle for independence and freedom; maternal and sororal bonds; and the transition from girlhood to womanhood. Appropriating a genre which was dominated by male writers (such as Hans Christian

Andersen) but which ‘invite[d] the attention chiefly of girls’,¹⁵ these women wrote fairy stories charged and encoded with feminist content for young women growing up in a new century.

Sororal Creative Partnership: The Syrett Sisters

Born in Kent, Netta (a writer) and Nellie (an artist) cohabited in London with their creative sisters Mabel (an illustrator) and Kate (a designer) during the 1890s. Here they accessed training and employment, pursued creative careers, and hosted and attended parties unchaperoned.¹⁶ They were related to author Grant Allen, whose novel *The Woman Who Did* (1895) featured in the Keynotes series. The sisters were regarded by friends as ‘pioneers’ for the way they lived in a shared flat as independent professional New Women moving in aesthetic, decadent, and feminist circles, leading ‘a very full and busy life of alternate work and amusement’.¹⁷ Nellie studied with suffragists at the Slade School of Art, while Netta mixed with prominent feminists – including Sarah Grand who coined the term ‘New Woman’ – at the Women Writers’ Dinner of 1902.¹⁸ Netta actively participated in women’s groups and events, forging female and feminist alliances that she recruited as contributors to *The Dream Garden*.

Collectively, the Syrett sisters published in volumes II, VII, X, XI, XII, and XIII of *The Yellow Book*. Nellie contributed a drawing to Volume X and designed the front cover and title page for Volume XI (fig. 1), and Mabel produced the cover design for (the final) Volume XIII (fig. 2). Margaret D. Stetz and Mark Samuels Lasner argue that the ‘sensibilities of artists’ including Nellie played a part in directing *The Yellow Book*’s ‘visual style’.¹⁹ Indeed, her front cover design marks an innovative shift in *The Yellow Book*’s content as it took ‘children’s book illustrators and illustrations seriously’, presenting them alongside ‘High Art’ subjects and increasing representations by women artists.²⁰ By featuring Nellie’s monogrammed work on the front cover of *The Dream Garden* (fig. 3), Netta developed and promoted her sister’s reputation as a book-cover illustrator; she had also previously illustrated and produced cover designs for Netta’s collection *The Garden of Delight* (1898) and Sharp’s *The Other Side of the Sun* (1900). *The Dream Garden* is, along with *The Garden of Delight*,

the most obvious record of the Syrett sisters' hitherto-unexplored sororal creative partnership. Despite the notoriety of the other contributors, it is Nellie (affectionately referred to as 'Nell') who dominates Netta's description of *The Dream Garden* in her memoir:

Its charming cover, designed by Nell, represents a fairy child standing in a chariot composed of flowers, driving ribbon-harnessed lambs tandem-fashion, the 'leader' guided by a little pierrot waving a bouquet. The first story, which gives its name to the volume and was written by me, has a delightful coloured picture by way of illustration of the 'Dream Garden' when the 'Ivory Gate' has swung open and the dreamers enter their paradise. This also was Nell's work.²¹

Nellie's work is foregrounded in *The Dream Garden*: she is listed as the artist in the first two 'Contents' page entries, and copies of her 'extremely decorative' frontispiece with its 'exquisite colour and strong yet delicate handling' were sold separately by the publisher.²² Nellie also provides a full-page illustration for playwright Osman Edwards's story 'Recollections of a Japanese Baby', and her depiction of the close maternal and sororal bonds in the text reflects her aesthetic interest in nurturing female relationships as well as dreamscapes and Japonisme.²³ Nellie's prominence in *The Dream Garden*, and in Netta's account of its production, illustrates Netta's admiration of her sister's artwork as well as their shared social and creative circles, combining Nellie's artistic connections and Netta's literary connections. It was also *The Dream Garden* that led to the meeting of Nellie and her husband, *Punch* theatre critic Joseph Peter Thorp, who was recommended to Netta by John Baillie in her quest to get the book printed; as a wedding present, Netta (who, like many New Women, never married) gifted the couple a specially bound copy of the volume.²⁴

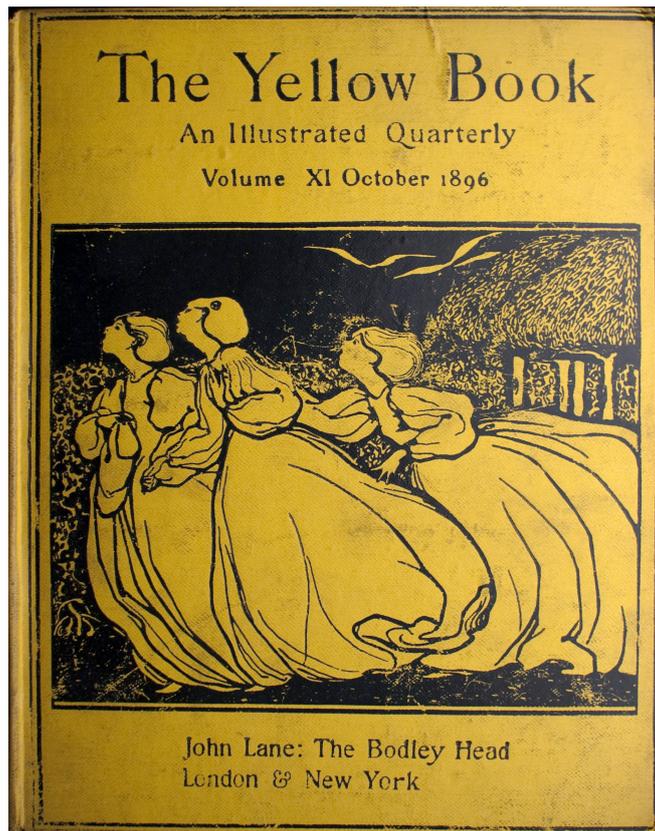


Fig. 1: Nellie Syrett, Front Cover, *The Yellow Book*, vol. XI (1896).
 © *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities

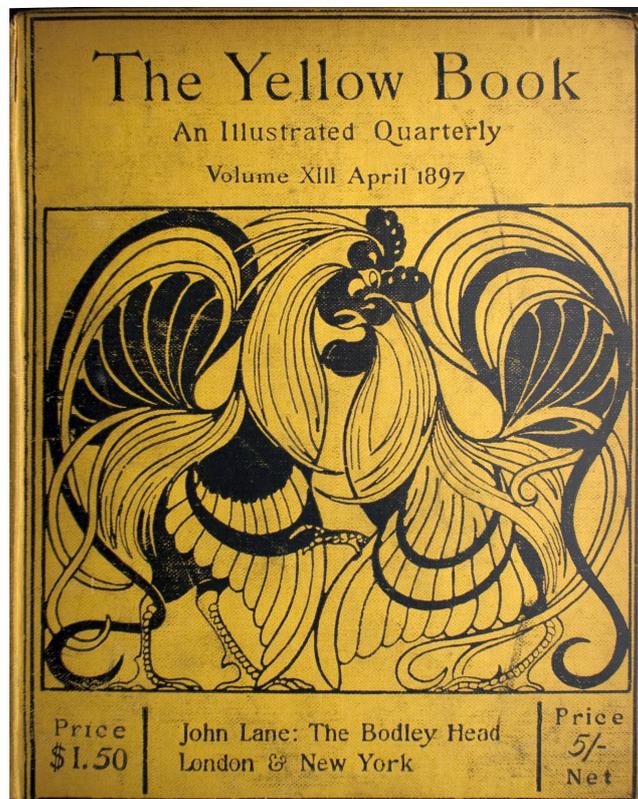


Fig. 2: Mabel Syrett, Front Cover, *Yellow Book*, vol. XIII (1897).
 © *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities



Fig. 3: Nellie Syrett, cover design, *The Dream Garden: A Children's Annual*, ed. by Netta Syrett (John Baillie, 1905). © *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities

The first story in the volume, 'The Dream Garden', is written by Netta and illustrated by Nellie (fig. 4). It draws on the dream world device famously used by Lewis Carroll in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) but is more comparable with Olive Schreiner's feminist visionary work *Dreams* (1890), which was celebrated by the suffragettes.²⁵ In Netta's story, the impoverished, shy, lonely protagonist Anne, who finds no solace in absent parents or cruel friends, discovers the invaluable escapism of literature and dreamland, where suffering, prejudices, and hierarchies (related to class, appearance, and intellect) are eliminated. In the Dream Garden, Anne can play with Sylvia, the schoolgirl she so admires but cannot find courage to speak to, and Netta's story concludes with the girls – depicted in the foreground of Nellie's illustration – united in flight. Syrett's story is comparable with stories by fellow *Yellow Book* writers Charlotte Mew and Ella D'Arcy, similarly featuring isolated characters who momentarily escape mundane reality through

fantasy and dream sequences, blurring the boundaries between social realism and aestheticism in a feminist phantasmagoria.²⁶

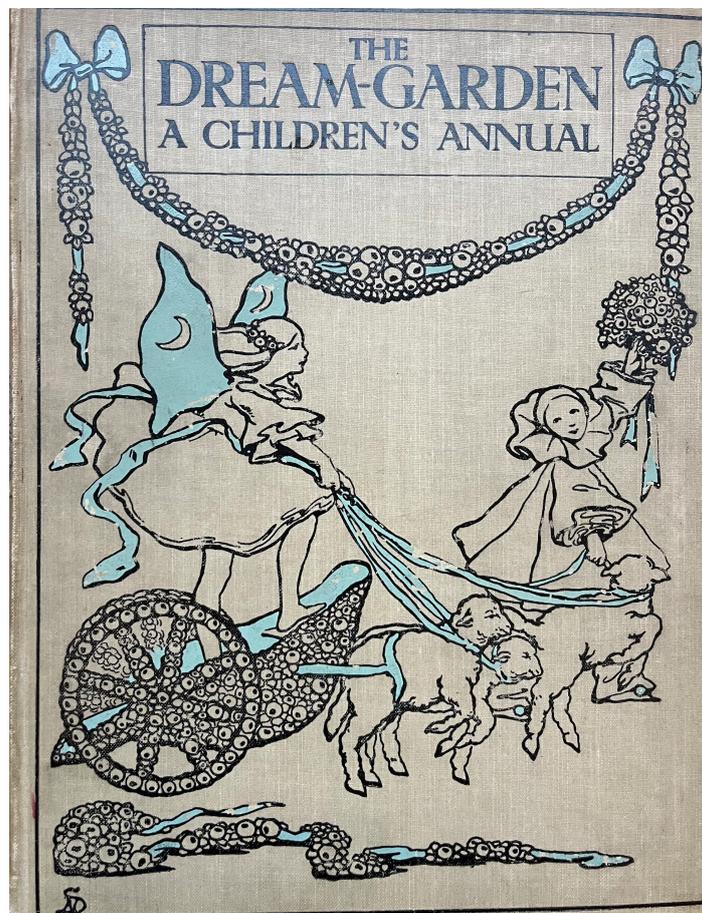


Fig. 4: Nellie Syrett, 'The Dream Garden', frontispiece to *The Dream Garden: A Children's Annual* (1905). © *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities

Nellie's full-page three-colour illustration of an ethereal dreamscape stands out in the context of the black-and-white designs dominating *The Dream Garden* and, for example, the social-realist illustrations by Gertrude Steel. It represents a key passage in Netta's story: the entrance of Anne, guided by the kind Dream Fairy, into the beautiful Dream Garden. This is marked in the text by the narrator's sudden direct address to the reader: 'picture to yourself stretches of velvet lawns with fountains tossing crystal showers into the sunshine [...] where [...] white lilies glistened [...] to where beyond the mountains the distance lay veiled in shimmering mist'.²⁷ Demonstrating Netta's proficiency in, and perhaps nostalgia for, *Yellow Book* imagery, nature is aestheticized in its velvet lawns, crystal water, glistening lilies, and shimmering mist. The garden is an Italianate paradise, possibly inspired by the Syrett sisters' Italian travels together in the late 1890s.²⁸ Nellie

depicts the elaborately carved ‘great white’ ivory gate, leading into an idyllic landscape, featuring fountains and pointed Cypress trees. Crucially, it is not an external, wild landscape, but rather an internal aestheticized dreamscape, that offers the protagonist a liberating escapism from a ‘miserable, dull monoton[ous]’ life – particularly for girls and women bound to the domestic sphere – in a London cityscape. Netta’s story creates a space for enchantment in a disenchanting modern world, emphasising the transformative and self-liberatory potential of the creative imagination for young girls.²⁹ In its suggestion that the child possesses the capacity to liberate herself, or at least that aesthetic escapism can be a valuable form of self-preservation, it has empowering implications for a young female readership. Netta draws on the popular trope of the garden in children’s fantasy as a ‘heterotopia’ (an ‘other’ world within a world) where children regain agency, but with a feminist agenda to challenge conventional limits and categories (fantasy and reality).³⁰ The Dream Fairy’s declaration, ‘I am so many things. I can easily be that too’ also highlights the fluidity of (gender) identity, as embodied by the dissident New Woman.³¹

Netta’s narrative and Nellie’s illustration reference each other in a symbiotic relationship between text and image, co-constructing the imaginary dreamscape, and Nellie’s illustration is also an interpretation of Netta’s text. True to Netta’s story, Nellie’s illustration features the cloudlike gown of the dream fairy, the winged figures, the wooded hillsides, and winding pathways. Yet while the paganistic procession of people in Netta’s story includes male and female figures, Nellie’s image depicts exclusively-female figures in an intergenerational community entering a matriarchal universe. The liberation of a woman (Anne) by a woman (Dream Fairy), with its socio-political implications, is emphasised in Nellie’s illustration by the two female figures in the group (one adult in especially decorative dress and one child) with direct, stoic, or determined gazes. The Syrett sisters’ shared feminist vision of a liberatory female community is reflected in *The Dream Garden’s* New Woman network. The title of the volume itself seems to refer to a utopian, heterotopic space of sororal collaboration in which female collectivity is key. Significantly, it is dawn in Netta’s Dream Garden:

the sun was shining! Between the mountain peaks, from beds of pink and primrose clouds, it was soaring into the blue sky. The dew was yet on the grass, where the long shadows lay [...]. And oh, the birds! [...] Only within the Ivory Gate was the sunrise and the morning.³²

This passage dialogises with fin-de-siècle feminist iconography, where dawn signals rebirth and the advent of ‘a new age of equal opportunity’³³ for women at the start of the twentieth century. In ‘The Dream Garden’, Netta envisions not just ‘an Arcadia for the Industrial age’³⁴ but a utopian future of female enlightenment and empowerment. As Matthew Beaumont notes, ‘writing utopia represents for the New Woman a species of activism’ which ‘move[s] people to build an alternative world’ and refers a female readership to a ‘possible future opposed to the patriarchal present, to be put to political purpose in the struggle for women’s rights’.³⁵ The Syrett sisters’ collaborative construction of this post-patriarchal Dream Garden, then, is a feminist ‘species of activism’ that promotes equality, liberty, and community among women.



Fig. 5: Nellie Syrett, ‘The Five Sweet Symphonies’, *The Yellow Book*, vol. X (1896), p. 257.
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Female collectives in garden settings are also characteristic of Nellie’s work for *The Yellow Book*. Her cover illustration for Volume XI, which depicts three female figures in forward motion with raised or entwined limbs, creates a graceful fluidity and sense of community; they seem to

make reference to the three Syrett sisters (Netta, Nellie, and Mabel) who contributed to the periodical. Her internal illustration *Five Sweet Symphonies* (1896) (fig. 5), alludes to the poem ‘The Blessed Damozel’ by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and features a group of five weaving women in creative female community, perhaps referencing the five Syrett sisters who cohabited in London.³⁶ Prefiguring her illustration for ‘The Dream Garden’, two central women in *Five Sweet Symphonies* bear a strikingly sororal resemblance to each other in their frontal poses, facial features, and direct gazes, highlighted through the contrast with the profile poses, tilted heads, and averted gazes of the other figures. In a reflection of the sisterhood that was integral to the Syretts’ artistry and partnership, these two figures could be seen as a self-portrait of Nellie and a portrait of Netta – the Syrett sisters who worked together most closely and collaboratively, especially given that Nellie worked a self-portrait and a portrait of her ‘no less distinguished sister’³⁷ into her fan designs around the time *The Dream Garden* was published.

Nellie’s illustration for Netta’s opening story ‘The Dream Garden’ bears a striking resemblance to her illustration (fig. 6) for Sharp’s opening story ‘The Weird Witch of the Willow-Herb’ in *The Other Side of the Sun* published five years earlier, highlighting connections between these women writers and their works.³⁸ Both illustrations feature an idyllic, verdant, sloping landscape with a tree-framed pathway winding upwards to the horizon, and – most notably – almost identical female figures with frontal poses and direct gazes, the same hairstyles and expressions. The large, foregrounded, statuesque female figure in Nellie’s illustration for Sharp’s story, where she is the witch, is transposed into the female procession entering the Dream Garden in her illustration for Netta’s story, where she is the Dream Fairy. In both illustrations, the viewer’s eye is drawn to the winged, barefoot woman in decorative dress (featuring flowers and butterflies or cherubs) with large sleeves shaped like arum lilies, her raised arms holding a basket on her head. Such visual similarities suggest a twin-like resemblance between these female figures with supernatural powers, highlighting dialogues between Sharp’s and Netta’s opening fairy stories, while also drawing connections between the women writers as children’s authors, *Yellow Book*

contributors, and suffrage supporters. Nellie's allusion to Sharp's book in *The Dream Garden* was perhaps also a marketing strategy designed to raise the profile of the collection, expand its readership, and promote the careers of the Syrett sisters in their respective roles as editor and cover artist of the volume.



Fig. 6: Nellie Syrett, illustration for Evelyn Sharp's 'The Weird Witch of the Willow-Herb', *The Other Side of the Sun*, 1900. © *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities

***Yellow Book* Sisters: Edith Nesbit, Evelyn Sharp, and Nora Chesson**

An analysis of the works produced by *Yellow Book* authors for *The Dream Garden* illuminates fresh connections between the work of Nesbit, famed for her adventure stories; Sharp, known for her feminist fairy tales; and Nora Chesson (née Hopper), associated with Irish folklore. Comparable to Netta's fiction typically featuring non-conformist or 'strange' children and particularly 'girls who do not fit in',³⁹ Nesbit's, Sharp's and Chesson's protagonists in *The Dream Garden* – a bird, a princess, and a group of schoolgirls, respectively – are all dissident, rebellious, resourceful and/or questioning, seeking greater experience, freedom, or fortune. A complimentary contemporary

review of the annual lists the Syretts, Sharp, and Chesson among its ‘clever’ contributors, along with writers – (Netta’s friends) Mary E. Mann and Smedley – and illustrators – (Nellie’s friends) Helen Stratton and Woodward.⁴⁰ Chesson and Sharp featured in the same *Yellow Book* volumes (Volume V, the last in which Beardsley was involved, and Volume VIII), and Fabian writers Nesbit and Sharp both contributed to Volume IV – the literary contents of which Henry Harland perceived as particularly high quality – and to *Blackie’s Children’s Annual* in 1910.⁴¹

Surrey-born Nesbit wrote poems ‘Day and Night’ – decadent in its subject of an adulterous ‘woman having sex with her husband but thinking of her lover in the conceit of enjoying the sun but longing for the night’ in a celebration of transgression⁴² – and ‘A Ghost Bereft’ for *The Yellow Book*.⁴³ She turned to children’s fiction in the ‘yellow nineties’, and in the early twentieth century she published *The Rainbow Queen and Other Stories* (1903) and *The Wonderful Garden* (1911), which are comparable to *The Dream Garden* in their focus on fantasy, children’s adventures, magic, gardens, and fairy godmothers. Nesbit’s utopian fantasy *The Magic City* (1910) shares the title of Netta’s earlier fairy tale collection (*The Magic City* [Lawrence and Bullen, 1903], illustrated by Mary Corbett [Headlam], who also features in *The Dream Garden*), inviting comparisons between their works. Nesbit gained a ‘reputation as a key contributor to the “golden age” of children’s literature’, and to late-Victorian female-authored fairy tales and fantasies infused with feminist commentary on Victorian gender constructions.⁴⁴ A socialist and co-founder of the Fabian Society, Nesbit stood against inequality and social injustice; her work was praised for its ‘radical vision’ and ‘merging of social protest and lyric pathos’.⁴⁵ Despite her apparent ‘impatience with the suffragettes’,⁴⁶ Nesbit was a political activist with ‘radical ideas on the role of women’; her famous novel *The Railway Children* (1906) is ‘her ultimate assertion of female superiority’⁴⁷ in which the mother figure is herself a talented children’s story writer. In Nesbit’s work for *The Dream Garden*, too, the beloved maternal figure is a gifted storyteller who ‘has the loveliest tales to tell’ and fosters infants’ imaginations, illustrating a nurturing female influence on the younger generation.⁴⁸ This is perhaps what New Women writers for *The Dream Garden* embodied for their readership.

Nesbit's 'child-centred' fiction gives children 'a positive independence' and 'a voice: they are still children, bounded by, but no longer intellectually controlled by, adult value systems'.⁴⁹ Children's navigation of adult value systems through fantasy and fairy worlds is the keynote of *The Dream Garden*. Nesbit's notion of the 'immeasurable value of imagination' which 'gives to the child a world transfigured' and is 'the best magic in the world' is at the heart of Netta's story 'The Dream Garden'.⁵⁰ In contrast to Sharp's *The Youngest Girl in the School* (1901), which reflects her own happy schooldays as a boarder, Nesbit recalls in *My School-Days*, 'when I was a little child I used to pray fervently, tearfully, that when I should be grown up I might never forget what I thought and felt and suffered then'.⁵¹ Nesbit, who spent much time travelling in Europe with her chronically ill sister, was no stranger to suffering, and this is a dominant theme in both her verse for *The Dream Garden* and in New Woman fiction more broadly (for both children and adults), often in the form of painful growth experiences and narratives of female exclusion.

Nesbit's poem (six quatrains of rhyming couplets) for *The Dream Garden*, titled 'The Scolded Eaglet', is narrated by an orphan eaglet, scolded by its aunt for playing with the merry little stork family because eagles are (supposedly) superior birds to storks.⁵² The avian imagery she employs was a significant feature of early feminist iconography, often manifest in the contrasting motifs of caged and wild birds. The eaglet, with an assertive voice, questions this divisive hierarchical system (eagle/stork) when it says, 'Why was it wrong? I *cannot* see!' and threatens to rebel against its aunt's authority by changing its identity and community: 'And if Aunt does not stop her talk | I'll go and try to *be* a stork'.⁵³ Nesbit's verse can be seen to challenge essentialist definitions and categories, and forms of segregation that re/produce inequality and oppression, encouraging her young readership to question arbitrary rules and break out of traditional power structures. Indeed, her prioritisation of personal freedom in childhood, and her attack specifically on stifling patriarchal systems, is conveyed in *Wings and the Child* (1913), which illuminates the socio-political (socialist and feminist) significance of her verse:

liberty is one of the rights that a child above all needs – every possible liberty, of thought, of word, of deed. The old systems of education seem to have found it good to coerce a child for the simple sake of coercion – to make it do what the master chose [...] to ‘break the child’s spirit’.⁵⁴

Her discourse here – employing a feminist lexis of ‘liberty’, ‘rights’, ‘word’ and ‘deed’, ‘old systems’, ‘coercion’, ‘master’ – is in dialogue with that of the increasingly-militant women’s suffrage movement prior to the Representation of the People Act (that saw women’s partial enfranchisement) in 1918.

The questioning of coercive authority in Nesbit’s ‘The Scolded Eaglet’ compliments Wallace Dunlop’s story for *The Dream Garden*, ‘The Elf and the Grumbling Bee’, which is similarly Aesopic in its non-anthropocentric narrative and concern with injustice. The fairy punishes the mischievous elf and rewards the innocent Flower-baby, but ‘nothing happen[s] to the spider or the bee, who were the real cause of all the trouble’.⁵⁵ Its comparable lack of fair resolution seems designed to encourage young readers to question biased (masculinist) systems of law and punishment. This story would have been read, at least by adult and adolescent audiences, with an awareness of the first militant action by The Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) in Manchester that same year (1905), which later led to the imprisonment of ‘troublemaking’ women – including Wallace Dunlop and Sharp – for campaigning for equality.

Like Netta and Nesbit, London-born Sharp was a *Yellow Book* contributor and New Woman writer who became renowned as a children’s author, contributing a fairy tale to *The Dream Garden*. Taught by her sisters until around age twelve, sorority was integral to her upbringing and her political activism as a prominent suffrage campaigner in adulthood, as well as to her creative collaborations with her female contemporaries, including the Syretts, Woodward, and *Yellow Book* artist Mabel Dearmer.⁵⁶ Netta and Sharp both attended the North London Collegiate School for Girls, contributed to the *Quarto*, and were members of the (international writers’ movement) P.E.N. Club. The Syretts’ creative partnership with Sharp has never before been examined, but the autobiographies of both Sharp and Netta attest to their lifelong comradeship. Sharp (who lived

with *Yellow Book* author D'Arcy in a flat in Knightsbridge in the 1890s) lived with Netta at the New Victorian Club (founded 1893) on Piccadilly's Sackville Street. Netta fondly recalls her modest attic room next to Sharp, where they enjoyed a shared freedom:

long ago at that little club she and I used to have a great deal of fun in those attic rooms, whose windows were so close together that a great deal of conversation went on in the open air when we put our heads out of them to talk to our neighbours.⁵⁷

Such clubs offered young unmarried women opportunities for professional development and networking, a product of which is *The Dream Garden*. Though their living arrangements were regarded by some as a 'slightly dangerous innovation', Netta and Sharp 'normalize[d] new urban living for working women'.⁵⁸

Both Sharp and Netta were at the hub of collaborative creativity generated by the *Yellow Book* circle. Just as Netta entered 'the world of brilliant, interesting men and women who knew all about books and pictures and music' through her friendship with the Beardsley family,⁵⁹ Sharp describes her entry into John Lane's 'charmed circle' as a liberatory time: 'I knew it was very heaven to be young when I came to London in the 'nineties'.⁶⁰ Sharp and Netta regularly attended the same gatherings such as Harland's notorious parties (along with *Yellow Book* writers D'Arcy, Mew, and Dollie Radford), which were 'central to the success of *The Yellow Book* as a forum for women's creative work, since women could take part in them on an equal footing as they could not in gentlemen's clubs and public houses'.⁶¹ Sharp's autobiography mentions Netta among the *Yellow Book* writers that contributed to its cultural value, and the inclusion of Sharp's portrait as a 'Bodley Head' in *The Yellow Book* shows her esteemed place in it.⁶² D'Arcy notes Sharp's and Syrett's apparently particularly close relationship with Lane in a jealous letter to him: 'I expect you are having a good old time, with tea parties every day, and Evelyn Sharp, and Netta Syrett [...] for ever popping in upon you'.⁶³ Nonetheless, Netta records a close companionship with D'Arcy in her memoirs; D'Arcy visited the Syrett sisters at their London flat and stayed with Netta in Paris, where Netta encouraged her to fulfil her potential as a writer.⁶⁴ Like Netta's memoir, *The Dream*

Garden testifies to her advocacy (rather than jealousy) of her successful female contemporaries and her collaborative approach particularly to children's fiction.

The six stories Sharp contributed to *The Yellow Book* all present New Woman dilemmas, such as the navigation of female roles in society and the struggle for financial independence and personal freedom. They include her 'feminist fairytale' 'The Restless River', which prefigures her children's fiction.⁶⁵ Sharp's fiction for both adults and children focuses on protagonists' 'struggle with and confrontation of social gender expectations, which Sharp portrayed as cruel and marginalizing'.⁶⁶ Unlike many of her contemporaries, but like Nesbit and Netta, Sharp refused to romanticize children's experiences and insisted that 'Childhood, at its worst, is unhappy; at best, it is uncomfortable.'⁶⁷ Comparable with Nesbit's *Wings and the Child*, Sharp's *Fairy Tales: As They Are, as They Were, and as They Should Be* (1889) is a non-fictional defence of fairy tales as they appeal to children's imaginations and 'the marvellous in their minds'.⁶⁸ Indeed, the marvellous is key to Sharp's surreal story, reminiscent of Carroll's *Wonderland*, for *The Dream Garden*.

Sharp's story 'The Castle with the High Bell' subverts Victorian notions of gender. Its princess is inquisitive and strong-willed, challenging the idea that it is 'the prince [who] always has to go out into the world to find his bride' instead of the princess doing the finding.⁶⁹ The Prime Minister's sixteen-year-old daughter, Limosella, has to overcome bizarre obstacles and crack a riddle to ring the high bell that makes her queen.⁷⁰ It can be read as a 'coming of age' story and journey to adulthood that traces the female protagonist's transgression of the domestic sphere (along with its triviality and court dresses) and dangerous journey 'through the forest in search of someone who could tell her the way to grow up'.⁷¹ This story demonstrates how Sharp's fiction often treats children as 'creative, intelligent beings' and displays empathy with 'the child's perception of the world, depicting "grown ups" as the mysterious, irrational ones'; her fairy stories are 'neither patronizing nor moralistic though they reflect her own increasingly progressive views on gender'⁷² and are 'deliberately subversive'.⁷³ The sympathy in Sharp's story is with the adventurous teenage girl, rather than the 'grown ups' who 'are apt to be stuffed with sawdust'.⁷⁴

Speaking to a hawk, Sharp's protagonist says, 'it is so tiring to be told the same thing all day long'⁷⁵ (that is, to grow up), evoking Nesbit's eaglet's opening cry, 'I have been scolded all day long'.⁷⁶ Limosella's quest for autonomy no doubt resonated with Edwardian teenagers railing against Victorian notions of femininity.

