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Preface

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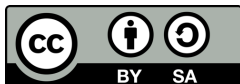
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Preface

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Despite its many famous female and queer icons, Decadence is still perceived as a male domain of aesthetic production. The narrowness of this perception does not do justice to the large proportion of female Decadent writers and artists who, often subversively, collapsed strict gender binaries. In 1979, Linda Dowling asserted that the New Woman and Decadence were ‘twin avatars of the “New”’.¹ Following Dowling, Sally Ledger observed in 2007 that ‘the discursive and aesthetic resonance between aestheticism, the Decadence and the New Woman writing is indisputable. For the cultural movement that embraced aestheticism and Decadence was broader and more eclectic than is sometimes allowed.’² Ledger also agreed with Laurel Brake ‘that “Impressionism, feminism, naturalism, dandyism, symbolism, and classicism all participate in the politics of decadence in the nineties” and with Linda K. Hughes’ account of aestheticism’s ability to combine “everything from impressionist nature poems to perverse sexualities”.’³ Ledger’s comments frame the purpose of this issue of *Volupté*, which seeks to re-establish the creative importance of female Decadent authorship by emphasizing its international scope.

Decadence as an international literary and artistic phenomenon traditionally features women as objectified *femmes fatales*, sphinxes, dancers, and demi-mondes. However, feminist scholarship over the last three decades has retrieved many prolific women writers of the period. Over twenty years ago, Elaine Showalter’s volume *Daughters of Decadence* (1993) brought together twenty of the most original and important stories penned by women, re-introducing little-known writers such as Vernon Lee and Charlotte Mew. Yet while there have been forays into French studies exploring questions of female authorship and female creativity in the field of Decadence studies, the English-speaking canon fell short of comprehensive studies of women as active agents of Decadent production.

Exploratory studies such as *Women and British Aestheticism* (1999) edited by Talia Shaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades, and Shaffer's *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (2000), set the scene for the academic consideration of female Decadence. Shaffer reframes New Women writers such as Lucas Malet (Mary Harrison); Ouida (Marie Louise de la Ramée); Rosamund Marriott Watson; Una Ashworth Taylor; Elizabeth Robins Pennell; Mary and Jane Findlater; and John Oliver Hobbes (Pearl Craigie) as female Aesthetes who made significant contributions to the development of feminist ideologies and pioneered new literary strategies that were incorporated by their successors.⁴ Ana Parejo Vardillo, Marion Thain, Catherine Delyfer, and Sarah Parker, amongst others, established and expanded the field which considered female British Aestheticism as it was practised, interpreted, and reconfigured by women writers and painters of the late-Victorian period. Their work pays special attention to Alice Meynell, Mary F. Robinson, Vernon Lee, and Michael Field.⁵ Joseph Bristow's 2016 study of female Decadence, *The History of British Women's Writing, 1880–1920*, liberates queer writers of the late-nineteenth century from a limiting connection to the New Woman phenomenon by emphasizing their contributions to *The Yellow Book*. As one of the tradition's staple literary platforms, *The Yellow Book* had a decidedly inclusive avant-garde profile. Many male editors and publishers failed to acknowledge the prominent connections between women and Decadence. As Bristow argues, it was the female authors and illustrators in particular (such as George Egerton, Netta Syrett, Evelyn Sharp, Olive Custance, and Victoria Cross) who helped fashioned the journal's reputation as the 'organ of these ubiquitously decadent times'.⁶

In 2010, Judith R. Walkowitz addressed the extensiveness of female creativity, not only on the page, but also on the stage, in 'Cosmopolitanism, Feminism, and the Moving Body'. Walkowitz drew attention to actress Maud Allan who 'would satisfy the cultural distinctions of high art and also manifest disturbing signs of animated modernity and sexuality'.⁷ One of the most recent contributions to the field is *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Poetry* (2019), edited by Linda K. Hughes. This generalist volume is important not only because it is dedicated to the

scholarly analysis and contextualization of female-authored literature, but because it reflects the increasing focus on Decadent literature authored by women.

And yet, there is a persistent Anglo-French angle to the research that has emerged to date. This issue of *Volupté* widens this angle by introducing and expanding the knowledge of female writers and artists in and beyond Anglo-French networks. This feminist internationalism maps onto a broader current of interest in British and European cross-cultural relations and cosmopolitan studies and pays attention to the active role played by women as creators in the Victorian era and beyond. Indeed, the international and interdisciplinary nature of female artistic networks in Decadence has so far been overlooked. In July 2018 a conference organized at Oxford's English Faculty addressed this gap in the record of women creating Decadent texts and art; *Women Writing Decadence: European Perspectives 1880-1920* formed the starting point of this publication.

