



NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 2.2 (SUMMER 2006)

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*

<1>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.(1) 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.(2) 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.

<2>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.

<3>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.

<4>In challenging this model, Egerton suggests a critique of New Woman literature and nineteenth-century feminism, both of which often refused to interrogate the class and ethnic differences they elided in order to construct Woman as political category and spiritual identity. Egerton reconstitutes this difference between women, so often figured in conventional literature as moral difference between the good middle-class woman and all other "bad" women, as a positive and necessary part of women's relationships rather than an impetus for reform of wayward sisters by way of middle-class morality. Though the essentialism implicit in Egerton's notion of womanhood means that her challenge is always co-opted by the system it attempts to challenges, *Keynotes* and *Discords* still represent a sustained and nuanced re-imagining of women's sexuality that actively takes part in the tumultuous sexual politics of late-Victorian England, and indeed the recuperative implications of this essentialism foreground underlying problems with both the New Woman as a cultural figure and the Victorian women's movement.

<5>When Egerton's female characters have the most agency to choose what sort of life they want to lead and what role their sexual desires will play in that life, they remain always inside the system that they seek to challenge. Egerton's positing of an essential womanly wildness ultimately obscures the very real differences between her upper middle-class English mistresses and their lower-class and often culturally-other women companions, kindred spirits, and protectors. Noting Egerton's tendency to ignore the privilege of her white, largely upper middle-class heroines, Jusová points out that their position gives them "the potential to choose among various lifestyles and even racial identifications" (74). These middle-class women have the freedom to choose what sort of life they want to live, and ignore the power structures that prevent other women from having the same choice. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has argued in her discussion of the relationship between white Victorian women's access to liberal individuality and racially other women, "As the female individualist, not quite/not-male, articulates herself in shifting relationship to what is at stake, the 'native female' as such (within discourse as a signifier) is excluded from any share of this emerging norm" (244-5). These Othered women serve to assist their mistresses in working out the problems between desire and agency, but rarely gain access to agency themselves.

<6>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.

<7>For Egerton, this dedication to giving voice to women's "sensations" requires a radical departure from the Victorian three volume novel. In structuring *Keynotes* and *Discords*, Egerton destabilizes the genre boundaries that divide the short story and the novel so that her books become hybrids of both, blending the intense focus of the short story and the larger breadth of the novel in order to explore possible narrative structures outside of the conventional novel's courtship plot. As Gerd Bjørhovde notes in *Rebellious Structures*, Victorians were "as shocked by the way she wrote as by what she wrote" (129). Through this hybrid form, Egerton was able to avoid many of the well-sedimented conventions of the Victorian domestic novel to reveal

character that she felt had yet to be depicted in English fiction: “the *terra incognita* of herself, as she knew herself to be, not as man liked to imagine her—in a word to give herself away, as man had given himself away in his writings” (“A Keynote to *Keynotes*” 58). This structure of non-linear development in *Keynotes* and *Discords* is critical to understanding what Egerton is doing with women’s sexual desires because through this structure she can chart an alternative narrative of woman’s development without having to conform to conventions and proscriptions of the domestic narrative, what Jusová terms the “popular narrative of the evolution of a woman’s character” (66). Egerton purposefully chooses the short story, which she uses not to achieve the typical final ending of the Victorian domestic novel, where the good woman is happily married and the bad woman humbly reformed or altogether erased; instead, her short stories function more like suggestive photographs, giving precise detail about a single turning point in each woman’s lives. These are the instants when women try to balance their fundamental desires, romantic love and motherhood, with their need for agency and self-determination in the face of Victorian femininity, which positioned the surrendering of women’s agency, becoming subsumed under the identities of wife and mother, as the goal of women’s lives.

