



## **Engendering New Motherhood: Tactile Exchange in George Egerton's *Keynotes* (1893) and *Flies in Amber* (1905)**

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### **Abstract**

George Egerton's *Keynotes* (1893) is a seminal text of the New Woman movement at the *fin de siècle* and has garnered significant critical attention over the last four decades. Egerton went on to publish four more volumes of short fiction, with decreasing popularity, the last being *Flies in Amber* (1905). This article addresses the shortage of scholarship on Egerton's later writing by assessing the consistency with which she invokes moments of touch and object exchange as a means to radicalise motherhood in two popular and well-known early stories, "A Cross Line" and "The Spell of the White Elf" (*Keynotes*), and a less-known later story "Mammy" (*Flies in Amber*). Through tactile exchange, Egerton's female protagonists establish a maternal network that challenges patriarchal hypocrisy and preserves their New Womanhood. By understanding Egerton's valorisation of maternity as a "New Motherhood," this article challenges claims of essentialism and accusations of conventionality in Egerton's writing while reinstating the cultural value of her later publications.

### **Keywords**

George Egerton; tactile exchange; touch; motherhood; popular; New Woman.

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**Engendering New Motherhood:  
Tactile Exchange in  
George Egerton's *Keynotes* (1893) and *Flies in Amber* (1905)**

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**Introduction**

In “Flies in Amber” we hear again the emphatic, purposeful voice of the lady who wrote “Keynotes” in the days when the Pioneer Club was something novel and well-advertised, and the “Yellow Book” was in existence or about to come into existence. “George Egerton” was taken to represent what were then the New Women; and the short stories here show that she is still in high revolt, and that her dislike of the conventionalities of the “suburban” view is as keen as ever. The majority of the tales deal with “sex” problems; and some of the sayings-by-the-way are, to say the least of them, “frank”, while at times, too, in the descriptions of love-making there is a lack of delicacy and restraint; all of which is a pity, the lady being a writer of real power, who can present a subtle analysis of a feminine character.

(“Flies in Amber,” *The Bookman* 1905: 145)

In an often-quoted passage from “A Keynote to *Keynotes*,” George Egerton (pseudonym for Mary Chavelita Dunne, 1859–1945) reflects that at the time she was writing her first and bestselling volume of short stories in the early 1890s, “there was only one small plot left to tell: 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” (Egerton 1932: 59). With this as her philosophy, Egerton’s early writing sought to do something that, as she viewed it, neither men’s nor women’s writing had thus far fully achieved: the authentic articulation of womanhood. The same could be said of Egerton’s later publication *Flies in Amber* (1905), which achieved, as *The Bookman* attests above, “a subtle analysis of a feminine character” and maintained the “keen” dislike of conventionality and “high revolt” that was so esteemed in *Keynotes* (1893), though it garnered significantly less acclaim, less commercial success, and subsequently less critical attention.

In this article, I address this oversight through a closing reading of moments of tactile exchange in both her early and late short fiction, through which, I argue, Egerton reconceptualises motherhood. In doing so, I challenge claims of essentialism and accusations of conventionality attributed to Egerton by reconciling her as-yet unresolved valorisation of motherhood with her radical philosophy.

To accomplish the subtle and authentic characterisations that brought Egerton her early success, she drew from sources not yet familiar within British literary culture – Friedrich Nietzsche and Knut Hamsun, among others – which lent her writing an idiosyncrasy that set her apart from her contemporaries. In her highly subjective and naturalistic style, Egerton did not shy away from addressing topics which were conventionally considered immoral, instead celebrating the taboo of female sexuality and advocating extreme measures for liberation, including marital estrangement (as in her 1894 story “Virgin Soil” from *Discords*). Even those who were fans of *Keynotes* thought, as T. P. Gill did (while still under the impression that ‘George Egerton’ was a man), that “less of this starkness” and fewer “appeals to the sexual sense” (Letter to George Egerton, 10th March 1893, in De Vere White 1958: 23) might be more palatable for contemporary readers. *Keynotes*’s “starkness” becomes *Flies in Amber*’s “frankness;” both critiques attest to the centrality of truth-telling throughout Egerton’s writing. Her fiction pays respect to womanhood as a varied, fluctuating, and ultimately subjective experience, with heroines from many walks of life who bring to the page complex hardships, and though critics such as Iveta Jusová are cautious of her “essentializing tendency” (2000: 35), it is Egerton’s “gallery of characters whose desires are as diverse as they are numerous” (36) that resound across her entire oeuvre and undermine in practice the problematic philosophy she has been accused of endorsing.

