

George Egerton's Bewitching New Women

Abstract

The Victorian writer George Egerton—who rose to sudden popularity in the 1890's but sank into obscurity soon thereafter—greatly contributed to the shaping of the “New Woman.” Egerton believed that women should embrace their sexuality and use their “bewitching” power to their advantage—a proposal uniquely progressive for her time, given Victorian society's mores concerning women's behavior. Through an in-depth analysis, the author traces the theme of bewitching women throughout Egerton's first and most popular book of short stories, *Keynotes*.

A New and Witchy Woman

George Egerton's first book of short stories, *Keynotes*, sold 6,000 copies in 1893, its first year of publication. By 1898, *Keynotes* had gone into eight printings, been translated into seven languages, and in America, ranked second in sales only to Rudyard Kipling's short stories (Stetz 34). However, more than a century later, not many people know who George Egerton is; do you?

Cornelius Weygant wrote in 1925, “There was a to-do about ‘George Egerton’ in the *Yellowbook*¹ Days. There are few who recall her now” (qtd. in Stetz viii). For those among the still fewer who recall her in 2001, she was born Mary Chavelita Bright in 1859, and she chose to write under the masculine pen name “George Egerton” in order to escape the expectations of sentimentalism and “genteel” writing placed on female

¹ The *Yellowbook* was a Victorian literary journal, printed by Egerton's publisher, that prided itself on presenting the newest and sometimes most controversial writing and artwork.

Victorian authors by editors and readers. Her works, mostly autobiographical fiction, were received as frank and honest depictions of womanhood, unlike what she saw as the male-imagined passive victims that had so defined the majority of female characters in Victorian literature prior to the 1890's (Stetz 29, ix; McCulloch 206). Today, her fiction is categorized as "feminist" or "suffragist" and grouped with authors such as Sarah Grand, Mona Caird, Elizabeth Robins, and Olive Schreiner. Moreover, her works are generally thought to have greatly influenced the creation of a new literary figure of the time, the "New Woman"—a label applied to many types of power-seeking females, ranging from women who wanted their own careers to women who desired sexual liberation. (Lee; Heilman 2).

However, George Egerton was not a feminist. She rejected the "New Woman" label and attempted to distance herself from her feminist contemporaries (Heilman 2; Vicinus ix). She thought the women's rights movement produced "an atrophied animal, with degenerate leanings to hybridism," and she argued for "not civil, but *sexual* rights for women" [emphasis in original] (Stetz 131, 68). In keeping with this line of reasoning, Egerton proposed that women should embrace their sexuality and use their "bewitching" power to their advantage (Vicinus x).

Egerton's ideas were progressive for her time—perhaps too progressive for her to remain popular². While a substantial literary record is devoted to analyzing the varied and sometimes contradictory roles of women in Victorian society and literature, the majority of the texts do not mention Egerton, but instead discuss works by better-known

²A backlash against art and literature considered risqué followed the 1895 trials of Oscar Wilde. Subsequently, Egerton's work was criticized because of her progressive ideas. No one criticized her more than her first publisher, John Lane at The Bodley Head, who made her change much of her short stories

Victorian writers such as Dickens, Browning, and Eliot (Anderson, Logan, Reynolds). A number of texts, however, do mention Egerton, but most do so in little more than brief recognition of her contribution to the emergence of “the New Woman” (Ardis, Heilmann, Krandis, Ledger, Lee). Even fewer scholars have analyzed Egerton’s fiction for the general themes of female desire, the fallen woman, maternity, and feminism (Stetz and McCollogh). Despite these existing analyses, none have accomplished an acutely focused analysis of her female characters’ exploitation of their “bewitching” sexual power.

Egerton’s “bewitching” proposal, in particular, was uniquely progressive for her time, given that expressing and exploiting one’s sexuality was unladylike according to Victorian society’s mores. Nevertheless, this theme runs through many of her works, most noticeably her first book of short stories, *Keynotes*. The following article analyzes *Keynotes* with the main objective of providing a better insight into how Egerton conveyed her unique suggestion to countless readers, thus impacting the social conception of the “New Woman.”