<8>Furthermore, Egerton insists on the multiplicity of her vision by repeating throughout both *Keynotes* and *Discords* a particular type of nameless woman, a keenly sensitive and intelligent late-Victorian upper middle-class woman, in each of the stories with certain important variations that mark the development of the theme. Laura Marholm Hansson comments on this repetition of Egerton’s central subject in both collections: “A little woman in every imaginable mood, who is placed in all kinds of likely and unlikely circumstances: in every story it is the same little woman with a difference” (65). Although Egerton returns to this character every story, her woman is always repeated with a difference in the characters’ specific situations and personalities. The stories in both collections connect with each other through the periodic reiteration of various motifs, such as a hypersensitive female protagonist, a Norwegian setting, and an emphasis on women’s wildness. Though both include the repetition of these motifs within their stories, the books differ in their overall tones. The stories of *Keynotes* largely concentrate on the moments when women set the tone for their lives, whereas the stories of *Discords* mostly concern themselves with moments when women are in fundamental conflict with the barriers to any kind of happiness that Victorian society imposes on them as women. The first story of *Keynotes*, “A Cross Line,”⁽³⁾ and the last story of *Discords*, “The Regeneration of Two,” function as overture and finale respectively and, as such, these “key” stories provide a framework for understanding the variations presented in each of the other stories.⁽⁴⁾ The two stories form a double gesture, with “A Cross Line” recuperating the woman’s awareness of her subversive potential within the conventions of Victorian motherhood and marriage as she maintains boundaries between herself and other women, and “The Regeneration of Two” exploring how far that potential may be realized within a diverse community of women.

<9>In “A Cross Line,” Egerton’s female protagonist ultimately reaffirms the boundaries that separate her from gender, racial, and class Others because her own agency comes at the price of her working-class maid’s. Despite the ultimate containment of subversion, Egerton sets up her female protagonist as a mixture of elements that enable her to understand men and especially women. The first view of the woman immediately emphasizes her varied nature: “A woman sitting on a felled tree turns her head to meet its [the sound of the grey man’s whistle] coming, and an expression flits across her face in which disgust and humorous appreciation are subtly blended” (*Keynotes* 1). The mix of contradictory reactions in the woman’s facial expression establishes her as capable of appreciating and enjoying something beyond the easy pleasure of similarity and symmetry; she likes difference and can respond to the incongruity of the grey man’s vulgar whistle and their pastoral surroundings with fitting ambiguity.

<10>Despite all of her seemingly disruptive potential, this woman remains “a lady decidedly” with all traditional Victorian racial and class distinctions of separation (*Keynotes* 4). The woman in “A Cross Line” may step outside the borders of English whiteness through the non-English color of her “slim brown hand” and “her skin [that] looks duskily foreign” in contrast to her light-colored gown, yet she remains English and white under that tan (*Keynotes* 4; 7). In remaining a Victorian woman in the conventional sense of the term, she remains unable to have any contact that would acknowledge mutual need for another person. As she tells her lover, the female protagonist of “A Cross Line” cannot have any sort of reciprocal exchange with men or other women; she is, in her own words, “written in black letter to most” (*Keynotes* 24). Like many of Egerton’s women, the woman here possesses a feminine unknowability that men wish to figure out. Critically, however, this woman’s solitariness prevents her from creating any sort of community, even with other women. For Egerton, it is vitally important for women to have

impressions be effected by the people around them, and this woman remains self-contained throughout the story. Moreover, throughout her stories, Egerton advocates a sort of personal social responsibility to work with others in order to avoid the isolation so endemic to modern life – something the woman in “A Cross Line” cannot imagine.

