



the yellow nineties online

edited by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra

INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME 1 OF *THE YELLOW BOOK* (APRIL 1894)

When John Lane and Elkin Mathews published the first volume of *The Yellow Book* on 16 April 1894 at The Bodley Head in London, and with Copeland and Day in Boston, the new periodical made a splash on both sides of the Atlantic. Since early spring, editors Henry Harland and Aubrey Beardsley had built up public interest in the quarterly through an aggressive marketing campaign of pre-publication promotional materials and interviews stressing the innovative features of their magazine. Despite the declared aim of distinguishing the periodical by its material quality and attention to bibliographic detail, the first volume appeared with the month misspelt “Aprtl” on the front cover, an error corrected in the subsequent issues. Notably, this printer’s error is now one of the only sure ways to know if a copy of Volume 1 is a first edition. Another distinguishing element of the first edition, Mark Samuels Lasner notes, is the appearance of the publishers’ advertisements at the back of the volume (10).

Branded with distinctive Beardsley designs, the promotional poster and Prospectus anticipated the startling covers the art editor created for the yellow and black quarto. This invitation to judge the book by its cover proved irresistible to critics. *Vanity Fair* observed “the much-expected new quarterly...comes in a wondrous ugly cover” (240), while the *Nation* sneered that it is “bound in boards of a hideous yellow color, with a design, only more hideous than frivolous, in violent black” (390). Frederick Wedmore of *The Academy* specifically connected the magazine’s physical appearance to its reception: “Its cover, I am sorry to say, might go a long way to damn it as a serious venture; for tasteful people can only

suppose that the design was a joke of a third-rate order, sent back as unacceptable from the office of *Pick-me-up*" (349), referring to a popular illustrated comic weekly. Decried as vulgar and decadent, the avant-garde magazine was associated by conservative critics with an upstart suburbia acquiring its taste in mass culture: "you can see young men going home from their labour in the city, bearing the work deferentially under their arms; it flames out from the forehead of many an 'occasional table' in Brixton and Bayswater. For the great world likes to be told what it must admire, especially when it is told to admire something new" (Rev. of *The Yellow Book* 1, *National Observer*).

Providing no editorial introduction of any kind, the editors implicitly asked that the magazine's 272 pages of letterpress and pictures be judged as art for its own sake. The 15 pictures (all by male artists) were printed exclusively on the recto, facing a blank page and prefaced by a half-title and signature, thereby demanding that they be viewed independently. Although Beardsley's publicity artwork and cover designs set his distinctive art-nouveau stamp on the magazine, the artistic contents of Volume 1 were extremely varied. As art editor, Beardsley selected life drawings and drapery studies, portraits, sketches, landscapes, genre studies, and illustrative art, including book plates—all in a variety of media and styles, reproduced by process engraving. Critics generally responded positively to the contributions of Frederic Leighton, Joseph Pennell, Charles Furse, and William Rothenstein, while attacking the work of Beardsley, Laurence Housman, and Walter Sickert. The volume's first picture after Beardsley's title page, a drapery study by "Sir Frederic Leighton, P.R.A. [President of the Royal Academy of Art]," points to the magazine's eclectic mix of the traditional with the new. While the Royal Academy was the key institution against which the Aesthetic and Decadent Movements claimed to rebel, Leighton himself promoted modern art and the avant garde while also representing a more classical tradition in his own work. Introducing the first volume of *The Yellow Book* with a work from Leighton's hand was an artistic coup for art editor Beardsley, guaranteeing the magazine

high profile attention and confirming the editorial plan “to present a fresh, brilliant, varied, and diverting table of contents” (Prospectus).

Henry Harland’s coup, as literary director, was in securing Henry James as the first volume’s lead-off writer, a feat he managed with Lane’s assistance by assuring the writer that his work would *not* be illustrated in the new magazine (Mix 73). James was also drawn by the opportunity to publish in a magazine without the usual restrictions on length, which he disliked. In return, James agreed to be paid by the piece, rather than by the word--a necessary concession, as his long story, paid at his usual magazine rate of £10 per thousand words, would have cost £220, and drained Lane's budget for the whole volume (Henry Harland to John Lane).

James’s novella, “Death of the Lion,” introduced five other pieces of fiction, three essays, nine poems, and two plays in Volume 1. Of the eighteen contributors to the letterpress, three were women writers. Only one of these, assistant editor Ella D’Arcy, wrote under her own name; the other two signed their work under male nom de plumes as George Egerton (Mary Chavelita Dunne) and John Oliver Hobbes (Pearl Craigie). Critics found the literary contents uneven in quality, generally praising the writing of established authors such as James, Edmund Gosse, and George Saintsbury, while slamming the contributions of the younger generation: D’Arcy, Max Beerbohm, Hubert Crackanthorpe, and Harland himself.

After the unprecedented fanfare of promotion, Volume 1 of *The Yellow Book* was, perhaps, deliberately inviting a hyperbolic reception, and the critics did not disappoint. Noting that it had been foretold that “a new planet—a star of modernity, a yellow asteroid, in fact—should swim into the ken of the nation which hitherto had sat in a most lamentable darkness,” the British *National Observer* commented: “Never was the way of a magazine made so plain before it as *The Yellow Book*'s judicious advertisements planted and injudicious interviews

watered” (588). In the United States, *The Critic* called the new quarterly “A Yellow Impertinence,” noting that the inordinate attention it had received merely showed “that the mountebank in his motley can call the crowd” (“A Yellow Impertinence,” 360). While Volume 1 of *The Yellow Book* did indeed call out the critical crowd, it also interpellated consumers who in England were willing to pay the comparatively high price of five shillings and in the United States one dollar and fifty cents for the new magazine. The first volume’s run of 5000 copies sold out in the first week of publication, and another four issues were subsequently released (Stetz and Lasner 11). Thus *The Yellow Book* became, from its inception, a notorious success, talked about as much for the image it was branded with as for its actual literary, artistic, and bibliographic innovations.

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