Given their close relationship as friends, neighbours, and collaborators, Sharp may have influenced Netta's feminist views and works. Indeed, the increasing radicalism of Sharp's career (in her move from the progressive National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies to the militant WSPU) is also detectable in Netta's fiction: from her *Yellow Book* stories of the 1890s exploring women's social roles and positions of exclusion, to her suffrage play *Might is Right* (1909) and novel *Portrait of a Rebel* (1929) – recalling Sharp's *Rebel Women* (1910) focused on the lives of suffrage supporters.⁷⁷ Sharp and Netta both wrote about suffragette militancy, and Sharp's 'awakening to militancy came in 1906', the year after the publication of *The Dream Garden*.⁷⁸ This was a pivotal time for Sharp's creative career and campaigning. While Nesbit expressed concern that suffrage would divert attention from the broader socialist cause, Sharp made suffrage central to her political agitation. She subsequently became vice president of the Women Writers' Suffrage League (founded 1908) and she became editor of the WSPU's official newspaper *Votes for Women* (1912). Netta's increasingly feminist stance – previously denied by critics⁷⁹ – likely informed her selection of prominent suffragettes and feminists (that is, Sharp and Wallace Dunlop, who both went on hunger strike in Holloway prison, Colman Smith, and American author Margaret Deland⁸⁰ who overtly supported women's rights) as contributors to *The Dream Garden*.

Lesser-known journalist, story writer and poet Nora Chesson was a member of the Lyceum Club along with Netta and Smedley. Like Sharp, Chesson wrote children's fiction for the *Girls' Own Paper*, and contributed to many contemporary periodicals and 'little magazines'. Chesson lived in London, in an all-female household with her mother and unmarried aunt, until her marriage in 1901, when (unusually for the time) her own literary earnings enabled her to move to a house in Surrey.⁸¹ Her 1890s stories and poems – *Ballads in Prose* (1894), praised by W. B. Yeats, and *Under*

Quicken Boughs (1896) – were published by Lane at the Bodley Head. Her novel *The Bell and the Arrow: An English Love Story* (T. Werner Laurie, 1905) was published in the same year as *The Dream Garden*, which would be one of her final projects; she died the following year in 1906. A memorial essay in the *Monthly Review* by suffrage-supporting poet and journalist S. Gertrude Ford applauds Chesson as ‘a woman who speaks for her sex’ and ‘shows us a new world in the midst of our own’, comparing her poetry to that of *Yellow Book* writer Olive Custance.⁸² While Chesson, better known as Hopper, felt that ‘the press refused her the privilege of being equally well known’ under her married name, *The Dream Garden* ensures her post-marital literary legacy.⁸³

Chesson’s works for *The Yellow Book*, where her ‘beautiful verses’⁸⁴ were commended by contemporary reviewers, include: her Swinburnian ‘Shepherds’ Song’ celebrating the vibrancy of paganism; ‘A Song and A Tale’,⁸⁵ referred to by a contemporary reviewer (who was not generally in sympathy with *The Yellow Book*) as ‘charming in an individual way’;⁸⁶ and ‘Wolf-Edith’⁸⁷ which offers ‘the most innovative take’ on the subject of ‘love lost’, as the solitary, uncivilised and sexualised ‘heroine maintains a haunting romance with a lover killed in battle’.⁸⁸ Her ‘Lament of the Last Leprechaun’ for *The Yellow Book*, which led one reviewer to call her ‘a young writer of much promise’,⁸⁹ thematically prefigures her verse ‘The Leprechaun’ for the *English Illustrated Magazine* (1903), her story ‘The Fairy Cobbler’ for *Blackie’s Children’s Annual* (1910), and her piece titled ‘The Leprechaun’ for *The Dream Garden*.⁹⁰ Despite the apparent inspiration of Irish fairy-lore, folklore, and mythology on her work (which returns to the figure of the leprechaun), she had never been to Ireland and her writing was apparently ‘spun out of the moonshine of [her] own brain’.⁹¹ In *The Dream Garden*, Chesson seemingly employs a supernatural being in Irish folklore in order to stage controversial New Woman issues (financial aspiration, collective female power) in a form more palatable to Edwardian society and appealing to her young readership.

Chesson’s ‘The Leprechaun’ is illustrated in *The Dream Garden* by Olga Morgan (b.1873), who illustrated several children’s books in the early twentieth century (figs. 7 and 8).⁹² Chesson’s menacing verse in *The Dream Garden* urges the girls to ‘catch’ and ‘trap’ a ‘napping’ leprechaun – a

‘lonely’, hardworking boy or ‘cobbler fairy’ making ‘shoes from withered leaves’ – holding him against his will until he ‘give[s] up hope’ of ‘liberty’ and grants them their ‘fortune’ (the limitless ‘gold of Fairyland’) in exchange for his freedom.⁹³ Morgan’s accompanying illustrations depict two scenes: before the attack, as several girls creep up on the unwitting leprechaun; and during the attack, when two girls pull hard at the stretched arms of the leprechaun, who is depicted as a small, vulnerable, exploited figure on his knees with his face turned away from the viewer. The compositions, which show girls in dresses and hats working together to overpower the ‘cobbler lad’, can be seen to illustrate a class struggle as well as an unconventional gender dynamic which affords the group of girls physical strength and control over the solitary male figure (who, according to myth, is notoriously difficult to catch). Here it is not the leprechaun that is mischievous and devious, but the girls, thus subverting Victorian associations of femininity with passivity and propriety. Whilst parts of the verse suggest sympathy for the victimised leprechaun, financial and physical female empowerment is ultimately valued over male liberty in the text. It entreats young women to ‘be wise, be wary’,⁹⁴ and is politically charged in its promotion of collective female power, determination and even strategic violence. Linda Hughes includes Nesbit and Chesson among *Yellow Book* women poets who practised new creative freedoms, leaning ‘more overtly toward decadence’⁹⁵ – as well as, I argue, feminism – in the wake of the Wilde trial.



Fig. 7: Olga Morgan, illustration 1 for Nora Chesson's 'The Leprechaun', in *The Dream Garden: A Children's Annual*, ed. by Netta Syrett (John Baillie, 1905).
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Fig. 8: Olga Morgan, illustration 2 for Nora Chesson's 'The Leprechaun', in *The Dream Garden: A Children's Annual*, ed. by Netta Syrett (John Baillie, 1905), © *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities

Conclusion

The Dream Garden is culturally valuable as a female-edited collection featuring numerous notable New Women writers, artists, and feminists, representing and contributing to late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century women's culture. This article reveals hitherto unexplored interconnections between the lives, works, and circles of the Syrett sisters, Nesbit, Sharp, and Chesson, revealing a symbiotic creative sorority formed during – and developed in the wake of – the *Yellow Book* years. The turn of the century was a particularly fertile time for female creativity and collaboration, and this article offers a broader understanding of the relationship between women and *The Yellow Book*, between *The Yellow Book* and *The Dream Garden*, and between the women contributors themselves. *The Dream Garden* offered women career-enabling or career-promoting opportunities, in some cases marking important points in their professional lives: Netta's editorial debut; Sharp's work on the cusp of militancy; and Chesson's final collaboration with her contemporaries. Their works – featuring female figures and communities, power struggles and systems, dreamscapes and utopias – engaged in subtle or encoded ways with contentious socio-political issues and early feminist discourses for the benefit of a school-age and teenage audience. As a volume, *The Dream Garden* portrays unconventional, educated, resourceful, aspirational, and irreverent girls rather than sleeping beauties or damsels in distress, challenging and subverting traditional gender roles. Documenting a New Woman network, *The Dream Garden* testifies to the formation of sororal creative partnerships as a feminist strategy through which Victorian-Edwardian women forged greater personal, professional and political freedoms.

¹ Netta Syrett, *The Sheltering Tree* (Geoffrey Bles, 1939), p. 152; *The Dream Garden: A Children's Annual*, ed. by Netta Syrett (John Baillie, 1905). Henceforth Netta Syrett is referred to as 'Netta' and her sister Nellie Syrett will be referred to as 'Nellie', to avoid confusion due to their shared surname.

² Syrett, *Sheltering Tree*, pp. 149–50.

³ Richard Le Gallienne, *The Romantic '90s* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1925), pp.191–92; Joseph Thorne, 'Decadent Sociability and Material Culture at the Fin de Siècle' (unpublished doctoral thesis, PhD thesis, Liverpool John Moores University, 2019) <<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/11254/1/2019thornephd.pdf>> [accessed 27 September 2023], p. 1.

⁴ Jad Adams, *Decadent Women* (Reaktion Books, 2023), p. 196.

- ⁵ Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (University Press of Virginia, 2000), pp. 25 & 2.
- ⁶ Julia Briggs, 'Nesbit [married name Bland], Edith', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004, doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/31919.
- ⁷ Syrett, *The Sheltering Tree*, p. 95.
- ⁸ Adams, *Decadent Women*, pp. 122, 175, & 125.
- ⁹ Linda K. Hughes, 'Women Poets and Contested Spaces in "The Yellow Book"', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 44.4 (2004), pp. 849–72, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sel.2004.0038> (pp. 856 & 859).
- ¹⁰ Margaret Stetz and Mark Samuels Lasner, *The Yellow Book: A Centenary Exhibition* (The Houghton Library, 1994), pp. 12 & 17.
- ¹¹ Hilary Fraser, *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century: Looking Like a Woman* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 11.
- ¹² Contributors to *The Dream Garden* also contributed to *The Yellow Book*, *The Venture*, the *Quarto*, and *Temple Bar Magazine*, for example.
- ¹³ Syrett, *Sheltering Tree*, pp. 147–78. For more on *The Venture*'s feminism, see Emma Frascchetti, *A New Woman's Venture: Linking a Little Magazine to the Suffrage Atelier*, 2019, <https://y90sclassroom.blog.torontomu.ca/2019/09/09/a-new-womans-venture-linking-a-little-magazine-to-the-suffrage-atelier/> [accessed 9 January 2024].
- ¹⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 15 December 1904, p. 11.
- ¹⁵ *Liverpool Mercury*, 20 December 1899, p. 9.
- ¹⁶ 3 Morpeth Terrace in Victoria, London, was home to Netta, Nellie, Mabel, and, for a time, Kate and Georgiana during the 1890s.
- ¹⁷ Syrett, *Sheltering Tree*, pp. 92 & 116.
- ¹⁸ Sarah Grand, 'The Modern Girl', *The North American Review*, 158.451 (1894), pp. 706-14 (p. 707); Syrett, *Sheltering Tree*, p. 85. Suffrage-supporting Slade artists include Emily Ford, Evelyn De Morgan, Olive Hockin, and Bertha Newcombe.
- ¹⁹ Stetz and Lasner, 'Centenary Exhibition', pp. 44–45.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 40–41.
- ²¹ Syrett, *Sheltering Tree*, p.149.
- ²² *St James' Gazette*, 21 December 1904, p. 19.
- ²³ Osman Edwards, 'Recollections of a Japanese Baby', *The Dream Garden*, pp. 131-39.
- ²⁴ Syrett, *Sheltering Tree*, p. 149.
- ²⁵ Lyndsey Jenkins, *Lady Constance Lytton: Aristocrat, Suffragette, Martyr* (Biteback Publishing Ltd, 2015), p. 123.
- ²⁶ Maroula Joannou and Claire Nicholson, eds, *The Women Aesthetes: British Writers, 1870-1900, Volume 1: 1870-1880* (Pickering and Chatto, 2013), p. xxiii.
- ²⁷ Syrett, 'The Dream Garden', *The Dream Garden*, pp. 9–10.
- ²⁸ Syrett, *Sheltering Tree*, p. 138.
- ²⁹ Syrett, 'The Dream Garden', p. 2.
- ³⁰ Sandra Dinter, 'Spatial Inscriptions of Childhood: Transformations of the Victorian Garden in *The Secret Garden*, *Tom's Midnight Garden*, and *The Poison Garden*', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 40.3 (2015), pp. 217-37.
- ³¹ Syrett, 'The Dream Garden', p. 7.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ³³ V. Irene Cockroft, *New Dawn Women: Women in the Arts & Crafts and Suffrage Movements at the Dawn of the 20th Century* (Watts Gallery, 2005), p. 5.
- ³⁴ Laurence Talairach-Vielmans, *Fairy Tales, Natural History, and Victorian Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 13.
- ³⁵ Matthew Beaumont, "'A Little Political World of My Own': The New Woman, the New Life, and "New Amazonia"', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 35.1(2007), pp. 215-32.
- ³⁶ Nellie Syrett, 'Five Sweet Symphonies', *The Yellow Book*, 10 (1896). Rossetti's work was first published in 1850 and is doubled by a painting of the same title (1875–1878).
- ³⁷ *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 1902, p. 4.
- ³⁸ Evelyn Sharp, 'The Weird Witch of the Willow-Herb', *The Other Side of the Sun* (The Bodley Head, 1900), pp. 3-24.
- ³⁹ Adams, *Decadent Women*, p. 87.
- ⁴⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 15 December 1904, p. 11.
- ⁴¹ Lorraine Janzen Kooistra and Dennis Denisoff, 'The Yellow Book: Introduction to Volume 4 (January 1895)', *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, ed. by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities, 2019 <<https://1890s.ca/yb-v4-introduction/>> [accessed 1 December 2024].
- ⁴² Adams, *Decadent Women*, p. 105.
- ⁴³ E. [Edith] Nesbit, 'Day and Night', *The Yellow Book*, vol. 4, January 1895, p. 260, *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, <https://1890s.ca/YBV4_nesbit_day/>; and Nesbit, 'The Ghost Bereft', *The Yellow Book*, vol. 12, January 1897, pp. 110-112, *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, https://1890s.ca/YBV12_nesbit_ghost/ [accessed 1 December 2024].
- ⁴⁴ Briggs, 'Nesbit'. See also Talairach-Vielmas, *Fairy Tales*, p. 2.

- 45 Marion Thain, 'Poetry', *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Gail Marshall (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 223-40 (p. 235); Linda K. Hughes, 'Feminizing Decadence', *Women and British Aestheticism*, ed. by Talia Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades (University Press of Virginia, 1999), pp. 119-38 (p. 120).
- 46 Briggs, 'Nesbit'.
- 47 Peter Hunt, ed., *Children's literature: An Anthology 1801-1902* (Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2001), p. 461.
- 48 Edith Nesbit, 'The Scolded Eaglet', *The Dream Garden*, pp. 193-94 (p. 193).
- 49 Hunt, *Children's Literature*, p. 461.
- 50 Edith Nesbit, *Wings and the Child or, the Building of Magic Cities* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1913), p. 143.
- 51 See Angela V. John, 'Sharp [married name Nevinson], Evelyn', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004, doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/37950; Nesbit, *My School Days*, serialised intermittently in *The Girl's Own Paper*, 1896-1897, <<https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks07/0701291h.html>> [accessed 6 February 2024].
- 52 Nesbit, 'Scolded Eaglet', pp. 193-94.
- 53 Ibid., p. 193. Original emphasis.
- 54 Nesbit, *Wings and the Child*, p. 11.
- 55 Marion Wallace Dunlop, 'The Elf and the Grumbling Bee', in *The Dream Garden*, pp. 211-14 (p. 214). See also Wallace Dunlop's *Fairies, Elves and Flower Babies* and *The Magic Fruit Garden* (1899).
- 56 See John, 'Sharp'; and Evelyn Sharp and Alice B. Woodward, *Round the World to Wympland* (John Lane, Bodley Head, 1902). Dearmer illustrated Sharp's *Wymps and Other Fairy Tales* and *All the Way to Fairyland* (published 1897 and 1898, respectively, by John Lane).
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- 59 Netta Syrett, *Strange Marriage* (Geoffrey Bles, 1930), p. 48.
- 60 Evelyn Sharp, *Unfinished Adventure: Selected Reminiscences from an Englishwoman's Life* [1933] (Faber & Faber, 2011), p. 56.
- 61 Adams, *Decadent Women*, pp. 76 & 86.
- 62 E. A. Walton. 'Bodley Heads No. 6: Portrait of Miss Evelyn Sharp', *The Yellow Book*, 12 (January 1897), p. 7.
- 63 Ella D'Arcy, letter to John Lane (n.d.), in Adams, *Decadent Women*, p. 95.
- 64 Syrett, *Sheltering Tree*, pp. 98 & 100.
- 65 Evelyn Sharp, 'In Dull Brown', *The Yellow Book*, 8 (January 1896), pp. 180-204; 'The End of an Episode', *The Yellow Book*, 4 (January 1895), pp. 255-74; 'Restless River', *The Yellow Book*, 12 (January 1897), pp. 167-90. Krystal Cusma, 'A Feminist Fairytale: Evelyn Sharp's "The Restless River"', 2018, <https://y90sclassroom.blog.torontomu.ca/2018/11/19/victorian-feminism-fairytale-in-evelyn-sharps-the-restless-river/> [accessed 1 December 2024].
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- 68 Ibid., p. 2.
- 69 Adams, *Decadent Women*, pp. 226-27.
- 70 Sharp's story is illustrated by Glyn W. Philpot, a prizewinning gay artist and founder member of the National Portrait Gallery in 1911
- 71 Sharp, 'The Castle with the High Bell', p. 57.
- 72 John, 'Sharp'.
- 73 Adams, *Decadent Women*, p. 226.
- 74 Sharp, 'The Castle', p. 56.
- 75 Ibid., p. 57.
- 76 Nesbit, 'Scolded Eaglet', p. 193
- 77 Netta Syrett, 'Might is Right' (1909), in Naomi Paxton, *The Methuen Drama Book of Suffrage Plays: Taking the Stage* (Bloomsbury, 2018); Netta Syrett, *Portrait of a Rebel* (G. Bles, 1930).
- 78 Adams, *Decadent Women*, p. 316; Evelyn Sharp, *Rebel Women* (John Lane, 1910).
- 79 For example, see Ann L. Ardis, *Modernism and Cultural Conflict, 1880-1922* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 130.
- 80 Deland wrote an article for the *Atlantic Monthly*, recognising the ongoing struggles for women's rights in the US, in 1910.
- 81 Warwick Gould, 'Hopper [married name Chesson], Eleanor Jane [Nora]', *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Biography*, 2004, doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/6292.
- 82 S. Gertrude Ford, 'The Poetry of Nora Chesson', *The Monthly Review*, 1906, pp. 92-98 (p. 92).
- 83 Chesson, in Warwick Gould, 'Hopper'.
- 84 'The Yellow Book', Review of *The Yellow Book*, 8, January 1896, *The National Observer*, 8 February 1896, p. 401, *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, <https://1890s.ca/yb8-review-national-observer-feb-1896/> [accessed 1 December 2024].

- ⁸⁵ Nora Hopper [Chesson], 'Shepherds' Song', *The Yellow Book*, 5, April 1895, pp.189-90; 'A Song and a Tale', *Yellow Book*, 3, October 1894, pp. 158-66.
- ⁸⁶ Review of *The Yellow Book*, 3, October 1894, *The Saturday Review*, 27 October 1894, p. 469, *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, <https://1890s.ca/yb3-review-saturday-review-oct-1894/> [accessed 1 December 2024].
- ⁸⁷ Nora Hopper [Chesson], 'Wolf-Edith', *The Yellow Book*, 9, April 1896, pp. 57-59.
- ⁸⁸ Lorraine Janzen Kooistra and Dennis Denisoff, 'The Yellow Book: Introduction to Volume 9' (April 1896), *The Yellow Book Digital Edition*, <https://1890s.ca/yb-v9-introduction/> [accessed 1 December 2024].
- ⁸⁹ 'Review of *The Yellow Book*', 3, October 1894, *The Bookman*, November 1894, p. 58, *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, <https://1890s.ca/yb3-review-bookman-nov-1894/> [accessed 1 December 2024].
- ⁹⁰ Nora Chesson, 'The Leprechaun', *The Dream Garden*, pp. 96-98. See Chesson's work (e.g. for *Mr Punch's Christmas Book*, 1904), *V&A*, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/search/?id_person=A21583> [accessed 12 January 2024].
- ⁹¹ Gould, 'Hopper'.
- ⁹² Morgan's drawings are the only ones from the volume held in the Syrett archive, *Osborne Collection of Early Children's Books*, Toronto Public Library.
- ⁹³ Chesson, 'The Leprechaun', pp. 96-98.
- ⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- ⁹⁵ Hughes, 'Contested Spaces', p. 857.

Ella and Marion Hepworth Dixon: ‘What’s in a Name?’

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‘The name, of course, [...] the name counts for *something*. Your late father’s name carries weight with a *certain* section of the public’, declares a fictional editor in Ella Hepworth Dixon’s seminal New Woman novel, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894).¹ One cannot help wondering if the name ‘Hepworth Dixon’ resonated in the same way for Henry Harland and John Lane, the editors of *The Yellow Book*, which began that same year. The name had definitely acquired a certain notoriety earlier in the century when William Hepworth Dixon (1821-1879) had been editor of *The Athenæum* from 1853 to 1869, but by 1894 two of his daughters, Marion (1856-1936) and her younger sister, Ella (1857-1932), had begun to make names for themselves in the literary world.

In *Decadent Women: Yellow Book Lives*, Jad Adams suggests that *The Yellow Book* sought to showcase women writers in particular.² Perhaps, as Oscar Wilde had done when he took over *The Lady’s World* in 1888, the editors relied, initially at least, on those with a name.³ This article will examine in detail the contributions of the Hepworth Dixon sisters to *The Yellow Book*, and thereby provide further insight into contemporary debates about women’s lives, both private and professional. To what extent, for example, did they challenge traditional values, and quite how decadent were they?

Although Ella and Marion had initially set out to pursue artistic careers, circumstances, especially their father’s premature death, had obliged them to abandon such aspirations.⁴ They subsequently set about earning a living by their pens rather than their paint-brushes. Marion, nevertheless, continued to pursue a career primarily in the art world and developed a fine reputation as an art critic, described in February 1894, in the words of the *Lady’s Pictorial* reviewer, as ‘one of our most successful and sympathetic art critics’.⁵ Ella, on the other hand, as a writer of both fiction and non-fiction, became ‘much sought after by editors because she writes carefully, punctually, and

honestly, never “scamping” and having only one quality of work’, according to a review in *Woman* also in December 1894.⁶

From the outset, William Hepworth Dixon’s name must have provided his daughters with vital introductions to several influential editors, including Edmund Yates (1831-1894) of *The World*. ‘He was an old friend of my people, and [...] most kind to my youthful efforts’, writes Ella Hepworth Dixon in her memoirs, *As I Knew Them: Sketches of People I Have Met on the Way* (1930).⁷ Yates also proved to be ‘kind’ to Marion as well, since the names of both sisters appeared on several occasions in Yates’ journal. Unfortunately for present-day readers, when they had begun their careers, anonymity had still been largely *de rigueur* in the profession. It is therefore not always possible to identify with certainty their early work. Moreover, Marion sometimes signed her name ‘Marian’, and Ella’s first notable success was with the pen-name ‘Margaret Wynman’ for her 1892 series of humorous sketches entitled *My Flirtations*, which is fundamentally, as the title implies, a satire on the marriage-market.⁸ Incidentally, in this text, too, the father’s name is important: several potential suitors are primarily attracted not so much by the charms of the eligible young woman as by her father’s renown as a member of the Royal Academy. Initially serialised anonymously in the *Lady’s Pictorial*, the sketches were later published in book form by Chatto and Windus, using the protagonist’s name. Correspondence between Andrew Chatto and Marion Hepworth Dixon, who appeared to be acting as her sister’s agent, shows that he, however, would have much preferred the use of the author’s own name.⁹ ‘I had not noticed that “My Flirtations” were published anonymously, and was under the impression that your sister would put her own name to a publication of the sketches in book form’, writes Chatto in a letter dated 28 April 1892. ‘I would always advise authors to secure to their own names any popularity that may attract to a success, by always publishing in their own names – most pseudonyms are open secrets.’ Nevertheless, when the *Lady’s Pictorial* began serialising *The Story of a Modern Woman* two years later the name ‘Ella Hepworth Dixon’, in spite of Andrew Chatto’s claims, was obviously not enough of a selling point:

“Margaret Wynman”, author of *My Flirtations*’ was added, as if to clarify matters. Significantly, the contributions that both sisters made to *The Yellow Book* always bore their full names.

In her memoirs, Ella Hepworth Dixon naturally alludes to many luminaries of her day, and not surprisingly devotes a whole chapter to ‘Some Editors’.¹⁰ Besides Edmund Yates, she cites, amongst others, Alfred Gibbons of *The Lady’s Pictorial*, Bruce Ingram of *The Sketch* and *The Illustrated London News*, and Sidney Low of the *St James’ Gazette*, which later became the *Evening Standard*. She even dedicates a whole section to William (‘Billie’) Heinemann, ‘a lifelong friend’ and ‘the most loyal and devoted of friends’.¹¹ Somewhat curiously, though, the names of John Lane and Henry Harland are never mentioned, and neither is Ella D’Arcy. This might suggest that the Hepworth Dixon sisters took no part in the celebrated ‘at homes’ hosted by Henry Harland and his wife, nor, in spite of Ella’s later claims for ‘a kind of [...] trades-unionism among women’,¹² is there any indication that they engaged in networking with other *Yellow Book* authors. However, in a chapter entitled ‘Some Moderns’, Ella Hepworth Dixon nevertheless writes of Aubrey Beardsley as ‘the prop and pillar of *The Yellow Book*’,¹³ and in an earlier chapter devoted to ‘People in the Gay Nineties’, she refers to ‘the vogue of *The Yellow Book*, and [that she] had contributed to one of its fat, buttercup-coloured volumes a tale called “The Sweet o’ the Year”’.¹⁴ This actually appeared in Volume IX in April 1896, after the departure of Beardsley, and was later included in her 1904 collection of republished short stories, *One Doubtful Hour and Other Sidelights on the Feminine Temperament*.¹⁵

It is surely interesting for twenty-first-century readers, who are more likely to be familiar with the name of Ella Hepworth Dixon, that the name of her sister, Marion, appeared in *The Yellow Book* first. ‘A Thief in the Night’ was published in January 1895¹⁶ and a second story, ‘The Runaway’, appeared in April 1897.¹⁷ Throughout her career, as far as can be ascertained, Marion Hepworth Dixon only produced a very small body of fiction. Up until now just six stories signed by her have been found, but, crucially for our present purposes, two of those were published in *The Yellow Book*.¹⁸

'A Thief in the Night' was immediately condemned as 'gruesome in the extreme' by the critic in the *Lady's Pictorial*,¹⁹ perhaps precisely the effect her editors wished to produce, and, of course, inciting the curious reader to want to find out more. What could provoke such a reaction? What could be so offensive, so unwholesome for a fin-de-siècle reader? From the opening lines, there is an obviously unsettling gothic atmosphere, and throughout the story Marion Hepworth Dixon employs language loaded with disturbing undertones. The setting is an 'unfamiliar room' in 'semi-darkness' illuminated only by a nightlight 'burning uneasily' in 'a house of death'. An unnamed sleepless woman is 'turning and twisting on the rumpled sheet' of the bed she is sharing with her husband 'to the accompaniment of [his] heavy breathing'.²⁰ Only later in the text is she given a name: 'Mrs Rathbourne'. Like most women of the day, she has no identity except as the appendage of someone, in this case a husband. On other occasions it could be a parent, or a child, as in Marion Hepworth Dixon's later story, 'The Runaway'. Ironically, however, neither of the Rathbourne brothers is given a first name, and neither is the husband nor the son in the second story.

With a few well-chosen images, perhaps indicative of her own artistic talents, Marion Hepworth Dixon immediately draws the reader not only into the claustrophobic intimacy of the couple's life, but also, as the story develops, echoing George Egerton (1859-1945) and pre-dating Freud, into the depths of the woman's troubled psychological state: '[T]he October night was dank, the atmosphere numb and heavy'; '[T]he silence alone was terrible, speaking as it did of the austere silence of the death-chamber below – a chamber where a white figure, once her husband's brother, lay stretched in awful rigidity on the bed'.²¹ Mrs Rathbourne is 'agitated and agitating, a woman worn with the fret of a single idea'.²² Nor is she simply 'worn' metaphorically; she is also physically drained, no longer in her prime. She is 'a lean, spare woman, with the leathery skin of the lean, and with hair now touched with grey'.²³ In some ways she is reminiscent of another fictional character, Adela Bulla, who appears in one of Ella Hepworth Dixon's stories, 'The World's Slow Stain', published in the same year: Adela is described as 'besmirched' by time.²⁴ In fact, time, the passing

of time, the effects of time, the lack of time is continually stressed throughout this narrative, as it is in all three stories by the Hepworth Dixon sisters. Time is never kind to women. Noticeably, in ‘The Thief in the Night’ the expression ‘too late’ is repeated no fewer than six times in one paragraph. At this stage one might well imagine that Time is the real thief of the title.