Getting Under Her Spell

Keynotes is the subject of this critical analysis, as opposed to Egerton’s other books³, because it is her first and most popular fictional publication. Also, *Keynotes* is Egerton’s most sensationally received book, perhaps due to it being the book least edited by her publishers, and thus it reveals more of her unique sentiments on women’s issues (Stetz 84-90). In order to accomplish an analysis of *Keynotes* for Egerton’s first public

before he would publish them. She subsequently left The Bodley Head in 1897, although she still felt pressure from the reading public to curb the expression of her radical ideas in her writing (Stetz 84-90).
³ *Discords* was published in 1894, *Symphonies* in 1897, *Fantasias* in 1898, *The Wheel of God* in 1898, *Rosa Amorosa* in 1901, and *Flies in Amber* in 1905.

revelations on female sexuality and, more precisely, the theme of bewitching females, two different publications of the book were consulted. The 1977 reprinting of *Keynotes* by Garland Publishing, Inc. contains only the short stories of the original 1893 *Keynotes*—“A Cross Line,” “Now Spring Has Come,” “The Spell of the White Elf,” “A Little Gray Glove,” “An Empty Frame,” and the three-part “Under Northern Sky.”

The 1983 Virago Press publication of *Keynotes and Discords*, contains an introduction by Martha Vicinus. Her introduction provides useful information on Egerton’s life, as well as a look into Egerton’s views on sexual power. Vicinus writes: “Throughout her work the highest compliment Egerton could give a woman was to declare her a witch, in the sense of being bewitching—someone who knew her sexual attractiveness and was willing to use it” (18). Given that Egerton’s female characters often refer to themselves or are referred to by other characters as witches, Vicinus’ use of the word “bewitching” is particularly apropos.

Besides Vicinus’ introduction, Kate McCulloch’s 1996 essay, “Mapping the ‘Terra Incognita’ of women: George Egerton’s *Keynotes* (1893) and New Woman Fiction,” was also consulted for further elaboration on the related theme of female desire in Egerton’s writing. Also, Margaret Stetz’s 1982 dissertation, *‘George Egerton’: Woman and Writer of the Eighteen-Nineties*, and 1997 article, “*Keynotes*: A New Woman, Her Publisher, and Her Material,” provided invaluable biographical information on Egerton. Both works appear exhaustively researched, and Stetz’s dissertation, in particular, may indeed be the most comprehensive source for researchers looking for information on Egerton’s life. However, *A Leaf from the Yellowbook*—a biography and collection of Egerton’s letters compiled by her nephew, Terence de Vere White—was not

consulted directly, as it contains inaccuracies. No other texts that significantly discuss Egerton were found.

The Witch's Witches

Keynotes begins with “A Cross Line,” a story that features a woman who is happily married but forms a scandalously close relationship with a man outside her marriage. A torrid affair is hinted at, but the evidence presented by Egerton leads one to conclude the two never act on their sexual tension, characterized by the “infinitesimal electrical threads” that run between them (25). Rather, she leaves his desires unfulfilled at the end of the story, as he says to her, “You have given me something—something to carry away with me—an infernal want. You ought to be satisfied. I am infernally miserable” (25). Indeed, the only love scene in the story occurs between the woman and her husband, which results in a pregnancy—her reason for ending her extramarital relationship before it becomes an affair. Thus the “cross line” is never breached.

An important dynamic of the relationship between the unnamed woman and the “cold grey eye[d]” man lies in the setting (3). They meet at a trout stream, where she displays superior skills in fly-fishing. Even though he sees “the female animal” as merely an object to “study” and prefers to gain as much “experience” with the objects of “his untiring pursuit” as he can, this particular subject’s unladylike talent intrigues him, and he immediately falls under her spell, falling deeper as the summer goes by (3). The symbolism of their fly-fishing friendship reinforces Egerton’s bewitching theme, as the woman *lures* and *entices* the man with irresistible bait, her “witch woman” powers (30). “I believe you are half a witch,” her companion says to her while she lies daydreaming, and she responds, “Is not every woman that?” (23). Through a great deal of dialogue

between the two companions, Egerton presents this female character as an intelligent, philosophical woman, who has spent a great deal of time pondering the essence of her womanhood. She says:

They have all overlooked the eternal wildness, the untamed primitive savage temperament that lurks in the mildest, best woman. Deep in through ages of convention this primeval trait burns, an untameable [sic] quantity that may be concealed but is never eradicated by culture—the keynote of woman’s witchcraft and woman’s strength. (22)

