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## Netta Syrett's Afterlife: From London to Hollywood

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The most notable example, however, of a 'New Woman' of the *Yellow Book* circle whose popularity held steady in the next century was Janet Syrett, who signed herself 'Netta' Syrett. A published author from 1890 onwards, she wrote only two of her novels in the 1890s; all the rest of her thirty-eight long works of fiction came afterwards, with twenty-one of them appearing after 1920.<sup>4</sup> None of these was a blockbuster, but most of them enjoyed respectable sales – certainly enough to convince a variety of major British publishing firms ranging from Methuen to Unwin, to Chatto and Windus, to go on investing in her. As Jill Tedford Jones puts it, she 'held an audience of intelligent, educated readers up until her last novel was published in 1940'.<sup>5</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277.

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

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256. Emphasis in original.

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

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

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

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

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

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