With her career of two halves, critical work on Egerton tends to focus almost exclusively on the early *Keynotes* and *Discords* (1894). Over the last four decades, the work of Elaine Showalter, Martha Vicinus, Margaret D. Stetz, Sally Ledger, and Angelique Richardson, among others, has successfully reappraised the forgotten women writers of the *fin de siècle* and the bold politics espoused in their bestselling fiction. Despite this, critical attention surrounding Egerton has tended to accept, and thereby replicate, the narrative that Egerton’s writing in the latter half of the 1890s and particularly after the turn of the century was of less cultural value in comparison to her earlier work, since it was less prolific in terms of sales. However, my article aims to reappraise Egerton’s later short fiction, namely her final volume *Flies in Amber*, which was published by Hutchinson after Egerton had been officially dropped from The Bodley Head. In one of the only critical assessments of the later collection, Tina O’Toole proposes that, by paying closer attention to *Flies in Amber*, we are better able to appreciate “the extension of [Egerton’s] aesthetic experiments into the late 1890s” (2017: 21). This approach also enables O’Toole to recognise the “abiding concerns” of “urban and migrant identities” (19) and the “sustained interest in class and confessional divides” (21) prevalent throughout Egerton’s entire oeuvre. In this article, I expand O’Toole’s recovery work by bringing together Egerton’s earliest and latest, most and least known short stories. The consistency across her short fiction that materialises by this widened approach is important to recognise, as it brings into relief the overarching concerns that endure throughout the twelve years between the publication of the popular *Keynotes* and that of the more obscure *Flies in Amber*. Such consistency also attests to the enduring need for women writers to continue articulating the truths of women’s struggles in their fiction, in turn reinstating the cultural value of the still-forgotten work of New Woman writers. Attentiveness to this aspect of her fiction serves to refresh scholarship that has thus far been predominantly occupied with moments that stunned late-Victorian readers, such as the dream sequence in “A Cross Line,” or ideas that have been frequently problematised by scholars, such as Egerton’s interest in the *Ewig Weibliche* (“eternal

feminine”). Instead, understanding her writing more broadly helps to reorient scholarship towards new unexplored avenues, or *terra incognita*, of Egerton’s short fiction. My study of maternity through a novel close reading of the tactile serves this end, as it reframes Egerton’s fictional mothers in a more positively feminist light and challenges accepted criticism of her alleged essentialism while also bridging the gap between her early fiction and her largely dismissed later writing.

To achieve this, I first reassess two of Egerton’s best-known stories from *Keynotes*, “A Cross Line” and “The Spell of the White Elf,” since both have continually concerned critics in their seemingly retrograde conclusions. By approaching these texts through the lens of tactile exchange, I am able to foreground Egerton’s “New Motherhood,” before then going on to discuss a lesser-known story “Mammy” from *Flies in Amber*, which presents this “New Motherhood” in its most radical iteration. I will analyse the ways in which pivotal moments of tactile exchange enable Egerton’s protagonists to endorse their instincts and desires through establishing a supportive maternal network. I will then demonstrate the ways in which this radical self-governance delivers further rebukes to the conventions of late-nineteenth century patriarchal society. These rebukes are engendered, firstly, by enabling middle-class and wealthy protagonists to empathise with other, often lower-class, women, thus exposing the hypocrisy and prejudice of patriarchal institutions. Secondly, Egerton radicalises motherhood by depicting a parental lifestyle that preserves the New Woman’s agentic independence, which, I argue, becomes increasingly viable as it is replicated. Finally, by expanding the valorisation of maternity beyond biological reproduction, and encompassing characters who are not, strictly speaking, biological mothers, a careful reading of Egerton’s stories actually contradicts accusations of essentialism, as they promote a strikingly progressive inclusivity within her maternal network.

