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Keynotes from Millstreet, Co. Cork: George Egerton's Transgressive Fictions

by TINA O'TOOLE

IN TANDEM WITH the stirrings of first-wave feminism, the literary work of “New Woman”¹ writers came to the fore in the early 1890s. Replacing the Victorian “angel in the house”, these writers depicted desires never realised in fiction before, and imagined worlds quite different from bourgeois patriarchy. Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* are well-known examples of this genre today. The principles of this fiction included the abolition of hierarchical systems and an incisive understanding of the workings of ideological process. The triumph of the new woman figure is seen as effecting a liberation of the whole community, and of social relations in general in these fictions.

George Egerton’s *Keynotes* collection, published in 1893, was central to this *fin de siècle* feminist campaign. This essay looks at her career, and asks why her work has been almost completely erased from literary history. Those critics who have attempted to uncover her influence, moreover, tend to neglect any consideration of the effect of her Irishness on the material. I will examine Egerton’s use of her Irishness, her “outsider” status, as a subversive tool to disrupt the ideological matrix, holding both women and men in place during the Victorian period. Situating her work in the wider context of *fin de siècle* fiction, I will also investigate Egerton’s experiments with form, and will argue that they contribute to an early feminist, modernist aesthetic.

Born in 1859, in Australia, Chavelita Dunne was the daughter of an Irish army captain. The family settled in Dublin when she was quite young. In 1875, after her mother’s death, she worked in Germany, returning two years later to resume responsibility for her siblings. She spent a year in New York during the early 1880s, in an effort to make ends meet back home. Then, in a twist scarcely less sensational than the plot of any New Woman fiction, she eloped to Norway in 1887 with Henry Higginson, a bigamist. Learning the Scandinavian languages, she read widely and met Knut Hamsun. After Higginson’s death, she returned to London with a small inheritance, and

1. “New” was a crucial term in the critical discourse of the 1890s, suggesting an attack on the status quo of middle-class values. The origin of the name “new woman” came in a response to an essay by Sarah Grand entitled “The New Aspect of the Woman Question”. The phrase “new women” was singled out by Ouida to ridicule the revolutionary aspirations of this feminist project. The label was used by *Punch* among others to delegitimise the radicalism of the group.

began to translate Hamsun's novel, *Sult*. In 1891 she met and married George Egerton Clairmonte, whose name she later used as a pseudonym, and the couple set up home in Cork.

Considering the explosive effect of her first literary collection, *Keynotes*, on the literary and social world in 1893, those curious about the unknown author might have been surprised by the rather mundane circumstances of their gestation. That these texts, subverting the Victorian social and domestic world as they did, were written by a woman determined to preserve her own domestic establishment is curious, if not uncommon at that time. Unable to survive financially, the couple were about to emigrate to South Africa when Egerton hit on the idea of writing for a living. She later told her nephew, Terence de Vere White, that she had written the stories "straight off": "'The Little Grey Glove' on the back of an upturned teatray after supper in the gauger's cottage near Millstreet, Co. Cork" (138).

T.P. Gill, the literary editor to whom Egerton submitted these stories, responded well to her first efforts. His assumption as to the gender of their creator was to be repeated by both readers and reviewers alike when the work was published:

Could you not think ... whether it is not possible for you to say what you want with less of ... these mere effects of starkness and of appeals to the sexual sense? ... To put it brutally you would not (however Scandinavian your ideas may be) invite your coachman, or even your bosom friend, to 'assist' you while you and your wife were engaged in the sacred mysteries. (White 23)

Despite his shock on discovering that the chap who had written "those virile sketches" (26) was, in fact, a married woman of thirty-four, Gill nonetheless offered Egerton good advice on how to proceed.

