

A Community of Women:

Women's Agency and Sexuality in George Egerton's *Keynotes* and *Discords*

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The grey man, after all, had his consolation.

“She-Notes Part II,” Punch

In so ending its parody of “A Cross Line,” the first story of George Egerton's *Keynotes* (1893), Punch revises the short story's ending by having the maid run off with her mistress's lover, thus destroying the bond of shared maternal feelings between the two women in Egerton's original story by making the man the center of attention and the object of sexual competition between the women. In making this revision, “She-Notes” reveals the anxiety with which the conservative Victorian press viewed cross-class intimate relationships between women and, specifically, the extent to which such relationships in new fictional forms of the day shifted narrative focus away from heterosexual courtship plots. Both Egerton's *Keynotes* (1893) and her second collection *Discords* (1894) were reviled by conservatives for exploring such relationships between women. In these stories, George Egerton departs from conventional fiction through her fairly explicit portrayal of women's sexuality and her stylistic innovations in narrative and character development. Moreover, through these collections, Egerton develops a particular vision of woman's sexuality that enables her women to move towards relating to other women on the basis of mutuality rather than hierarchy.

In *Keynotes* and *Discords*, Egerton seeks to redefine the place that sexuality holds in women's lives by focusing on women who no longer repress their sexual desires and thus have

the freedom to become more than sexual objects now that their sexuality is no longer being hegemonically controlled or hidden. As Tina O'Toole notes, "Egerton frequently makes the point that such evasions around desire cause more attention to be drawn to sexuality than is often warranted" (152). Egerton's female characters are clearly sexual, but their sexuality does not define them. She situates women's relationships with other women, particularly of different classes and ethnicities, as being of primary importance in women's lives. Once Egerton's upper middle-class women are no longer required to police their sexual desires and find the proper "home" for their sexuality in marriage, they can begin to relate to these other women in terms of cooperation and mutuality, rather than competing for the limited amount power granted to them under Victorian patriarchy. No longer buying into conventional moral definitions of the "good" or "bad" woman, these women can begin construct their agency without the denying the difference and agency of women different from themselves. In emphasizing the importance of these relationships, Egerton struggles to envision sexuality as simply one note, not the keynote, in women's lives, and thus she uses her re-imagining of women's sexual desires in order to subvert the restrictive ideologies that fix women within conventional Victorian middle-class femininity.

Current scholarship on Egerton has concentrated on her representations of women's sexuality and the complex essentialism she mobilizes to connect women, concentrating primarily on these two short collections as well as her semi-autobiographical novel *The Wheel of God* (1898). Though scholars have contextualized Egerton's work in terms of issues of late nineteenth-century Irishness, maternity, sport, empire, and literary style, most discussions of her work also grapple with this problem of her notion of an essential, often pre-cultural wild womanhood. Laura Chrisman, like many critics, faults Egerton for this gender essentialism,

arguing that “it was precisely through collusion with, and not in opposition to, hierarchical notions of ethnic and cultural difference, that feminist identity was articulated” (45). While I am not necessarily arguing, as Chrisman does here, that Egerton was attempting to formulate a specifically “feminist identity,” Egerton’s work does operate within late-Victorian discourses of racial and cultural privilege, and, in doing so, reinforces existing cultural power structures through her erasure of differences between women. However, like Iveta Jusová, I will argue in my discussion of women’s sexuality in *Keynotes* and *Discords* that Egerton explores “discursive strategies subversive of both middle-class values and, in some instances, the colonial project” even as many of those strategies are ultimately co-opted by the very values she is trying to subvert (53). Her largely white, middle-class, English female protagonists do indeed fit the conventional model of their race, class, and nationality to a great extent, but Egerton challenges this model of identity by showing the limits it places on women’s ability to participate in reciprocal encounters and exploring the possibilities once women begin to resist such a fixed role.

Clearly, such a project was very much in dialogue with the cultural debate in the 1890s surrounding the New Woman and the agitation for women’s rights with which she is so often tied. Egerton herself had a conflicted relationship with the New Woman genre. Unlike fellow New Woman writers Mona Caird and Sarah Grand, with whom she is still often grouped today, Egerton refused to be fixed in the New Woman genre or the political agenda of Victorian women’s rights movement even as her writing reveals a sustained inquiry into the psychology of women’s sexuality and consciousness of women as specific category of the oppressed. In an interview with an American periodical, the reporter paraphrases her attitudes on the Woman Question: “she has no views on ‘emancipation’ or the ‘woman question . . . She says she gets

letters from many women who write her that they have often felt just like the uneasy woman in 'A Cross Line,' and that they are glad to see their sensations made matter of record" (Book Buyer 243-4). Here as well as elsewhere in her work, Egerton rejects being grouped in with the movement of which she was highly critical, while at the same time remaining clearly interested in adding women's voices to English literature and positing a commonality of sensation or desire among women. In particular, Egerton's clear commitment to giving voice to women's desires connects her, however ambiguously, with both New Woman fiction as well as Victorian feminism.