In contrast to the ephemeral nature of time, Mrs Rathbourne’s wristwatch indicates, or should indicate the precise moment: ‘five-and-twenty minutes to three’.²⁵ However, a clock in the house, also appropriately downstairs, ‘struck the half-hour’ leading her to wonder if ‘her watch had gained since she had set it right by the station clock on their journey from Sheffield’.²⁶ Even geographically there is a downwards movement as she and her husband have travelled from the North of England to London, and her memories will take her even further south to Hampshire, and back in time to a kind of lost garden of Eden.

Her watch, as a consequence, takes on particular significance, as well as reminding the reader of its other meaning not as a timepiece, but as a sort of look-out. On the simplest level it suggests merely the problematics of time, but, because the fear of dropping it and awakening her husband obliges her to lay it aside, her attention is subsequently drawn to a photograph, ‘faded’, as one might expect, which hangs on the wall.²⁷ It is a photograph of ‘the dead man below-stairs’. This in turn reminds her of another sleepless night, thirty years previously, when she was ‘rejoicing in the moment’, and looking forward to meeting ‘the dead man, then a slim young lieutenant’ before his regiment was to set sail. No specific details are given but ‘to look at this portrait, meant to ignore all intervening time, to forget that dread thing, that shrouded and awful something stretched on the bed in the room below’.²⁸

The reader is thus left to fill in the gaps of what constituted ‘the felicitous “had been” of her youth’. This technique of withholding certain details is also much in evidence in the fiction of many New Woman writers, thereby encouraging reader participation long before reader reception aesthetics became so popular. It was also useful in preserving authors from revealing even more

intimate details and exposing themselves to some of the acerbic criticism so generously meted out especially to the likes of George Egerton in particular.

One can, however, begin to understand what might appear ‘gruesome’, decadent even, to a late Victorian critic. Infidelity in a wife was surely a heinous crime. And, as if it were not bad enough for a woman to express desires *per se*, Mrs Rathbourne’s physical yearnings are for the brother of her husband, which must constitute a double transgression. And worse is to come: she shows no regret or remorse. Quite the contrary. ‘She *craved* for something more tangible, more human, something more *intimately* his’.²⁹ The longing for something more, a ‘tangible remembrance’, leads her downstairs, taking the reader with her, down into the dead man’s room, carefully ‘screening the light from the sleeping man’s eyes’,³⁰ as she must have done literally and metaphorically in the past.

‘An insatiable desire mastered her’³¹ as she surveys the dead man’s room, and Marion Hepworth Dixon surely deliberately repeats the verb ‘want’ in several short phrases. ‘She wanted ... she wanted the living, not the dead. [...] She wanted the man, not the clay’.³² Then in contrast to the shrouded ‘thing’ from which she recoils, Mrs Rathbourne touches – and eventually purloins – ‘something warm’, his dressing gown, the very gown he had been wearing when he died. It is surely most fitting that the woman who was initially described as ‘worn’ should choose to avail herself of something equally worn, and well-worn, by the man she loved. Minute details, a frayed braid, a crumpled handkerchief, a vague odour of cigars, encapsulate the ‘palpitating, everyday, intimate life’³³ of the beloved. With admirable economy of words Marion Hepworth Dixon reveals the complexity of emotions felt by the grieving woman. Now, as she returns to the room where her husband slumbers carrying with her a memento of his brother, her lover, she can finally give way to her emotions and shed tears.

In ‘The Runaway’, Marion Hepworth Dixon presents another female protagonist whose reactions and behaviour must have disturbed if not outraged a portion of her contemporary reading public, as again no doubt the editors of *The Yellow Book* would have wished. As mentioned earlier,

the woman is identified primarily by the men in her life. Mrs Reinhart is both a widow and a mother, and again marriage and motherhood, contrary to contemporary popular belief or propaganda, are not presented as ideals. Her husband had apparently been a 'loyal companion to her in the brief year of their married life',³⁴ but one cannot help wondering how much of a companion a sailor would have been. Nevertheless, she claims to have been 'ridiculously happy in those long summer months following the birth of her child',³⁵ so, for a while at least, she seems to fit the profile of society's womanly ideal. However, as must have been fairly common, 'early married gentility' rather rapidly gave way to impoverished widowhood obliging her to find paid employment for which she was woefully ill-equipped.

Trying to make ends meet, like many a lower middle-class woman, she takes to sewing, where the work is precarious and involves 'long monotonous hours'. This recalls a memorable image from Ella Hepworth Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman*. Towards the end of the first chapter when Mary Erle, one of the primary female protagonists, has gone to speak to her seamstress, she becomes acutely aware of 'the women of the lower classes [...] who live on ministering to the caprices of the well-to-do'.³⁶ 'It sometimes soothed Mary to stitch', but she is then 'reminded of many women she had seen: ladies, mothers of large families who sat and sewed with just such an expression of unquestioning resignation [...]. The Woman who sews is eternally the same.' Ultimately 'an immense pity seized her for the patient figure bending [...] over her foolish strips of flounces', and the last sentence of the chapter reads, 'It was not so much a woman, but The Woman at her monotonous toil'.³⁷

The very first sentence of Marion Hepworth Dixon's story 'The Runaway' indicates that Mrs Reinhart has suffered this 'monotonous toil' and this 'weary round of endeavour'³⁸ for a son who, in the meantime, has become a profligate: 'The very round of effort which had kept her cribbed within those four walls seemed to show itself a vain thing. It had availed nothing'.³⁹ Her repeated use of 'the round' accentuates the laborious monotonous cycle within which the woman is caught, and yet '[t]he boy for whom she had sacrificed her last sovereign would not work'. In

fact, he had already ‘run away from two excellent situations, one after another, when he was little more than eighteen’,⁴⁰ and has now disappeared. From the beginning, then, the reader could once more be misled by the title, thinking the eponymous runaway is the prodigal son. As it turns out, the term could apply to both mother and son.

Dissolute young men are not rare in literature, quite the contrary, but a mother abandoning her child even today seems shocking. Not that it is a decision easily taken by Mrs Reinhart. Desirous of keeping the promise she had made to her dying husband, she has done her utmost to spare their son from the hardships of life, and now struggles internally to come to terms with the unpleasant truth: ‘In herself there was confusion, doubt and misery.’⁴¹ The horrible realisation that their son is not only ‘terrible stubborn’ and ‘incorrigibly idle’, but ‘*what she most feared, then was true!*’⁴² Acknowledging that their son is also a thief, stealing from his hard-working mother and, moreover, pawning her few treasured possessions, only returning home when all the money is spent, leads to a kind of dark night of the soul. Referring to their son as a ‘scourge’, she recognises that ‘for the first time in her life, an extraordinary gulf appeared to open between them. [...] It was over. [...] It was all over’.⁴³ In the end she asks herself not simply, ‘Where was her son?’ but ‘Did she any longer actually care?’ Maternal feelings are clearly not infinite, and Mrs Reinhart has exhausted her limit.

Marion Hepworth Dixon then challenges another stereotype: it is an older woman, and her mother-in-law, the archetypal bane of many a spouse, who reaches out to her, inviting her to a new home and a new life in Sweden, away from the ‘mildewed steps of a squalid house’ and the ‘smirch of big cities’.⁴⁴ Apparently, ‘the offer was one that had been made many times, but that the widow had regularly refused on account of her determination to remain near her son’.⁴⁵ At this stage one cannot help wondering to what extent the Hepworth Dixon sisters worked together or influenced each other, since such solidarity between women is a dominant theme in much of Ella Hepworth Dixon’s writing, particularly in *The Story of a Modern Woman*. When interviewed by W. T. Stead after the success of her novel, Ella Hepworth Dixon had explained:

The keynote of the book is the phrase: ‘All we modern women mean to help each other now. If we were united, we could lead the world.’ It is a plea for a kind of moral and social trades-unionism among women.⁴⁶

It could be argued that in ‘The Runaway’ the apparently generous gesture from the elderly mother-in-law is not entirely disinterested, but by all accounts, the proposal had been made several times previously, and it is only at the end of a ‘gruesome night’⁴⁷ that Mrs Reinhart accepts, and sets out on ‘a radiant spring morning’.⁴⁸ ‘As a matter of fact’, the last sentence of the story reads, ‘the outward-bound bark *Edelweiss* had slipped her moorings and the widow had started for her new home’.⁴⁹ What could have ended on a despondent note actually offers a glimmer of hope.

Somewhat surprisingly, Ella Hepworth Dixon’s contribution to *The Yellow Book*, ‘The Sweet o’ the Year’, in spite of its more cheerful sounding title, could be viewed in some ways as less sanguine, and, contrary to much of her writing, whether fiction or non-fiction, contains none of the female solidarity she advocated so adamantly in the Stead interview. Nor does it contain a great deal of her customary humour, unless it is in her satirical descriptions of both the latest ‘young lady’ to interrupt the work of the initially unnamed painter in whose studio the narrative is set, and the painter’s own self-confessed, but completely un-self-aware, prejudices. True to her name, Mlle. Rose is ‘a radiant apparition in pink’,⁵⁰ wearing pink roses and pink shoes, but she is referred to as a ‘tas de saletés’ [a ‘pile of dirt’] by Virginie, the principal character in the story, who succumbs to ‘a strange spasm of jealousy’.⁵¹ Ironically, it is the French artist, M. Georges, for whom Virginie works, and surely this is a fine example of Ella Hepworth Dixon’s tongue-in-cheek style, who ‘[b]eing a Frenchman, had an innately tender regard for the sex’,⁵² and later pleads with Virginie not to be ‘hard on women’. However, it is the sound of ‘the shuffling pair of feet – feet which pattered about in the aimless way of the old and tired’ which ‘brought up a vision of Virginie’ for him.⁵³ The reader may further question the extent of his tenderness and compassion when he comments to himself, ‘Yes, Virginie certainly had her uses, although she was old, and shrivelled, and unsightly’. And if that were not enough, he continues, ‘Poor, bent old Virginie, with the failing memory, the parchment skin, and the formless lips!’ No wonder that he concludes, no doubt

expressing the opinion of many of his ilk: ‘The world is made for men [...]. I am glad I was born a man’.⁵⁴

As mentioned earlier, this was also one of ten stories which Ella Hepworth Dixon later chose to include in *One Doubtful Hour and Other Sidelights on the Feminine Temperament*, her 1904 collection of previously published short fiction.⁵⁵ One could thus assume that it was of special importance to her, perhaps exemplifying a particular aspect of ‘the feminine temperament’. It was in fact the last story in the collection which is not arranged in any kind of chronological order, but its place seems quite fitting since the main female protagonist is the oldest of all of Ella Hepworth Dixon’s fictional characters. Virginie admits to being over seventy-five, having remained unmarried and, like Mrs Reinhart, been reduced to doing menial work, is consequently only referred to by her first name. It has to be said that neither her employer nor his current lady-friend are given family names, but their names are at least prefixed with ‘Mademoiselle’ and ‘Monsieur’, indicating a marked class distinction. Virginie turns out to be a woman with a past, but not quite the stereotypical past one might expect. She is certainly not a proverbial ‘fallen woman’, nor has she proved unfaithful or disloyal, quite the reverse.

Margaret Stetz has already pointed out in her fine contribution to the *Y90 Biographies* that the story is set in an atmosphere which Ella Hepworth Dixon would have known intimately.⁵⁶ Just as in *The Story of a Modern Woman* she could pass comment primarily on the world of periodicals which she frequented so regularly, so in this story, without belabouring the point, she could draw attention to the blatant sexism and fundamental inequalities in the art world. The setting she chooses is Paris, not London, perhaps, as Stetz suggests, to appeal to Henry Harland, the Francophile literary editor of *The Yellow Book*. Paris was also where Ella Hepworth Dixon and her sister had studied art, at the Académie Julian.

Like Mrs Rathbourne in ‘The Thief in the Night’ who starts thinking back to a previous night, in a similar way Virginie begins comparing the situation of her current employer with that of an earlier artist whom M. Georges and his generation refer to as ‘The Master’. She is consequently

‘reminded [...] of things that had occurred half a century ago’.⁵⁷ Stereotypically, it turns out that she had served as model and inspiration for ‘the greatest painter of his day in France, the famous Victor Gérault’,⁵⁸ but, also stereotypically, she was then cast aside when fame and fortune changed his life. Unlike Mrs Rathbourne, nonetheless, Virginie already possesses her keepsakes: ‘a yellowish packet of letters, tied with a ribbon which had once, possibly, been rose-coloured’.⁵⁹ Incidentally, all three stories by the Hepworth Dixon sisters contain references to yellow: in ‘The Thief in the Night’, Mrs Rathbourne had noticed ‘fields splashed with yellow advertisements of divers infallible cures’⁶⁰ on their journey from Sheffield to London; in ‘The Runaway’ Mrs Reinhart observes ‘the yellow light from a street lamp’⁶¹ during her dark night of the soul, and here in ‘The Sweet o’ the Year’, besides the ‘primrose-coloured sky’,⁶² the letters are regularly described as ‘yellow’ or ‘yellowish’. It is difficult to imagine that this was not a deliberate decision by contributors to the by then infamous *Yellow Book*, underlining perhaps the desired decadent associations.

Tellingly, it is only when M. Georges condescendingly comments on the possibility of Virginie’s having been ‘a pretty woman *once*’ that she, ‘in a more defiant tone’, informs him that he has often seen her portrait, and with emphasis declares, ‘I was pretty once, M. Georges! I was a model. *He* chose me for his “Psyche”’.⁶³ At this point M. Georges is suddenly obliged to begin to re-appraise his view of his domestic servant, cruelly referred to twice as ‘withered out of all semblance of a woman’. That Virginie had even then ‘had her uses’, to employ his gallant phrase, that ‘[t]he Master had painted Virginie in [a] world-famous picture’, is just about believable, but that is still not quite enough.⁶⁴ It is only when Virginie produces the ardent love letters she had received from Victor Gérault, and forces M. Georges to read them aloud that he actually sees her as a person, as a woman, and is eventually moved to tears. Only then does his attitude towards her change, and ‘he gave way to a charming impulse. Bending down, he took her fingers and demanded deferentially, “May I salute the hand, madame, that the Master delighted to honour?”’⁶⁵ What might have led to further expressions of sentiment, although the astute reader of Ella Hepworth Dixon may have serious doubts, is interrupted by the arrival of the ‘radiant apparition in pink’.⁶⁶ With

typical understatement Ella Hepworth Dixon comments ‘in another moment, with the ferocious egoism of youth – and especially of youth in love – he had almost forgotten her’.⁶⁷ So much for his compassion.

Virginie’s last words to M. Georges might serve as an epitaph for all three stories discussed here: ‘when one is a woman, and one has been very, very happy, and – and – it is all over – one has to learn to forget’. She continues, ‘Life is like that... it is hard for women. [...] And women live long [...]. In spite of their sorrows, they live long...’.⁶⁸ It is now easier to understand why Ella Hepworth Dixon might have chosen ‘The Sweet ’o the Year’ as the concluding story to her collection. Unlike the harrowing title story, ‘One Doubtful Hour’, which ends with the suicide of the dejected young woman, in ‘The Sweet ’o the Year’, and in both stories by Marion Hepworth Dixon, whether a woman is a wife, a widow or a spinster, and whether she forgets or not, she chooses to live. This is also reminiscent of Mary Erle in *The Story of a Modern Woman* who stoically aims ‘to stand alone, to fight the dreary battle of life unaided’,⁶⁹ and it recalls a much earlier story by Ella Hepworth Dixon, ‘A Suburban Tragedy’ published in the *Lady’s Pictorial* in December 1890:

There are tragedies of which the world never hears. It is the women who elect to live, and not the women who elect to die, who are the most pitiful figures in the drama of human passion. Their pale monotonous lives, dragged out to the far end, are a hundred times more bitter than the sharp struggle which ends in self-destruction.⁷⁰

It would be reductive, however, to classify these stories and their authors as ‘morbid’ or ‘neurotic’ or even ‘depressing’, epithets generously bandied about at the fin de siècle particularly in relation to women writers. Like much fiction of their day, and perhaps typical of *The Yellow Book*, they sought to raise pertinent questions and perhaps provoke responses. Rather unusually, these stories centre on women of a certain age, not typical fictional heroines, young women on the threshold of their destinies, but women with pasts which, frankly, in many ways makes them more interesting. On the whole, Marion Hepworth Dixon’s women might appear more transgressive – Mrs Reinhart even abandons her child – but they are all resilient. Marriage and motherhood are

clearly not the panacea Victorian society would have women believe. In fact, of the three principal female characters, the married woman seems ultimately to be the least content.⁷¹

Without doubt, it has to be conceded that most of the male characters in the stories discussed are either absent or of questionable of character: the husband in 'The Thief in the Night' is asleep, the once-adored son in 'The Runaway' is dissolute and his employer unsympathetic, and the young artist in 'The Sweet o' the Year' is patronizing. The men who were loved are all dead: the brother-in-law in 'The Thief in the Night', the husband in 'The Runaway' and the older artist/lover in 'The Sweet o' the Year'. Moreover, readers cannot help wondering quite how admirable they actually were. In the last two stories, the women in practical terms are abandoned by their men, either through natural causes, character, or social conventions. Female characters unsurprisingly fair better, but only marginally. They are often unkind to each other: Mrs Rathbourne admits to hating her rival, and Virginie disdains the young actress, but she in turn barely acknowledges Virginie.

As mentioned earlier, in all three stories time is a recurrent theme. Everything passes, whether youth or beauty, but perhaps not love. The fleeting nature of time and its effects on characters, including their hopes and desires, remains predominant, as is the idea that, on the contrary, a whole lifetime can be encapsulated in a few words, images, or gestures. Readers are left asking questions about what actually remains of the past. At times, the characters themselves barely hold together, represented as they are by a few select objects, and it would be an exaggeration to speak of plots as such. Like many of the other contributions to *The Yellow Book*, these stories certainly played with readers' expectations, and whilst all the female characters without exception at some point look to the past with a certain nostalgia, their creators are most definitely heralding future changes in the literary world prefiguring modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf. Their names may have been forgotten, but it is surely appropriate that they once again 'count for something'.

- ¹ Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (Broadview, 2004), p. 108. Italics in original. Initially serialised in twelve weekly instalments in the *Lady's Pictorial* between January and March 1894, then published in book form later that year by Heinemann in London and Cassell in New York, the novel has since been republished several times, first in 1990 in the Merlin Radical Fiction series. All subsequent page references will refer to the Broadview edition.
- ² Jad Adams, *Decadent Women: Yellow Book Lives* (Reaktion, 2023).
- ³ Ella Hepworth Dixon contributed several short stories and non-fiction articles to the magazine, which, incidentally, Wilde re-named *The Woman's World* as soon as he took over editorship.
- ⁴ See Valerie Fehlbauer, 'Sisters in Life, Sisters in Art', in *Michael Field and their World*, ed. by Margaret D. Stetz and Cheryl A. Wilson (The Rivendale Press, 2007), pp. 107-15.
- ⁵ [Anon.], 'Lady Journalists', *Lady's Pictorial* (10 February 1894), p. 177. From November 1893 to February 1894 the *Lady's Pictorial* ran a five-part series on Lady Journalists: 'Lady Journalists', *Lady's Pictorial* (11 November 1893), p. 734; (25 November 1893), p. 823; (9 December 1893), pp. 928-29; (23 December 1893), p. 1020, and (10 February 1894), p. 176-77.
- ⁶ [Anon.], *Woman* (5 December 1894), p. 5.
- ⁷ Ella Hepworth Dixon, *As I Knew Them: Sketches of People I Have Met on the Way* (Hutchinson & Co. 1930), p. 161.
- ⁸ *Lady's Pictorial* (January 23-April 30, 1892); Margaret Wynman, *My Flirtations* (Chatto and Windus, 1892).
- ⁹ Correspondence between Marion Hepworth Dixon and Andrew Chatto can be found in the Chatto and Windus archives in the University of Reading Archives and Manuscripts Department, Reading, UK.
- ¹⁰ Ella Hepworth Dixon, *As I Knew Them*, pp. 161-67.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 187-90.
- ¹² See W. T. Stead, 'The Novel of the Modern Woman', *Review of Reviews*, 10 (July 1894), pp. 64-74.
- ¹³ Ella Hepworth Dixon, *As I Knew Them*, p. 271.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- ¹⁵ Ella Hepworth Dixon, *One Doubtful Hour and Other Sidelights on the Feminine Temperament* (Grant Richards, 1904).
- ¹⁶ Marion Hepworth Dixon, 'A Thief in the Night', *The Yellow Book*, 4 (January 1895), pp. 239-46.
- ¹⁷ Marion Hepworth Dixon, 'The Runaway', *The Yellow Book*, 13 (April 1897), pp. 110-20.
- ¹⁸ Besides the two discussed here which were published and signed in *The Yellow Book*: 'Let the Best Man Win', *English Illustrated Magazine* (February 1895), pp. 47-52; 'A Desperate Remedy: A Dialogue', *The Englishwoman* (May 1895), pp. 198-202; 'A Supper for Two: A Dialogue', *The Christmas Number of The World* (17 November 1898), pp. 57-59; and 'The Disenchantment of Dever Deming', *The Christmas Number of The World* (16 November 1899), pp. 52-54.
- ¹⁹ [Anon.], *Lady's Pictorial* (2 February 1895), p. 158.
- ²⁰ Marion Hepworth Dixon, 'A Thief in the Night', *The Yellow Book*, 4 (January 1895), pp. 239-46 (p. 239).
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 240. Marion Hepworth Dixon's choice of the word 'fret' is surely not fortuitous. Besides its surface meaning containing various connotations of corrosion or wasting away, it also recalls Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' (1819) which begins 'My heart aches...' and the third stanza contains the line 'the weariness, the fever and the fret', which seems particularly fitting for the waking woman.
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ Ella Hepworth Dixon, 'The World's Slow Stain', originally published in *The Christmas Number of The World* (21 November 1895), pp. 59-61, and then was included in her 1904 collection of republished stories. The title is a quotation from Shelley's *Adonais*, a poem written after the death of John Keats in 1821.
- ²⁵ Marion Hepworth Dixon, 'A Thief in the Night', p. 240.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 242.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 243; my italics.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 245.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 246.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 241.
- ³⁴ Marion Hepworth Dixon, 'The Runaway', p. 113.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- ³⁶ Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman*, p. 49.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.* Images of seamstresses or governesses abound in a certain type of Victorian painting, but Ella Hepworth Dixon rejects any sentimentality which might have been suggested by such works of art.
- ³⁸ Marion Hepworth Dixon, 'The Runaway', p. 113.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

- ⁴² Ibid., p. 117; italics in original.
- ⁴³ Ibid., p. 118.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 114.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Ella Hepworth Dixon, quoted by W. T. Stead, 'The Book of the Month: The Novel of the Modern Woman', *The Review of Reviews* 10 (1894), p. 71.
- ⁴⁷ Marion Hepworth Dixon, 'The Runaway', p. 119.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 120.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Ella Hepworth Dixon, 'The Sweet o' the Year', *The Yellow Book*, 9 (April 1896), p. 269.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., p. 256.
- ⁵² Ibid., p. 254.
- ⁵³ Ibid., p. 253.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 254.
- ⁵⁵ Ella Hepworth Dixon, *One Doubtful Hour and Other Sidelights on the Feminine Temperament* (London: Grant Richards, 1904). All page numbers refer to this edition. According to a letter, dated 14 July 1904, in the Grant Richards Archives in the 'Rare Books and Special Collections' Library at the University of Illinois, Urbana, IL, the story was to be translated into Czech, but I have so far found no evidence of the translation.
- ⁵⁶ See Margaret D. Stetz, 'Ella Hepworth Dixon (1857-1932)', *Y90s Biographies*, 2010. *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, edited by Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities, 2019, https://1890s.ca/dixonE_bio/ [accessed 1 December 2024]. See also Valerie Fehlbaum in the same series on Marion Hepworth Dixon, https://1890s.ca/dixonM_bio/ [accessed 1 December 2024].
- ⁵⁷ Ella Hepworth Dixon, 'The Sweet o' the Year', p. 256.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 254.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 256.
- ⁶⁰ Marion Hepworth Dixon, 'A Thief in the Night', p. 240.
- ⁶¹ Marion Hepworth Dixon, 'The Runaway', p. 118.
- ⁶² Ella Hepworth Dixon, 'The Sweet o' the Year', p. 271.
- ⁶³ Ibid., p. 259; my italics.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 268.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 269.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 271.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 268.
- ⁶⁹ Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman*, p. 192.
- ⁷⁰ Ella Hepworth Dixon, 'A Suburban Tragedy', *Lady's Pictorial* (27 December 1890), pp. 1104-105.
- ⁷¹ Throughout her long career, in both her fiction and non-fiction, Ella Hepworth Dixon frequently points out the advantages for a woman of remaining single, and prefers to refer to spinsters as 'bachelor women' or 'lady bachelors'. Unlike Mona Caird in her famous piece in the *Westminster Review*, titled 'Marriage' (August 1888, pp. 186-201), she generally manages to avoid becoming polemical, and maintains a certain lightness of tone. See in particular 'Why Women are Ceasing to Marry', *The Humanitarian*, 14 (1899), pp. 391-96.

Netta Syrett's Afterlife: From London to Hollywood

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Now when everything else is gone, I have only one satisfaction: Children are beginning to be raised more intelligently. For that I can claim some small credit. Women are beginning to have some standing – not enough, but some.¹

Although the words above, spoken by the actor Katharine Hepburn in *A Woman Rebels*, were the creation of two male screenwriters – Anthony Veiller (1903-1965), an American, and Ernest Vajda (1886-1954), a Hungarian *émigré* to America – the source text for this 1936 film was a 1929 novel by a British woman writer. That the novel in question, *Portrait of a Rebel*, proved popular and successful enough on both sides of the Atlantic to be of interest to RKO Radio Pictures, a Hollywood studio, seems astonishing now. Its author, Netta Syrett, was a member neither of the current generation nor even of the Edwardian or Georgian ones immediately preceding it, for she had been born in 1865 – thus, in the middle of the previous century – and was nearing the end of a long career. Her literary fame had been achieved first in *The Yellow Book* with her short story ‘Thy Heart’s Desire’ for the July 1894 issue (Volume II), followed by further contributions in October 1895 (Volume VII) and January 1897 (Volume XII). She had, nonetheless, remained both relevant and appealing to a wide swathe of the reading public. Just how she accomplished what so many of her contemporaries did not can only be a matter for speculation. One possibility, however, was through her close attention to expressions of taste communicated via the medium of reviews, as these became more readily available to authors at the turn of the twentieth century thanks to the rise of professional press-cutting services, to which she herself was a subscriber, as evidenced by the collection of materials sent to her by Romeike and Curtice.

Certainly, Syrett was a relic of the *fin de siècle*, a period that some of the most vocal modernist critics of the 1920s and 1930s had dismissed as antiquated in its ideas and as marred by preciosity in its style. To Virginia Woolf, for instance, writing on ‘Poetry, Fiction and the Future’

in 1927, the literature of the 1890s, associated forever for her with the aesthetic and decadent worlds of ‘Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater’, was marred by ‘languor’ – by being too ‘sultry and scented’ – whereas ‘modern writing’, in contrast, possessed ‘an honesty [...] which is salutary if not supremely delightful’.²

Syrett was not merely affiliated with that so-called sultry and scented atmosphere through her identity as a *Yellow Book* author; as ‘an independent, confident woman’,³ in the words of Jad Adams, she was also an exponent of the ‘New Woman’ school of political fiction, from which many early-to-mid-twentieth-century women novelists had largely dissociated themselves. Thus, she was doubly a representative of the past. The chief setting of her 1929 success, *Portrait of a Rebel*, moreover, was London in the 1860s through the 1890s. This was an era that a majority of British and American readers and film audiences appeared to find retrogressive, *démodé*, and even risible, except as the source of entertainingly sentimental or sensational narratives about so-called Great Romances (always heteronormative ones, of course, such as *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* film in 1934), detective stories, supernatural gothic thrillers, and comedies with adorable child actors in equally adorable costumes. When Hollywood producers of the mid-1930s turned to this earlier period, they did so to inspire films such as *Peter Ibbetson* (1935; based on George du Maurier’s novel), *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1935; based on Charles Dickens’s novel), and *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1936; based on Frances Hodgson Burnett’s novel). Certainly, they were not looking for representations of late-Victorian feminist protest.

