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## 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).<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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’.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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).<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> ‘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’.<sup>10</sup> 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’.<sup>11</sup> 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’,<sup>12</sup> 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*’,<sup>13</sup> 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”’.<sup>14</sup> 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*.<sup>15</sup>

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 1895<sup>16</sup> and a second story, ‘The Runaway’, appeared in April 1897.<sup>17</sup> 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*.<sup>18</sup>

‘A Thief in the Night’ was immediately condemned as ‘gruesome in the extreme’ by the critic in the *Lady’s Pictorial*,<sup>19</sup> 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’.<sup>20</sup> 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’.<sup>21</sup> Mrs Rathbourne is ‘agitated and agitating, a woman worn with the fret of a single idea’.<sup>22</sup> 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’.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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'.<sup>25</sup> 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'.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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'.<sup>28</sup>

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’.<sup>29</sup> 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’,<sup>30</sup> as she must have done literally and metaphorically in the past.

‘An insatiable desire mastered her’<sup>31</sup> 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’.<sup>32</sup> 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’<sup>33</sup> 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',<sup>34</sup> 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',<sup>35</sup> 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'.<sup>36</sup> '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'.<sup>37</sup>

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'<sup>38</sup> 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'.<sup>39</sup> 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’,<sup>40</sup> 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.’<sup>41</sup> The horrible realisation that their son is not only ‘terrible stubborn’ and ‘incorrigibly idle’, but ‘*what she most feared, then was true!*’<sup>42</sup> 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’.<sup>43</sup> 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’.<sup>44</sup> 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’.<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup>

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'<sup>47</sup> that Mrs Reinhart accepts, and sets out on 'a radiant spring morning'.<sup>48</sup> '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'.<sup>49</sup> 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',<sup>50</sup> 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'.<sup>51</sup> 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',<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup> 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’.<sup>54</sup>

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.<sup>55</sup> 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.<sup>56</sup> 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’.<sup>57</sup> 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’,<sup>58</sup> 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’.<sup>59</sup> 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’<sup>60</sup> on their journey from Sheffield to London; in ‘The Runaway’ Mrs Reinhart observes ‘the yellow light from a street lamp’<sup>61</sup> during her dark night of the soul, and here in ‘The Sweet o’ the Year’, besides the ‘primrose-coloured sky’,<sup>62</sup> 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”’.<sup>63</sup> 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.<sup>64</sup> 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?”’<sup>65</sup> 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’.<sup>66</sup> 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’.<sup>67</sup> 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...’.<sup>68</sup> 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’,<sup>69</sup> 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.<sup>70</sup>

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.<sup>71</sup>

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'.

- <sup>1</sup> 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.
- <sup>2</sup> Jad Adams, *Decadent Women: Yellow Book Lives* (Reaktion, 2023).
- <sup>3</sup> 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.
- <sup>4</sup> See Valerie Fehlbaum, '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.
- <sup>5</sup> [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.
- <sup>6</sup> [Anon.], *Woman* (5 December 1894), p. 5.
- <sup>7</sup> Ella Hepworth Dixon, *As I Knew Them: Sketches of People I Have Met on the Way* (Hutchinson & Co. 1930), p. 161.
- <sup>8</sup> *Lady's Pictorial* (January 23-April 30, 1892); Margaret Wynman, *My Flirtations* (Chatto and Windus, 1892).
- <sup>9</sup> 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.
- <sup>10</sup> Ella Hepworth Dixon, *As I Knew Them*, pp. 161-67.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 187-90.
- <sup>12</sup> See W. T. Stead, 'The Novel of the Modern Woman', *Review of Reviews*, 10 (July 1894), pp. 64-74.
- <sup>13</sup> Ella Hepworth Dixon, *As I Knew Them*, p. 271.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- <sup>15</sup> Ella Hepworth Dixon, *One Doubtful Hour and Other Sidelights on the Feminine Temperament* (Grant Richards, 1904).
- <sup>16</sup> Marion Hepworth Dixon, 'A Thief in the Night', *The Yellow Book*, 4 (January 1895), pp. 239-46.
- <sup>17</sup> Marion Hepworth Dixon, 'The Runaway', *The Yellow Book*, 13 (April 1897), pp. 110-20.
- <sup>18</sup> 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.
- <sup>19</sup> [Anon.], *Lady's Pictorial* (2 February 1895), p. 158.
- <sup>20</sup> Marion Hepworth Dixon, 'A Thief in the Night', *The Yellow Book*, 4 (January 1895), pp. 239-46 (p. 239).
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> *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.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> 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.
- <sup>25</sup> Marion Hepworth Dixon, 'A Thief in the Night', p. 240.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243; my italics.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.
- <sup>34</sup> Marion Hepworth Dixon, 'The Runaway', p. 113.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- <sup>36</sup> Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman*, p. 49.
- <sup>37</sup> *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.
- <sup>38</sup> Marion Hepworth Dixon, 'The Runaway', p. 113.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 117; italics in original.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 118.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 114.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>46</sup> 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.
- <sup>47</sup> Marion Hepworth Dixon, 'The Runaway', p. 119.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 120.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>50</sup> Ella Hepworth Dixon, 'The Sweet o' the Year', *The Yellow Book*, 9 (April 1896), p. 269.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 256.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 254.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 253.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 254.
- <sup>55</sup> 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.
- <sup>56</sup> 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/](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/](https://1890s.ca/dixonM_bio/) [accessed 1 December 2024].
- <sup>57</sup> Ella Hepworth Dixon, 'The Sweet o' the Year', p. 256.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 254.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 256.
- <sup>60</sup> Marion Hepworth Dixon, 'A Thief in the Night', p. 240.
- <sup>61</sup> Marion Hepworth Dixon, 'The Runaway', p. 118.
- <sup>62</sup> Ella Hepworth Dixon, 'The Sweet o' the Year', p. 271.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 259; my italics.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 268.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 269.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 271.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 268.
- <sup>69</sup> Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman*, p. 192.
- <sup>70</sup> Ella Hepworth Dixon, 'A Suburban Tragedy', *Lady's Pictorial* (27 December 1890), pp. 1104-105.
- <sup>71</sup> 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.