<11>The often-discussed clouds passage in “A Cross Line,” the only point in the story in which Egerton narrates her protagonist’s desire, is grounded in an eroticization of the colonized Other that prevents the woman from understanding the humanity of that Other. In this passage, the woman experiences desire within her mind and body that enables her to cross the boundaries of time and place. She experiences this desire, the need for the Other, outside the bounds of Victorian society. The woman imagines a fantastic vision of herself dancing before men of the ages: “She bounds forward and dances, bends her lissome waist, and curves her slender arms, and gives to the soul of each man what he craves, be it good or evil” (*Keynotes* 19). Here, Egerton seems to be portraying how this woman does not need a man to enjoy the eroticism of her own sexual body. For although the female protagonist does include men as audience members in her fantasy and satisfies their desires through her dance, her focus on her own erotic experience undermines the traditional power of the male viewer. She mixes the experience of her own erotic body with the desire to view that body—she herself takes pleasure in seeing her own body as she dances.

<12>However, this daringly sexual and sensual passage, which plainly discusses a woman’s sensual enjoyment of her own body, is begun by an escape from the confines of English cultural space and Victorian time: “Someway she thinks of Cleopatra sailing down to meet Antony, and a great longing fills her soul to sail off somewhere too,—away from the daily need of dinner-getting and the recurring Monday with its washing, life with its tame duties and virtuous monotony” (*Keynotes* 18-9). As her mind crosses the boundaries of time, she closely connects the flight of her imagination with a flight from the domestic space of Victorian femininity. The foreign past becomes a space where she is not locked into playing a certain role and can begin to experience desire. This past place gives her access to choice, the freedom to be good or evil. Accordingly, her desire takes the form of an Arabian horse who takes her swiftly from the boring everydayness of Victorian England:

She fancies herself in Arabia on the back of a swift steed flashing eyes set in dark faces surround her, and she can see the clouds of sand swirl, and feel the swing under her of his rushing stride; and her thoughts shape themselves into a wild song,— a song to her steed of flowing mane and satin skin, and uncouth rhythmical jingle with a feverish beat a song to the untamed spirit that dwells within her. (*Keynotes* 19)

Here, in this clearly non-English, non-Victorian, non-white time and place the woman can feel the passion that her daily life lacks. In escaping to this land of desire, the woman positions the space of the imperial Other as “a signifier and repository of aestheticized eroticism” (Chrisman 55). She can freely experience desire because her individuality is not threatened due to her absolute racial difference and the temporal and geographical remoteness of the fantasy itself.

<13>The woman of “A Cross Line” demonstrates her feminine wildness in her encounters with the exotic foreign Other in the clouds passage, just as the woman in “A Shadow’s Slant” (the second story of “Under Northern Sky”) reveals that “untamable quantity that may be concealed but is never eradicated by culture, the keynote of woman’s witchcraft and woman’s strength” when she meets a gypsy woman (*Keynotes* 22). However, the woman in “A Cross Line” aestheticizes her encounter to the point that she does not even meet a single person, but instead sees “flashing eyes set in dark faces surround her” (*Keynotes* 19). She maintains stable and absolute difference, whereas the other woman connects with other women, the small moment of understanding where “Eye seeks eye—sympathy meets sympathy” between mistress and gypsy girl (*Keynotes* 148). The woman in “A Cross Line” remains firmly locked within Victorian constructions of the Other as non-subject and cannot understand what such an Other can offer her. She remains always the lady of the house who is untouched by those who are not of her own race and class.

<14>The female protagonist’s inability to let others affect her also severely inhibits the subversive possibilities of her relationships with other women. The woman constantly reasserts her privileged position in her relationships with other women and cannot acknowledge the individual agency of those women. Immediately after she envisions herself dancing erotically, the woman contemplates her interactions with other women and wonders if they too feel the wild

sensuality as she does: “Stray words, half confidences, glimpses through soul-chinks of suppressed fires, actual outbreaks, domestic catastrophes, how the ghosts dance in the cells of her memory!” (*Keynotes* 21). She knows how each of these women’s little rebellions signifies that all women have the potential and the desire to experience their bodies sensually and sexually even though society currently manages to confine them. In this woman, other women have been able to find a strength and candor that they have desperately needed in their own lives: “‘Women talk to me—why, I can’t say—but always they come, strip their hearts and souls naked, and let me see the hidden folds of their natures. The greatest tragedies I have ever read are child’s play to those I have seen acted in the inner life of outwardly commonplace women’” (*Keynotes* 28–9). Notably, however, this woman remains apart from the women she discusses; she has no story to share in turn with women who tell her the heartrending stories of their lives. She acts as witness, but is never a participant and never forms any lasting relationships with these women.