We must wonder, therefore, what made Syrett’s *Portrait of a Rebel* seem an attractive property to Hollywood in the mid-1930s. And we might wonder even more, when we recognise that this was one of very few feature films of that decade to be based on a novel by a woman who published in *The Yellow Book* and was identified with the ‘New Women’. Consider the many names and pseudonyms of the women associated with *The Yellow Book* who were well known at the turn of the twentieth century for their feminist or feminist-inflected fiction: Ella Hepworth Dixon (1857-1932), ‘George Egerton’ (Mary Chavelita Dunne) (1859-1945), Ella D’Arcy (1857-1937),

Evelyn Sharp (1869-1955), 'John Oliver Hobbes' (Pearl Richards Craigie) (1867-1906), and 'Frances E. Huntley' (Ethel Colburn Mayne) (1865-1941), among others. Although the 1914 silent film *Life's Shop-Window* and the 1915 *Five Nights* were adaptations of novels by 'Victoria Cross' (Annie Sophie Cory), filmmakers in the post-1927 sound era uniformly ignored works by women of *The Yellow Book*, even as they resurrected a few texts by earlier Victorian female predecessors – most notably, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* – while often stripping them of their more overt feminist content.

But it was not merely directors and screenwriters who allowed numerous late-Victorian feminist writers to sink into oblivion; it was also the post-1900 transatlantic reading public that did so. Many of these authors had been bestsellers in the 1890s. George Egerton's 1893 *Keynotes* sold six thousand copies in its first year and went into eight printings by 1898, proving that even a volume of 'New Woman' short stories could compete with full-length novels in the marketplace; yet she could not maintain equal commercial success with any new works of fiction after 1900, and both *Rosa Amorosa* (1901) and *Flies in Amber* (1905) had limited sales. In frustration, she turned to playwriting, while some contemporaries pursued journalism as an alternative.

The most notable example, however, of a 'New Woman' of the *Yellow Book* circle whose popularity held steady in the next century was Janet Syrett, who signed herself 'Netta' Syrett. A published author from 1890 onwards, she wrote only two of her novels in the 1890s; all the rest of her thirty-eight long works of fiction came afterwards, with twenty-one of them appearing after 1920.⁴ None of these was a blockbuster, but most of them enjoyed respectable sales – certainly enough to convince a variety of major British publishing firms ranging from Methuen to Unwin, to Chatto and Windus, to go on investing in her. As Jill Tedford Jones puts it, she 'held an audience of intelligent, educated readers up until her last novel was published in 1940'.⁵

How did she manage this? Did she abandon all feminist content and abjure that staple of 1890s woman-centred literature, the young female protagonist in revolt? Not at all. In fact, Syrett went on writing about similar sorts of politically and socially defiant heroines – often placing them,

moreover, in late nineteenth-century settings – for decade after decade. Her historical fiction about a ‘New Woman’ author-figure of the 1890s, the 1915 novel *The Victorians* (alternatively titled *Rose Cottingham*), was one of her most commercially and critically successful. It was so well received that it even generated a sequel, *Rose Cottingham Married*, in 1916. Her *Portrait of a Rebel* (1929), also set in the previous century, had the best reception of all, as the work that inspired a Hollywood film screenplay. Under the title *A Woman Rebels*, it served as a vehicle for a major star playing the role of an unwed mother and professional journalist of the late nineteenth century who founds a crusading feminist paper called, significantly, *The New Woman*.

What enabled Syrett almost uniquely to go on, despite her reputation as a woman of *The Yellow Book* in particular and as a ‘New Woman’ of the 1890s in general, and continue to be welcomed by audiences on both sides of the Atlantic, even as she was becoming an old woman (in all senses of the phrase) herself? Was she a literary genius? Or was she a writer who, more shrewdly than her peers, discovered a way early on to keep both herself and her feminist protagonists sailing along on mainstream currents? From what sources did she learn this strategy?

My own speculation about the matter has been fuelled by the large cache of Syrett family archives now in Canada. Located in the Toronto Public Library and donated by Syrett’s great nieces, these holdings include not only her papers, but those of her *Yellow Book* artist sisters, Helen (known familiarly as ‘Nellie’) and Mabel, all of which are now part of the Osborne Collection of Early Children’s Books. (Their presence in a collection devoted to the juvenile market, rather than to adult fiction, is explained by Syrett having also produced numerous works for children after 1900, and by her sisters having been successful illustrators in this genre.) Prominent among the Syrett materials are stacks of sheets from 1896 bearing the imprint of ‘Romeike and Curtice, Press Cutting and Information Agency, 359, Strand’: neatly bundled clippings of all the reviews of her first novel, *Nobody’s Fault*, which was issued by John Lane’s Bodley Head publishing firm concurrently with *The Yellow Book*.

That Syrett was aware of her reviews and read them carefully is clear from her 1939 memoir, *The Sheltering Tree*. By the third page of that volume, she begins referring to them:

For years I have wished, but been too lazy, to say a few not altogether kind words about certain reviewers. Not on account of adverse criticism, though, for by most of them I have been remarkably well treated. All in good time, however.⁶

She returns to this subject later, expanding upon the substance of her objections:

Personally, at all events till recently, I have had what is called ‘a good press’. That is to say, I have had long and, more often than not, eulogistic reviews for my novels, so perhaps it is hypercritical to complain that there have been few criticisms from which I have *learnt* anything. I should like to have done so, for though circumstances have forced me to write too much, and no one better than I knows that this is unfortunate, I have always *wished* to write as well as I could.⁷

In truth, Syrett’s statement is somewhat disingenuous. She did, on the contrary, appear to learn much from her critics. The tool that first enabled her to do so was, moreover, that pioneering monitor of the media, the firm of Romeike and Curtice.

The press-cutting business of Henry Romeike (1855-1903), who has been identified variously as ‘an itinerant Russian’,⁸ as a German native of ‘Memel, Eastern Prussia’,⁹ and as having been ‘born in Riga, Latvia’,¹⁰ was established in London in the early 1880s. At first, it was intended to fill a niche for theatrical professionals by gathering newspaper reviews of stage performances (something that actors had been trying for years to collect for themselves). But as the business expanded, it became ‘Romeike and Curtice’ through a partnership with Edward Curtice, Sr., and began actively to seek new markets, and – as Romeike himself moved to the United States in 1887 and set up offices in New York, as well – it increasingly drew its clientele from the late-Victorian publishing world at large. With its systematic monitoring of English-language periodicals, from magazines with the widest distribution to small-circulation provincial newspapers, Romeike’s company solidified the links among book reviewers, book publishers, and authors themselves, binding together the many players in Victorian print culture. Innovative, media-savvy publishing firms of the 1890s, such as The Bodley Head – which issued Syrett’s *Nobody’s Fault* (1896) in the pathbreaking ‘Keynotes Series’, established by John Lane in the wake of George Egerton’s *Keynotes*

(1893) to capitalise on that volume's enormous sales and notoriety – came to rely upon quick access to a full spectrum of reviews for a variety of purposes. These included the strategic excerpting and reprinting of attention-getting, controversial opinions (and even of virulent attacks upon its books) in paid advertisements, as a new marketing technique.¹¹ Thanks to Romeike's cutting service, tracking the public reception of experimental genres, such as the pro-feminist 'New Woman' novel, became much easier, and the clipped reviews that arrived in neatly sorted bundles influenced publishers' future decisions about whether or not to invest in further works of that type.

Publishers, however, were by no means the sole market for Romeike and Curtice's wares or for those of their end-of-the-century competitors, such as Durrant's, T. B. Browne, the General Press Cutting Association, or Woolgar and Roberts. In *The Literary Year-Book and Bookman's Directory* of 1901, an annual volume directed toward an audience of professional writers and intended to supply them with 'everything that can be reasonably required by any one at all concerned with literature',¹² Herbert Morrah included a list of the addresses of press cutting agents based in London. These were, as Morrah explained, businesses that would provide 'Extracts from the Papers upon all conceivable subjects. The usual charge for such extracts is about £1, 1s. for 125 cuttings, a reduction being made where the subscription covers a large quantity.'¹³ Such a fee was within reach even of authors who were just embarking on their careers and awaiting royalties. The existence of these agencies proved a boon to middle-class women writers in particular. Raised without training in how to tailor work for different markets and audiences or in the art of self-promotion, they often were naïve about the business side of authorship in general and, though able to join a limited number of organisations for women professionals, they lacked access to what Elaine Showalter has called 'Clubland', where male journalists and critics congregated.¹⁴ To subscribe to Romeike's service or to one of its rivals ensured that women novelists who did not enjoy the same opportunities for professional socialising and exchanges of information as their

male counterparts could still feel in touch with the larger world of opinion on any given subject and could follow the currents of literary taste across a broad swathe of periodicals.

Most important, the subscriptions taken out by individual authors to Romeike's clipping service meant that writers could receive almost instantaneous feedback from the press about their own work while it was newly in print, even as they were proposing and beginning to create their next projects. In some cases, hostile reviews made writers dig in their heels defensively; this was true, for instance, of 'George Egerton', who regarded such press notices as a challenge and as confirmation both of the rightness of her own approach and of the stupidity of the critics. But in the case of other 'New Woman' authors of the 1890s – who were, like Syrett, often women with limited experience in the world of business and few financial resources or support networks – to receive a packet of antagonistic or uncomprehending reviews via Romeike could be devastating. On the other hand, for a novice author to see a wide range of reviews urging her to move in a particular literary direction could prove tremendously influential, as she decided what steps to take next. Many innovative but self-supporting women novelists quite literally could not afford to ignore the weight of numerous opinions that steered their work into more acceptable and more popular channels.

Examining the packet of 1896 reviews of *Nobody's Fault* that Syrett preserved suggests how this easy and immediate access to recent clippings could have served to shape her subsequent fiction and to guide her in creating a version of 'New Woman' fiction that the public would find enduringly appealing, beyond the first thirty years of the next century. Though she may have claimed in her 1939 memoir that she had gleaned little from critics, her first batch of press cuttings gives hints that the contrary was true; it helped to determine the character of her later feminist political expressions, while teaching her both the means for achieving popular status and the necessity of doing so. We cannot know for certain why some of her feminist contemporaries of the 1890s either failed or chose not to make the same strategic use of reviews that Syrett did. What is obvious, however, is that Syrett proved herself a professional author in a newly modern sense –

that is, by being adept at ‘reading’ periodical reviews for the clues they offered as to the direction in which not only critics, but the larger English-speaking audience on several continents, wished to see her writing move. That she preserved so many of these cuttings throughout her long life certainly indicates how seriously she regarded the evaluations and guidance they contained.

After several years – especially from the early to the mid-1890s – in which ‘New Woman’ fiction rapidly had become a burgeoning, if not dominant, literary genre, the arrival of *Nobody’s Fault* in 1896 made it something of a late entry. As Syrett’s bundles of press cuttings show, it entered a climate of reception in which critical responses were to a large degree already fixed. Thus the anonymous reviewer in the 20 March 1896 issue of *The Literary World* opened by saying, ‘We begin to fear that stories of revolting women still extract interest from the public, though we had hoped that their vogue was dwindling with commendable dispatch [*sic*]’.¹⁵ Similarly, the article devoted to *Nobody’s Fault* in the *Whitehall Review* of 7 March 1896 was titled ‘More “New Womanism”’ and began with the complaint that nowadays ‘There is no getting away from the New Woman’. The reviewer, too, for the *Manchester Guardian* of 12 March 1896 dismissed Syrett’s novel as merely another example of a predictable ‘Revolting Daughter’ type:

It is the kind of book which any [...] young woman could write, and of which in later life, when the effervescence of youth has quieted down and experience has brought its inevitable discipline, she would in all probability be rather ashamed.

Little did the reviewer know that, in 1896, Syrett was already a mature woman of thirty-one, who had been working for years as a teacher in a school for girls.

Along with such statements of resistance or of weariness in the face of yet another defiantly pro-‘New Woman’ narrative, however, came many expressions of admiration and approval, as recorded in clippings from periodicals as diverse and far-flung as the *Westminster Gazette*, the *Liverpool Mercury*, the *Dundee Advertiser*, the *Weekly Sun*, and *Freeman’s Journal* of Sydney, Australia. The adjective running again and again as a thread throughout these positive critical assessments in so many newspapers and magazines was ‘clever’. What did it mean when a woman writer was called clever? Chiefly, that she employed comedy – that is, wit or a so-called ‘light’ touch. And

indeed, the presence of a light touch was, above all else, the basis for the laudatory note in these reviews, whether in the *Public Opinion* of 28 February 1896, which made reference to the ‘many bright passages that disclose touches of refined humour’, or in the April issue of the *Commonwealth*, which spoke of the novel’s ‘delicate humour’. The *Sketch* of 3 March 1896 summed up the matter: ‘Miss Syrett has a great flow of lofty ideas, and, of course, she will like to find an outlet for them. But lofty ideas are a glut in the market just now, and scenes to laugh at are rare indeed!’

The particular sort of comedy that reviewers singled out for praise was satire. Perhaps showing their own middle-class biases and snobbery, many critics were taken with Syrett’s lampoon of lower-middle-class social life in the third chapter of *Nobody’s Fault*, which contained her devastatingly funny portrayal of a party attended by well-to-do tradesmen and clerks with social pretensions. There, she cast a cold eye on everything from their turns of phrase, to their manners, to their taste in home furnishings, focusing on the ‘plush-covered chairs’ and ‘a sea of crimson carpet’, along with a ‘marble-topped chiffonier’ decorated with a particularly execrable array of ornaments, including a ‘glass-covered statuette of a fat little girl with an emaciated lamb, and a little boy in a white parian sailor suit, teaching a dog to beg’.¹⁶

Reviewers responded with equal enthusiasm to her skewering of an evening among the aesthetes and decadents, the world into which her heroine innocently and unhappily marries. Although Angela Kingston, in *Oscar Wilde as a Character in Victorian Fiction* (2007), does not flag Syrett’s brief portrait of ‘Mr. Trilling’ – a ‘young man with long hair, and very loose-jointed about the knees’, who is ‘lounging on the corner of a divan’ – as a version of Oscar Wilde,¹⁷ that character’s dialogue is unmistakably (and rather ridiculously) Wildean: “‘Yes, but they are blind to the exquisite snake-like charm, to the subtle glamour of sin, which is the perfect flower of a well-spent life,” the man peevishly complained’.¹⁸ In an essay on *Nobody’s Fault* and its relationship to ‘Female Decadence’, Crescent Rainwater points to this as a moment when Syrett ‘skewers’ a particular ‘style of decadence that has become lazy and impotent’.¹⁹ The effect is certainly meant to be amusing.

Greatly taken with the novel's comic effects, the critic for the *Whitehall Review* of 7 March 1896 concluded with a recommendation: 'our readers must peruse the book on their own account; and then they will, most likely, be delighted to detect and relish, in all this studiously fantastic social picture and character-picture, a delicate vein of magnetographed satire'. The adjective 'magnetographed' is an interesting one, suggesting that Syrett's comic pen had been drawn to powerful currents that dominated the contemporary cultural sphere. Although, of course, in 1896 Wilde was no longer part of that world, as he had been imprisoned and was suffering in isolation, Leonard Smithers's newly established periodical, the *Savoy*, was indeed evidence that aesthetes and, especially, decadents remained on the cultural scene in Britain as an artistic force, particularly in the sphere of print.

What the unanimous praise for the relatively few satirical passages in her first novel signalled was the reviewers' desire – indeed their demand – for a novelistic spirit that would accord, in some fashion, with more culturally conservative values, however 'new' the material her fiction otherwise addressed. Satire is, after all, a form of humour often friendly to conservative perspectives, for it tends to punish the unfamiliar and to correct what it designates as extreme – or, as Matthew Bevis puts the matter, it uses 'jokes to police communities and to create scapegoats'.²⁰ Syrett heard this call from her critics, and she answered it. She would have learned from her press cuttings that a 'New Woman' writer could go a long way toward espousing feminist positions in favour of women's higher education, women's employment, and even in support of women's right to dissolve unhappy marriages unilaterally, so long as she made fun of something else and, in effect, threw another group, whether would-be Fabians, social parvenus, or Wildean decadents under the bus. While it may be impossible now to prove definitively that the reviewers whose opinions she preserved had such influence on her authorial choices, careful reading of periodical reviews certainly could have shown her the way toward the creation of feminist fiction that also served the purposes of popular entertainment – toward the writing of, in the words of the reviewer for the *New Age* of 27 February 1896, 'a "problem novel" which is something more

and something better than undigested Ibsen'. And as public taste veered ever further away from the Ibsenite 'problem novel' after the turn of the twentieth century, Syrett would have been well positioned to move in new directions by such advice.

Syrett was able to put this lesson to use at once. The rapid appearance of book reviews, the rapid access to them afforded by the press cutting service, and the equally rapid production methods of John Lane's publishing firm meant that, by Spring 1896, she already had a guide to help in the composition and revision of her next novel, *The Tree of Life*, which the Bodley Head then issued in late 1897. In *The Tree of Life*, she turned her satirical pen against both socialism and organised women's rights movements that worked collectively and aggressively through protest rallies and public lectures. By doing so, she managed once again to earn favourable reviews, even as she offered readers a truly radical ending, in which the heroine leaves her husband and rushes ardently into the embrace of another man. Even the otherwise disapproving critic in charge of the 'Novel Notes' column for the *Bookman*, who complained that the protagonist was 'so hysterical that we do not find it easy to sympathise with her undeniably hard lot', felt compelled to admit that the novel was 'cleverly written'.²¹

Proclaiming that "most women see things so ridiculously out of proportion, when they see them at all", and agreeing with a female friend who finds "exasperating" women's organised expressions of "enthusiasm for humanity and temperance and the suffrage, and all the rest of it", Syrett's protagonist nonetheless proves herself to be, throughout *The Tree of Life*, a free thinker in pursuit of both higher education and love, while being heedless of social convention.²² Syrett's narrative snickers at the politics of the platform; yet, through plot and characterization, Syrett makes the personal do the work of the political to advance one of the important goals of late-Victorian feminist activists: women's sexual self-determination. By dissociating both herself and her female protagonist from the methods taken up by political groups or movements, she persuades even less progressive-minded readers to accept otherwise seemingly unacceptable social advances on the part of the individual woman, especially in the realm of sexuality.

Several works for the theatre and for children intervened between *The Tree of Life* and her next novel, *Rosanne*, in 1902 (this time for the firm of Hurst and Blackett). With each of these novels, however, she demonstrated that she had absorbed another lesson from her early critics' published pronouncements. As the *Pall Mall Gazette* of 16 March 1896 had said approvingly of *Nobody's Fault*, the “modern” ideas of all the characters are the ideas which reasonable people are beginning to hold, and they are propounded not in a scheme, but in the level conversational tones in which reasonable people would speak them'. In other words, so long as Syrett's fictional middle-class 'New Women' did not *seem* to preach or to use what the *Sun* of 12 March 1896 called 'strident homily', they could be highly unorthodox in their conduct, yet also be embraced by mainstream critics and audiences.

Netta Murray Goldsmith has claimed that the impetus behind Syrett's carefully conservative literary practices was a combination of personality and practicality:

Syrett was as discreet as her heroines. This was partly a matter of temperament but also because she wanted to ensure her books sold. Having decided to become a full-time writer, she had to make enough money to live on because after her father died, at the beginning of the twentieth century, she had no other source of income [...]. In giving the majority of her readers what they wanted and by working day in, day out, Syrett succeeded in making enough money to live on.²³

Such an assessment, however, overlooks the unexpected vein of radicalism that often ran through Syrett's narratives. She was committed to challenging (albeit on an individual, rather than a communal, basis) the patriarchal edicts that narrowed middle-class women's choices and made their lives a misery – although, as Goldsmith rightly asserts, she was equally determined to ensure her own livelihood while doing so.

Syrett's early reviewers had in fact presented her with lessons that stood her in good stead immediately and that made possible her later career, allowing it to span most of the first half of the twentieth century and enabling her to outlast many of her 'New Woman' contemporaries. After the mid-1890s – but especially after the 1895 Wilde trials, which produced so strong a backlash among publishers, critics, and readers alike – a 'New Woman' fiction-writer could no longer

espouse radical causes such as recognition of a woman's equal right to sexual pleasure, regardless of marital status, openly and certainly not through anything resembling diatribes or polemical speeches by their protagonists, as authors such as George Egerton once had done. Egerton herself acknowledged as much, bitterly and angrily, when complaining in a letter to John Lane on 10 November 1896 about the Bodley Head's attempts to 'bowdlerise my poor *Symphonies*', a volume of short stories, and to gut the manuscript of its overt sexual politics in the interests of producing 'a "milk and water" book on entirely different lines to that which made the success of *Keynotes*' three years earlier.²⁴ Once Wilde had been forced to exchange his velvet suit for prison garb, the 'New Woman' could not, so to speak, present socially revolutionary views nakedly. She would instead have to drape across her shoulders a cloak, one that had woven into it at least a few major strands of safely conservative sentiments and middle-class social snobberies. But if she agreed to such measures, she could ultimately tie that cloak in feminist knots and go on producing novels that remained both popular and at least in some measure subversive, long after the stereotypical 'New Woman' volume associated with the Bodley Head in the early-to-mid 1890s had fallen into disrepute. Labelling her a 'middlebrow' novelist, Ann L. Ardis focuses on the limited number of overt political challenges on view throughout Syrett's Edwardian-era works: 'In Syrett's novels, in other words, scandal is avoided by her heroines – not because her female aesthetes do not behave scandalously but because they do so without flaunting their defiance of bourgeois social and sexual norms.'²⁵ I would go further, however, and connect this stance to Syrett's shrewdness in taking tuition from her turn-of-the-century reviewers, whose warnings and directives were always before her in those carefully preserved envelopes filled with clippings, which she kept her whole life long.

This is not to undervalue other sources of guidance to which Syrett also had access at the beginning of her career. As she recounts in her autobiography, *The Sheltering Tree* (1939), she was uniquely fortunate in being related by marriage to the novelist Grant Allen (1848-1899), who offered her material assistance by passing along an early short story of hers to the editor of *Longman's Magazine*. Syrett says nothing, however, about Allen having accompanied this service to

her with any literary advice. Indeed, as Allen was, in the mid-1890s, engaged in writing explosively controversial and divisive fiction such as *The British Barbarians* and *The Woman Who Did* (both published by the Bodley Head in 1895) – which he, as an established male author felt emboldened to do – it is unlikely that he would have been a trustworthy source of guidance for an unmarried young woman, dependent on writing for a living, who had both her social and her literary reputations to secure and ensure. Syrett needed to be more careful in walking the line between political protest and propriety than did many of the men such as Aubrey Beardsley, Henry Harland, and Max Beerbohm with whom she socialized in *Yellow Book* circles of the 1890s. Lessons in just how to maintain that balance were more likely to come from reviewers for popular periodicals, and they proved durable ones not only in the short term, but in the coming decades, long after novels such as *The Woman Who Did* had come to be regarded as mere curiosities of the ‘Yellow’ past.

Incorporating conservative elements and a ‘light touch’ into her protests against women’s lot within the existing social order would go on proving to be a highly workable strategy for Syrett in her 1929 example of historical fiction, *Portrait of a Rebel*, which presented the reader with a double-faced narrative, at once socially reactionary and politically radical. In it, the female protagonist, Pamela Thistlewaite, is both outrageous – an upper-middle-class woman who secretly bears a child out of wedlock, who supports herself by breaking Victorian class taboos against trade and against salaried work for ‘ladies’ by becoming a shopkeeper, and who later achieves renown as a feminist activist – and comfortingly conventional, especially on the subject of feminine self-presentation. As the narrator makes explicit in describing one of the protagonist’s social gatherings,

[Despite] her wholehearted enthusiasm for improvement in the position of her own sex, Pamela was almost as impatient of the cranks and extremists in the movement, as she was of the type of woman described by her as the ‘simpering slave.’ As guests of such a hostess, it was not surprising that though nearly all the girls in the room were workers either for improvement in education, for the right of entrance to the medical profession, or for the grant of the suffrage, none of them should consider eccentricity in dress or behaviour as part of their programme.²⁶

In *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism*, Ann Heilmann reminds us that in the 1890s many New Women writers had ‘used the debate on dress reform to make far-reaching statements about women’s external and internal oppression’.²⁷ Indeed, devotion to the dress reform is one of the reasons why, in *Constance: The Tragic and Scandalous Life of Mrs. Oscar Wilde*, Franny Moyle grants ‘New Woman’ status to Constance Lloyd Wilde, who lectured and wrote on the subject, and who also sported such sensational garments as a divided skirt.²⁸ Wilde himself, in his role as editor of the magazine *Woman’s World* in the late-1880s, had championed the Rational Dress Movement, linking conventionally restrictive feminine clothing ‘to the control and constraint of women’.²⁹

But honouring the nineteenth-century dress reform movement as a contribution to feminist advances was no part of Syrett’s project in her retrospective *Portrait of a Rebel*. Syrett’s 1920s version of late-Victorian ‘New Woman’ fiction offered readers instead the pleasure of following the travails of a protagonist who remained, throughout her sufferings at the hands of patriarchal injustice, almost preternaturally beautiful and always beautifully (and fashionably) dressed. In every mode of every era, including that of the ‘aesthetic craze originated by the much-discussed young man Oscar Wilde’, who was ‘in the realm of dress [. . .] responsible for many ludicrous garments’, Syrett’s heroine – at this point in the narrative approaching middle age – manages to remain *comme il faut*:

A suggestion of medievalism in the hanging sleeves, and the low clasped girdle of her velvet robe suited her slim figure as perfectly as its colour, like that of a dusky rose, enhanced the brilliance of her hair and the delicacy of her still lovely complexion.³⁰

Such material (so to speak) concessions proved sufficient to appease both the British and the American mainstream ‘middlebrow’ public. Their presence freed Syrett to make *Portrait of a Rebel* an unforgiving indictment of men – as abusive fathers, as sexual predators, and as hypocrites imposing a double standard of purity on women alone. It was, moreover, an indictment that transcended the boundaries of time, eliminating the seemingly safe distance for the reader of

historical fiction between the period setting of the novel and the present-day era of the late 1920s. (Indeed, it still resonates uncomfortably today in the era of #MeToo.)

But for the Hollywood film industry, this critique of men either as individuals or as a political class would not do. Thus, the 1936 RKO film, *A Woman Rebels*, turned the cold-hearted rapist of Syrett's narrative into a loving but misguided figure, while omitting entirely the figure of the male hypocrite, and while also giving the tyrannical patriarch who rejects his erring daughter a change of heart. The screenplay absolved, moreover, present-day masculine audiences from charges of sexism by historicising oppression and relegating it to a matter of past error – one of the many errors of the Victorians that the early twentieth century had supposedly corrected. As Katharine Hepburn, playing Syrett's Pamela, told her father in Veiller and Vajda's script (in a scene set in the 1890s), but speaking words that Syrett herself had never written, 'Perhaps it was your generation to blame, not yourself.'³¹ When it came to issues of gender and 'blame', an entire 'generation' of earlier Victorians, of course, was a safe and undifferentiated target, as it could just as easily refer to women, too, not men alone or the institutions of patriarchy.

Eager to repeat Katharine Hepburn's cinematic triumph as Jo March in its 1933 adaptation of *Little Women*, RKO Studios evidently went looking for another costume drama that could showcase its star as both feisty and feminine – as a woman who 'rebels' – while softening her innate angularity and androgyny by swathing her in Victorian velvet and lace. Syrett became, therefore, the only late-Victorian New Woman and female *Yellow Book* contributor to find her work represented in Hollywood's early sound era. What remained of the political content of her original narrative was a tribute to groundbreaking nineteenth-century feminists. As the aged protagonist of Syrett's novel says, near the end of her life, to a young flapper,

'But how do you suppose your present freedom has come about? [...] That you can [...] travel alone? choose your work in life? go to College if you please [...]? How is it that next year you will go to a polling station, record your vote [...]? Because of a long and brave fight of pioneers now for the most part dead and practically forgotten.'³²

In the process of adaptation, Anthony Veiller and Ernest Vajda preserved at least this spirit of paying homage to past battles, relatively uncontroversial as it was. But there was no place in 1930s cinema for a script that declared, as Syrett's original narrative did quite unambiguously, that all the struggles had not yet been won, or that feminism was still much needed in activist, rather than archival, form.

Through her deft handling of her own literary career, which included exploiting the new technologies of print culture represented by the press cutting industry, Netta Syrett survived and flourished as an author, doing so nearly to the end of her life in 1943. As Melissa Purdue sums up the situation, 'Syrett should be remembered today as a successful and prolific *fin-de-siècle* author who challenged conventional gender roles and contributed to new artistic movements' while remaining 'a respected and popular author'.³³ She proved that the Revolting Daughter of the 1890s could turn into an older, yet commercially viable, woman writer of the modernist period who, for all the right reasons, was still *revolting*. The fate of her fictional 'New Woman' as a character in the popular cinematic imagination, however, was a slightly less cheering one. On her voyage from London to Hollywood, Syrett's 'New Woman' protagonist got to keep her natty shirtwaists and picture hats, but had to strip off the battle dress of the true rebel.