Published in 1893, Egerton's stories proved to be the "keynote" of their time. John Lane recognised at once the potential of these original stories in the "New" marketplace he was then carving out for the Bodley Head. Commissioning a Beardsley cover for the book,² which was lavishly produced, he shuffled the contents to put the most provocative story first (Stetz and Lasner 39). *Keynotes* was an immediate hit. Within the next six months it was reprinted twice (Sturgis 202), and had lent its name to the *Keynotes* series of books (by different authors) published by John Lane. Egerton wrote a story for the first issue of *The Yellow Book* (the infamous journal at the centre of the Decadent movement in London), and she was lampooned by *Punch*. The toast of the literary set, Egerton moved to London and mixed with other *fin de siècle* artists, including Arthur Symons and Richard Le Gallienne.³ Havelock Ellis made a favourable impression on her (White 34) and she went to tea with W.B. Yeats—whom she later dismissed as a *poseur*

2. As a result of this cover, Sturgis suggests (221) that Egerton's *New Woman* (independent, sexually emancipated, politically, and athletically active) had instantly merged in the popular imagination with the Beardsley *Woman* (morally dubious, sexually ambiguous, and improbably thin). According to Sturgis, Lane deliberately cultivated this misapprehension in order to sell his new product.

3. Richard Le Gallienne had been the enthusiastic reader for *Keynotes* when she submitted it to Lane.

(White 166). Her nephew describes the collection of books owned by Egerton when she was an old woman: "... the white shelves filled with books in attractive bindings, special editions, many of them presents from their authors ... Hardy, Wilde, Meredith, Shaw—these were the names on the gilded bindings which everywhere caught my eye" (White 177). This is just one indication of the esteem with which Egerton was regarded by her peers during the 1890s.⁴

However, by the late 1890s, like so many other writers and artists in that period, Egerton's fame had waned. By the time her third collection, *Symphonies*, was published in 1897, the literary and social world which she had become part of had undergone complete transformation. The effects of the Wilde trials in terms of the social and political atmosphere of the period cannot be underestimated. It was (incorrectly) reported in the press that Wilde had been carrying *The Yellow Book* when arrested and stones were thrown through the windows of the Bodley Head in Vigo Street. Fearful of the backlash, Lane withdrew the next issue of the journal, and dismissed Beardsley. Part of this growing conservatism affected the work of Egerton, as Lane no longer wanted to publish anything that might bring opprobrium on the Bodley Head. She was asked to tone down her subject matter, presumably a request to suppress the sexual content in her stories. While working on *Symphonies*, she expresses her dismay in a letter to Lane in 1896:

You did not say you wished a 'milk and water' book on entirely different lines to that which made the success of *Keynotes* when we made our autumn arrangements ... I have had to change a great deal, out of concession to the new Bodley Head policy and this has necessitated much rewriting and rearrangement, as merely erasing paragraphs would not do. (White 41-42)

In terms of her responsibilities, this backlash was ill timed. By now a single mother, writing was her only source of income. Egerton had to compromise in order to survive in a climate in which her art was considered dangerous, even by her old friend and publisher. It is no wonder that she writes to Lane: "... I feel as if I am writing to the shade of a 'friend' gone into the realms of silence for some inexplicable reason" (White 39). The spirit of the 1890s was gone. Egerton published one more collection at the Bodley Head but gave her later work to other publishers. By then, interest in her experimental work had dwindled.

While a definition of Egerton's sense of her own national identity is a reasonably straightforward affair, critical discussion of its effect on her work is quite another. Today, Egerton's work is generally included in a specifically British genre of fiction, the New Woman novel. Yet, her writing consistently addresses questions of national identities, kinship loyalties and, more significantly, outsider perspectives on different cultural practices. By virtue of her family background, which was Irish, Catholic, and nationalist, Egerton was

4. Notably, White omits the names of any other New Woman novelists of the period, with the exception of Olive Schreiner. This may reflect his prejudice rather than Egerton's lack of interest in them.

an outsider to the political and cultural hegemony of the late nineteenth century. Commenting on what he refers to as “the history of her marginalisation”, Scott McCracken discusses Egerton’s deliberate positioning of her work within the Decadent movement, in other words, on the margins of “respectable British society”. Criticised, as a result, by conservative commentators, Egerton was ultimately alienated from the literary scene after the Wilde trial—the backlash expelled both sexually degenerate and foreign influences—when imperial conservatism reasserted itself (145). This marginalisation consistently finds voice in her fiction, particularly in the stories from *Discords*.

