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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 Leverson 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 Leverson 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 Leverson's Mockery of Marriage

When Leverson 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 Leverson. Such an act might seem to signal conventionality, foregrounding her husband's identity and her own marital status. However, Leverson'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. Leverson'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 Leverson 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. Leverson 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, Leverson'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. Leverson'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 Leverson'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, Leverson 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. Leverson'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, Leverson 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.

Leverson'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] Leverson'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 Leverson 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 Leverson'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. Winddholz, '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 & Edouardiens*, 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, Leverson 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 Leverson (1862-1933)', *Yellow Nineties 2.0* <https://1890s.ca/leverson_bio/> [accessed 28 November 2023].
[43] Ada Leverson, 'Suggestion', *The Yellow Book*, 5 (April 1895), pp. 249-57 (p. 251).
[44] Ahmed, p. 29.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Leverson, pp. 253-54.

[47] William H. Harrison, 'Ada Leverson's Wild(e) *Yellow Book* Stories', *Victorian Newsletter*, 96 (Fall 1999), pp. 21-28 (p. 23).
[48] Kristin Mahoney, 'Dainty Malice: Ada Leverson 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 Leverson's career, Mahoney explains that 'Leverson 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 Leverson, 'The Quest of Sorrow', *The Yellow Book*, 8 (January 1896), pp. 325-35 (p. 333).
[50] Mahoney, p. 30.
[51] Ahmed, p. 115.
[52] Leverson, *Little Ottleys Trilogy*, W. W. Norton & Co., 1962. For more detailed information about Leverson's biography, see Louise Wenman-James, 'Ada Leverson (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].