¹ Anthony Veiller and Ernest Vajda, screenwriters, *A Woman Rebels*, dir. Mark Sandrich (RKO Radio Pictures, 1936).

² Virginia Woolf, 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future', in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV, 1925-1928*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie (Hogarth Press, 1986), pp. 428-41 (p. 434).

³ Jad Adams, *Decadent Women: Yellow Book Lives* (Reaktion Books, 2023), p. 201.

⁴ Jill Tedford Jones, 'Netta Syrett', in *Late-Victorian and Edwardian British Novelists, Second Series*, ed. by George M. Johnson, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 197 (Gale Research, 1999), pp. 275-84 (p. 284).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

⁶ Netta Syrett, *The Sheltering Tree* (Geoffrey Bles, 1939), p. 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 256. Emphasis in original.

⁸ Richard K. Popp, 'Information, Industrialization, and the Business of Press Clippings, 1880-1925', *Journal of American History*, 101.2 (September 2014), pp. 427-53 (p. 431).

⁹ [Anon.], 'Death of Henry Romeike', *New York Times*, 4 June 1903, p. 9.

¹⁰ J. O. Baylen, 'Romeike, Henry', *American National Biography* (2000), <https://www.anb.org/display/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-1601406?print=pdf> [accessed 1 December 2024].

¹¹ For more about this strategic use of negative reviews in the publisher John Lane's advertisements, see Margaret Diane Stetz, 'Sex, Lies, and Printed Cloth: Bookselling at the Bodley Head in the 1890s', *Victorian Studies*, 35.1 (Autumn 1991), pp. 71-86.

¹² Herbert Morrah, ed., *The Literary Year-Book and Bookman's Directory, 1901* (Francis P. Harper, 1901), p. viii.

- ¹³ Ibid., p. 119.
- ¹⁴ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (Viking, 1990), p. 11.
- ¹⁵ This and the subsequent quotations from reviews are taken from the press clippings compiled and preserved in the Syrett family papers, Osborne Collection of Early Children's Books, Toronto Public Library, Ontario, Canada. These clippings include the dates of publication of the newspapers from which they were extracted, but are usually without page numbers, titles of the articles, or authors of the reviews (most of which were anonymous in any case).
- ¹⁶ Netta Syrett, *Nobody's Fault* (John Lane, and Roberts Bros., 1896), p. 45.
- ¹⁷ See Angela Kingston, *Oscar Wilde as a Character in Victorian Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 157-224, where the section covering works from 1896 through 1900 makes no mention of Syrett's novel.
- ¹⁸ Syrett, *Nobody's Fault*, p. 147.
- ¹⁹ Crescent Rainwater, 'Netta Syrett, *Nobody's Fault*, and Female Decadence: The Story of a Wagnerite', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 25.2 (2020), pp. 185-99 (p. 196).
- ²⁰ Matthew Bevis, *Comedy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 92.
- ²¹ [Anon.], 'The Tree of Life', 'Novel Notes', *Bookman* (UK), January 1898, p. 132.
- ²² Netta Syrett, *The Tree of Life* (John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1898), p. 95.
- ²³ Netta Murray Goldsmith, 'Netta Syrett's Lesbian Heroine', *Women's History Review*, 13.4 (2004), pp. 541-57 (p. 547).
- ²⁴ Qtd in *A Leaf from the Yellow Book: The Correspondence of George Egerton*, ed. by Terence de Vere White (Richards Press, 1958), pp. 41-42.
- ²⁵ Ann L. Ardis, *Modernism and Cultural Conflict, 1880-1922* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 137.
- ²⁶ Netta Syrett, *Portrait of a Rebel* (Geoffrey Bles, 1929), p. 171.
- ²⁷ Ann Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism* (Macmillan, 2000), p. 124.
- ²⁸ Franny Moyle, *Constance: The Tragic and Scandalous Life of Mrs. Oscar Wilde* (John Murray, 2011), p. 142.
- ²⁹ Eleanor Fitzsimons, 'Wilde Words and "Monstrous Fashion"', in *Fashion and Material Culture in Victorian Fiction and Periodicals*, ed. by Janine Hatter and Nickianne Moody (Edward Everett Root, 2019), pp. 135-51 (p. 141).
- ³⁰ Syrett, *Portrait of a Rebel*, p. 236.
- ³¹ Veiller and Vajda, *A Woman Rebels*.
- ³² Syrett, *Portrait of a Rebel*, p. 307.
- ³³ Melissa Purdue, 'Netta Syrett (1865-1943)', *Latchkey: Journal of New Woman Studies*, 11 (Summer 2022) <http://www.thelatchkey.org/Latchkey11/essay/Purdue.html> [accessed 1 December 2024].

‘Golden threads in the sober city woof’:
London and the First Women Writers of *The Yellow Book*

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Of the eighteen writers whose work appeared in the inaugural volume of *The Yellow Book*, only three were women: Ella D’Arcy (1857-1937), ‘George Egerton’ (Mary Chavelita Dunne, 1859-1945), and ‘John Oliver Hobbes’ (Pearl Richards Craigie, 1867-1906). This article considers the London publishing context within which D’Arcy, Egerton, and Hobbes wrote their pieces that were included in that first issue of the new magazine in April 1894. The women’s representations of London in each of their works are discussed in relation to their common portrayal of artistic characters who must make and potentially mistake their way in its contemporary metropolis.

The London Publishing Context

It was to the literati of London that the creators of *The Yellow Book* hoped to appeal most immediately. Early in 1894, literary editor Henry Harland had enthused that the forthcoming new magazine was ‘the talk of the town already’ and that it would ‘make our fortunes’.¹ When the prospectus for the first issue of *The Yellow Book* subsequently appeared, Beardsley’s trademark yellow and black design for the cover depicted an unaccompanied woman browsing by lamplight at a pavement bookstore on a city street. The centrality of her independent silhouetted persona, while still under the supervisory gaze of the background Pierrot-like male bookseller, suggested the irrefutable value of women both as potential readers and contributors to the magazine. This was compounded by the inside text’s personification of the forthcoming publication as a woman of a certain class and culture, able to ‘preserve a delicate, decorous, and reticent mien and conduct’ while at the same time having ‘the courage of its modernness’ not to ‘tremble at the frown of Mrs. Grundy’.² Such a combination suggested that *The Yellow Book* intended to reflect contemporary

cultural trends without alienating its audience. Women, as much as men, would be able to identify with the magazine's claim to be 'charming [...], daring [...], distinguished'.³

The prospectus also listed nine women amongst the forty-four writers that were expected to contribute to *The Yellow Book*, amongst whom were D'Arcy, Egerton, and Hobbes.⁴ The publicising of their names signalled John Lane's intention that the new magazine he was about to publish would provide a wide range of avant-garde as well as proven contributors, attracting as wide an audience as possible. The potential economy of paying aspiring women writers for their pieces may have been another significant factor in the acceptance of their work for publication and *The Yellow Book* would quickly gain a reputation for its extensive inclusion of work by women writers and artists.⁵

The inclusion of texts by D'Arcy, Egerton, and Hobbes in the inaugural issue also reflected the heightened profile of women writers and the influx of them into London during the 1890s, attracted by the possibility of work in the burgeoning world of magazine publishing.⁶ The launch of *The Yellow Book* provided Lane with an additional means to promote his existing list of women writers and recruit others to it. *The Yellow Book* also offered its women contributors opportunities to meet with fellow writers, for example at Lane's Bodley Head premises, or at the home of the Harlands where the process of producing the magazine took place.⁷ These work and social spaces were valued as being both affordable and available for aspiring women writers who could not rely on the pre-existing university connections or club memberships afforded to their male counterparts.⁸ Accessed readily by public transport, such opportunities led to the growth of 'a community of London-based women writers'.⁹ This community in turn could be seen to extend women's networks previously constituted around the arts and crafts and aesthetic circles of the 1870s and 1880s. The traces of this earlier literary and artistic community were still discernible in Lane's *Keynotes* series which took its title from Egerton's short story collection of the same name published in 1893.¹⁰ Like the early issues of *The Yellow Book*, its 'literary modishness would be emphasised by Beardsley-designed covers'.¹¹ Following the success of this volume, Australian-born

Egerton returned from Ireland to live in London as a welcome contributor to *The Yellow Book*. Her second book of short stories, *Discords*, was published by Lane in December 1894. Suffrage composer Ethel Smyth (1858-1944) later recalled the formation of a ‘charmed circle of authors and poets and artists’¹² revolving around Harland and ‘Petticoat Lane’, as he was dubbed by some.¹³ The overlapping of *Keynotes* and *Yellow Book* authors extended the currency of both. The appearance of Egerton’s ‘A Lost Masterpiece’ in the inaugural issue of *The Yellow Book* therefore underlined the avant-garde credentials of the new magazine and allowed for the reciprocal promotion of both sets of publications as well as additional opportunities for *Yellow Book* contributors.¹⁴ As Talia Schaffer has pointed out, for women writers to have a whole volume published by John Lane ‘was to achieve full aesthetic recognition’ – Lane’s ‘well-crafted books ensured that the text looked artistic, valuable, and antique’ and afforded their work the same status as that of their male counterparts who also ‘prized these aesthetic associations’.¹⁵

D’Arcy likewise benefitted from the crossover of authors between the proposed *Yellow Book* and *Keynotes* series. D’Arcy had studied art at the Slade School in London in the 1870s, but had been unable to pursue a career as an artist due to poor eyesight, turning to literary work instead and contributing to various London magazines of the day.¹⁶ In later life, she recalled to Katherine Mix how she had submitted the manuscript of ‘Irremediable’ to Harland which was ‘dog-eared’ from the rejections of other publishers who regarded its theme of the suffering occasioned by a wrong marriage as too controversial.¹⁷ Harland accepted the story immediately and paid D’Arcy out of his own pocket to act as his sub-editor, translator, secretary, editor and reviewer of women’s stories until late in 1895. He also helped D’Arcy to find a suitable flat close to his own London house to enable her to work on *The Yellow Book*.¹⁸ The publication of ‘Irremediable’ in the first *Yellow Book* was followed by D’Arcy’s own volume in the *Keynotes* series entitled *Monochromes* in 1895.

Like Egerton and D’Arcy, Evelyn Sharp (1869-1955), Victoria Crosse (Annie Sophie Cory, 1868-1952), Netta Syrett (1865-1943), Edith Nesbit (1858-1924), and Marie Clothilde Balfour

(1862-1931) were all published in both *Keynotes* and *The Yellow Book*. These and other connections of friendship and collegiality continued across the wider London network of women writers. In her memoirs Katherine Tynan wrote about attending the first ‘Women Writers’ dinner in London in 1889.¹⁹ *Yellow Book* contributor Rosamund Marriott Watson had been present on that occasion and was elected president of the ‘Literary Ladies’ in 1892. Hobbes was to become president of the Society of Women Journalists in 1895-96.²⁰

Although she was the youngest of the first three women writers published in *The Yellow Book*, Hobbes was already well known in literary circles by 1894. Brought up in London, Hobbes had combined her father’s first name with the names of Oliver Cromwell and the philosopher Hobbes to form the male *nom de plume* she adopted when her first novel, *Some Emotions and a Novel*, was accepted for the T. F. Unwin Pseudonym Library Series and published in 1891, with a cover design by Aubrey Beardsley. Given George Moore’s 1893 *succès de scandale* with *Esther Waters*, his shared authorship with Hobbes of ‘The Fool’s Hour: The First Act of a Comedy’ made it an even more appealing item to be placed at the end of *The Yellow Book*’s first volume.²¹ Neither author was to contribute to *The Yellow Book* again. Hobbes wrote to Moore that, despite Harland’s pleading with her, she could not ‘oblige him’ by writing anything for future issues.²² This was because she concurred with press criticism of the whole project: ‘*The Speaker* on *The Yellow Book* is only too just. I have never seen such a vulgar production.’²³ As Margaret D. Stetz and Mark Samuels Lasner have commented, it seems that ‘if Lane hoped to land either her or Moore [...] by publishing their slight little effort in *The Yellow Book*, he was disappointed.’²⁴

Representations of London by D’Arcy, Egerton, and Hobbes: Artists in the Metropolis

For all their different responses to the magazine and its publishers, the pieces D’Arcy, Egerton, and Hobbes contributed to the magazine’s first issue reveal a common preoccupation with the contemporary London they lived in and the cultural concerns of what Egerton later called the ‘London so-called literary set’.²⁵ The discussion of their works that follows suggests the ways in

which they expressed their interest in the dissociative qualities and potentially shocking corruption of modern city life and in the artistic individual's often thwarted need to express their creative impulse. In doing so they rehearsed contemporary fascinations with 'new' women, aesthetes, and decadents, while experimenting with *à la mode* forms such as psychological realism in fiction and subversive Wildean wit in drama.

D'Arcy's 'Irremediable' was the second short story to appear in *The Yellow Book's* first issue in which Henry James' 'The Death of the Lion' was the opening item.²⁶ Both stories feature male writers whose manuscripts turn out to be either missing, presumed stolen, or absent, presumed unwritten. In James' satirical story, famous writer Paraday flees the country house to which he has been tracked by journalists who are intent on finding him to uncover the manuscript of his new work as the possibly ironically termed 'keynote' for their next scoops.²⁷ When Paraday seeks sanctuary in the city he is lionised by a literary London characterised by the cross-gender identities of its authors Dora Forbes and Guy Walsingham and also by its obsession with external image and momentary fame, epitomised in the studio of Mr Rumbles in which the man or woman of the hour 'leaped through the hoops of his showy frames almost as electrically as they burst into telegrams and "specials"'.²⁸ Manipulated by his female fans as much as by the press, Paraday collapses and leaves the city to die whilst his missing manuscript is deemed to be lost.

D'Arcy's 'Irremediable' tells the story of Willoughby, a London bank clerk who is enjoying his country holiday. Amidst the bucolic landscape he becomes fixated with Esther Stables who, it turns out, is a tailoress from the East End of London staying with her country aunt. After kissing Esther repeatedly, he offers her marriage and in the second part of the story, back in London, realises that his now-unhappy marriage has made it impossible for him to pursue his literary ambitions.

Despite the contrasting depictions of London as a place of wealth or poverty by James and D'Arcy, their stories may both be read as epitomising the strains placed on the male artistic temperament by demanding women. James, however, appears to offer a male perspective on the

stresses of London literary life as a site of fame, whilst D'Arcy represents her writer's London as a place of unfulfilled obscurity. As in the Egerton story discussed later in this article, D'Arcy acknowledges the creative struggles of its would-be writer protagonist. Like Egerton, D'Arcy also exposes the self-absorption and vanity that accompanies a preoccupation with notions of genius. In the works of other contemporary women writers, such a depiction had often been a comic one, making the fictional male writer into a subject of ridicule by exposing his affectations. Ella Hepworth Dixon (M. Wynman, 1857-1932), whose 1896 short story, 'The Sweet o' the Year' about the 'unjust gender politics of [her] male counterparts' was to appear in volume IX of *The Yellow Book*,²⁹ and whose novel *Story of a Modern Woman*, featuring London, appeared in 1894, had already created the figure of Claud Carson in her earlier comic novel, *My Flirtations* (1892): 'some cad with long hair, who rolls his eyes about and recites erotic poems'.³⁰ Carson eventually dedicates his book *Roses of Passion* to the female narrator, but is then socially unmasked as being already married to his landlady's daughter and living in a small stucco house in Hammersmith.

While Carson's absurdity is portrayed as ultimately harmless, men's misuse of their socially endorsed celebrity and charisma might also be shown to have tragic consequences for the women around them. In her 1890 story 'Girl's Hero', for example, the later *Keynotes* author Mabel Wotton (1863-1927) employed the satiric mode to access the male 'interiority [...] to criticize rather than arouse sympathy for him'.³¹ The narrator details the older poet's exploitation of his young admirer Laure who he meets on a trip to the country and who follows him back to London. He continues to use her as a source of artistic inspiration and apparently feels no remorse for his part in her early death.³² In 'The Fifth Edition' from her 1896 *Keynotes* collection of short stories, *Day-books*, Wotton portrays a young male writer who exploits the good nature of a more talented woman writer to make his way amongst the 'denizens of Bohemia'.³³ He leaves her to die in poverty and goes on to make a socially advantageous marriage.

The issue of the incipient destitution of female artists and writers who depended entirely on their own earnings and were exploited by men was one keenly felt by *Yellow Book* and *Keynotes*

women writers. In *The Sinner's Comedy* from 1892, Hobbes had focussed on the plight of a woman who must work to maintain her estranged husband and so subjugate her talent to hack work. Anna Christian sacrifices herself for the 'Unspeakable man' who she has left 'having endured all things', and whose demands keep her in continuous frugality.³⁴ She supports herself with work as an illustrator and is unable to fulfil the artistic promise she had shown as an art student.³⁵

In 'Irremediable', however, the girl does not show artistic or literary promise, nor does she die a melodramatic death. Instead, the aspiring writer Willoughby can be seen as the victim of the institution of marriage that ties him irrevocably to a woman who may be considered as socially and intellectually his inferior, or as the victim of his own multiple vacillations and self-centredness.

As the story opens, D'Arcy evokes Willoughby's 'exquisite enjoyment' of his holiday freedom to 'roam whither sweet fancy led him'.³⁶ The reader is left in no doubt about the outcome of the story as the narrative voice informs them, just before his first meeting with Esther, that Willoughby has 'little idea he was taking thus the first step towards ruin'.³⁷ While the reader's image of Esther is formed entirely through Willoughby's gaze, the narrator's presentiment of doom makes his judgement questionable to the reader. Willoughby idealises Esther as a 'working class daughter of the people', in keeping with his socialist leanings, and as 'natural, simple-minded', in contrast to the middle-class girl who had previously jilted him.³⁸ He is attracted to her sexually by her 'rough abundant hair', but still notes the picturesque qualities that make her part of 'an agreeable picture' amidst the woodland.³⁹ During their short courtship, Willoughby vacillates between thinking about Esther and enacting the role of a contemplative Romantic who 'traced fantastic pictures and wove romances in the glories of the sunset clouds'.⁴⁰ Willoughby also assumes the role of Esther's heroic rescuer, feeling 'full of wrath with her father, with all the world which makes women suffer', despite the 'interior voice' that urges him 'to break away, to seek safety in flight even at the cost of appearing cruel or ridiculous'.⁴¹

As Heather Marcovitch has commented, D'Arcy's focalising of events through the male narrator throughout does not inhibit the reader's ability to provide their own 'double reading'.⁴² It

is still possible for the reader to sympathise with ‘male protagonists engaging in unsuitable romances and bad marriages’, but the depiction of them as ‘egotistical fools whose efforts to set the terms of their romances backfire’ undermines their assumed masculine authority.⁴³ Willoughby, for example, patronisingly believes that he will change Esther to conform to his ideal of womanhood, improving her beyond her class, but in the second part of the story the reader sees how she refuses to be educated by him.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, while the reader may respond to the narrator’s ridiculing of Willoughby, the story’s ending simultaneously sustains a sympathetic fascination for his plight just as realist narrative is replaced by proto-modernist psychological description.⁴⁵

In the final section of the story, the narrator describes Willoughby’s walk home from the city to his Highbury Park lodgings.⁴⁶ The narrative voice is ambiguous, maintaining suspense despite the earlier prediction of ruin: ‘Esther’s face was always before his eyes, [...] she filled the universe for him’.⁴⁷ D’Arcy then frames the reader’s response to the first floor rooms he now shares with Esther, through Willoughby’s threshold view of it as ‘repulsive in its disorder’.⁴⁸ The final paragraphs move the reader into a focalised interior reverie, in which Willoughby reviews his life and his early success in writing for ‘the magazines’⁴⁹ before reaching a kind of epiphany, knowing that he will no longer be able to write again. Instead of noting the books around him, Willoughby reads only the truth ‘like a written word upon the tablecloth before him’.⁵⁰ His own literary ambitions have been replaced in effect by the ties of domesticity in which the passion of hatred generated by the immovable presence of his wife has replaced any kind of male-contrived idealism or intellectualism. He experiences only ‘agonising, unavailing regret’.⁵¹

An internal drama of regret also characterises Egerton’s contribution to the first issue of *The Yellow Book*. ‘A Lost Masterpiece: A City Mood, Aug. 93’ evokes its London setting through a series of ‘impressions’ garnered by the ambiguously gendered first-person narrator.⁵² Inspired by their journey through the city, the narrator fails to transmute the musings provoked into any

satisfactory final form. For this the narrator lays the ‘blame [...] blame’ on the woman whose sighting in the street has caused them a distraction which they can ‘only regret [...] regret’.⁵³

Like D’Arcy, Egerton focuses on the increasingly heightened sensitivity of the story’s aspiring artist and writer, making use of dreamlike ‘psychological moment[s]’⁵⁴ that give the story its ‘proto-modernist quality’.⁵⁵ This ‘impressionistic, allusive, episodic’ writing, ‘making extensive use of dream, reverie and interior monologue’, made Egerton ‘a controversial new woman writer in the 1890s’ and for more recent critics an ‘exemplar of “feminine modernity”’⁵⁶ whose experimental use of the form promoted its decadent associations.⁵⁷

As in ‘Irremediable’, contact with a woman, however cursory, exposes the vulnerability of the would-be writer who is so easily diverted from their vocation. Also, as in D’Arcy’s story, travelling within London presages the unravelling of creative inspiration. Egerton’s narrator declares that the passing woman is ‘murdering, deliberately murdering’ the ‘delicate creation’ of their ‘brain, begotten by the fusion of country and town’.⁵⁸ Initially forced into the city by business, the narrator takes on the guise of a flâneur, who is making an expedition through London on a kind of parallel grand tour and is ‘simply an interested spectator of its varied panorama’.⁵⁹ The narrator travels by boat into the city from the Chelsea embankment, its environs developed in the 1870s to appeal as an ‘artistic neighbourhood’.⁶⁰ The persona of the first-person narrative voice is further constructed through references to musical, literary, and visual texts that evoke disparate historical and contemporary representations of London familiar to the reader and narrator alike. The grim realism of the grimy barges and their impoverished inhabitants associate themselves in the narrator’s mind with the pleasing seventeenth-century canal pictures of Canaletto and Guadi.⁶¹ The Dickensian depiction of London is revealed in the reference to Miss La Creevy from *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839) and encompasses a zoomorphic vision in the observation that the modern London ‘chimneys ceased to be giraffic throats belching soot and smoke’, morphing instead into ancient obelisks and hieroglyphics.⁶²

Egerton's narrator describes the process of inspiration in which 'delicate inner threads were being spun into a fanciful web'⁶³ in terms redolent of Pater's description of the *Mona Lisa's* 'strange webs',⁶⁴ and, reminiscent of his 'gem-like flame',⁶⁵ identifies the ensuing 'precious little pearl of a thought' that evolves into a 'unique little gem' of composition.⁶⁶ She also anticipates it as a possible 'embryo of genius', 'work of genius', and even a 'solid chunk of genius'.⁶⁷ The equating of Paterian diction with notions of genius re-enforces how far the narrator's aesthetic ambitions are rooted in Pater's idea that 'the small particular moment is deeply significant'.⁶⁸ However, arguably the reader is aware also of the narrator's subversion of such aesthetic discourse to pursue their own ambition for celebrity. The narrator then grandiosely anticipates the gratitude of the London crowd who can benefit from 'no greater miracle than the tale I had to unfold', and likens the story to alchemy, being able to 'reveal to them the golden threads in the sober city woof'.⁶⁹

At this high point of excitement, the narrator becomes fixated by a woman seen from the bus who hurries along the pavement beside it. The narrator associates the woman with 'Pompier' from the lyrics of a popular Brazilian song, but also puts the reader in mind of the narrator's 'pomposity' in blaming her for the disappearance of the 'lovely illusive little being' of the proposed composition.⁷⁰ The narrator's presentiment of her as a 'ghoul-like spirit that haunts the city and murders fancy'⁷¹ only underlines the self-aggrandisement of this self-proclaimed genius. Instead, the focus shifts to the woman who is not constrained by the narrator's attempts to categorise her and who cannot be dismissed like the earlier 'anaemic city girl' with the admonishment to 'get thee to thy typing'.⁷² While the narrator begins and ends the story by expressing regret, the reader does not necessarily share that regret over the pedestrian woman's presence. Her exotic persona can be seen as supplanting the now failed impressionistic perceptions of the narrator with her alternative exuberance of lived experience. The woman does not speak for herself. Instead, the narrative voice is scuppered by her display of energy and sense of purpose in keeping with Egerton's own declared narrative project to cultivate 'one small plot: *the terra incognita* of [woman] herself, as she knew herself to be, not as man liked to imagine her – in a word, to give herself away, as man has given

himself in his writing'.⁷³ Effectively, the unnamed woman becomes the unacknowledged masterpiece of the story's title. Egerton herself finds through her the means to surmount the narrator's creative impasse, which was one that she too had encountered in capturing a moment of inspiration with its '*toys of the brain*' in the short story form, since '*to write them down is to destroy them -as fancies!*'⁷⁴

Nonetheless, despite the eventual disjunction between the narrator and reader, the reader's response to London remains constructed through the sheer range of cultural and class references invoked by Egerton's aspiring writer. For example, the woman on the pavement provokes images of a Brazilian singer on an Eastern steam ship for the narrator.⁷⁵ There are references also to popular street music of the kind that might have aroused moral objections at the time, for instance when the narrator observes a busking violinist and harpist as they play 'some tuneful thing [...] likely a music-hall ditty'.⁷⁶ The resonances of different class cultures colliding in London can also be felt in the final piece of *The Yellow Book's* first volume. Hobbes had begun work on *The Fool's Hour: A Play* with George Moore, who only wrote dramas through a 'quasi-theatrical performance of collaboration',⁷⁷ not long after their first meeting in December 1893.⁷⁸ The appearance of 'The Fool's Hour: The First Act of a Comedy', in the inaugural issue of *The Yellow Book*, introduces a group of upper-class characters attracted to the theatre for different reasons. Its publication would seem to be in keeping with the future *Yellow Book* in which items on all aspects of theatrical culture would appear, acknowledging the lure of musical theatre and its capacity to shock.⁷⁹

'The Fool's Hour' rehearsed many of the themes from Hobbes' novels that were re-published in a single volume as *The Tales of John Oliver Hobbes* also in 1894.⁸⁰ As in the play, the tales reveal the incompatibility of male and female aspirations in an environment that is *à la mode*. Upper-class characters are frequently infused with artistic pretensions and impinged upon at times by parallel bohemian worlds without ultimate detriment to the existing status quo. The published first act of the play maintains both satiric and comedic modes. The drafts of Acts 2 and 3 introduce additional darker elements of blackmail and extortion through a London theatrical setting, but also

show how the foolish young protagonist, Cyril, is rescued from his infatuation with a musical actress by the love of a suitable young woman. The conventional order of Act 1 will thus be restored by the end of the play.

Act 1 is set in a smart townhouse in Brighton, close to London by train as we are reminded, and yet apparently far removed from its questionable mores. By the end of the act, several of the characters have left Brighton to attend the dress rehearsal of a new musical production in London. Lord Doldrummond's friend, Lord Soame, must hurry as he has 'an engagement in town to-night [...]. An amusing one [...]. At the Parnassus'.⁸¹ Soame describes the theatre in an epigrammatic flourish that confirms both its and his own dubious morality: 'A theatre much favoured by young men who wish to be thought wicked, and by young ladies who *are*'.⁸²

Later, the reader learns that Cyril, the young man of the house, is also being taken to the Parnassus by the tenor singer Mandeville who will be singing there at a dress rehearsal of the decadently titled 'Dandy and the Dancer'.⁸³ This show and its famous lead actress, Sarah Sparrow, with whom Cyril is already infatuated, act as a magnet for the wealthy young man who is desperate to escape his mother's control because he 'cannot see much of the world through [his] mother's embroidery'.⁸⁴ Cyril leaves with Mandeville to catch the train to London, having announced that he intends to take chambers of his own in town and live a bachelor life, thus removing himself from the moral influence of his parents. Additionally, the audience are aware that Julia, who his mother has chosen as a good match for Cyril, has mentioned to a flattering Mandeville that she too 'should like to be an actress!'⁸⁵ The world of the theatre then has widespread appeal for characters in a play that, in turn, courts its *Yellow Book* audience through stage witticisms that carry the frisson of deviance. Soame, for example, tells his foil Lord Doldrummond that 'the pleasures we imagine are so much more alluring, so much more dangerous than those we experience', before hurrying away to the Parnassus.⁸⁶ Julia is drawn to Mandeville by his inevitably immoral reputation as a performer, telling him: 'You – you are supposed to be rather dangerous. You sing on the stage and have a tenor voice.'⁸⁷ For Cyril, the Parnassus offers an opportunity to indulge the aesthetic

and potentially decadent aspects of his character as indicated in the stage directions for his entry: 'his features have that delicacy and his expression that pensiveness which promise artistic longings and domestic disappointment'.⁸⁸

In the draft version of Act 2, the audience sees Cyril backstage at the Parnassus and besotted by Sarah.⁸⁹ He is manipulated into borrowing money at an extortionate rate to woo her and to propose marriage to her. When he reneges on their engagement, the astute Sarah and her lover Mandeville pursue Cyril for damages with which to buy their own theatre and set themselves up as impresarios. The business necessities of the theatre become central to the plot of a play which was never to be performed. Ironically it is Julia, who has not yet experienced the Parnassus, who steps in to persuade Sarah to settle out of court. The reader and audience can expect that there will be a happy ending in which Julia and Cyril will marry, reverting to acceptable norms of class and gender.