Like Sarah Grand’s *The Beth Book*,⁵ Egerton’s only novel, *The Wheel of God* (1898), is semi-autobiographical. Taking as her subject a young Irish woman who emigrates to New York late in the nineteenth century, fleeing destitution and a dysfunctional family, Egerton questions national and social identities during the period. The novel is steeped in contemporary feminist thought and contributes a fictional model to historical accounts of women’s emigration from Ireland.⁶ From a current feminist perspective, essentialism and a belief in eugenics detract from Egerton’s late nineteenth-century feminist agenda in the novel. This novel is crucial, however, not only in the context of Egerton’s themes, but also as part of the discourse central to the New Woman project. Despite this, it has been almost completely ignored by critics examining her work.⁷ This is almost certainly due, in part, to its political content and candid feminist agenda.

Some of Egerton’s heroines have strongly nationalist viewpoints (particularly Mary in *The Wheel of God*, mentioned above), and many of her earlier stories give small hints as to the origins of its author. In “The Child”, Egerton’s use of Hiberno-English idiom squarely locates the tale in Dublin. Several of the stories evoke the Irish countryside in their setting, although they may not be geographically located in any specific way. In “A Cross Line” she writes: “She is stretched on her back on the short heather-mixed moss at the side of a bog stream—Bunches of bog-wool nod their fluffy heads, and through the myriad indefinite sounds comes the regular scrape of a sickle on the scythe of a reaper in a neighbouring meadow” (*Keynotes* 18). Such a fusion of Irish regionalism, and a more elusive, impressionistic perspective of landscape often appears in Egerton’s work. She frequently uses a specifically delineated locale as a basis for an imaginative leap into the aesthetic. Egerton sketches a particularly Irish social landscape in other stories. In “Gone Under”, she describes an Irish dock labourer in New York who is “sending home the rent to Kerry” (*Discords* 82). Her stories define Irish identity in social terms that fit in with her own childhood experience of a rootless

5. Sarah Grand (1854–1943) was another “New Woman” novelist, best known for her trilogy *The Heavenly Twins*. Grand’s background was also Irish, however, her work is set in the context of British society.

6. Many of the fictional experiences of Mary in *The Wheel of God* have historical parallels in work such as that of Diner and O’Carroll.

7. The only exception to this is Scott McCracken.

existence in many different countries, but they also convey a strong, albeit oblique, sense of an Irish national identity imparted to her by her father.

More importantly, the overall perspective of these fictions is that of an outsider. Having established the psychological depth of her protagonist in "The Child", Egerton goes on to show that such depth marks out the individual from the crowd. Among her playmates, the nameless child is a star: "They are waiting for her, for is she not the most daring, the most individual amongst them?" (*Discords* 6-7). However, this singularity ceases to be an asset as the child grows up. In the second part of this story, "The Girl", Egerton comments: "[The girl] is too sharp-tongued, too keen-eyed, too intolerant of meanness and untruth to be a favourite with her classmates—too independent a thinker, with too dangerous an influence over weaker souls to find favour with the nuns" (*Discords* 12). The chance for an individual intellect to choose its own path is seen as potentially seditious by one of the nuns: "For to the subdued soul of this still young woman who has disciplined thoughts and feelings and soul and body into a machine in a habit, this girl is a *bonnet-rouge*, an unregenerate spirit, the embodiment of all that is dangerous" (*Discords* 13).

Described by Frierson as the first writer in English to delineate the "sexual instinct" as experienced and expressed by women, Egerton's interrogation of sexuality and gender roles was pivotal in the 1890s feminist move to "tell the truth about sexuality". Her outsider status clearly enabled her to subvert bourgeois social values, particularly in relation to the sexual mores of her day. Reading her narratives in the light of attitudes to sexuality current in *fin de siècle* feminism, this emphasis is quite unusual. After all, this was the period when suffrage leaders advocated sexual purity for their members. Directly comparing this aspect of Egerton's work to that of her contemporary, Sarah Grand, it becomes clear that their attitudes to sex are widely divergent. The relationships encountered in Grand's work are either abusive, characterised by what she calls "animalism", or ethereal and unconsummated, as in the relationship between Beth and Arthur Brock in *The Beth Book*. Those who show any interest in sexuality tend to be castigated by Grand as "low class", or die from syphilis, thus illustrating the dangers of carnality. Egerton's women, by comparison, are given much more liberty to express their erotic desires, even if, as in "Now Spring Has Come", these desires are not always fulfilled.