Both her husband and her new companion flirtatiously refer to her as a “gipsy” [sic] (14), a “devil” (15), and a “witch” (30) throughout the story. However, these labels are not meant as insults⁴. Indeed, as Martha Vicinus wrote in her introduction to *Keynotes*, for Egerton to declare a woman a witch was the highest compliment she could bestow (18). Nevertheless, just being bewitching was not enough; a woman had to know how to use her powers in order to be successful in Egerton’s eyes, which the woman in “A Cross Line” clearly demonstrates. She knows that most men do not understand women:

And she laughs softly to herself because the denseness of man, his chivalrous conservative devotion to the female idea he has created blinds him, perhaps happily, to her complex nature...The wisest of [men] can only say we are enigmas”; “It is the elusive spirit in her that he divines but cannot seize, that fascinates and keeps him. (21, 29)

She understands that she is a mystery to men, and she employs this mystery to keep them under her spell until she no longer desires their companionship.

⁴ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “witch” as “A female magician; in later use *esp.* a woman supposed to have dealings with the devil or evil spirits...” as well as “a young woman or girl of bewitching aspect or manner.” In addition, *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* defines “witch” as an “ugly old woman: HAG.” Indeed, during many times throughout history being labeled a “witch” could mean death—for example, the Salem Witch Trials of 1692 (“Salem”).

“Now Spring Has Come,” the second story in *Keynotes*, also features an intelligent woman who holds a similar ideology to the woman in “A Cross Line,” as she reveals in her conversation with an unnamed listener, who is audience to the entire story:

What half creatures we are, we women!—hermaphrodite by force of circumstances, deformed results of a fight of centuries between physical suppression and natural impulse to fulfill our destiny...In one word, the untrue feminine is of man’s making; while the strong, the natural, the true womanly is of God’s making. (49-50)

In “Now Spring Has Come,” the main character finds herself deeply attracted to the author of a “very bad book...One of the modern realistic school,” an inappropriate book for a lady of her status— unmarried, but wealthy enough to travel between England and Norway at her whim (47). She is “consumed with a desire to see and know the author” (48). Once they meet, she sets out to make a love match. She says, “He admired—no that is not the word; he was taken with me, that is better” (55). She bewitches him, but interestingly, unlike other female protagonists in *Keynotes*, instead of remaining aloof and bewildering, she expresses herself freely. She shares many insights with him, and perhaps this is what attracts him to her.

Although she is unique in her openness, she does share certain qualities with other Egerton “witches.” For example, she describes herself as having “something shining through” (56). As we shall see in the stories that follow “Now Spring Has Come,” whether it is a sense of mystery or a special wisdom, many of Egerton’s women have this ambiguous “something”—an essence that is not quite identifiable. Another interesting aspect of Egerton’s bewitching females is that they are described as having childlike features. For example, the woman in “Now Spring Has Come” sees the “very childishness of [her] figure” (52). By giving her female characters childlike features,

Egerton not only makes them appear youthful and attractive to their male counterparts, she also reinforces the theme of their bewitching abilities in the paradox of their innocent and childlike appearances and their strong and, more over, crafty natures.

Yet another common trait we shall see among Egerton's females is the use of their hands to lure a mate. For example, in "A Cross Line" the fisherwoman's companion notices her "perfect[ly] shaped" hands (6). A woman's hands are sexual icons in Victorian terms, perhaps because they are often the only naked patches of skin, other than the neck and face, in every-day Victorian dress. Thus, they represent the entire body of skin under the gown. In "Now Spring Has Come," the female character raises her hands above her head and puffs "them with sweet smelling powder" to make them white, and therefore more alluring (58).

Indeed, by the end of her first trip to Norway, she has successfully snared him, evident in his request for her portrait. As she leaves Norway via boat, she thinks she has captured his soul: "I look into his soul through his eyes, and see it is sorry, regretful—as sorry as I am glad it is so: he is sorry I am going from him, and in that short concentrated gaze his soul comes to me as I would have it come to me." In addition to this scene, she says she often has "*intuitive experiences*" [emphasis in original] (69). The instances of supernatural or mystical experiences in this story, as well the instances we will see in other *Keynotes* stories, echo Egerton's theme of witchery.

