

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.

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