Her directness in writing about sexual matters contrasts sharply with most other New Woman writers, with the possible exception of "Iota" and Mona Caird. One of the stories which deals openly with the erotic is "A Shadow's Slant", part of the "Under Northern Sky" trilogy. At one point in this tale, the male protagonist declares: "I'd lick you like a dog"—(slower, with emphasis), 'and you don't care for me'" [sic] (*Keynotes* 144). This kind of explicit sexual expression, indeed, the story as a whole, would seem more at home in the collection of a writer such as D.H. Lawrence, than in the work of any of Egerton's peers. As I mentioned earlier, T.P. Gill criticised the passage in "A Cross Line", where a couple retire to their room together. This hint at their sexual lives was, for the time, quite scandalous. Egerton challenges Victorian

pieties, however, in portraying erotic love from a woman's perspective. In "The Regeneration of Two", the female character is immediately attracted by a man she meets: "The utterly non-admirative look in the man's eyes is burning into her—It has grown natural to her to exact homage from every man, and it piques her, rouses a devil-may-care mood in her" (*Discords* 182). Her curiosity is aroused by his lack of attention, which she has come to expect as a matter of course. Egerton's use of the word "rouses" is a carefully chosen one. She rejects the conventional wisdom that women do not experience sexual attraction, or arousal.

Bridget Elliott notes that the form and style adopted by Beardsley, not only his subject matter, were considered daring by his contemporaries. Similarly, Egerton's style was thought to be transgressive by reviewers such as Hugh Stutfield. Gerd Bjørhovde writes that Egerton's technique, with its emphasis on "inner realism", was considered "new, daring and downright provoking" and that *Punch*, among others "seem[ed] to have been as shocked by the way she wrote as by what she wrote" (129). One example of her experimentalism is the description of the main female protagonist in "Under Northern Sky: How Marie Larsen Exorcised a Demon" which hints at a sensuality beneath a seemingly passive exterior:

Her eyes are a fishy grey green, the left eyelid droops; when she thinks you are not looking, a sly elusive gleam brightens them, her pursed lips loosen, and if you happen to see it, you think that there may be something after all in the stories the gossips whisper of Marie Larsen. (*Keynotes* 132-33)

The reference to gossip suggests notoriety, but the subversiveness of this description lies in the ways in which it was interpreted within the framework of the late Victorian optical imagination. Looking closely at the visual clues given about her inner self, they can be read, in this context, as a challenge to received ideas about femininity. Her eyes, the colour of witches' eyes, hint at the supernatural. Her drooping eyelid is an oddity, marking her out from the norms of feminine beauty, but also suggestive of languorous sensuality. This is reinforced by the description of her lips as "loose", a word that could also be used to refer to moral character. "Loose lips" in a woman could be seen as referring to loquaciousness, or worse still, sexual abandon. Most important is the fact that Marie Larsen maintains an inner life, "a sly elusive gleam", that she keeps secret from the outside world. The overall depiction is of a complex and sensual character, who will not be dictated to by others. Her hidden erotic power suggests a direct threat to social mores—this is a strong woman who will do as *she* pleases. In some ways, this portrait is mindful of the Beardsley woman, who always bore signs of corruption and sexual deviance on her body.⁸

8. The figure of Marie Larsen is similar to a *Punch* caricature of a sketch of the actress Florence Farr by Aubrey Beardsley. This is described by Elliott:

... her sidelong eyes which evade the viewer ... something about her throat (her low-cut dress) that should not be seen, and something about her lips (their sensuous fullness) which should not be mentioned. The cartoon's emphasis on the woman's slanted eyes and thick lips also must have carried Asian or African racial connotations which would have reinforced the racist notion that non-European women were more primitive and sexually voracious. (44)