Unfortunately for the "witch" in "Now Spring Has Come," she is unable to keep hold of her catch, even with the "lip-kisses" they share upon her return to Norway (69). After a year away from him, she has changed physically. She is thinner and older looking than his memory of her, his "dream creature" (70). Thus, she has lost some of

what drew him to her, and although it would seem that with age she would be even more adept at using her bewitching attributes, she has lost perhaps the most alluring—her looks. Yet, his rejection does not break her heart. Instead, she describes her heart as “a sponge with a lot of holes in it...the feeling had oozed away through them” (74). With this durable heart, she remains strong and independent, and her emotions do not defeat her.

“The Spell of the White Elf” also features strong, independent women. However, this story does not involve the bewitching of men. Rather, two women are bewitched. First, “a very learned lady” bewitches the narrator. Second, a baby, the “white elf,” bewitches the “learned lady” (80, 90). This “learned lady” is highly educated, a scholar and writer who, though married, travels alone to do research. She also possesses “intuitive” powers, like other Egerton females (85). This woman exudes power through her lifestyle and intellect, which attracts the narrator: “There is something manlike [or powerful] about her; I don’t know where it lies, but it is there” (82). The two women become friends while traveling back to England from Norway, and the writer tells her new friend of her experiences with a child she has taken into her home, who “rules [her] with a touch of her little hands” (97).

Egerton continues her keynote theme of witchery, though not sexual witchery, throughout this story. Indeed, even the title, “The Spell of the White Elf” reinforces this theme. Here and in other stories, Egerton even makes the land, most notably the beautiful land of Norway, bewitching: “there is a witchery about the country [Norway] that creeps into one and works like a love-philter, and if one has once lived up there, one never gets it out of one’s blood again” (81). Egerton’s choice of a Norwegian backdrop

further reinforces her supernatural theme of witchery due to Norway's rich heritage of folk tales that feature fantastic creatures like elves and trolls, such as the well-known "Three Billy Goats Gruff."

Scenery again plays an important role in the next story in *Keynotes*, "A Little Gray Glove." At a country inn near a trout stream, the narrator of this story, a man who is the would-be fish about to be caught by a woman's fancily teased lure, crosses paths with Egerton's next witch. Egerton repeats several themes from "A Cross Line." First, like the male fly fisherman in "A Cross Line," this man has a past with women and presents himself as being weary them. He also prides himself on being a student of women. He says, "I pursued the Eternal Feminine in a spirit of purely scientific investigation" (101). However, he soon finds himself quite literally lured and snagged by a different femme fatale fly fisher.

The femme fatale in "A Little Gray Glove," also similar to the woman in "A Cross Line," uses her knowledge of fishing to attract a man. She appears to him as a "gray-clad woman" fishing by a river (107). Though he presents himself as an experienced fisher, he foolishly walks too close to her while she casts, and he ends up caught in the ear with her hook. This blunder turns out to be a blessing in disguise to him, as he encounters the most interesting woman he has ever met and falls under her spell almost immediately. His enchantment is best illustrated when she strips the hook from his ear. He is not aware of the pain; instead, all he notices is her "very white forehead," Victorian mark of beauty and class, her "most maddening mouth," and her "soft as a child's" face (109).

This last attribute echoes the childlike features common to most of Egerton's bewitching women, and is just one of the many repeated themes that "A Little Gray Glove" shares with other stories in *Keynotes*. Also echoed throughout this story is Egerton's use of the color gray. For example, the narrator says, "What a fool I am to be disturbed by a gray-clad witch with a tantalizing mouth!" (110). Gray is neither black nor white and encompasses many shades, thus adding to the mystery behind the "gray-clad" woman. In addition to the mystery she presents, he is also attracted by yet another characteristic of Egerton witches—her hands, which remind him "of white orchids" (111).

During their time at the inn, he becomes even more attracted to her simply because he does not know enough about her; she is an enchanting mystery to him. Why does she wear a wedding ring? Why does she return from town weary and distressed? By the time she gives him the answers to these questions, he is completely enamored with her. So much so that when she reveals her scandalous past—a rumored affair and subsequent divorce that would be devastating to a Victorian woman's most valuable possession, her reputation—he asks her to marry him, something that could be dangerous to his own reputation. She continues the enchantment by telling him to wait for her answer and return to the inn in one year, when he can ask her again. She does not, however, say whether she will answer "yes" or "no." But she does leave a memento—her "little gray glove," which serves as a reminder of her and keeps him in her spell, especially since it is a representation of her attractive hands. One might say that she still has her hook in him, and that by leaving her glove with him, she continues to string him along.