<15>Consequently, though she can appreciate the tragedy of the death of her unwed maid’s baby and use the knowledge of the other woman’s sorrows to better understand her own pregnancy, she will not suffer as her maid has because she remains always in the position of the married, middle-class lady of the house. The maid is positioned in the narrative as a non-subject, as an animal: “The look in her eyes is the look of faithful dog, and she loves with the same rare fidelity” (*Keynotes* 34). Egerton constructs the maid as yet another person who cares for the woman without requiring full return of emotion rather than a domestic worker whose livelihood requires her to care for the lady’s physical and emotional needs. The maid does not volunteer her story about her child, nor does she offer to show her keepsake box. Instead, her mistress commands her to expose the emblems of the self by asking the unmarried maid if she ever had a child with the assumption that such a lower-class woman would naturally have been a mother: “she asks it with a quiet insistence, as if she knew what the answer would be, and her odd eyes read her face with an almost cruel steadiness” (*Keynotes* 34). Not once does the selfishly motivated lady of the house seem to care about the unequal power position in which she puts her maid when she asks about the maid’s child. She lacks the ability to alter her own viewpoint and see from the eyes of those whose circumstances differ from her own. While she sympathizes with the maid as a mother-to-be, she remains always the lady who is protected by her position as an upper middle-class married woman: “the mistress, who is a wife, puts her arms round the tall maid, who has never had more than moral claim to the name, and kisses in her quick way” (*Keynotes* 35). The working-class maid lacks any sort of subjectivity because the female protagonist cannot go beyond her own specific position to understand how she could need other women in any way. Egerton positions these women bonding over maternity as a positive ending and does not acknowledge the extent to which the class difference between the two women creates a distance between them that has not been addressed.

<16>However as *Keynotes* progresses, Egerton returns to the woman-to-woman bond, and the women begin to learn the importance of other women as subjects but still view the other women as serving them rather than possessing independent agency. Increasingly in *Keynotes*, Egerton reveals how the identities of female protagonists depend upon their relationships with other women. The mistresses and other upper middle-class women characters make gestures towards honoring differences and similarities, but class boundaries prevent them from being anything more than gestures. In “Spell of the White Elf,” the seemingly independent woman acknowledges how other women enable her artistic life and maternal fulfillment, but also constructs them as less evolved than herself because they are creatures of emotion. As she tells the narrator about the woman whose child she now cares for as her own, she makes clear both her appreciation for having the child that she was physically incapable of producing and her superiority over the child’s biological mother, whose hate for the woman was so strong as to make the child resemble the woman. Thus, though she grants the woman’s importance in her life, she simultaneously positions the biological mother of her child as a lesser being: “‘Those narrow, poor creatures are capable of an intensity of feeling concentrated on one object that larger natures can scarcely measure’” (*Keynotes* 79). She does the same with her housekeeper, whom she very much appreciates but also thinks of as a lesser, more emotional creature: “I have a treasure, too, in Belinda. She is one of those women who must have something to love” (*Keynotes* 80). This woman represents a progression from the woman in “A Cross Line” in that she can at least admit the value of other women, but she still has yet relate to them as anything other than creatures of emotion and thus represents yet another means for distancing and constituting the self.