The representation of theatrical London's intrusion into the more suburban stability of the Brighton house allows the reader of the play to vicariously experience potential threats to the social order, balanced by the reassuring certainty that class and gender order will be restored. As in the texts by D'Arcy and Egerton, the fate of an individual with artistic longings lies at the heart of the piece and the draw of the city as a source of potential inspiration is invoked. As with the stories, the unpublished later Acts of 'The Fool's Hour' also show London as the place where artistic aspirations and pretensions are thwarted. For D'Arcy's aspiring young writer, as for Egerton's thwarted genius and Hobbes and Moore's potential aesthete, London life disappoints. For Willoughby the outcome veers towards drudgery, for Egerton's narrator towards mediocrity, for Cecil towards domesticity. For all three the abnegation of their hopes of fulfilment is realised in the city.

Unsettling spaces: Stories by Mew and Syrett in the *Yellow Book's* Second Volume

The début *Yellow Book* stories by Netta Syrett (1865-1943) and Charlotte Mew (1869-1928) that were to appear in the second volume of *The Yellow Book* also deal with themes of domestic and artistic disappointment. Here, however, the stories focus directly and unquestionably on the failure of their female protagonists to find fulfilment, whether in Mew's London or Syrett's opposed pastoral settings of rural colonial India and an English seaside village. In Mew's 'Passed', for example, the first-person narrator lays to one side her embroidery thread work and leaves her city home. In this 'proto-modernist piece', the narrator finds herself moving into an unsettling phantasmagorical and sensual London, identifying herself with the otherness of the city and forging a narrative 'in which the style is [...] related to the expression [...] of a queer consciousness'.⁹⁰ Taking an unexpected path she finds her way through the city on a mysterious course in which London is transformed into a momentary pastoral idyll when 'the broad roads are but pathways through green meadows, and your footstep keeps the time to a gentle music of pure streams'.⁹¹ Having witnessed the death of a destitute young girl and the despair of the girl's bereaved sister, the narrator returns to her more suburban house, but she no longer feels at home there.

Similarly, Syrett's 'Thy Heart's Desire', expresses the protagonist's experience of 'frustration, especially the frustration of women who, lacking any positive alternatives, make poor choices and wind up entrapping themselves in impossible domestic circumstances'.⁹² The narrator describes Kathleen as she struggles to continue with the familiar task of sewing despite the unsettling domestic setting that causes her eyes to wander 'from the gay silks of the table-cover she was embroidering to the canvas walls' of her Indian tent.⁹³ After her soldier husband's death she returns to England. In a tense final scene set on an English cliff top, overlooking the unexotic 'grey sea',⁹⁴ she tells her late husband's friend, with whom she had fallen passionately in love in India, that she cannot now marry him. There is no comfortable return to an English, pastoral landscape for, as in Mew's story, there is no narrative means by which the woman can comfortably settle back into a homely domestic status quo.

As this article has discussed, poverty and the demands of respectable domesticity were ever-present hindrances for emerging women writers in 1890s London. Their first contributions to *The Yellow Book* revealed the way in which these familiar societal and emotional restrictions could be seen to affect their characters, but also showed how they themselves might succeed in achieving the expression of an unfettered imagination in their writing. Arguably the launch of *The Yellow Book*, with the augmentation of friendships, collegiality, and the publishing opportunities it offered, provided D’Arcy, Egerton, and Hobbes, as well as later *Yellow Book* women writers, a further means by which they might hope to engage with a wider public and ‘reveal to them the golden threads in [their] sober city woof’.⁹⁵

¹ Margaret D. Stetz and Mark Samuels Lasner, *The Yellow Book: A Centenary Exhibition* (Houghton Press, 1994), p. 21.

² Mrs Grundy was an archetypal figure representing respectability. See <https://archive.org/details/TheYellowBookProspectusToVolume1/page/n1/mode/2up>, p. 4 [accessed 19 January 2024].

³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴ Jad Adams, *Decadent Women: Yellow Book Lives* (Reaktion Books, 2023), p. 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 92-96.

⁶ See C. L. Whyte, *Women’s Magazines: 1693-1968* (Michael Joseph, 1970), p. 8. Cited by A. Clayworth, “‘The Woman’s World’: Oscar Wilde as Editor”, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 30:2 (1997), p. 85.

⁷ Adams, pp. 84-108.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁹ Ana Parejo Vadillo, ‘Phenomena in Flux: The Aesthetics and Politics of Traveling in Modernity’, in Ann L. Ardis and Leslie W. Lewis, eds., *Women’s Experience of Modernity 1875-1945* (John Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 211.

¹⁰ The second *Keynotes* volume also appeared in 1894. Florence Farr’s *The Dancing Faun* satirised the theatrical world in which its author had achieved fame as an actress. Farr had also worked as an embroiderer for May Morris during the late 1880s alongside Una Taylor, an expert embroiderer, whose story collection *Nets for the Wind* appeared as a *Keynotes* volume in 1896.

¹¹ W. V. Harris, ‘John Lane’s Keynotes Series and the Fiction of the 1890s’, *PMLA*, 83.5 (October 1968), p. 1407.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 1412.

¹³ Stetz and Lasner, p. 27.

¹⁴ George Egerton, ‘A Lost Masterpiece. A City Mood, Aug. 93’, *The Yellow Book*, 1 (April 1894), pp. 189-98.

¹⁵ Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (University Press of Virginia, 2000), p. 49.

¹⁶ Short stories by Ella D’Arcy appeared in *Temple Bar*, *Argosy*, and *Blackwood’s* between 1890 and 1893 under the name Gilbert H. Page. See Benjamin Franklin Fisher IV, ‘Ella D’Arcy: A Commentary with a Primary and Annotated Secondary Bibliography’, *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920*, 35.2 (1992), pp. 179-211.

¹⁷ K. L. Mix, *A Study in Yellow: The Yellow Book and its contributors* (London: Constable and Company, 1960), p. 77.

¹⁸ Adams, p. 24.

¹⁹ Katherine Tynan, *Twenty-Five Years: Reminiscences* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1913), p. 290.

²⁰ See Linda Hughes, ‘A Club of their own: The “Literary Ladies”, New Women Writers, and *fin-de-siècle* authorship’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 35.1 (2007), pp. 233-60.

²¹ George Moore, *Esther Waters* (London: Walter Scott, 1894); John Oliver Hobbes and George Moore, ‘The Fool’s Hour’, *The Yellow Book*, 1 (April 1894), p. 260.

²² Mix, p. 95.

²³ Ibid., p. 95. Not all women writers wished to be publicly linked to the magazine once its first volume had appeared. Michael Field (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper) had been included in the prospectus' list of contributors, but withdrew the poem they had submitted for the July issue of *The Yellow Book* after being 'almost blinded by the glare of hell' when approaching the window display of the inaugural issue in the Bodley Head's Vigo Street premises. See Marion Thain, *'Michael Field' Poetry, Aestheticism and the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 14-15.

²⁴ Stetz and Lasner, p. 27.

²⁵ Adams, p. 312.

²⁶ Ella D'Arcy, 'Irremediable', *The Yellow Book*, 1 (April 1894), pp. 87-110.

²⁷ Henry James, 'The Death of the Lion', *The Yellow Book*, 1 (April 1894), p. 22.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 37.

²⁹ Margaret D. Stetz, https://1890s.ca/dixonE_bio/ [accessed 6 May 2024].

³⁰ Ella Hepworth Dixon, *Story of a Modern Woman* (William Heinemann, 1894); M. Wynman [Ella Hepworth Dixon], *My Flirtations* (Chatto and Windus, 1892), p. 75. Wynman's poignant story, 'The Sweet of the Year', in which a young Parisian artist discovers that his elderly concierge was once the adored model of a celebrated artist, was to appear in the April 1896 volume of the *Yellow Book* (pp. 158-63).

³¹ B. Randall, "'Everything Depend[s] on the Fashion of Narration': Women Writing Women Writers in Short Stories of the Fin-de-Siècle", in *Cross-Gendered Literary Voices*, ed. by R. Kim and C. Westall (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 41-42.

³² Mabel E. Wotton, *A Pretty Radical and Other Stories* (David Stott, 1890), pp. 226-46.

³³ Mabel E. Wotton, *Day-Books* (John Lane, 1896), p. 164.

³⁴ J. O. Hobbes, *The Sinner's Comedy* (1892), in *The Tales of J. O. Hobbes* (T. Fisher Unwin, 1894), p. 129.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 139-40.

³⁶ D'Arcy, 'Irremediable', p. 87.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 88.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 91.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 90.

For a discussion of D'Arcy's use of this 'recurring trope in writing from this period' in her 1891 story 'The Smile', published under the pseudonym Gilbert H. Page, see Sue Asbee, *The Women Aesthetes: British Writers*, vol. 3 (Pickering and Chatto, 2013), p. 110

⁴⁰ D'Arcy, 'Irremediable', p. 96.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 98.

⁴² Heather Marcovitch, 'White Magic, Black Humour: Ella D'Arcy's Narrative Strategies' in *Cahiers Victoriens & Édouardiens*, 96 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.4000/cve.11663> [accessed 1 December 2024].

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., Section 13.

⁴⁵ See Kate Krueger's segment of the British Association of Decadence Studies Jeudi 'The *Yellow Book* Community: Sisterhood and Collaboration', 7 April 2022. Recording available at <https://bads.gold.ac.uk/2022-spring> [accessed 30 January 2024].

⁴⁶ Highbury Park was a relatively new residential area. The nearby church of St. John whose spire is noted by the narrator had been permanently erected and consecrated in 1881.

⁴⁷ D'Arcy, 'Irremediable', p. 100.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 101.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 106.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 108.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Egerton, 'A Lost Masterpiece', p. 190.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 196.

⁵⁴ Sally Ledger, ed., *Keynotes and Discords by George Egerton* (Continuum, 2006), p. xvii.

⁵⁵ Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the fin de siècle* (Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 188.

⁵⁶ Lyn Pykett, 'Egerton, George', in *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English*, ed. by Lorna Sage (Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 216.

⁵⁷ Kostas Boyiopoulos, Yoonjung Choi, and Matthew Brinton Tildesley, eds., *The Decadent Short Story* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 124.

⁵⁸ Egerton, 'A Lost Masterpiece', p. 195.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 190.

⁶⁰ Mark Girouard, *Sweetness and Light: The 'Queen Anne' Movement 1860-1900* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p.93.

⁶¹ Egerton, 'A Lost Masterpiece', p. 191.

⁶² Ibid.

- ⁶³ Ibid., p. 190.
- ⁶⁴ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1873), p. 118. See also Pater's description of how, for the close observer of the external world, 'Experience' becomes 'reduced to a swarm of impressions', p. 209.
- ⁶⁵ Pater, p. 210.
- ⁶⁶ Egerton, 'A Lost Masterpiece', p. 193.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 193-194.
- ⁶⁸ Schaffer, p. 171.
- ⁶⁹ Egerton, 'A Lost Masterpiece', p. 193.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 195-196.
- ⁷¹ Ibid., p. 196.
- ⁷² Ibid., p. 193.
- ⁷³ George Egerton, 'A Keynote to Keynotes', in John Gawsworth, ed., *Ten Contemporaries* (Ernest Benn, 1922), p. 58. Cited by Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (Bloomsbury, 1991), p. 65. Emphasis in original.
- ⁷⁴ George Egerton, *Keynotes* (Mathews and Lane, 1894), Epigraph. Italics in original.
- ⁷⁵ Egerton, 'A Lost Masterpiece', p. 195.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 192. For a brief discussion of the 'Purity Crusades' of the 1880s, see Boyiopoulos, Choi, and Tildesley, p. 4.
- ⁷⁷ Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *George Moore: Influence and Collaboration* (University of Delaware Press, 2014), p. 6.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 204. The manuscripts and typed versions of the three acts extant suggest that Hobbes wrote the draft version and Moore added his comments from January 1894 onwards.
- ⁷⁹ For more on the *Yellow Book's* inclusion of art and literary works related to all forms of theatre, see Stetz and Lasner, pp. 37-38.
- ⁸⁰ The texts included were: *Some Emotions and a Moral* (1891); *The Sinner's Comedy* (1892); *A Study in Temptations* (1893); *A Bundle of Life* (1893).
- ⁸¹ John Oliver Hobbes and George Moore, 'The Fool's Hour', *The Yellow Book*, 1 (April 1894), p. 260. In the draft Act 2, events behind the scenes at the theatre suggest that it is far from being the abiding place of poetry its name would suggest.
- ⁸² Ibid. Emphasis in original.
- ⁸³ Ibid., p. 271.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 270.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 256.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 267.
- ⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 270.
- ⁸⁹ For Ann Heilmann's edited texts of Acts 2 and 3, see Heilmann and Llewellyn, pp. 219-71.
- ⁹⁰ K. Flint, 'The "Hour of Pink Twilight": Lesbian Poetics and Queer Encounters on the Fin-de-Siècle Street', *Victorian Studies*, 51.4 (2009), p. 705. Cited in Asbee, p. 241.
- ⁹¹ Charlotte Mew, 'Passed', *The Yellow Book*, 2 (July 1894), p. 124.
- ⁹² Margaret D. Stetz https://1890s.ca/syrett_bio/ [accessed 30 January 2024].
- ⁹³ Netta Syrett, 'Thy Heart's Desire', *The Yellow Book*, 2 (July 1894), p. 231.
- ⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 250.
- ⁹⁵ Egerton, 'A Lost Masterpiece', p. 193.

New Woman Poetics and Revisionist Mythmaking in Fin-de-Siècle Periodicals

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Since the publication of Talia Schaffer's *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (2000), much has been done to ensure that late nineteenth-century women writers and poets remain no longer forgotten. Studies such as Ana Parejo Vadillo's *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity* (2005), Marion Thain's *'Michael Field': Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Fin-de-Siècle* (2007), Naomi Hetherington and Nadia Valman's *Amy Levy: Critical Essays* (2010), Emily Harrington's *Second Person Singular: Late Victorian Women Poets and the Bonds of Verse* (2014), Clare Stainthorp's *Constance Naden: Scientist, Philosopher, Poet* (2019), and Jill R. Ehnenn's *Michael Field's Revisionary Poetics* (2023), to name but a few, have drawn attention to a range of formerly marginalised female poets.¹ *Volupté's* own special issue, 'Women Writing Decadence' (Spring 2019), has further widened the range of writers in academic discussions, highlighting the transnational elements of decadent thought and redefining the boundaries of what had long 'seemed to be an all-male club'.² These developments indicate the ongoing need to revise critical accounts of fin-de-siècle literary production at large. In his recent book *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860–1910: Desire, Decay, and the Pagan Revival* (2021), Dennis Denisoff contends that the once typical association of decadence with 'the urban, the cultured, and the artificial', as exemplified in the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, obscures its broader 'interweaving strands of interest', from feminist politics to the resurgence of pagan spiritualities based in reverence for nature.³ His analysis invites further consideration of how aestheticist and decadent poetry engaged dynamic, intersecting discourses of gender, ecology, and religion.

Reassessing the contributions of late Victorian women poets to aestheticism and decadence necessitates that these cultural formations be understood as fluid, rather than fixed. Such an approach embraces some degree of taxonomic instability as a productive alternative to

essentialising terms. Consider, for instance, the descriptor ‘New Woman’ poets, rendered increasingly meaningful thanks to developments from Linda K. Hughes’ *New Woman Poets: An Anthology* (2001) to Patricia Murphy’s *Poetry of the New Woman: Public Concerns, Private Matters* (2023). This category, which adapts the language introduced by Sarah Grand (Frances Elizabeth Bellenden Clarke, 1854-1943) in an 1894 essay for the *North American Review*, generally refers to female-authored poetry of the 1880s and 1890s that challenges conservative gender ideologies. As a cultural phenomenon and literary icon, the New Woman challenged the notion that women find fulfilment solely in marriage and maternity, seeking instead to expand their socio-political roles and reclaim their bodily autonomy. Hughes acknowledges, however, that such a label sits uneasily with several of those featured in her anthology, whose work reflects many different artistic and intellectual aims; likewise, Murphy highlights the ‘multivalent’ qualities of the poetry she examines.⁴ Indeed, turn-of-the-century readers might themselves have used rather different terminology. Oscar Wilde, who featured many such poems in *Woman’s World* (1887-1890) during his editorship (1887-1889), offered brief yet thought-provoking remarks on such writers in an essay entitled ‘English Poetesses’ (1888) – though *poetess* itself remains a contested term, as a recent *Victorian Review* forum has underscored.⁵ My own essay uses the descriptor ‘New Woman poetics’ to highlight tropes that expand, reclaim, and celebrate women’s embodied experiences, both sexual and spiritual. In so doing, I aim not only to shed light on this poetry’s feminist potentials but also to locate these artistic strategies in relation to broader developments in literary and cultural history.

As Schaffer emphasises,

Though today we may see the late-Victorian period as consisting of separate clumps of aesthetes, naturalists, New Women, decadents, canonical authors, popular novelists, and so forth, it is vital to remember that during this period these writers enjoyed multiple, flexible, social, and professional networks.⁶

One way to illuminate these networks is to consider the periodical contexts in which much of this work first appeared.

Among the venues that provide windows into the contested discourses that shaped the 1890s, *The Yellow Book*, identified in its own time as ‘the Oscar Wilde of periodicals’, deserves substantial attention.⁷ Established by publisher John Lane, writer Henry Harland, and artist Aubrey Beardsley, this illustrated quarterly produced a total of thirteen issues between April 1894 and April 1897. Previous scholarship on this magazine has demonstrated both its imbrication in masculinist discourse and its importance as a literary venue for women writers, illustrators, and poets.⁸ In a focused analysis of *The Yellow Book*’s poetry, Hughes has shown that female poets helped sustain this periodical’s decadent agenda in the aftermath of the public scandal surrounding Wilde, given that ‘women, already marginal, could more safely articulate thoughts that had become dangerous for men’.⁹ Although Wilde himself never published in this periodical, scholars have typically divided its run into two distinct phases: before and after the infamous trials during the spring of 1895. Rumours that Wilde had been carrying *The Yellow Book* in his possession at the time of his arrest (though other accounts have indicated that it was rather a yellow-backed novel) led to vandalism of the Bodley Head offices, as well as the dismissal of Beardsley, associated with Wilde because of his illustrations for the English edition of the daringly explicit play *Salomé* (1893) as well as rumours of his own sexual exploits with men.¹⁰ While Hughes upholds this general two-phase discussion of *The Yellow Book*, her attention to women’s poetry results in a four-stage account:

an initial male-dominated phase (volumes 1-3); a second phase instigated by the journal’s entanglement with decadence and the trial (volumes 4-6); an eclectic phase characterized by gender equity (volumes 7-12); and, in the final volume (volume 13), a resumption of male domination in terms of numbers, yet accompanied by an integration of New Woman poetics.¹¹

Building on insights from Hughes, my analysis situates selected poems by Rosamund Marriott Watson (1860-1911), Edith Nesbit (1858-1924), and Nora Hopper (1871-1906) in relation to broader patterns evident throughout fin-de-siècle periodical poetry. Reading their contributions to *The Yellow Book* in conjunction with their publications elsewhere illuminates new constellations of meaning both across contexts and within the lyrical poetry of *The Yellow Book* itself, throughout the four phases described above.

My discussion begins where Hughes concludes, with the last lines in the final poem by a female poet to be featured in *The Yellow Book*: Rosamund Marriott Watson's 'Oasis' (1897), published in volume XIII. This lyrical celebration of a place of solace amid the wilderness ends with the promise offered by 'a blackbird singing – | Singing the Song of Songs by the Gates of Dream'.¹² Hughes proposes that this closing note might be read self-reflexively, observing that 'the blackbird carols a biblical song of desire in a pagan setting of evanescence, at once an exuberant and marginal singer – an apt trope for women poets in *The Yellow Book*'.¹³ While this assessment effectively summarises Hughes' overall analysis, Watson's reference to the Song of Songs resonates beyond the horizon of *The Yellow Book*. The only instance of erotic poetry within the biblical canon, the Song of Songs occupied a significant place in the literary imagination of aestheticist and decadent writers, from Wilde to Michael Field (Katherine Harris Bradley [1846-1914] and Edith Emma Cooper [1862-1913]), as several studies have shown.¹⁴ Like many other poems by Watson and her contemporaries, 'Oasis' establishes a sensual spirituality grounded in material, earthly experiences. This poetry reveals that the refashioning of religious traditions played a crucial role in the New Woman project of articulating more robust expressions of desire – as operative outside a patriarchal economy and as a form of spiritual ecstasy that transgresses established categories of sacred/profane.

This subtle yet extensive work of symbolic transformation invites both close and distant reading. Developments within the field of periodical poetry studies have successfully demonstrated the value of what was once dismissed as mere 'filler' (notoriously, the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* [1824-1900] omitted poetry) and enjoined critics to develop 'new ways of reading and new interpretive skills', as Kathryn Ledbetter urges.¹⁵ The miscellaneous, heterogeneous format of nineteenth-century newspapers and magazines requires that scholars learn to move 'sideways' – a directional metaphor memorably taken up by Hughes to describe interpretive methods that attend to dialogical connections across genres.¹⁶ Additional forms of lateral reading have become possible with the advent of online archives such as the *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, edited and directed by Lorraine

Janzen Kooistra; the *Periodical Poetry Index*, a database of citations to English language poetry published in nineteenth-century periodicals (co-directed by Natalie Houston, Lindsey Lawrence, and April Patrick); and *Digital Victorian Periodical Poetry (DVPP)*. Directed by Alison Chapman, *DVPP* encompasses poems and poetry translations from the full runs of twenty-one periodicals, magazines, and newspapers to date (approximately 15,500 poems). The project recovers many previously unknown poets (*DVPP* includes a substantial personography), and its advanced search features aid in discovering trends in authorship (users can search by identity categories such as nationality or assigned sex) and poetic characteristics, such as patterns in rhyme or stanza formation (this latter search feature is available for a representative sample of transcribed poems from decadal years spanning 1820 to 1900).¹⁷ Chapman has convincingly modelled how this digital archive might facilitate the re-evaluation of cultural trends: it reveals, for instance, that Scottish cosmopolitan poetry was a widespread phenomenon that appeared not only in magazines focused on Celtic revivalism such as *The Pagan Review* (1892) and *The Evergreen* (1895-1897) but also in those less immediately associated with these circles, from *Good Words* (1860-1911) to *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* (1832-1956).¹⁸ Rather like cosmopolitanism, expressions of religion or spirituality emerge in unexpected places throughout Victorian periodicals, as Mark Knight has highlighted.¹⁹ While such diffusive expressions can be challenging to trace, *DVPP* facilitates the tracking of patterns in authorship and/or poetic form across periodical contexts. Reading in this way results in more nuanced understandings of religious transformations within late nineteenth-century women's poetry, even as our critical vocabulary for conceptualising these developments itself continues to grow and evolve.

Re-Imagining Eve's Legacy: Revisionist Mythmaking across Periodical Contexts

While previous studies have recognised subversive or creative engagement with religious inheritances as an element of the New Woman project – Hughes' anthology, for instance, clusters several poems under the header 'Confronting Religious Tradition' – the complex relationship

between organised religion and women's rights movements in the late nineteenth century demands further, nuanced study.²⁰ Despite the patriarchal thrust of organised Christianity, many Victorian women poets found an enriching, even emancipatory, potential in biblical figures and images. Surveying this vast and various body of work, including poems published in periodicals from *The Christian Lady's Magazine* (1834-1848) to the *Women's Penny Paper* (1888-1893), F. Elizabeth Gray's *Christian and Lyric Tradition in Victorian Women's Poetry* (2010) has theorised this creative output in relation to the feminist hermeneutics articulated by poet and theologian Alicia Suskin Ostriker.²¹ Ostriker, whose critical and creative work is informed by her Jewish heritage and knowledge of midrash, calls attention to how women writers from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries have negotiated between a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of desire as they seek both to challenge the misogynistic underpinnings of the traditions they engage and to re-imagine their source texts in ways that are truly life-giving.²² Elsewhere, Ostriker uses the term 'revisionist mythmaking' to express how women poets might advance a powerful 'challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth'.²³ Whereas Gray's work on Victorian women poets focuses primarily on those who wrote from within a devotional perspective, this focus on creative refashioning of Christian traditions might be put into productive dialogue with more radical efforts to rewrite religion. As Margot. K. Louis has shown, the rise of paganism and other alternative spiritualities in late Victorian and early modernist literature, including expressions of Hellenism that highlighted Greek mystery religions, resulted in various poetic appropriations and re-imaginings of the myth of Persephone, which she traces from Algernon Charles Swinburne to Mathilde Blind, and from H. D. to D. H. Lawrence.²⁴ Beginning with the decadent poetry published in *The Yellow Book* and other fin-de-siècle periodicals, I aim to show how New Woman poets engaged in a process of revisionist mythmaking that undercuts misogynistic assumptions.

The opening chapter in Murphy's recent book reflects on how much New Woman poetry unsettles 'Eve's supposed legacy', facing the shadow cast by the patriarchal exegesis that blames the first woman for bringing sin into the world, an interpretation often used to justify restricting

women's social and political roles.²⁵ Within *The Yellow Book*, the poem that most explicitly encapsulates this interpretive habit is 'The Lost Eden' (1897) by William Watson (1858-1935), who led the campaign for Beardsley's dismissal following Wilde's arrest. Mediated through Adam's perspective, this poem presents Eve as the *femme fatale* who cost him paradise, describing her as 'Eve the hot-hearted' and 'Eve the unslaked'.²⁶ This example underscores the weight of the patriarchal tradition that the New Woman sought to overturn. The female-authored poetry that appears in this periodical does not directly rewrite the biblical fall mythology, as do several other New Woman poems such as 'Adam and Eve' by A. Mary F. Robinson (1857-1944) and Hopper's 'Apples' (both of which also invoke Lilith, Adam's insubordinate first wife according to Jewish mythology, initially represented as a seductive and murderous demon but subsequently reclaimed by feminist thinkers as a symbol of sexual liberation); however, the poetry of *The Yellow Book* frequently, if somewhat indirectly, re-imagines Eve's legacy.²⁷ Many of these poems are deeply invested in exploring women's appetites – both carnal passion and thirst for knowledge – and representing these longings as sacred. By portraying the relationships among humankind, divinity, and nature in terms of interconnectivity rather than separation, these texts effectively undo the curse issued on expulsion from Eden in the Genesis account. This revisionary work proceeds according to multiple strategies, from braiding together pagan and Christian mythology to recovering elements derived from biblical traditions that lend themselves to more favourable perspectives on female desire.

While typological readings might most readily pair the Garden of Eden (where yielding temptation results in condemnation) with the Garden of Gethsemane (where resisting temptation brings about salvation), another useful counterpoint emerges in the unnamed *hortus conclusus* (enclosed garden) featured throughout the Song of Songs, a place of sensual pleasure.²⁸ From the early church fathers onward, this text has often been interpreted allegorically, as an expression of divine love for the Church as the Bride of Christ; however, nineteenth-century developments in higher critical scholarship read it in a secular context, as in Ernest Renan's translation *La Cantique*

des Cantiques (1860).²⁹ Subsequent biblical scholars have further highlighted the extent to which the Song of Songs foregrounds the sexual experiences of the unnamed woman (often identified as the Shulamite woman), as well as its rich synaesthetic metaphors.³⁰ These features – delight in carnal satisfaction, attention to female sexuality, and emphasis on the comingling of the senses – align with the hallmarks of aestheticist and decadent poetry. Duc Dau’s recent study *Sex, Celibacy, and Deviance: The Victorians and the Song of Songs* (2024) has highlighted the literary reception of this book in nineteenth-century Britain, with particular focus on feminist and queer interpretations that align with the aims of contemporary queer theology.³¹ Against the backdrop of critical developments that portrayed biblical texts less as unified divine revelation than as imperfect human poetry, subject to its own theological inconsistencies and ideological contradictions, many Victorian writers re-engaged religious traditions from experimental and imaginative perspectives.³²

The same year that Watson published ‘Oasis’ in *The Yellow Book* (1897) she also published a poem entitled ‘The Song of Songs’ in *Pageant* (1896-1897), a decadent gift book edited by J. W. Gleeson White and Charles H. Shannon.³³ There, her work appeared in conjunction with several other poems that engage artistically and expansively with religious traditions. ‘Ancilla Domini’ by Selwyn Image – a poet, artist, illustrator, and former Anglican clergyman associated with the Arts and Crafts movement – features a tender lullaby from the Virgin Mary to the child Jesus that describes the Annunciation in moving, poetic language:

Foretold upon the awful morn,
When Gabriel spake, and on my soul was borne
God’s grace unutterable, o’ershadowing me.³⁴

Elsewhere in the same volume, ‘Twenty-Four Quatrains from Omar’ turns to the mystical Persian poet whose work received renewed attention in Victorian Britain following Edward Fitzgerald’s translation of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (1858) – though in this case, the quatrains in question were translated by Frederick York Powell. Even as these lyrics reflect Victorian Britain’s imperialistic and orientalist fascinations, they also offer a thought-provoking portrayal of divine delight, one with the potential to unsettle dominant discourses of religion and morality: ‘Being, as

Thou art, the Player and the Play, | And playing for Thine own pleasure, carelessly'.³⁵ This crossing of subject and object positions accords with the sensuous mysticism of Watson's poem.