“An Empty Frame” is the next story in *Keynotes*, and features “a woman wondrously soft and swift in her movements” (124). She shares the same childlike features as Egerton’s other witches, exhibited by “her delicate thoughtful temples” and “slim child-hands” (124, 126). Also, she is not a beauty: “Her face is more characteristic than beautiful. Nine men would pass it, the tenth sell his immortal soul for it” (124-5). This characteristic is reminiscent of the Egerton woman’s indefinable essence, which can make even the most plain-faced woman extremely sexy and desirable.

Unfortunately, all her “witchlike” attributes do not help her win the man she truly desires. In the story, she reads a letter from an ex-love while waiting for her current husband to come to bed. The letter, in part, reads, “good, sweet woman; you slight, weak thing, with your strong will and your grand, great heart; you witch, with a soul of clean white fire.” (126). She had bewitched him at one time, but he would not marry her: “I love you, I worship you; but you know my views. I cannot, I will not bind myself to you by any legal or religious tie” (126).

In her loneliness after his rejection, she married a man “who seemed to need her most” (127). However, she remains aloof to her new husband: “Don’t mind me. I have a bit of a complex nature; you couldn’t understand me if you tried to, and better not try!” (130). She, like other women in *Keynotes*, continues to be a mystery by hiding her thoughts and feelings from her husband. Although she chooses to hide her true self, at the end of the story she seems to find happiness in her marriage, as she falls asleep “with his curly head on her breast” (131). One gets the feeling, however, that she will never forget the “untamed, natural man” she could not domesticate (125).

“Under Northern Sky,” the last story in *Keynotes*, also features a man who would not be tamed; however, two women accomplish just that. This three-part story tells the tale of a married couple living in Norway. The husband is a drunkard and brute who verbally and physically abuses his quiet, childlike wife, as well as his servants. However, he succumbs to the spells of his wife, the “pale little mistress” of the house, and one of his maids, Marie Larsen (132).

Marie Larsen, like the woman in “A Little Gray Glove,” is a woman with a checkered past. However, instead of being a hindrance, Marie uses her past as a source of strength. She is an empowered woman, a quality that bewitches the master of the house, and she is able to stand up to him, even through his tantrums: “She dodges a glass adroitly, and raises her voice to drown his shriek of what the merry devil she means” (145). The unladylike Marie drinks cognac and wine with the husband in an effort to help him fall asleep, and the first part of “Under Northern Sky” ends with Marie lullabying him to sleep, like a child. Thus, “Marie has exorcised the devil” (147).

Unlike Marie Larsen, the “little mistress of the great house” bewitches her husband with childlike features and innocence (133). Her husband even seems to recognize the power she has over him: “Ah, if you women knew what a hold simple goodness has on us!” (136). He also refers to her as a “witch! With eyes that probe into a fellow’s soul, and shame him and fear nothing,” as well as a “queer little gypsy” (153). She, indeed, envisions running away with a group of gypsies, which represent her freedom from him. Yet, she decides not to run away after watching him sleep and noticing his powerful yet childlike features, which remind her that he desperately needs her to help him through his illness. This “pale little mistress” may be the least powerful

woman in *Keynotes* because she is the character most trapped in her relationship with the man she bewitches. However, she more likely represents the most powerful woman in *Keynotes* simply because she manages to tame Egerton's most stubborn male character.

Spell-Bound

Keynotes features many strong female characters. However, the mere appearance of strong female characters would not have been shocking to Victorian readers; they were already familiar with strong, "thinking" female characters like those in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* of 1847 ("Brontë"). But the source of Egerton's female characters' strength—their bewitching power—would have been quite shocking to a society that did not recognize the expression and exploitation of sexuality as a ladylike endeavor.

Indeed, women's use of their sexualities as power is still a hot-button feminist issue that even today's empowered women have not been able to agree upon—is it beneficial or detrimental to womankind? The debate continues. Egerton helped sparked this debate, along with other Victorian writers, such as Henry James and Ella D'Arcy, whose works (most notably *Daisy Miller* and "The Pleasure Pilgrim" respectively) also feature independent and flirtatious women ("James", D'Arcy). *Keynotes*, in particular, with its record sales and sensational reception brought Egerton's views into the public conscious. And despite her attempts to distance herself from the feminist movement, George Egerton remains one of the strongest influences on the early feminist movement and the development of "the New Woman."

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