<17>In the three-part “Under Northern Sky,” lower-class women also support their mistresses, but the lower-class women in this final story of *Keynotes* become more than just emotional

supports through their abilities to understand what is required for their mistresses to continue on after the keynote events in their lives. "How Marie Larsen Exorcised a Demon," the first story in "Under Northern Sky," is the only story in the entire collection where a working-class woman is the main character. Marie Larsen gains for her mistress a night of rest by using her storytelling to triumph over the drunken master of the house and keep him quiet. She alone has the ability to do battle with the master and "[takes] the enemy by stratagem" (*Keynotes* 132). Marie is not just an emotional lower-class woman, but instead has the intellect to overcome the master through language. In "An Ebb Tide," the concluding story, the cow-girl Gundrun enables the lady of the house to make the journey toward her future. The cow-girl may be the one who is the most emotional over the death of the master, but she also sees her mistress safely to the boat by instinctively "[watching] her steps" (*Keynotes* 178). Above all the townspeople that follow the woman to the waiting tugboat, Gundrun makes sure that her mistress can go on to "a brighter dawn" after the death of their master (*Keynotes* 184). These working-class women are still servants, but they are also pivotal individuals who support fellow women. By developing the bond between women throughout *Keynotes*, Egerton revises the woman of the first story to begin envisioning a way for middle-class Victorian women to take steps towards reciprocal relationships with other women so that all have full control over the direction of their lives.

<18>Although "A Cross Line" does ultimately maintain the power structures that it appears to disturb, the story did provoke a very strong reaction among its Victorian readers for its brazen challenge to Victorian codes of feminine propriety. As Margaret Stetz has argued, the story acted as an attention grabber for the rest of *Keynotes*: "With its plot based on casual adultery, its references to unwed mothers, and its flattering portrayal of a woman who drinks whiskey, goes fishing alone, and smokes cigarettes, 'A Cross Line' flung up a red flag to John Bull [the well-known Victorian conduct book writer] that guaranteed attention for the whole book" (36). Despite the female protagonist's recuperation within very conventional Victorian feminine roles of wife and mother, this story still represents the beginning of Egerton's revision of those roles in order to make possible reciprocal contact with other women. As the overture to such a project, "A Cross Line" continually points to but does not realize the possibility women forming communities with other women. However, the story is only the beginning of Egerton's project, which culminates in the final story of *Discords* going much further than the already shocking "A Cross Line."

<19>Published only one year after *Keynotes*, *Discords* continues Egerton's exploration of women's agency, but takes a much darker turn. All but the last story of the collection focus not on the triumphant keynotes of women beginning to claim their own subjectivity, but on the tortured discords between women's needs for agency and the denial of that agency inherent in Victorian femininity. As Marholm Hansson noted two years after its publication, *Discords* is very much about the pain of women's position in Victorian society: "no book that I have ever read has impressed me with such a vivid sense of physical pain . . . a woman who holds her trembling hands to the wounds which man has inflicted upon her, of which the pain is intensified each time that he draws near" (88). Surprisingly, however, for a book known for its anguish, *Discords* concludes with Egerton's very hopeful utopia, "The Regeneration of Two." This last story of the book works to resolve the problems presented in the book's other stories. As Martha Vicinus has argued, the power of this story comes from "a need to imagine a better world where women work together and men understand and keep their freedom too" (23). In addition to Vicinus's assertion that such forms allowed women writers "to subvert traditional form with utopian images, opening out the closed world of the realistic story to new, provocative, and unpredictable paths," the utopia in Egerton is also space where the existing conventions of the realist story can be made unsettled and reworked to disturb the power of those conventions to create the illusion of the "real" in fiction (21). Yet, the utopic aspects of this story implicitly require a containment of that subversion inherent in depicting a separatist space that is not possible in everyday life. Egerton does not take her readers outside of the realm of Victorian social codes, but rather works within that realm to create tension that undercuts its fundamental ability to account for the women's potential sexuality integrated with a profound sense of individual and communal identity.