Egerton sketches a whole range of transgressive relationships in her stories. She frequently describes women whose lives are barren because at a crucial moment they were not courageous enough to defy public opinion. The protagonist in "Her Share" reminisces about falling in love with a young foreign artist who came to restore a local church when she was young. Explaining her attraction to this man, the woman focuses on her appreciation of his art: "—They [the images] spoke to me in a strange way—I felt vaguely that somewhere in under my pink and white English skin there lurked a brown spirit that responded to their influence" (*Discords* 76-77). In this passage, erotic urges are tellingly conceived of as at odds with the national identity of the young "pink and white" English girl. The social conditions in which she lives depend on upholding the moral order of an English woman, including her sexual modesty. Alternately, if she can step outside of her social conditioning, by admitting a "brown spirit" or foreign blood in her system, then it might be possible for her to accept her desire. The framing of the story—it is told by an elderly "spinster" to the New Woman narrator—suggests some distance between their perceptions of the social world. It is clear to the reader versed in the characteristics of the New Woman figure, that the younger woman will not be trapped by the English moral order, she will be able to "own" her sexual desire on home territory. In this way, Egerton undermines the constructs of national and sexual identities as fixed. The older woman might have been assimilated to a new culture, in order to pursue her love, but the younger woman is now in a position to question such static definitions, because of her solidarity with her older "sister".

Egerton consistently admits the possibilities of women having sustaining non-erotic relationships with other women, but she is also open about the different kinds of sexual identities available within female friendships. In "The Girl", she focuses on the same-sex desires of the young women in the school:

... the sisters are favourites and number many "flames" amongst the crowd of girls filled with sickly sentiment, "*schwärmerei*", and awakening sexual instinct. They are genuinely in love. If their favourite leans over their shoulder to correct them, and happens to touch their arm, it calls forth a blushing disturbance in even the most stolid of the pupils. (*Discords* 11)

This passage shares themes and phrases with Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices*, published in 1941. As in this later school novel, unsuccessful efforts are made by the authorities to contain such desire. Egerton suggests that this attempt at policing same-sex love: "adds to the picquancy of a flirtation with a chum of one's own sex" (12). Although these young girls leave behind such illicit pleasures in adulthood, thus treating lesbian desire as a phase which will be outgrown, the suggestion that such attachments are possible, and can sustain those involved in them, is radical for its time.

Egerton often focuses on the social and economic reasons as to why women marry, and challenges what Adrienne Rich terms compulsory heterosexuality. Delineating women's motivation for marriage, she disrupts the ideologies of the social contract and sets her protagonists apart from other

romantic heroines. For example, in “The Regeneration of Two”, we learn that the woman’s companion is about to marry a man with three children, not for love of him, but for his children. Exposing the financial insecurities of women’s lives, Egerton interrogates the sexual economy of the time. In “Gone Under”, the young woman returning to Ireland after some years spent as a working girl in New York reflects on the worldly wisdom she has acquired there. The narrator comments: “She has learnt strange lessons in social economy; understands how sealskin ‘sacques’ and imported hats can be bought on a salary of six dollars a week; has lost most of her illusions” (*Discords* 83). This hint at the alternative incomes earned by young women through sex work is somewhat oblique. It is not wholly clear whether Egerton is suggesting that these young clerical workers and shop girls are actively involved in prostitution, but her recognition of the underlying financial advantages of participating in heterosexual exchange is incisive.

In a less circuitous way, Egerton deals with the same territory in the story “The Woman”. Using terms such as “bondage”, she brings bourgeois marriage into sharp relief against a backdrop of illicit affairs. Egerton explodes the virgin/whore dichotomy by illustrating the similarities between the life experiences of two women, one respectably married before “all Catholic Dublin” (*Discords* 56), the other forced into living as the mistress of an unscrupulous man in Paris. Illustrating the powerlessness of both women, Egerton examines the economic basis of marriage and highlights the coercion involved in the heterosexual contract (Wittig).