'The Song of Songs' echoes both 'Oasis' and its biblical precedent, opening as 'a blackbird, waking | Sings in a dream'. Watson's jubilant apostrophe to this 'Dear Voice – O fount pellucid and golden' and her poem's emphasis on hidden things ('Better than all things seen, and best of the unbeholden, | Song of the strange things that we shall not know') accord with the words of the Shulamite woman in Song of Songs: 'O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice'.³⁶ Moreover, the emphasis on dreams as a pathway to intimate knowledge accords with the attention to the Shulamite woman's dreams throughout the third and fifth chapters of the Song of Songs.³⁷ This symbolic association arguably extends to the biblical fall narrative as well, at least as refracted throughout British literary tradition: John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* (1674) twice portrays Eve as experiencing revelation through a dream, first as a warning of temptation and finally as a foreshadowing of redemption.³⁸ Fittingly, Watson's poem concludes with the prospect of eternal life, or at least perpetual youth, with its unanswered question to this mysterious voice, 'Who would say, "Youth is past," while you keep faith with the year?'

This poet herself had something akin to multiple incarnations as a literary figure, writing first as 'R. Armytage', then as 'Graham R. Tomson', and finally as 'Rosamund Marriott Watson'. Born Rosamond Ball, she became famous for her poetry and notorious for her personal life, as a woman who twice left her husband for another man: first, Arthur Graham Tomson – she had previously been married to George Francis Armytage – and later H. B. Marriott Watson – with whom she had an affair while still legally married to Tomson – prompting the change in pseudonym.³⁹ Though a self-identified agnostic, she dabbled in spiritualism during her final years, and intimations of her interest in life after death surface in several poems she contributed to *The Yellow Book*, including 'Vespertilia' (1895), 'The House Desolate' (1895), 'D'Outre tombe' (1896), and 'Children of the Mist' (1897).⁴⁰ Like 'Oasis', 'The House Desolate' features a striking biblical

allusion. Here, the imagery of twilight and dreams takes a darker tone. Its quatrain stanzas depict the spectral presences that haunt an old abode, where ‘faint winds about the lintel sigh | “Your house is left to you desolate”’.⁴¹ This line, the last in the poem, quotes the passage in the gospel of Matthew in which Jesus rebukes the scribes and Pharisees, religious leaders of the day, for their hypocrisy: ‘Behold, your house is left unto you desolate’. In this context, the rebuke occurs in conjunction with a thwarted wish to care for the people of Jerusalem: ‘how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings’.⁴² This maternal and avian imagery accords with the moments in Watson’s other poetry discussed previously, wherein she presents divine love or presence in terms of birdsong. By implication, then, the bleak edifice of ‘The House Desolate’ figures forth the emptiness of an institutional religion that has no room in its concept of God for such tender, embodied, and feminine energy.

Another gothic poem from *The Yellow Book* that similarly culminates in a thought-provoking reference to Christian traditions is ‘The Ghost Bereft’ (1897) by Edith Nesbit. Although Nesbit herself was not a supporter of the suffrage cause, her work is often discussed in the context of New Woman poetry, including the studies by Hughes and Murphy cited previously. Nesbit shared with many decadent writers a fascination with Catholicism, and her supernatural fictions reflect her investment in pagan and occult ideas.⁴³ This poem’s couplet rhymes tell the tale of a ghost who returns to earth in hopes of catching sight of his beloved, only to find that she too has died. Since she is in heaven while he is wandering in limbo, this discovery would seem to seal his despair – ‘I have lost her for evermore!’ However, an epilogue destabilises this closure. The scene shifts to heaven, where ‘one pale saint shivered’, discomfited despite her ‘shining raiment’. She seems dimly conscious of her former lover’s anguish, reflecting, ‘The past is hid and I may not know | – but I think there was sorrow long ago’.⁴⁴ This narrative pattern both recalls and departs from Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s ‘The Blessed Damozel’, a poem that was first published in the Pre-Raphaelite periodical *The Germ* in 1855 and was itself inspired by Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Raven’ (1845). Rossetti’s poem ends as the lady weeps and sighs, longing for her lost lover – a subversive

exaltation of physical passion on earth above spiritual communion in heaven.⁴⁵ By contrast, Nesbit's speaker at last implores, 'O Christ, because of thine own sore pain, | Help all poor souls in the wind and rain!'⁴⁶ Her petition appeals to Christ's human nature and embodied suffering as a wellspring for compassion and mercy – both of which are qualities that Victorian culture perceived as conventionally feminine. Rather than merely invert established hierarchies that position heaven above earth, then, Nesbit seeks to bring spiritual and physical love together on the same plane, through the mystery of the incarnation.

Such bridging aligns with several poems that Nesbit had previously contributed to *Atalanta* (1887-1898). Founded by Elizabeth Thomasina Meade Smith (1844-1914), who used the pseudonym 'L. T. Meade', this monthly periodical marketed itself to girls and young women from middle and upper classes, while also adopting elements of the family literary magazine; furthermore, the periodical's name evokes the powerful huntress and follower of the goddess Artemis in Greek mythology.⁴⁷ In Nesbit's 'Medway Song' (1894), the first-person speaker declares that heaven must be very near and very like the places with which she is familiar on earth, revelling in the vivid details of the riverside scene.⁴⁸ Similarly, her subsequent poem 'The Woman's Kingdom' (1895), reclaims humble, earthly experiences: the hearth in place of a throne, and a heart instead of a golden sceptre. While this imagery might seem to uphold a domestic ideology that relegates women to the private sphere, 'The Woman's Kingdom' ultimately suggests that what is at stake is not the simple exchange of sceptre for heart but, rather, a transformation whereby the two become one, especially insofar as this object is described as a 'royal heart' held in the speaker's hand.⁴⁹ These subtle transfigurations effectively complement the more overtly transgressive refiguring in the other poem that Nesbit contributed to *The Yellow Book*: 'Day and Night' (1895), which represents the Earth as an adulterous woman who feigns faithfulness to the Sun while longing for her secret lover, Night.⁵⁰ Taken together, these poems not only demonstrate Nesbit's artistic versatility but also underscore that the New Woman effort to reclaim women's sexuality might be closely coupled with matters of spirituality.

Elsewhere within the poetry of *The Yellow Book*, a similar reverence for divinity on earth finds expression through the collision or intertwining of classical and Christian traditions, as in Nora Hopper's 'Shepherds' Song' (1895). Cast in the form of a lament and published during the Easter season, this song venerates the sensuality of Greek mythology, in contrast to the frigid chastity associated with Christianity. Even as the shepherds acknowledge that the rule of Diana, goddess of the hunt and moon, has passed away with the rise of the Virgin Mary, they declare their preference for the former figure: 'Maiden rule we still obey – | Yet we loved the first maid best'. They further suggest that the advent of 'a maid with softer eyes, | Colder breast' has brought about the diminishing of the entire natural order: 'Earth was green that now is grey'.⁵¹ Such lines recall Swinburne's 'Hymn to Proserpine' (1866), which even more forcefully identifies Christianity as a force that subdues the earth – 'Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown grey from thy breath' – and concludes by defiantly affirming Proserpina, goddess of death, as the strongest of all.⁵² Yet Hopper's poem ends differently, as the final stanza echoes the first in its remembrance of Diana's resting place:

Here Diana dreaming lay
 (Snow in snow!)
Lay a-dreaming on a day
 Long ago.⁵³

This variant refrain bears an uncanny resemblance to the opening of Christina Rossetti's 'A Christmas Carol' (1872):

snow on snow, snow on snow
in the bleak midwinter,
long ago.⁵⁴

Moreover, the repetition of the poem's opening passage and the description of this dreamscape suggest the cyclical pattern of the seasons and effectively disrupt the linear progression of time, resulting in a disorienting blend of past and present, as well as pagan and Christian. After all, as the shepherds themselves acknowledge, they 'still obey' a 'maiden rule', implying similarity as well as difference between Diana and the Virgin Mary.⁵⁵ Read in this light, the poem's interplay of

classical and Christian imagery appears to have less in common with Swinburne's 'Hymn to Proserpine' than with a poem entitled 'In Picardy' (1889) published in the *Woman's World* and signed 'Graham R. Tomson'. This poem's twilight scene employs neutral tones as it combines Christian and pagan deities, simply stating that 'our martyred God hangs high above | The poppies of Persephone' – a much more ambiguous portrayal of divinity, death, love, and resurrection.⁵⁶

Several pastoral poems that Hopper contributed in subsequent years to *Atalanta* further complicate this seeming opposition between classical and Christian traditions. The first of these, similarly entitled 'A Shepherd's Song' (1896), declares allegiance to Pan, in contrast not to the Christian God but to other pagan deities: Hermes and Cytherea, or Aphrodite. As the speaker reveals, his prayers to Pan issue from another aspect of devotion altogether – that is, his romantic love for the woman Thais, whose name recalls the Athenian courtesan and mistress of Alexander the Great. In Hopper's poem, Thais herself is deified as 'a goddess in a russet gown' and described as the one who commands the shepherd's obedience day and night. The speaker's declaration 'There is no Eden I can lose | While Thais keeps kind watch for me' effectively intertwines classical and Christian imagery.⁵⁷ In other poems published in *Atalanta*, Hopper turns more overtly to Christian stories, refashioning these traditions to highlight and expand the roles of women. 'An Old-Fashioned Carol' (1896) offers a lullaby sung by Mary, employing distinctly archaic diction and orthography ('lullay', 'fere', 'Rood', and 'Goddë's') suggestive of Hopper's participation in the late nineteenth-century Celtic revival, with its recovery of folk traditions – an interest that emerges throughout many of her poems in *The Yellow Book*, including 'Lament of the Last Leprechaun' (1894) and 'Two Songs' (1896).⁵⁸ Hopper furthers her imaginative engagement with the Christmas story in 'A Carol', a dialogue between a shepherd and shepherdess that inventively combines the biblical narratives of fall and redemption. The shepherdess, who travels far and wide to proclaim the birth of Jesus, reveals herself to be none other than Eve, the 'apple-thief' who was 'Plucked out of Adam's side | To be his thorn'. Even as such descriptions seem to participate in misogynistic traditions that associate Eve with sin, Hopper revises patriarchal interpretation by

making Eve an ‘immortal’ being who is ‘well-beloved’ by her people in the heavenly realms.⁵⁹ In this poem, Eve’s earthly journey cannot be reduced to punishment or curse; instead, she has an active role in bearing witness – rather as Mary Magdalene is portrayed as the first to see and tell of the risen Christ in the Gospel of John.⁶⁰ Situated within these broader frameworks, Hopper’s poetry becomes both more artistically innovative and more deeply invested in re-imagining Christian traditions than might at first appear.

When the poems by Watson, Nesbit, and Hopper published in *The Yellow Book*, *Pageant*, *Woman’s World*, and *Atalanta* are read together, what emerges is a richer understanding of their revisionary work. Although their most daring poems are those that appear in the periodicals most immediately associated with decadence, there are remarkable similarities across their texts. Considerations of audience and context necessitate that, to some extent, these poets wrote differently for different periodicals – *Atalanta*, for instance, targeted a younger and broader readership – but their more subtle acts of engaging creatively with inherited religious frameworks should be seen as on a continuum with their more overt transgressions.

Flesh, Soul, and Divine Ecstasy: Re-Creating Nature in *The Yellow Book*

Attending to such religious rewritings across periodical contexts makes it possible to return to *The Yellow Book*’s other female-authored poetry with fresh eyes. While its many poems celebrating nature may not seem subversive, their portrayal of heaven and earth as meeting in an ecstatic embrace could be deeply rooted within the New Woman project. Among the women who contributed poetry to *The Yellow Book*, Olive Custance (1874-1944) rivals Watson as the most frequently featured: Watson published a total of nine poems in this periodical, whereas Custance published eight. Custance has been regarded as a quintessential, if also somewhat problematic, decadent poet. A bisexual woman, she married Wilde’s former lover Lord Alfred Douglas and eventually converted to Catholicism, though her publications in right-wing and anti-Semitic periodicals later in her career offer a sobering reminder that decadent poetics might be put to a

variety of ideological purposes.⁶¹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, literary scholars have highlighted Custance's expressions of same-sex desire across her creative output, including poems published in *The Yellow Book* such as 'The White Statue' (1896), a transgressive twist on the Pygmalion story, and 'A Madrigal' (1895), a sensuous appeal to a 'sweet maid'.⁶² In addition to challenging patriarchal and heteronormative economies, her contributions to this periodical intermingle sexual and spiritual ecstasy in ways that have not yet been fully appreciated.⁶³ Even as it is charged with ambiguously gendered sensual imagery, celebrating the maid's 'sunlike hair' with the phallic power to 'pierce' as well as the 'rare red tint' of her lips, 'A Madrigal' foregrounds the stasis and motion of the speaker's soul. Initially described as 'still as summer noon', 'silent', and prone to 'struggle', the speaker's inner states later give way to impassioned abandon: 'I see thee, and my soul is swung | In golden trances of delight'.⁶⁴ This soulful eroticism accords with the blending of flesh and spirit throughout Custance's nature poetry.

'Twilight' (1894), the first of her poems to be printed in this periodical, features an epigraph from George Meredith that effectively personifies the poem's subject as both a maternal and a sensual presence: 'Mother of the dews, dark eyelashed Twilight! | Low-lidded Twilight, o'er the valley's brim'.⁶⁵ Custance's poem itself opens with an apostrophe to Twilight, inspired by a brief and partial glimpse of the spirit's ineffable majesty:

Spirit of Twilight, through your folded wings
I catch a glimpse of your averted face,
And rapturous on a sudden, my soul sings
'Is not this common earth a holy place?'

Bridging the mundane and the marvellous, this opening address underscores Twilight's excessive glory – insofar as her face remains averted – as well as her immanent presence. The next stanza amplifies this language of adoration, presenting God himself as keenly desiring this ethereal being:

Spirit of Twilight, you are like a song
That sleeps, and waits a singer, like a hymn,
That God finds lovely and keeps near Him long
Til it is choired by aureoled cherubim.

The speaker's sense of wonder achieves cosmological proportions, reclaiming ordinary material realities as sacred and re-imagining heaven and earth. A similar hallowing occurs in Custance's 'The Waking of Spring' (1895), which welcomes the spirit that personifies nature's renewal as a 'Blithe stranger from the gardens of our God' and an 'awakened bride' – imagery that once again recalls the Song of Songs.⁶⁶

Her later lyric 'Sunshine' (1896) further develops this imagery, commenting on the intersection of erotic and spiritual passions. The speaker, self-identified as a woman – 'A mortal maid, whose heart is yet | Too full of all the world's vain fret' – describes her experiences of gazing upon the 'Sunshine Spirit', who is likewise gendered feminine, in terms of a sensual catalogue from 'gold wings spread aslant the green' and 'slim feet' to 'limbs so shimmerous white' and 'parted strands of shining hair'. In addition to delighting in these physical features, she ponders the experience of yearning for that which eludes her understanding:

Because your subtle smile had caught
My soul in tangled trance of thought –
Your sweet hushed speech I strove to hear
You seemed to sway so strangely near ...
Sun-Vision, was it I you sought?

As smile catches soul, spirit and body intertwine. Moreover, the reversal of subject-object positions in the final question, wherein the speaker raises the possibility that the Sunshine might be desiring her as much as she desires the Sunshine, effects a mystical reorientation. Ellipses, aposiopesis, and unanswered questions punctuate this stanza, as indeed they do the entire poem, underscoring that the speaker's knowledge remains tenuous and fragmentary. The final lines open into awe: 'Are you a dream? I cannot guess ... | God's earth is full of mysteries ...'.⁶⁷ This affirmation of uncertainty creates space for the marvellous, conceptualising desire beyond possession and revelling in the pleasures of unknowing.

Custance's songs effectively intensify the images and concerns introduced in the very first poem to appear within *The Yellow Book*: 'Tree-Worship' (1894), by Richard Le Gallienne, with whom Custance had a brief romance.⁶⁸ Like many other contributors, Le Gallienne combines

pagan and biblical elements, including an allusion to the grief of Rizpah (the concubine of King Saul whose children were slaughtered to atone for their father's wrongdoings).⁶⁹ Declaring that 'all other gods have failed' him, the speaker venerates the tree. His prayer reveals a deep yearning for union with nature ('Give me to clasp this earth with feeding roots like thine'), expressed in distinctly erotic terms ('With loving cheek pressed close against thy horny breast, | I hear the roar of sap mounting within thy veins'). The final stanza features an invocation to the Muse, in what amounts to a mysterious resurrection and a prayer that this divine presence might dwell within him: 'O winds that blow from out the fruitful mouth of God, | [...] O God's best Angel of the Spring, in me arise'.⁷⁰ Custance's nature poems, in turn, take these tropes a step further, more directly addressing the concept of divine desire and more self-reflexively meditating on the process of spiritual searching.

My analysis aims not to suggest that all of the female-authored poetry within *The Yellow Book*, or even all of its nature poetry, participates unequivocally in this New Woman poetics. Images of divine presence within earthly beauty might well be used for various ideological purposes. Consider, for instance, Frances Nicholson's 'Wait!' (1896), which features an evocative description of a twilight scene, expresses the soul's longing for ineffable mysteries, and declares that 'Nature is Heaven's Prophet'. For those who have ears to hear, this prophet offers the revelation 'Obey in silence – work – hope – *wait!* – a message that, if reductively applied, might crush feminist activism.⁷¹ And yet, the experience of waiting is not necessarily passive; it can also be an active, agential, and even empowering state, as Emily Harrington has proposed in her analysis of the dynamics of waiting throughout the poetry of Dollie Radford (Caroline Maitland, 1858-1920), who likewise contributed to *The Yellow Book*.⁷² In the case of Nicholson's poem, the title's exclamation mark hints at the intensity of desire that attends this expectation. Though not without its limitations, her poem presents such anticipation as more than blind submission – indeed, as something that might point the way beyond a domineering model altogether. Initially, the speaker seeks to command the earth, highlighting her frustrated experiences of reaching for that which

eludes her grasp: ‘Answer, and end the long unrest, | The strain to see, and touch, and know’. What issues instead is ‘a silence, half mysterious, | half tender’, a gentle refusal that renders spiritual knowledge not as a proclamation but as an invitation.⁷³ This participatory poetics both portrays and actively creates the experience of desire.

As a meditation on spiritual pathways, ‘Finger-Posts’ (1896) by Eva Gore-Booth (1870-1926) is similarly nuanced in both its didacticism and its inchoate amalgam of classical and Christian myth.⁷⁴ An Anglo-Irish writer admired by William Butler Yeats and involved in the Celtic revival, Gore-Booth was also a vocal suffragette, and her vision for social and political reform reflects a heterodox Christianity informed by Theosophical teachings about divinity, selfhood, and spiritual evolution.⁷⁵ ‘Finger-Posts’, highlighted in a review published in the *National Observer* as ‘mildly reminiscent of Rosetti [*sic*], but not without individual distinction’, offers a series of seven sonnets, describing in turn the direction toward heaven, nature, sorrow, joy, despair, love, and hope.⁷⁶ Rather than prescribe a single trajectory, this sequence outlines the various, at times contradictory, seasons of the soul, speaking of ‘the gods’ while also borrowing liberally from biblical imagery. The second sonnet, which discusses ‘the way of Nature’, invokes the Parable of the Sower: ‘From the rich furrows where the good seeds fall | She brings forth life’.⁷⁷ Seemingly antithetical states become unified within the final stanza, which outlines ‘the road of Hope’ in terms that recall elements from all the previous sonnets, thereby suggesting that the very condition of being ‘on the way’ – *any* way – might in itself be a manifestation of anticipation in action.⁷⁸ Foregrounding process rather than destination, this sequence marvels at the beauty, pain, and mystery of human life, throughout its manifold moods.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that there is a critical imperative to attend carefully to the shades and shadows evident across the spectrum of the nineteenth-century efforts to articulate a new cult of beauty, from Pre-Raphaelitism to aestheticism and decadence. Within and beyond *The Yellow Book*, New Woman poetics encompasses not only overt expressions of subverting inherited religious symbols but also more subtle acts of reforming them. Attending to

such varied and nuanced artistic strategies aids in pursuing what several scholars have identified as a growing edge within scholarship on aestheticism and decadence. As Joy Dixon observes, nearly ten percent of British feminists at the turn of the century had ties to the Theosophical Society or other alternative spiritualities – a statistic that underscores the need to consider this period’s complex discursive intersections between gender and religion; similarly, Denisoff remarks that literary scholarship has not yet fully accounted for the degree to which New Woman ideas were influenced by occultic mysticism.⁷⁹ In addition to enriching scholarly understanding of intellectual developments at the fin de siècle, from the rise of alternative spiritualities to decadent conversions to Catholicism, focusing on revisionist mythmaking might help revitalise narratives of literary history. As both Ostriker and Louis highlight, nineteenth-century refashionings of mythic archetypes for the purposes of challenging cultural norms about gender and power find intriguing afterlives throughout works by writers in our own time such as Adrienne Rich, Sheri S. Tepper, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Margaret Atwood.⁸⁰ Rather than categorising decadent and aestheticist poetry as reflecting a transitional moment from the Victorian to the Modernist era, this framework illuminates how New Woman poetics participates in a process of transformation that is a much more perennial aspect of making art and being human.

¹ Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (University of Virginia Press, 2001); Ana Parejo Vardillo, *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Marion Thain, *‘Michael Field’: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Fin-de-Siècle* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Naomi Hetherington and Nadia Valman, eds, *Amy Levy: Critical Essays* (Ohio University Press, 2010); Emily Harrington, *Second Person Singular: Late Victorian Women Poets and the Bonds of Verse* (University of Virginia Press, 2014); Clare Stainthorp, *Constance Naden: Scientist, Philosopher, Poet* (Peter Lang, 2019); and Jill R. Ehnenn, *Michael Field’s Revisionary Poetics* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

² Melanie Hawthorne, ‘Women Writing Decadence: An Introduction’, *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies* 2.1 (2019), pp. 1–15 (p. 1). Writers considered within this special issue include Gertrude Eysoldt, Maria Kazimiera-Zawistowska, Olive Custance, L. Onera, Maria Jotuni, Emilia Pardo Bazán, and Else Lasker-Schüler.

³ Dennis Denisoff, *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860–1910: Decay, Desire, and the Pagan Revival* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 4.

⁴ Linda Hughes, Introduction to *New Woman Poets: An Anthology* (The Eighteen Nineties Society, 2001), p. 1; and Patricia Murphy, *Poetry of the New Woman: Public Concerns, Private Matters* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2023), p. 3.

⁵ Wilde’s essay initially appeared in *Queen* (8 December 1888). Although the term *poetess* is often associated with specifically sentimental lyric forms, it has diverse and dynamic applications. See Marjorie Stone’s editorial introduction and the forum pieces featured in *Victorian Review*, 48.2 (2022), pp. 147–206.

⁶ Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, p. 16.

⁷ The epithet ‘the Oscar Wilde of periodicals’ was bestowed by the American magazine *The Critic*. See Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, ‘The Yellow Book: (1894–1897): An Overview’. *The Yellow Book Digital Edition*, ed. by Dennis Denisoff

and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, 2010. *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities (2019) <<https://1890s.ca/yb-general-introduction/>> [accessed 31 January 2024].

⁸ See, for instance, Sally Ledger, 'Wilde Woman and The Yellow Book: The Sexual Politics of Aestheticism and Decadence', *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, 50.1 (2007), pp. 5-26; Margaret D. Stetz, "'Ballads in Prose': Genre Crossing in Late-Victorian Women's Writing", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 34.2 (2006), pp. 619-29; and Laurel Brake, 'Endgames: The Politics of *The Yellow Book* or, Decadence, Gender, and the New Journalism', *Essays and Studies*, 48 (1995), pp. 38-64.

⁹ Linda K. Hughes, 'Women Poets and Contested Spaces in *The Yellow Book*', *Studies in English Literature*, 44.4 (2004), pp. 849-72 (p. 859).

¹⁰ See Heather Marcovitch, 'The Yellow Book: Reshaping the *Fin de Siècle*', *Literature Compass*, 13.2 (2016), pp. 79-87.

¹¹ Hughes, 'Women Poets', p. 851.

¹² Rosamund Marriott Watson, 'Oasis', *The Yellow Book*, 13 (April 1897), p. 212.

¹³ Hughes, 'Women Poets', p. 865.

¹⁴ See Gerald Carter, 'The Shulamite of Sodom: Wilde's Subversion of the *Song of Songs* and the Birth of the Monstrous-Feminine', *Miranda*, 19 (2019), pp. 1-16; see also Duc Dau, 'Stronger than Death': The Song of Songs in Michael Field's Poetry and Life Writing', *Religion and Literature*, 50 (2018), pp. 17-38.

¹⁵ Kathryn Ledbetter, 'Time and the Poetess: Violet Fane and Fin-de-Siècle Poetry in Periodicals', *Victorian Poetry*, 52.1 (2014), pp. 141-59 (p. 156). See also Linda K. Hughes, 'What the Wellesley Index Left Out: Why Poetry Matters to Periodical Studies', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 40.2 (2007), pp. 91-125.

¹⁶ Linda K. Hughes, 'SIDEWAYS!: Navigating the Material(ity) of Print Culture', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 47.1 (2014), pp. 1-30.

¹⁷ Alison Chapman, ed., *Digital Victorian Periodical Poetry* (2024) <<https://dvpp.uvic.ca/>> [accessed 31 January 2024].

¹⁸ Alison Chapman, 'Locating Scottish Cosmopolitanism in the Digital Archive', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 48.1 (2022), pp. 83-92.

¹⁹ Mark Knight, 'Periodicals and Religion', *The Routledge Handbook to Nineteenth-Century British Periodicals and Newspapers*, ed. by Andrew King, Alexis Easley, and John Morton (Routledge, 2016), pp. 355-64.

²⁰ Hughes, *New Woman Poets*, pp. 59-65. This category features poetry by Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, May Kendell, E. Nesbit, Graham R. Tomson / R. Armytage (Rosamund Marriott Watson), A. Mary F. Robinson, Dora Sigerson, and Mathilde Blind.

²¹ F. Elizabeth Gray, *Christian and Lyric Tradition in Victorian Women's Poetry* (Routledge, 2010), pp. 22-30.

²² Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Feminist Revision and the Bible* (Blackwell, 1993), p. 57.

²³ Alicia Suskin Ostriker, 'The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking', *Signs*, 8.1 (1982), pp. 68-90 (p. 75).

²⁴ Margot K. Louis, *Persephone Rises, 1860–1927: Mythography, Gender, and the Creation of a New Spirituality* (Ashgate, 2009).

²⁵ Murphy, *Poetry of the New Woman*, pp. 22-25 (p. 22). See, for example, the statements about Eve made by Tertullian, 'The Apparel of Women', in *Disciplinary, Moral, and Aesthetical Works*, trans. and ed. by Rudolph Arbesman, Sister Emily Joseph Daly, and Edwin A. Quain (Fathers of the Church, 1959), p. 117; see also Augustine, *The Confessions, The City of God, On Christian Doctrine*, trans. by J. F. Shaw (William Benton, 1952), p. 628.

²⁶ William Watson, 'The Lost Eden', *The Yellow Book*, 12 (January 1897), pp. 11-14 (p. 12).

²⁷ These poems by Robinson and Hopper can be found in Hughes, *New Woman Poets*, pp. 71-72. For an example of feminist scholarship that reclaims Lilith, see Judith Plaskow, 'The Coming of Lilith: Toward a Feminist Theology', in *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics*, ed. by Donna Berman and Judith Plaskow (Beacon Press, 2005), pp. 32-43.

²⁸ For discussion of such pairing of Eden and Gethsemane, see Katherine B. Jeffrey, 'Gethsemane', *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, ed. by David Lyle Jeffrey (William B. Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 302-03. Examples of nineteenth-century applications of this interpretive pattern include William Adams, *The Three Gardens: Eden, Gethsemane, and Paradise* (London: Scribner, 1856). For biblical scholarship that analyses the intertextual connections between Eden and the garden of the Song of Songs, see Phyllis Trible, 'Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation', *Journal of American Academy of Religion*, 51.1 (March 1973), pp. 30-48; see also Francis Landy, 'The Song of Songs and the Garden of Eden', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 98.4 (1979), pp. 513-28. For a more recent re-evaluation of these intertextual connections, see Katharine J. Dell, *The Solomonic Corpus of 'Wisdom' and Its Influence* (Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 197-204.