<20>For while the female protagonist of "The Regeneration of Two" does indeed step outside the bounds of Victorian feminine identity in forming a "free-love" union with her poet and founding a non-reform oriented commune for fallen women, the absolute perfection of her love and work takes this woman's lifestyle outside the realm of the possible and into the world of the imaginary. By setting this story in Norway, Egerton moves her utopia outside of England to the picturesque Norwegian countryside where the power of Victorian convention is decidedly weaker, even as she attempts to prevent the total romanticization of Norway as a place of escape by complicating her descriptions of its simple beauty with the practical demands of everyday life.⁽⁵⁾ Using the greater

freedom of the utopic mode, Egerton portrays a woman who develops from a bored worldly woman into a woman who understands the importance being an active agent in her own life and valuing the individuality of others, but the utopic aspects of the story severely limit the availability of such a life to Victorian women by placing the woman too far outside the real-lived experience of those women.

<21>Through an encounter with a wandering poet whose comments on the degeneration of women in society inspire her own process of self-reflection, the woman in “The Regeneration of Two” begins the process of understanding how she has allowed herself to be contained by Victorian femininity. Prior to meeting the poet, the woman seems to be another of Egerton’s potentially great women: “taking her altogether, she is seductively attractive, a thing of piquant contrasts—the attractive artificiality, physical lassitude and irritable weariness of a disillusioned woman of the world, and the eyes of a spoilt child filled with frank petulant query” (*Discords* 165). Her reaction to the poet’s critique of modern society and particularly the role of women is the first time she considers a man’s feelings toward her: “she never remembers before to have taken the man’s feelings into consideration; she has simply dwelt on her own as of primary importance” (*Discords* 185). Her recognition of her difference from the sort of woman he values leads her to reflect for the first time on how her own pleasure relates to others. She listens intently to his discussion of society’s ills and begins to see her own position as an artificial woman of the world as distasteful: “She feels her corset press her like an iron hand; she is shamed to the depths of her soul . . . she is the epitome of the class of women he lashes with his scorn! She cringes inwardly, and a dull pain stirs in her” (*Discords* 197). The pain of his disdain for women like her prompts this woman to look inside herself and see the invisible bonds that confine her within a decorative role that encourages her degeneration, a common theme in New Woman fiction and non-fiction. After she and the poet part ways, she regenerates her body and mind through her own devices, but she retains her desire for the man who inspired her internal and external projects. Thus though Egerton establishes a traditional dynamic, with the clear-sighted male poet showing the worldly woman the error of evil feminine ways, that dynamic is upset by the poet’s mixed nature and the woman’s ability to find a solution on her own to the problem he poses.

<22>Rather being primarily concerned with her romantic and sexual relationships with men, the protagonist’s work and her bonding with other women as part of that work occupy the most important places in her life. While the poet continues his wandering, the woman establishes a commune for fallen women where “She has not stilled her heartache, nor has she forgotten him but she has found a use for herself” (*Discords* 204). Egerton mobilizes traditional Victorian feminine self-sacrifice here to construct a commune that refuses to heed the judgments of middle-class morality upon its participants and attempt to reform them according to those standards. This woman has learned the lesson of the female protagonist’s advice in “A Psychological Moment in Three Periods”: “Forget yourself, live as much as you can for others, get a purchase for your own soul some way, let no fate beat you” (*Discords* 58). Accordingly, while she yearns for the poet, she puts the three and a half years that they are apart to good use and finds work that fulfills her in and of itself. For, in becoming part of a community of women, she betters her own life by putting her own sufferings in perspective and coping with the absence of her love. She understands, as does the woman in the other story, that ““it may help you to forget your own fate to realize another’s harder one”” (*Discords* 59). She keeps a place in her heart open for the poet whether he returns or not: “something tells her to wait, just wait. She scarcely knows what she expects, sometimes she tells herself nothing—and yet better so” (*Discords* 212). In the absence of her lover, the woman has learned how to maintain her own agency while embracing her desire for another.

