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*Yellow Book* Women  
Guest Editors' Introduction

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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*.<sup>1</sup> 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*.<sup>2</sup> 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).<sup>3</sup> 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'.<sup>4</sup> 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'.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup>

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'.<sup>8</sup> 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'.<sup>9</sup> 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'.<sup>10</sup> 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'.<sup>11</sup> 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'.<sup>12</sup> 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’.<sup>13</sup>

*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’.<sup>14</sup> 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’.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> 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’.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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'.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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;<sup>22</sup> 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 Fehlbaum’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*. Fehlbaum 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 Fehlbaum’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.

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

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

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

<sup>4</sup> Adams, p. 7.

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

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

<sup>7</sup> 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).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> Bristow, p. 95.

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

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

- <sup>15</sup> 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.
- <sup>16</sup> 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).
- <sup>17</sup> Unknown Author, p. 2.
- <sup>18</sup> Schaffer, p. 23.
- <sup>19</sup> 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).
- <sup>20</sup> 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).
- <sup>21</sup> Jackson, p. 14.
- <sup>22</sup> Alexis Easley, Clare Gill, and Beth Rodgers, *Women, Periodicals, and Print Culture, 1830s-1900s. The Victorian Period* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), p. 3.