



the yellow nineties online

edited by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra

GEORGE EGERTON [Mary Chavelita Dunne Bright] (1859-1945)



Walton, E.A. *Bodley Heads No. 3: George Egerton*. 1895. Drawing. *The Yellow Book* 5 (April 1895): 9.

Mary Chavelita Dunne Bright, who took on the pen name George Egerton, was born in Australia in 1859. During her childhood she lived in New Zealand, Chile, Wales, Ireland, and Germany. After the death of her mother in 1875, she helped raise her younger siblings, living in Dublin, London, and New York. She moved to Norway with one of her father's friends, Henry Higginson, but returned to England and married Egerton Tertius Clairmonte, whose first name she adopted as part of her pseudonym. She took on "George" as a tribute to her mother, whose maiden name was "Isabel George" (Stetz, "Keynotes" 91).

After divorcing Clairmonte, she married Reginald Golding Bright, a drama critic and theatre agent, in 1901.

Egerton burst onto the London literary scene in 1893 with her first book, *Keynotes*, published by Elkin Mathews and John Lane at the Bodley Head in a distinctive design by Aubrey Beardsley. In fact, because the short story collection's themes of sexual freedom, creativity, and independence were so emblematic of the 1890s New Woman, "Keynotes" also became the title of a book series Lane created later, once he was running the Bodley Head on his own. The series included 19 volumes of short stories and 14 novels – among them Grant

Allen's *The Woman Who Did* (1895), Ella D'Arcy's *Monochromes* (1895), and Victoria Crosse's *The Woman Who Didn't* (1895). Dedicated to the Norwegian author Knut Hamsun, Egerton's *Keynotes* proved extremely popular both in Europe and North America. In 1895, Lane wrote Egerton from the United States to tell her that he found her books in all the clubs and that she was "very much in the air" there (Egerton, *A Leaf* 38).

Egerton's fiction firmly opposed the conventional morality that she believed had been constructed by men to keep women in subordinate roles of limited agency. For Egerton, women's untamed and savage spirits would never conform to such artificial constructs. She encouraged women to tell the "*terra incognita*" of themselves ("A Keynote to *Keynotes*" 58). Egerton, however, is a rather paradoxical model of New Womanhood; while certainly constructing strong, sexually liberated female characters, she rejected any notion of gender equality (believing women to be superior to men). She was also opposed to female suffrage. "I am embarrassed at the outset by the term 'New Woman'," Egerton admitted in a letter to Ernst Foerster in 1900; "I had, contrary to opinion, no propaganda in view – no emancipation theory to propound, no equality idea to illumine" (qtd. in Heilmann fol. 221^r). In the same letter, she speculates that the term itself seemed to be "one of those loose, cheap, journalistic catch words."

Soon after *Keynotes* (1893), she published the short story "The Lost Masterpiece" in the inaugural volume of *The Yellow Book* (April 1894), as well as the short fiction collection *Discords* (1894) with The Bodley Head. The sensation of *Keynotes* and *Discords* was followed by several other works, none as successful. These include a translation of Ola Hansson's *Young Ofeg's Ditties* in 1895; *Symphonies* in 1897; both *Fantasias* and *The Wheel of God* in 1898; a translation of Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* in 1899; *Rosa Amorosa* in 1901; and *Flies in Amber* in 1905. In the twentieth century, Egerton shifted her attention to the stage, to little acclaim. Her first play, *His Wife's Family* (1907), was produced by George Bernard Shaw's theatre company in London. Her subsequent plays, *Backsliders* (1910) and *Camilla States Her Case* (1925), however, were rejected by Shaw and

never produced (see Ledger, "Introduction" xii).

Similar to that of other New Woman writers such as Olive Schreiner and Sarah Grand, Egerton's fiction challenged narrative conventions. Her short stories are so innovative in form that they are difficult to categorize definitively; this refusal to conform to type may be considered part of her challenge to prevailing codes of propriety in literature. Egerton's often impressionistic descriptions of protagonists' fleeting thoughts indicate her rejection of traditional realism, and her privileging of the connection between the physiological and psychological. This technique is reminiscent of Scandinavian authors Knut Hamsun, Henrik Ibsen, and August Strindberg (the latter two being referenced several times in her works).

Labeled variously as an aesthete and a naturalist, Egerton wrote stories that often depicted the devastation of abusive marital relations and prostitution. Along with her erotic descriptions of feminine sexuality, these topics secured her reputation as a scandalous figure of the fin de siècle. The satirical treatment of her as "Borgia Smudgiton," author of "She-Notes" in *Punch* magazine (1894) and the cartoon entitled "Donna Quixote" (1894) epitomize how rattled much of the reading public was by her fiction.

Egerton died in 1945, having passed most of her final 40 years outside the literary world. Even decades after her association with New Womanhood, she is remembered predominantly for her early contributions. As the writer of her obituary relates, "George Egerton's death brings back to mind the so-called 'new woman' school of fiction of the nineties in which the 'problems' of the relations of the sexes for the first time in English literature were put before a somewhat bewildered Victorian public" ("Mrs. Golding Bright"). Since the 1990s, interest in Egerton has grown, although she still remains under-studied in relation to other Victorian women writers such as Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, and Mona Caird. Contemporary scholars study Egerton's fiction in relation to a variety of topics, including, eugenics, colonialism, essentialism, impressionism, and feminism.

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