On the whole, Egerton appears to approve of those who go against social expectations and follow their instincts in matters sexual. The customary pretexts surrounding love, attraction, and sexuality during the late Victorian period are often indicted in her work. Egerton frequently makes the point that such evasions around desire cause more attention to be drawn to sexuality than is often warranted. In “The Woman”, one of the characters rails against:

... a futile code of morality—a code that makes the natural workings of sex a vile thing to be ashamed of ... A code that has thrown man out of balance and made sexual love play far too prominent a part in life ... a code that demands the sacrifice of thousands of female victims as the price of its maintenance. (*Discords* 190)

Egerton’s outsider status enabled her to perceive so-called “natural” social relations as part of an oppressive hegemony. Her national identity and her experiences of living in different social systems may have contributed to this perspective. More particularly, however, the fact that she lived outside of social norms—as the mistress of a married man, and as a single mother—forced her to analyse the conventions which oppressed her, and to deconstruct them.

Noting the changes in literature during the 1890s, Showalter describes Victorian fiction as: “... linear, progressive, causal and tripartite, ending in marriage or death ...”. *Fin de siècle* writers, according to her: “... question beliefs in endings and closures, as well as in marriage and inheritance” (18). This departure becomes very clear in the scenes, letters, short stories, and

episodes constituting Egerton's work. One of the pioneers of the short story form in the early days of its development (Bjørhovde 131), she specialises in catching a brief moment in the life of one of her protagonists—a mood or incident that influences future action. Delineating the chance nature of many destinies, Egerton rejects the “linear, progressive and causal” in favour of the accidental decisions reached by her characters, and their probable long-term effects.

Unusually, Egerton was influenced by the work of Scandinavian writers such as Knut Hamsun⁹ and Ola Hansson.¹⁰ The link between Hamsun's fictional technique, with its emphasis on the irrationality of the human psyche, and that of Egerton, is clear. Unlike Hamsun, however, she develops the consciousness of individual *women*. In “A Psychological Moment at Three Periods” she sketches an early attempt at psychological realism by describing the development of a young girl. The first tale describes the inner world of a child as follows: “... she lifts her head and draws a deep breath; she is trembling with excitement, for she has been holding it unconsciously ... and then... [sic] a shade passes over the questioning child-face as the inner voice that she alone knows of.... begins its warning and reproach” (*Discords* 1-2). Questioning her mother about this voice, the child declares: “I am tired *in me*. Does everybody think, I mean, ask about things, in one? I want to know so many things—I think such a lot, and— ... oh, I wish I didn't” (*Discords* 5). Her mother's advice not to probe too deeply into things brings about the first stage in her development as an individual consciousness. Egerton ends the story by focusing on the child's eyes: “the spirit that looks up out of her eyes is older than the spirit that looks down out of her mother's”.

Looking back at Egerton's work from the present day, it is clear that her writing forms part of the construction of an early feminist aesthetic. It is also possible to place her work at the centre of a series of experiments, which lead into the writings of modernists such as Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf. The didactic nature of some of Egerton's prose, often at the centre of more impressionist texts, makes it difficult categorically to define her work as modernist. However, taking Showalter's view that later explorations in fiction resulted from the “sexual anarchy” at the close of the nineteenth century, Egerton's place in this process seems clear. Her work fits in with the description of experimental modernism arrived at by Adams and Tate:

9. Knut Hamsun (1859–1952), Norwegian novelist, dramatist, and poet whose 1890 novel *Hunger* won the Nobel Prize. This novel was later translated by Egerton and published in 1899.

10. Ola Hansson (1860–1925), Swedish novelist, short story writer, and essayist. Originally a poet from the Skåne group, his early poetry collections *Dikter* (1884) and *Notturmo* (1885) are heavily influenced by aestheticism and mysticism. His 1892 work, *Ung Ofeg's Visor*, illustrates his adherence to Nietzschean philosophy and was translated by Egerton in 1893. In 1887 he published his best known work, a collection of short stories, *Sensitiva Amorosa*, which was an exploration of the erotic in its many forms. This work caused controversy at home and abroad, particularly because of its depiction of homoerotic experience. His wife, Laura Marholm Hansson, included a description of George Egerton in her collection *Modern Women: Six Psychological Sketches* (1896).