Focused on relatively unknown writers from six European countries – Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Poland, and Spain – the articles published in this issue illustrate the wealth of European female Decadent writers and emphasize particular national strands and international connections. In her introduction to the issue, Melanie Hawthorne demonstrates how the transnational perspective on *fin-de-siècle* women writers sheds new light on Decadence. With a special focus on the cosmopolitan figure of Renée Vivien (Pauline Tarn, 1877-1909), Hawthorne highlights the importance of enlarging our understanding of Decadence to create a more accurate picture of its multifaceted and international networks.

Yvonne Ivory's article on the German actress Gertrud Eysoldt (1870-1955) is a good example of the rich diversity of Decadent women's art. In her examination of Eysoldt's role as an interpreter of Decadent aesthetics for German audiences, Ivory offers a paradigmatic case of the Decadent links between gender, the arts, and (inter)national identity. Heidi Liedke moves into more uncharted territory for the English-speaking world, as she introduces the work of Polish translator and poet Kazimiera Zawistowska (1870-1902), whose poems epitomize the aesthetics

of the Modernist period in Polish arts known as ‘Young Poland’. Liedke shows how Zawiatowska’s voice was not strictly nation-bound; it was also in dialogue with that of the French Symbolists. The afterlives of Decadent femininities are present in Sarah Parker’s re-reading of Olive Custance’s (1874-1944) Decadent verse. For Parker, Custance’s style is representative of what Kristin Mahoney has recently called ‘post-Victorian decadence’.⁸

Viola Parente-Čapková and Riikka Rossi explore quintessential Decadent themes such as irony and sickness in the work of Finnish writers L. Onerva (Hilja Onerva Lehtinen, 1882-1972) and Maria Jotuni (1880-1943). Jotuni’s blending of Naturalism and Decadence and her emphasis on the contradictions of modernity recall the work of the Spanish writer Emilia Pardo Bazán (1851-1921), demonstrating again the existence of what Regenia Gagnier terms ‘global literatures of Decadence’.⁹ The first chapter of Pardo Bazán’s relatively unknown novel *La Sirena Negra* (*The Black Siren*, 1908) is here translated for the first time in English by Leire Barrera-Medrano. The inclusion of translations in this issue (Katharina Herold translates three poems by the German-Jewish poet Else Lasker-Schüler (1869-1945)) is not incidental. The role of translation for Decadence is of manifold importance: translation *was* key for Decadent writers and it *continues to be* if we are serious about disseminating and understanding the variety and wealth of Decadent literary production.

Alongside cutting-edge critical essays and new translations, we also feature here original artwork by Matthew Creasy. In the style of Max Beerbohm’s *Fifty Caricatures* (1913), Creasy delights us with eleven caricatures of seven *fin-de-siècle* women artists. In line with the spirit of the issue, the (wo)men have been ‘melted down, as in a crucible, and then, as from the solution, be[en] fashioned anew’, to paraphrase Beerbohm.¹⁰

Indeed, this issue of *Volupté* fashions Decadence anew; it offers a fascinating selection of trans-European and interdisciplinary papers, as well as translations and images that shed new light on the wide array of forms in which women contributed to Decadence across the continent. Instead of looking for the ‘daughters of Decadence’, the articles published here from the 2018

conference on Women Writing Decadence reveal the ‘mothers of Decadence’ and their exciting theoretical and practical approaches to authorship, gender, modernity, and cosmopolitan exchange.

¹ Linda Dowling, ‘The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890’s’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 33.4 (1979), 434-53 (p. 453).

² Sally Ledger, ‘Wilde Women and The Yellow Book: The Sexual Politics of Aestheticism and Decadence’, *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 50.1 (2007), 5-26 (p. 7).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (London: University Press of Virginia, 2000).

⁵ Ana Parejo Vadillo and Sarah Parker, eds, *Michael Field: Decadent Moderns* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2019).

⁶ Joseph Bristow, ‘Female Decadence’, in *The History of British Women’s Writing, 1880–1920*, ed. by Holly A. Laird (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 85-97 (p. 85).

⁷ Judith R. Walkowitz, ‘Cosmopolitanism, Feminism, and the Moving Body’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 38.2 (2010), 427-49 (p. 442).

⁸ Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁹ Regenia Gagnier, ‘The Global Literatures of Decadence’, in *The Fin-de-Siècle World*, ed. by Michael Saler (Oxford: Routledge, 2015), pp. 11-28.

¹⁰ For Beerbohm, ‘the perfect caricature (be it of a handsome man, or a hideous or an insipid) must be the exaggeration of the whole creature [...]. The whole man must be melted down, as in a crucible, and then, as from the solution, be fashioned anew’. Max Beerbohm, ‘The Spirit of Caricature’ [1901], in *A Variety of Things* (New York: Knopf, 1928), p. 119.