



the yellow nineties online

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ELLA HEPWORTH DIXON (1857–1932)



Ella Hepworth Dixon. 1930. Photograph. Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library, Newark.

By the time her sole contribution to *The Yellow Book*, a short story titled “The Sweet o’ the Year,” appeared in the April 1896 issue, Ella Hepworth Dixon’s major accomplishments as a writer of fiction were already behind her: an episodic comic novel, *My Flirtations* (1892), and the work of feminist social realism for which she is best known today, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894). It was no coincidence that both of her novels began as serials (in the weekly *Lady’s Pictorial*), for the world of periodicals shaped her career and her life, providing her with a satisfying series of occupations—feature-writer, editor, columnist, etc.—as well as a set of enduring friendships with publishers and fellow

journalists. Some of these relationships were, in effect, inherited ones, for her father, William

Hepworth Dixon—to whom she referred admiringly in her 1930 memoir, “*As I Knew Them*”: *Sketches of People I Have Met on the Way*, as a crusading “Knight of the Ink-Stand” (17)—had paved the way for her, professionally and socially, through his years as editor of *The Athenaeum*.

Another sphere in which she felt at home was that of painters. As a young woman, she studied art in Paris, doing so alongside her sister, Marion, at the Académie Julian. She exhibited work in the late 1870s before turning to writing instead (Fehlbaum 9–10).

Throughout her fiction, she drew upon these dual areas of knowledge. In *My Flirtations* (published under the pseudonym “Margaret Wynman”), she created a protagonist who was the daughter of a Royal Academician, and made one of the girl’s many ridiculous suitors a French painter of the Impressionist school. In *The Story of a Modern Woman*, she followed the efforts of a heroine, Mary Erle, who strove unsuccessfully for a career as a visual artist before reluctantly entering London’s “Grub Street” to support herself as a hack writer.

It was hardly surprising, therefore, that Dixon would set her *Yellow Book* contribution, “The Sweet o’ the Year”—later reprinted in her sole volume of short stories, *One Doubtful Hour* (1904)—in a Parisian painter’s atelier. This was an environment she knew at firsthand, as well as one with great appeal to the magazine’s Francophile literary editor, Henry Harland. Like many of her works, this story exposed the unjust gender politics of Dixon’s male contemporaries, including those who considered themselves enlightened and progressive (Stetz 104). As the French artist at the centre of the events says to himself complacently: “The world is made for men . . . [and] I am glad I was born a man.” He patronizes Virginie, the old and unattractive woman “who swept out the studio, kept the models from the door, and made him an excellent *tisane* when he was out of sorts” (158). The artist is astounded to learn, however, that Virginie was once the beloved of a dead painter whom he and the rest of his “generation spoke of always as the Master” (161). Only once he realizes that she was, in her youth, the beautiful sitter for numerous pictures that he now reveres does he offer her the respect that he had withheld earlier, when he had viewed her merely as a convenience who “had her uses” (158)—an object, like all aging woman, to be pitied, exploited, and disregarded. Dixon ends the story with a dramatic gesture, as the artist pays tribute to Virginie as a living relic, in effect, of “the Master,” sanctified by her association with masculine genius: “Gently, deferentially, he took her withered hand and kissed it” (163).

With this telling moment of action, Dixon demonstrated her own innate theatrical impulse. After 1900, her interest in theatre would lead her into yet another new phase of her career, this time as a playwright. *The Toyshop of the Heart* (1908), her only work to be produced, featured a dancer as its central character. Ella Hepworth Dixon turned out,

therefore, to share with other “New Woman” writers of the 1890s, such as “George Egerton” (Mary Chavelita Dunne) and “George Paston” (Emily Morse Symonds), a literary trajectory that moved, in the next century, from the page to the stage.

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Selected Publications by Dixon

“As I Knew Them”: *Sketches of People I Have Met on the Way*. London:

Hutchinson, 1930.

My Flirtations (as “Margaret Wynman”). London: Chatto & Windus, 1892.

One Doubtful Hour and Other Side-lights on the Feminine Temperament.

London: Grant Richards, 1904.

The Story of a Modern Woman. London: William Heinemann, 1894.

“The Sweet o’ the Year.” *The Yellow Book* Vol. 9 (April 1896): 158–63.

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