²⁹ James Doleman, 'The Song of Songs', *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, ed. by David Lyle Jeffrey (William B. Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 727-30 (pp. 727-28); Carter, 'The Shulamite of Sodom', pp. 2-3.

³⁰ Marcia Falk, Preface to *The Song of Songs: A New Translation* (HarperCollins, 1993), pp. xiii-xxii (pp. xv-xvii); Francis Landy, 'Song of Songs', *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 305-19 (pp. 310-11).

³¹ Duc Dau, *Sex, Celibacy, and Deviance: The Victorians and the Song of Songs* (Ohio State University Press, 2024), pp. 1-17. Her chapters consider works by Charlotte Brontë, Thomas Hardy, Christina Rossetti, John Gray, Michael Field, Edward Burne-Jones, Simeon Solomon, Phoebe Anna Traquair, and Augusta Theodosia Drane.

³² Of the developments in biblical scholarship that sent shockwaves throughout Victorian Britain, arguably the most impactful was David Friedrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (translated into English by George Eliot in 1846), which challenged ideas about the divinity of Jesus; however, foundational works of higher criticism by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, along with earlier studies of Hebrew poetry's parallel patterning, such as those by Robert Lowth and Johann Gottfried Herder, similarly invited a range of provocative biblical rewritings. See Charles LaPorte, *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible* (University of Virginia Press, 2011), pp. 4-21 and Denae Dyck, *Biblical Wisdom and the Victorian Literary Imagination* (Bloomsbury, 2024), pp. 11-22.

³³ Rosamund Marriott Watson, 'The Song of Songs', *Pageant*, 2 (1897), p. 63.

³⁴ 'Ancilla Domini', *Pageant* 2 (1897), pp. 196-97 (p. 197); 'Image, Selwyn', *Digital Victorian Periodical Poetry* (2024) <https://dvpp.uvic.ca/prs_517.html> [accessed 31 January 2024].

³⁵ 'Twenty-Four Quatrains from Omar', *Pageant*, 2 (1897), pp. 106-08 (p. 107).

³⁶ Watson, 'The Song of Songs', p. 63; Song of Songs 2.24, in *The Bible. Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha* (Oxford University Press, 2008). All subsequent biblical quotations come from this edition.

³⁷ Song of Songs 3.1-4; 5.2-7.

³⁸ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, V. 28-93 and XII. 594-96, in *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. by Merritt Y. Hughes (Hackett, 2003), pp. 207-469.

³⁹ For a thorough study of this woman's life and writing, including how she shifted her authorial signatures as her romantic affairs unfolded, see Linda K. Hughes, *Graham R. Rosamund Marriott Watson, Woman of Letters* (Ohio University Press, 2005), pp. 35-50, 217-45.

⁴⁰ This interest in spiritualism is noted by Linda K. Hughes, 'Rosamund Marriott Watson (Graham R. Tomson)', *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, 240 (2001), pp. 308-20 (p. 319).

⁴¹ Rosamund Marriott Watson, 'The House Desolate', *The Yellow Book*, 7 (October 1895), pp. 23-24 (p. 24).

⁴² Matthew 23.37-38.

⁴³ For a discussion of Nesbit's complex attitudes towards women's rights, including her refusal to support women's suffrage, see Julia Briggs, *A Woman of Passion: The Life of E. Nesbit, 1858-1924* (New Amsterdam Books, 1987), p. 130. On Nesbit's interests in pagan and occult ideas, see Denisoff, *Decadent Ecology*, p. 23.

⁴⁴ Edith Nesbit, 'The Ghost Bereft', *The Yellow Book*, 12 (January 1897), pp. 110-12 (p. 112).

⁴⁵ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'The Blessed Damozel', *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature, vol. 5: The Victorian Era*, ed. by Joseph Black et. al. (Broadview Press, 2021), pp. 709-12.

⁴⁶ Nesbit, 'The Ghost Bereft', p. 112.

⁴⁷ Jane Dawson, 'Not for girls alone, but for anyone who can relish really good literature': L. T. Meade, *Atalanta*, and the Family Literary Magazine', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 76.4 (2013), pp. 475-98 (p. 476); Petra Clark, 'The Girton Girl's "academic home": Girton College in the Late-Victorian Periodical Press', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 52.4 (2019), pp. 659-78 (see especially pp. 666-68).

⁴⁸ Edith Nesbit 'Medway Song', *Atalanta*, 7 (August 1894), pp. 702-03.

⁴⁹ Edith Nesbit, 'The Woman's Kingdom', *Atalanta*, 8 (August 1895), p. 683.

⁵⁰ Edith Nesbit, 'Day and Night', *The Yellow Book*, 4 (January 1895), p. 234.

⁵¹ Nora Hopper, 'Shepherds' Song', *The Yellow Book*, 1 (April 1895), pp. 189-90 (p. 190).

⁵² Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Hymn to Proserpine', *The Broadview Anthology of Poetry and Poetic Theory*, ed. by Thomas J. Collins and Vivienne J. Rundle (Broadview Press, 1999), pp. 984-86 (p. 985).

⁵³ Hopper, 'Shepherds' Song', pp. 189-90.

⁵⁴ Christina Rossetti, 'A Christmas Carol', *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, ed. by R. W. Crump and Betty S. Flowers (Penguin, 2005), pp. 210-11 (p. 210).

⁵⁵ Hopper, 'Shepherds' Song', p. 190.

⁵⁶ Graham R. Tomson, 'In Picardy', *Woman's World*, 2 (September 1889), p. 579.

⁵⁷ Hopper, 'Shepherd's Song', p. 193.

⁵⁸ Nora Hopper, 'An Old-Fashioned Carol', *Atalanta*, 10 (December 1896), p. 193.

For a discussion of Hopper's participation in the Celtic revival, see Gregory A. Schirmer, *A History of Irish Poetry in English* (Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 194-201.

⁵⁹ [Nora Hopper], 'A Carol', *Atalanta* 11 (January 1899), p. 160. The poem itself is unsigned; however, *DVPP* indicates that attribution is given in the volume index <https://dvpp.uvic.ca/poems/atalanta/1899/pom_15932_a_carol_with_apologies_to_a_t.html> [accessed 31 January 2024]. This poem appears with the subtitle '(With Apologies to A. T. Q. C.)'.

⁶⁰ See John 21.10-18.

⁶¹ Sarah Parker, 'Olive Custance, Nostalgia, and Decadent Conservatism', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 2.1 (2019), pp. 57-81.

⁶² Olive Custance, 'The White Statue', *The Yellow Book*, 11 (October 1896), p. 91; Olive Custance, 'A Madrigal', *The Yellow Book*, 6 (July 1895), pp. 215-16 (p. 215).

For criticism on same-sex desire in Custance's poetry, see Sarah Parker, *The Lesbian Muse and Poetic Identity, 1889-1930* (Pickering and Chatto, 2013), pp. 77-91; and Patricia Pulham, *The Sculptural Body in Victorian Literature: Encrypted Sexualities* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), pp. 171-75. Custance's contributions to the *Yellow Book* receive discussion by Hughes, 'Women Poets', pp. 859-60, 863, and Murphy, *Poetry of the New Woman*, pp. 75-80.

- ⁶³ In his biographical account, Brocard Sewell notes briefly that Custance converted to Catholicism in 1924 and further comments that shortly before her death in 1944 she ‘expressed deep regret’ for having ‘lapsed’ in 1927. See Sewell, *Olive Custance: Her Life and Work*, ed. by G. Krishnamurti (The Eighteen Nineties Society, 1975), p. 24. One notable instance of scholarship that begins to address Custance’s religious inclinations is Edwin J. King’s remarks in his introduction to *The Inn of Dreams: Poems by Olive Custance (Lady Alfred Douglas)* (Saint Austin Press, 2015), pp. xi–xl. King claims that Custance was ‘heavily influenced by Catholicism’ at the time that she published her 1911 collection and further asserts that she was ‘religiously inclined all her life’ (p. xi).
- ⁶⁴ Custance, ‘A Madrigal’, pp. 215-16.
- ⁶⁵ Olive Custance, ‘Twilight’, *The Yellow Book*, 3 (October 1894), pp. 134-35. This quotation comes from ‘Love in the Valley’; it is attributed simply to Meredith.
- ⁶⁶ Olive Custance, ‘The Waking of Spring’, *The Yellow Book*, 4 (January 1895), pp. 116-17 (p. 117).
- ⁶⁷ Olive Custance, ‘Sunshine’, *The Yellow Book*, 9 (April 1896), pp. 187-88.
- ⁶⁸ See Parker, ‘Olive Custance’, p. 57.
- ⁶⁹ See 2 Samuel 21.1-14.
- ⁷⁰ Richard Le Gallienne, ‘Tree-Worship’, *The Yellow Book*, 1 (April 1894), pp. 57-60.
- ⁷¹ Frances Nicholson, ‘Wait!’ *The Yellow Book*, 8 (January 1896), pp. 371-72 (p. 372). Emphasis in original.
- ⁷² Harrington, *Second Person Singular*, pp. 142-45.
- ⁷³ Nicholson, ‘Wait!’, p. 372.
- ⁷⁴ Eva Gore-Booth, ‘Finger-Posts’, *The Yellow Book*, 10 (July 1896), pp. 214-17.
- ⁷⁵ For a discussion of Gore-Booth’s political and spiritual vision, see Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 190-94.
- ⁷⁶ ‘Yellow and Green’, Review of *The Yellow Book*, vol. 10, July 1896, *National Observer*, 15 August 1896, pp. 393-94. *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, ed. by Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities, 2019 <<https://1890s.ca/yb10-review-national-observer-15-aug-1896/>> [accessed 31 January 2024].
- ⁷⁷ Gore-Booth, ‘Finger-Posts’, p. 215; See Matthew 13.3-23.
- ⁷⁸ Gore-Booth, ‘Finger-Posts’, p. 217. Emphasis in original.
- ⁷⁹ Joy Dixon, ‘Modernity, Heterodoxy, and the Transformation of Religious Cultures in Britain’, in *Women, Gender, and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800–1940*, ed. by Sue Morgan and Jacqueline de Vries (Routledge, 2010), pp. 211-30 (p. 219); Denisoff, *Decadent Ecology*, p. 141.
- ⁸⁰ Ostriker, ‘The Thieves of Language’, pp. 71-72; Louis, *Persephone Rises*, p. 133.

Review: Siôn Parkinson, *Stinkhorn: How Nature's Most Foul-Smelling Mushroom Can Change the Way We Listen* (Sternberg Press, 2024)
208 pp. ISBN 9781915609274

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Fascination with mushrooms has experienced a curious renaissance in the humanities within recent decades, as indicated by the scholarly interventions of Anna Tsing (*The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 2015), John Cage (*A Mycological Foray*, 2020), and Merlin Sheldrake (*Entangled Life*, 2020); to name but a few. To this ever-growing field of research, a new and highly evocative title is added. Siôn Parkinson's *Stinkhorn: How Nature's Most Foul-Smelling Mushroom Can Change the Way We Listen* is a volume perfumed with thought-provoking entries on the shared resonances between putrid smells, aural landscapes, and phallic fungi. Beyond the arresting image of a ripe dune stinkhorn proudly adorning the front cover, the reader encounters a heady concoction of etymological musings, philosophical provocations and punny wordplays, all of which waft together with each turn of a page. In stylish Plantin typeface, Parkinson crafts an elegant reflection on what is largely considered to be one of the strangest – if not the smelliest – mushrooms to have protruded from the ground below: *Phallus impudicus*, also known as the 'common stinkhorn'. While the book reflects a thorough engagement with natural history and mycology, it is wonderfully generous in how it conveys the story of this shameless, earthy growth, and its power to captivate the minds (or indeed noses) of thinkers such as Pliny the Elder, Hadrianus Junius, and John Gerard.

Leafing through *Stinkhorn*, one discovers that every paragraph is numbered according to an ambiguous sequence, one that stylistically imitates the accumulative list of figures found in an old naturalist's notebook or a collection of footnotes to some greater, enigmatic study on the oddities of this elusive fungus (as Parkinson himself notes, the odour exuded from the stinkhorn has historically denied an investigator's ability to carry out a sustained observation. Any attempt to draw or analyse its physical appearance indoors usually ends with its swift departure out of a nearby

window). What sets this publication apart from previous contributions, however, is Parkinson's commitment to the possibility of Stink with a capital 'S', a type of *smelling sound* that induces feelings of uncertainty or dread in a nearby listener, as if their ears were inhaling the pungent aroma of a flagrant stinkhorn mushroom.¹ Stink, according to Parkinson, is more than just a bad smell. It is an insistent, pervasive impression left behind by an odour so inebriating, one can think of or imagine little else.² It circulates throughout the mind as an ambivalent reeking miasma, teasing the brain-centre and sensorium as a whole with the full breadth of its foul tones and textures. At its most speculative, Stink meets the ear and the nose at the back of the throat, manifesting as a percussive contraction similar to a gag reflex that bubbles up when faced with something truly revolting.³ Stink, Parkinson tells us in *Stinkhorn*, is a durational intensity that has the potential to *inform* how we make sense of sound, going beyond what is normally considered to be our acoustic understanding of the world, to include 'tones' or 'notes' that are uniquely olfactory as well as auditory.⁴

Mycologists, neuropsychologists, chemists, and perfumers might scoff at this proposition for being unscientific or wishful thinking. How can sounds *smell*, or even *stink* for that matter? In what world is it possible to suggest that noise gives off any kind of odour? Parkinson is not oblivious to the likelihood of such strong opposition from critics, or even to the possibility that some might characterize his argument as the inconclusive ramblings of a 'shit-talker' (the provocative title he chose for his recent public lecture at Goldsmiths).⁵ However, the bold statement that drifts from the pages of *Stinkhorn*, like a cartoonish scent trail (think Pepe le Pew), is meant to be intellectually 'funky', even a little muddy. If images are 'listenable', Parkinson argues in the introduction, in the sense that noise can be implied by the content within their visual frame, then perhaps there are other sensory modalities that are shared between sound and smell which are independent of sight (can a 'ting' imply a 'tang?'). Perhaps, he suggests, there are instances in which one can think about sound *through* smell, where one can mull over a melodic musk as it diffuses into discrete tonal elements in space over time.

This is not a straightforward task, and one which Parkinson openly admits to still be mulling over even after publishing *Stinkborn*.⁶ Granted, it is a line of thought that is unprecedented, but only because it thwarts, in the words of philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, the principles of a language in which the prospect of a ‘sonorous scent’ cannot be heard as such.⁷ Stink, this ambivalent type of smelling sound that Parkinson chases throughout *Stinkborn* (again like Pepe?), is *inarticulate* because it cannot be addressed *by* language in the traditional sense. Rather, Stink ‘mushrooms’ as a language *beneath* language, a ‘sonorous depth’ or ‘scent’ of the senses which, as Lyotard muses in ‘Music, Mute’, only the ‘hallucinating ear’ can hear as such.⁸

In fact, the more we sniff around *Stinkborn*, the sooner we come to the realization that Parkinson’s Stink is largely *hallucinatory* in nature. Despite what appears to be an inevitable contradiction, Stink, according to Parkinson’s logic, is a philosophy of the senses which fosters a ‘nose-led approach’ to reality, a way of listening to sounds which are *felt* to be real, with the same sort of insistence that an offensive smell makes on the nose, despite the fact that the source object is largely absent from our immediate surroundings.⁹ These illusory smelling sounds, tones and textures that draw us in to the world, contribute to a ‘nasal imaginary’ which informs the elusive impressions of a reality that normally defies articulation as such. For Parkinson, this hallucinatory aspect of Stink is most prominent in the ‘funny turns’ that indiscriminately disrupt our uniform sensory perception of the world itself, a phenomenon which he himself started to experience a few months into the UK’s coronavirus pandemic in the form of random seizures that began one day without warning and which were accompanied by a strange, yet deeply obnoxious odour. ‘Cool, chemical-like, pure and poisonous’ are the words that Parkinson lands on when describing this phantom stench which would last no more than ten seconds before he lost consciousness.¹⁰ His subsequent diagnosis of temporal lobe epilepsy became the basis for a nasal imaginary in which smelling sounds are arguably *felt* to be real despite their ghostly manifestation. Pre-epileptic auras, Parkinson notes in *Stinkborn*, can be filled with sounds of buzzing, ringing, drumming, or humming, and smells of burning, rot, dirt, and mould, without appearing as an object in the world

as such. And while one might argue that the connection is tenuous, it is curious to think, as Parkinson asks us to do, about whether the ‘hum’ of a phantom Stink *informs* the ‘hum’ of a phantom sound in these moments of temporal disconnect, where the perceived differences between aural and olfactory registers become whisper-thin rather than worlds apart.

Many questions persist after reading *Stinkhorn*, like a bad smell that I can’t quite shake off. What does Stink confirm or deny about the longstanding issue of transcendence and immanence in philosophy, or the possibility that queer ecologies convey a ‘sonorous scent’, given that the foul-smelling phallic shaft of the stinkhorn mushroom naturally grows from a flagrant volva or ‘witch’s egg’? Does morning breath Stink? Is the human voice a smelling sound that rises from the back of the throat and the nasopharynx that connects the nose to the ears? It is difficult to say for certain, yet the potential for future Stink is substantial. When comparing Parkinson’s *Stinkhorn* to John Mowitt’s well-respected 2002 publication *Percussion*, if the intention behind the latter is to make sense of senseless beating, then it’s safe to say that the former is a volume obsessed with making sense of the sensible conditions which resist categorization: the foul smells and sounds of a world that draw us in while simultaneously repelling our desire to even sense reality as such. In short, this book Stinks, but for all the right reasons.

¹ Siôn Parkinson, *Stinkhorn: How Nature’s Most Foul-Smelling Mushroom Can Change the Way We Listen* (Sternberg Press, 2024), p. 23.

² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵ Siôn Parkinson, ‘Shit-Talker’, Goldsmiths, University of London, 21 November 2024.

<https://www.gold.ac.uk/calendar/?id=15219> [accessed 29 December 2024].

⁶ Such an ‘admission’ was clear from the lecture given at Goldsmiths in November 2024, yet Parkinson’s playful suggestion that he might be ‘shit-talking’ should not belie the intellectual endeavour behind his argument, or the very real fact that he might be about to ‘strike the right note’ in successfully articulating sounds that smell.

⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Music, Mute’, in *Postmodern Fables*, trans. by Georges van den Abeele (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 220.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 224, 227.

⁹ Parkinson, *Stinkhorn*, p. 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

Ocean Hester Stefan Chillingworth, *Blood Show*, Battersea Arts Centre,
12-23 November 2024
Transition, violence, and the choreographic

Marcus Bell

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Ocean Hester Stefan Chillingworth and Craig Hamblin face one another. Ocean is covered from head to toe in fake blood: an exuberance of concocted liquid pain. Craig is caked in clown white. They stand within an arm's distance of each other; noiseless, expectant. Craig raises his hand to check the quality of the gap between them, one of the many gestures which comprise the durational score that both dancers will repeat on loop throughout the performance. A breath. Suspension. Until the sickening crack of contact breaks the silence. A slap, which moves them both into the concussive rhythm of a sequence of fight choreography which rotates around the space. Navigating a set of modernist design pieces – a white sofa, a white potted plant, a large white rug, a small white table on which sits a water urn (filled with blood) and plastic cups (to hold this blood) – the performers describe broken noses, teeth clamping down into flesh, knees colliding with ribs. As they move there is a transfer of sweaty materiality, red streaks across Craig's neck, marks on the back of his white jumpsuit where Ocean held on for balance, painting the objects and one another as, negotiating the planar folds of bodies in motion, or redirecting force to sketch the trajectory of a wound, they leave traces. Simultaneously, they offer to us the tender revelation of flesh and musculature underneath blood red, bone white. Two bodies begin to heave and sweat alabaster, sweat crimson, under the heat and pressure of death.

It is Craig who, after being thrown over Ocean's shoulder in an exacting backward roll across the floor, emerges victorious. He pins Ocean down. The loop's wails and keens of pain subside into muffled peace as his hands wrap around his duet partner's throat. Ocean's body writhes. It is hard to mark the difference between their final attempts to fight back under the crushing vacuum and their body's involuntary spasms, its death throes. Starved of oxygen and

consciousness, their flesh screams and gasps into darkness. Craig watches them. This final gesture lasts minutes.

Transition is a violent process. The body opens, collapses and is resurfaced continuously. As we age we are worn, we fold and bend. At the cellular level this gentle cataclysm is ongoing, always liable to go wrong, open to mutation, transformation, glitch. It is happening right now as we breathe and the transfer of inside and outside works across fleshy, porous membranes, mucus, microbial ecologies belching, all our holes and surfaces working barely, just. ‘We are networks of blood’, Ocean reminds us.¹ Transition is constant. This violence is generative and at one level this is how the duet works, as ‘a trans celebration of destroying things, including ourselves, in order to create something new’.²

Through the performance we are also called to participate in what Dionne Brand has called the ‘calculus of living and dying’.³ This calculus shapes destruction, demolition, and acts of exuberant self-annihilation – seen in the horrifying rates of suicide which peak in minoritized and subjugated communities, self-destruction as self-expression of the systemic and violent murder of queer and trans people that is a core drive of the colonial machinery.⁴ This necropolitics, shapes the choreographic encounter in which a figure of total whiteness commits a sustained act of violence for the audience to witness. We know this destruction. We know the fear and grief. Queer and trans people feel this acutely in our daily fight for survival, in our failure to hold on to life. The performance score encompasses these histories which flow out of state and police repression that has a 200-year arc in the production of the identity categories that come to define us today.⁵ The recent undermining of the Equalities Act in the UK through the ban-extension on puberty blockers, is one of the latest indexes of this distribution of pain. But the performance score also indexes acts of destruction which work to smash out of and destroy those enclosures. The force of both forms of violence and demolition shapes the enfolding choreographic encounter, it is negotiated by Ocean as they scream a fist toward Craig’s head, it’s held in Craig’s body as he stands over Ocean’s gently breathing corpse.

However, as we sit in our ponchos ready to be splattered the frame of the work breaks open. Reader, do not worry, the stage violence is constructed (but you already knew this), and depending on which angle you see it from you can spot the gaps between skin and bone, spot the dancers knapping to produce the impacts. The performers are, as Ocean tells us, ‘increasingly worn down and done-in, not from violence but from the effort of simulating violence – the effort of intentionally not being violent’.⁶

The loop begins to reset. Rushing into the space comes a third performer: enter ghost, floating above the scene in a gentle bounce as Ocean and Craig head to their respective corners of the ring and begin to re-cover their bodies in pain. Toward the end of the night this demand for recovery leaves Ocean on their hands and knees scraping blood from the carpet to cover their face, their knees, and hands. The ghost guides Ocean back to face their double. Measuring the emptiness, Craig prepares to move. Ocean tells us:

This is a kind of dancing my body seems to understand. In some ways, it’s a very tender headspace (or, body space) to be in. It feels like saying: *Let’s use our bodies in a totally caring and connected way to convince people, momentarily, that we’re trying to kill each other. And then let’s start again. And again. And again.*⁷

At the end of the preceding loop Ocean tapped Criag’s leg, giving the signal for another suffocation: as if to say ‘more’, ‘give me more’, ‘again’. Craig places his hands over Ocean’s nose and mouth sealing off all airways. Criag watches them, as minutes pass in the enclosure of this dying act. Ocean’s diaphragm jerks as their body lifts off the ground in involuntary ecstasy. This loop unfolds as the ghost hovers between them and haunts the back of the space. Beyond the confines of the ring she begins to sing: ‘I’m going in for the kill, I’m doing it for the thrill’, [...] ‘but don’t let go of my hand.’

Perhaps it seems incongruous to be writing about this dance for a journal on decadence, as its poetic force works because it has a spare and economical score. The quartet – Ocean, Craig, the ghost, and 75 litres of blood – always threatens to resolve into a psychoanalytic conceit (‘oh they are fighting themselves’) before it spirals onward, and the overdetermination of meaning rends

interpretation down toward bone-feeling, with each loop introducing only one or two more choreographic devices into the mix. This time both artists can pause, for example, or now they can repeat a gesture so that an eye gouge happens in triplicate, and by the time both Ocean and Craig find themselves on the ground once more they rest, breathing heavily, checking in with one another before they go onward toward one more deadly suffocating clasp. Perhaps it doesn't seem decadent at all, and yet, there is something in the accumulation of violence, something threatening – boundless – that cannot be contained by the score. There is doom hidden beneath the once pristine white of the set, jumpsuits, and props. The looming terror of dying, the messiness of rebirth, a trans poetics of the bloody and gory mess of transition, and still beyond that a pain screaming to break through the fabric of the work.

We are in a balloon of gore. As these three phantoms respawn and loop, the atrocities in Palestine and Gaza amass. The terrifying genocidal and colonial campaign wrought by Israel and funded, technologically scaffolded, aided and abetted by the UK, USA, France, and Germany spills into Lebanon, Syria. Over 45,000 dead in Gaza, and the ability to report on those dying and sick devastated. Hospitals, schools, homes: ruins. We witness these planetary necropolitics also in Congo, Sudan, Yemen – the flush of war on our politicians' cheeks.

There is a gap between the violence of the dance and the world from which it was made. Suddenly the loop collapses. 75 litres of blood are unleashed in a deluge. Out from underneath the sofa cushions, out from underneath the potted plant, come buckets of red. A blood bath, then sequences which mime gunshot wounds, blood gurgling from a half-open mouth, exhaustion, a body rent through the space again, and again, and again. Encounters with the ghost: a human trying to measure up to death, an empty embrace. Until eventually Craig and Ocean begin to leave.

Blood Show is one part of a series which Ocean calls the *Extinction Trilogy*, a network of attempts to 'obliterate and transcend the human body'.⁸ It is comprised of

three works (*Monster Show*, *Blood Show*, and *Nature Show*) [which] present a slow experiment in masking performers and trying to delete humans from the stage, in

order to make us think more about the limits of the human body, why we want to know what people ‘really’ look like, and how dangerous the idea of ‘the natural’ is.⁹

Some of us have never been (fully) human. The natural is truly a deadly idea. We are in the wake of the collusion of these two concepts (human, nature) as they have been brought together or torn apart by coloniality. And here, as the performers exit the stage, there is an invitation to read this as the ending of man. I am with Ocean. Our concept of the human needs to be undone, and this leaving is a form of self-reflection also suggested by other such climate-inflected works – another invitation into self-destruction, perhaps – but I am more interested in the possibility for radical transformation.

I am hailed by the wake of the ‘human animal’ – I am caught by ‘the inconceivable decibels of all the things we’ve lived before’, as Dionna Brand puts it¹⁰ – I am in the vibrating blast-radius, the doom metal of disability,¹¹ and with Sylvia Wynter I know that being human is a verb that can be reshaped.¹² But to do this work we need to form critiques and find the mode of action capable of dismantling and breaking out of the enclosures that drive the ‘gore capitalism’ of which we are a part,¹³ the brutalism shaping the ongoing genocide in Palestine, the horror in Yemen, Sudan, Congo, and Lebanon.

I think the concept of extinction and the way it has been worked, driven and turned into profit is one way to get us there. Ocean’s trilogy when seen in full might articulate such a critique of violence through a deep exploration of this idea. But on its own I don’t think *Blood Show* does it. The final image is astounding, however, transcendent. As darkness falls over the pool of blood, we are left with the ghost spinning and singing – lifting spirals out of the earth.

¹ Ocean Hester Stefan Chillingworth, ‘Tender Brutality: The Violent Dance Of “Blood Show”’, *Dance Art Journal*, 16 October 2024 <https://danceartjournal.com/2024/10/16/tender-brutality-the-violent-dance-of-blood-show/> [accessed 29 December 2024].

² Chillingworth, ‘Blood Show’, *Chapter* <https://www.chapter.org/whats-on/blood-show> [accessed 29 December 2024].

³ Dionne Brand, ‘On narrative, reckoning and the calculus of living and dying’, *Toronto Star*, 4 July 2020 https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/dionne-brand-on-narrative-reckoning-and-the-calculus-of-living-and-dying/article_47884274-07ad-561a-973b-027ef2cbc8fb.html [accessed 29 December 2024].

⁴ See the Trevor Project for statistics and support.

⁵ Jules Gill-Peterson, *A Short History of Trans Misogyny* (Verso, 2024).

⁶ Chillingworth, 'Tender Brutality'.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Chillingworth, 'Blood Show'.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Dionne Brand, 'Prologue for now – Gaza', *Jewish Currents*, 27 October 2023, <https://jewishcurrents.org/prologue-for-now-gaza> [accessed 29 December 2024].

¹¹ Johanna Hedva, *How to Tell When We Will Die: On Pain, Disability, and Doom* (Hillman Grad Books, 2024).

¹² Katherine McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter, 'Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?: Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations', in Sylvia Wynter, *On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. by Katherine McKittrick (Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 9-89.

¹³ Sayak Valencia, *Gore Capitalism* (Pluto Press, 2022).

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