<23>Through the relationship between the poet and the woman, Egerton portrays a committed bond between a woman and a man that allows for passion without the subordination of women’s identity and de-valuing women’s relationships with other women in Victorian marriage. The woman in the story knows that she must simultaneously be a person herself and love another completely as she decides what she can be to her lover: “she is only weighing the effect of it on her own life and work; she is not willing to leave the plough she has set herself to guide. She realizes well that his love, no matter if it be his whole love will not fill her completely” (*Discords* 248). Unlike the bitter woman in “Virgin Soil,” this woman knows the true character of the man she binds herself to and understands that in the institution of marriage ““man demands from a wife as a right, what he must sue from a mistress as a favour”” (*Discords* 155). The female protagonist of “The Regeneration of Two” knows exactly what sort of relationship to which she is committing herself, and she does not give up her right to herself in doing so. She forms a non-

marital union with a man who realizes that their love “will never be more than one note; true, a grand note, in the harmony of union; but not the harmony” in her life (*Discords* 246). Her love will be one of reciprocity where she is both independent from and dependent on her beloved.

<24>The woman’s transformed subjectivity, a subjectivity not founded on separation from but connection with another, also enables her to form bonds with other women that acknowledge their agency. Before the woman has her encounter with the poet, her relationship with her maid Aagot is typical and resonates with the relationship between the lady and the maid in “A Cross Line.” The woman in “The Regeneration of Two” asks her maid about being in love, but dismisses the maid’s Spanish love affair as just a function of environment with the comment: “‘You northerns always do; ‘Spanish’ seems to convey an idea of romance, of beauty to you folk up here’” (*Discords* 168). The mistress, as an English woman, is doubtless above such quaint Norwegian associations. Nonetheless, once she has fallen for her foreign “crack-brained poet,” she begins to value other women on a higher level through her establishment of a fallen women’s commune (*Discords* 210). However, this shift does not mean that she does not retain her position as lady of the house, but rather that the protagonist does not see her position as granting her the right to dismiss difference in others. Consequently, while she can dissect some of her women’s faults, she also recognizes their virtues: “‘Take Strine. A lump of emotional inclination, without a grain of reasoning power or resistance; the daughter of a drunken father and an epileptic mother; at times affectible as an aspen leaf to a wind-puff—and yet not a bad mother’” (*Discords* 208). This woman does indeed feel that she is “helping her sisters out of the mire” in what Chrisman terms the woman’s middle-class reformist “social tendency,” yet the woman characterizes these women as sisters and not children (*Discords* 212; Chrisman 49). They are not inferiors who need to be given lessons in how to live a good life but rather fellow women who need to be granted the right opportunity to live their lives well according to their own standards. She understands the lesson that encountering the fallen Edith teaches the young woman in “Gone Under”: “‘I have no right to sit in judgment; I have never been tempted’” (*Discords* 105). Hence the woman in this final story of *Discords* echoes the young woman’s “‘Edith, sister!’” in viewing these women as sisters (*Discords* 112).

<25>The story also revises the figure of cow-girl seen in *Keynotes*’ “An Ebb Tide.” Gunhild is not the instinctual being of all feeling like the earlier story’s Gundrun, but instead this cow-girl is an extremely valued member of the household in this final story of *Discords*: “she is true to her nature with its splendid loyalty, sturdy independence and stubborn pride, and about as much understanding of conventional morality as the first best cow amongst her flock” (*Discords* 228). No longer is the cow-girl just the typical, over-emotional, working-class woman, acting purely on instinct, nor is she required to fit the mold of a middle-class woman. Instead, Gunhild’s difference is valued for its strengths, and the lady asks only for the cattle-girl’s hard work and not for her assimilation. Out of all the women in her house, the lady seems to admire most Gunhild, a woman who is only barely a part of their community: “She is never in the house except when the big bell rings for meals, and she brooks no interference; it is only on rare occasions where strength is wanted that she lends a hand, and she is proud of the reliance placed in her” (*Discords* 228). Though she does not join Gunhild in her radical lifestyle because she does have some “conventional morality,” the female protagonist can appreciate the cattle-girl without romanticizing the other woman’s life (*Discords* 228). As Lyn Pykett notes in *The “Improper” Feminine*, Egerton’s marking of space for difference within the community that she depicts in “The Regeneration of Two” allows her “to emphasise multiplicity and to focus on differences (between women) as well as difference (as a universal, essentialist gender category)” (173). The female protagonist no longer has “to elide the specific terms of this othering (ethnic, socioeconomic) by conflating it with the othering of women on the basis of gender,” and can bond with other women while each remains a valued individual (McCullough 211). Egerton thus ends her development of a new model of women’s agency with the image of women’s collective as well as individual agency, a utopic resolution to the discord between women’s desires and the social conventions.

