

Wilde women and The yellow book: The sexual politics of aestheticism and decadence.

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## **Wilde Women and The Yellow Book: The Sexual Politics of Aestheticism and Decadence**

Sally Ledger

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### **Wilde Women and *The Yellow Book*: The Sexual Politics of Aestheticism and Decadence**

*Sally Ledger*

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As Oscar Wilde was escorted to the Old Bailey in 1895, one or two newspaper men noted that the disgraced author had under his arm a large volume bound in yellow. According to subsequent reports in the media, the yellow-backed tome that Wilde took with him to the first of his two trials was *The Yellow Book*, the hardbacked quarterly periodical edited by Henry Harland and Aubrey Beardsley.<sup>1</sup> As it happened, the book clutched under Wilde's arm was a French novel; the yellow dust jacket generally denoted either risqué French fiction or popular novels sold at railway bookstalls. But as far as the newspapers were concerned, Wilde was accompanied to his trial by *The Yellow Book*, and such media reports cemented in the cultural imagination of the 1890s an association between *The Yellow Book*, aestheticism and Decadence and, after April and May 1895, homosexuality. The association was reinforced intertextually by the fact that the very title of *The Yellow Book* appears to allude to an episode in Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, when Dorian's incipient decline into decadence and degeneracy is anticipated in the moment when "His eye fell on the yellow book that Lord Henry had sent him"—an edition of Huysmans's bible of French Decadence, *À Rebours*.<sup>2</sup>

*The Yellow Book*, like other avant-garde publishing projects of the 1890s, paid a high price for its apparent connection with Wilde: "It killed *The Yellow Book* and it nearly killed me," John Lane would claim in later years, and he was barely exaggerating.<sup>3</sup> As well as *The Yellow Book*, Lane also published the high-profile Keynote series of novels under the Bodley Head imprint.<sup>4</sup> In the moral panic that ensued after the sentencing of Wilde to two years hard labour for "acts of gross indecency," Lane's premises in Vigo Street were attacked by a stone-throwing mob. The hitherto popular New Woman fiction—a good deal of which had been published in Lane's Keynote series—also came under **[End Page 5]** pressure, with *Punch* triumphantly announcing in December 1895 "THE END OF THE NEW WOMAN—The crash has come at last."<sup>5</sup> Aubrey Beardsley, as readers of this journal well know, was another who fell victim to the moral rearguard action and, in the wake of Wilde's imprisonment, he was sacked as art editor of *The Yellow Book*; all traces of his definitive

illustrative work for the quarterly were removed from the April 1895 edition before it was released for publication.<sup>6</sup> This essay will explore the cultural nexus that formed itself around Wilde, *The Yellow Book* and the New Woman writers, arguing that Harland's journal of art and literature was an important conduit for women writers at the *fin de siècle*.

There is a distinct irony in the fate of Beardsley, for he and Henry Harland had, from the outset, ruled out any involvement of Wilde in *The Yellow Book* project. Some cultural historians have interpreted the embargo on Wilde as evidence of a homophobic editorial policy.<sup>7</sup> The truth was, though, that there was a distinct sense of rivalry between Beardsley and Wilde, who in many respects were all too similar; this was much more likely to have been the reason for Wilde's exclusion. Wilde had disliked Beardsley's illustrations for *Salomé*, which had been commissioned by John Lane,<sup>8</sup> and the two men's mutual antagonism was fuelled by Wilde's rejection of Beardsley's translation of *Salomé* in favour of a rendering by Lord Alfred Douglas.<sup>9</sup> Wilde himself was dismissive of *The Yellow Book*, claiming that it was "not yellow at all."<sup>10</sup>

The existence of a homophobic *Yellow Book* editorial policy, conscious or unconscious, seems unlikely. As Margaret Stetz and Mark Samuels Lasner have pointed out, not only was Beardsley "himself ... of indeterminate orientation...", more to the point, future contributors to the magazine would include a number of lesbian and bisexual women—such as "Vernon Lee" (Viola Paget), Olive Custance, and Charlotte Mew—and an even larger number of gay men—A. C. Benson, "Baron...

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SALLY LEDGER

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