Central to these literary experiments were changes in the understanding of subjectivity.... The fiction interacted with the material conditions under which it was produced and with ideas occurring in other kinds of writing, especially ideas about the construction of the self. (xii)

The exposure of the cumulative effect of these social determinants on the subjectivity of her characters is one of her chief concerns. Without doubt, more subtle and thorough delineations of developing female consciousness occur in the work of later modernists such as Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson. Lynn Pykett points out that the kind of experimentation undertaken by writers such as Egerton, in their attempts to give voice to the female psyche, enabled later writers and contributed to their development of a “feminine realism” (75).

Bjørhovde also decisively locates Egerton’s work in a modernist framework, citing the “... tendency towards a breakdown of authorial authority” (157) as evidence of her connection with this mode. Looking at McCabe’s definition of the classic realist text as giving precedence to one discourse (156), he points out that, by contrast, Egerton rarely gives the reader clues as to the dominant discourse in her texts. Concentrating on the transitory nature of many of Egerton’s characters, Bjørhovde identifies this sense of rootlessness with “the modern mentality”. He reads these texts as early examples of the instability characteristic of modernist writing. As we have seen, Egerton endows her fiction with the kind of impermanence she experienced throughout her life. In addition, ambivalence about whether primacy belongs to the author or the text is something she shares with other Irish writers.

Lynn Pykett notes the influence of late nineteenth-century feminist writing on some of the figures of modernism: “Male short story writers in particular seem to have taken up the lead provided by some of the New Woman writers. The stories of Joyce and Lawrence, although remarkable, look less startlingly original when read alongside the plotless short fictions and lyrical psychological sketches of Egerton [et al.]” (73). Pykett draws comparisons between Joyce’s depiction of paralysis in *Dubliners* and the torpid landscape etched by Egerton in that same city in her later work. She points out the similarities between the Joycean epiphany and Egerton’s ecstatic moment, which may have had its roots in Hamsun’s work. Importantly, Pykett contends that in the work of Joyce, for example, “we are looking at the development, and not the beginning of a particular mode of writing” (73). Although Pykett focuses on modernism, she provides one of the few critical examinations of *fin de siècle* fictional experiments, such as those of Egerton. Her perspective of the lines held in common by New Woman fiction and modernism is clear-sighted; she rejects the assumption that modernist radicals invented a new world which revolutionised the didactic realism of the nineteenth century.

Perhaps George Egerton’s disappearance from literary history results from the fact that her work is disparate and difficult to place. Her literary production consists of five short story collections, a novel, a collection of love letters, and several plays. In addition, there were incidental short stories and “sketches” contributed to journals of the day, particularly *The Yellow Book*.

Her output is typical of a New Woman writer—a miscellaneous collection of genres and writing styles, issued by different editors and publishers. The material considerations of her life made it impossible for Egerton to sit down to longer work, such as the novel. By the time her financial and domestic situation had stabilised, interest in her work and the topicality of her themes was no longer as keen as it had been. In comparison to other New Woman writers, such as Sarah Grand, Egerton's texts appear slight and less cohesive. Nonetheless, this inconsistency should not be used to exclude writers from the canon of *fin de siècle* fiction. If anything, it is all the more reason to include her work, mirroring as it does many of the experiences and working conditions of other women writers in those years.

Egerton does not make an easy subject for the scholar who attempts a critical reappraisal of her work. A New Woman novelist who disagreed with the ideologies of the contemporary feminist movement, her work cannot be categorised as “decadent” because her social agenda is too far removed from those who believed in “art for art's sake”; but, on the other hand, those who have tried to label her work “modernist” find themselves caught on the horns of her more didactic pieces. Somewhere between the fissures of these different categories, using influences and absorbing ideas from them all, Egerton's work flourished. Her texts are truly “transitional” and could be said accurately to reflect the spirit of the *fin de siècle*.

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