<26>Egerton’s New Women constantly push at the edges of the roles Victorian society provides for them as they move toward a space that allows for the expression of their own desires, not the desires that men would grant them. They move towards freely expressing their sexual desires in reciprocal romantic relationships and becoming agents in directing their own lives. Critically, the negotiation of that space also requires Egerton’s women to respect the agency of other women, particularly class and ethnic Others. However, the challenge these women represent to Victorian femininity is ultimately contained by that very ideology because of the extent to which the upper middle-class protagonists’ greater access to individuality enables them a greater freedom to

choose the direction of their lives. Egerton's strategic deployment of essentialism both enables her women to bond across class and ethnic boundaries, even as it reinforces those same boundaries. Her working through this central problem of coalition building among women suggests not only a way of reading the New Woman as being involved in creating diverse communities of women, but also points towards feminism's continuing struggle to nurture a sense of community while valuing each member's difference and agency.

Endnotes

(1)Punch, in choosing this story for the basis of its “She-Notes” parody, cannot avoid acknowledging how difficult it is to contain the female protagonist in this story because she represents the beginning of Egerton’s slipping out of the confines of feminine identity. Unsurprisingly for a paper known for its harsh criticism of the New Woman, the parody expresses an obvious distaste for *Keynotes* and Egerton herself, whose transformation into “Borgia Smudgiton” alludes to her besmirching proper Victorian womanhood by smudging its purity (“She-Notes Part I”109). See “She-Notes Part I.” *Punch or the London Charivali*. 10 March 1894; “She-Notes Part II.” *Punch or the London Charivali*. 17 March 1894.([▲](#))

(2)Egerton would go on to write a total of five short story collections, one epistolary collection, one novel, seven plays, and various other sketches for journals such as *The Yellow Book*. For a full list of Egerton’s work, see Margaret Stetz’s bibliography in ““George Egerton”: Woman and Writer in the Eighteen-Nineties.”([▲](#))

(3)Although Egerton did not intend for “A Cross Line” to be at the beginning of *Keynotes*, the story’s scandalous subject of an extra-marital affair made her publisher and readers alike focus on the story as the keynote of the book. Egerton herself had positioned the story last in the table of contents that accompanied the book’s manuscript, but publisher John Lane decided that it ought to be first (Stetz 35). Thus while Egerton envisioned “A Cross Line” as the culmination of *Keynotes*, her readers read the story as its beginning. However, in either position, the story occupies an important place in the collection and represents what Egerton is doing in *Keynotes* as a whole.([▲](#))

(4)As Rosie Miles points out regarding the musical discord printed the first page of collection’s first story and the resolved chord at the beginning of this final story, “harmony is found in one of Egerton’s most utopian and positive stories in which she portrays the perfect union between a man and a woman” (251). Miles, Rosie. “George Egerton, Bitextuality and Cultural (Re)production in the 1890s.” *Women’s Writing* 3. 3 (1996): 243-259.([▲](#))

(5)In this space, Egerton can do what cannot be attempted in the real world: “Phantasmatic language allowed female aesthetes to describe actions forbidden to modern life . . . The languages marked the characters as ‘other,’ different” (Schaffer 51). Schaffer, Talia. *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000.([▲](#))

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