## Touch and Motherhood

Both Egerton’s style and subject matter alarmed reactionary critics. In 1895, Hugh Stutfield berated Egerton’s early writing as “erotomania,” with “dreadfully introspective” characters who are always in the “search for new thrills and sensations” and who “possess a maddening faculty of dissecting and probing their ‘primary impulses’ – especially the sexual ones” (1895: 835). *Flies in Amber* met similar criticism twelve years later for its “lack of delicacy and restraint” (“Flies in Amber,” *The Bookman* 1905: 145). Both conservative critiques object to the conspicuously narrated sensory experiences of Egerton’s female characters, which reject notions of propriety in favour of articulating authentic subjectivities. Egerton’s engagement with tactile sensation is a significant characteristic of such radical and provocative writing. Indeed, her popular and more obscure narratives alike often pivot around central moments of tactile exchange; these moments often constitute or incite each story’s climax. In the stories I discuss, it is through the exchange of an object and the tactile interaction therewith that Egerton’s fictional mothers (or mothers-to-be) identify with their female counterparts, subsequently creating a supportive maternal network. This constitutes what I term a “New Motherhood,” as it reconciles the feminist ethos of Egerton’s New Women with the ostensibly conventional heteronormativity that concludes many of her stories, often via Egerton’s valorisation of maternity.

Most criticism contends with Egerton’s belief in motherhood as the keynote of womanhood. For example, Elke D’hoker discusses the “tension” between the “desire for freedom” and the “desire to be mothers” (2011: 536) for Egerton’s female characters and describes “A Cross Line” as a tale in which the protagonist’s “maternal feelings and responsibilities thus win out over her individualism and desire for freedom” (536).

D'hoker likewise posits that “The Spell of the White Elf,” though it “does manage to resolve the tension between individualism and maternity,” is “clearly idealistic” and therefore is “again indicative of the tension between selfishness and devotion, creation and procreation which haunts Egerton’s women” (537). Nicole M. Fluhr sees Egerton’s writing as attempting to “reconceptualize earlier nineteenth-century approaches to motherhood and to female writers” (2001: 245) by troubling the supposedly antithetical relation between both types of productivity. Fluhr concludes her analysis by reading Egerton’s fiction as “experiments” that, “with a few wilfully idealistic exceptions, can only wish for a world in which women might combine [...] the proud independence of the self-supporting writer and the grateful interdependence of women who find they can turn to each other in times of need” (263). More succinctly, Lyn Pykett describes maternity in Egerton’s writing as “both women’s glory and their curse” (1992: 174). Even O’Toole’s analysis of *Flies in Amber* reproduces the struggle with Egerton’s maternal conclusions, writing of “The Chessboard of Guendolen” that “the ending reneges on the promise held out by Egerton’s earlier work” (2014: 839) as it hints towards its heroine’s pregnancy. My article, in contrast to these readings, seeks to resolve the difficulty of Egerton’s recourse to motherhood by demonstrating the ways in which her fictional mothers’ tactile interactions successfully extend, rather than negate, her radical philosophy.

Egerton’s interest in maternity, as well as her scandalous endorsement of female sexuality, has attracted scholarship on the topic of female bodies. My interest in the tactile is thus an intervention in an established field of New Woman criticism, including recent work on self-harm by Alexandra Gray and Charlotte Kelso on the body as an interface. Gray’s book *Self-Harm in New Woman Writing* (2018) considers drunkenness and self-mutilation in Egerton’s fiction, drawing on her wider output, including the story “Pan” from *Symphonies* (1897) and her novel *The Wheel of God* (1898). Nevertheless, Gray’s analysis is predominantly occupied with three stories from Egerton’s well-trodden collection *Discords* (1894), “A Psychological Moment,” “Her Share,” and “Gone Under.” For Gray, self-mutilation in New Woman fiction is “a strategy that requires the fictional body be deployed as a communicative surface on which traumas are inscribed” as well as “a tactic to both disrupt patriarchal control of the body and survive the internalisation of religious codes” (Gray 2018: 201). Similarly, Kelso’s article, “The Body as Interface: New Woman Identity in George Egerton’s ‘The Regeneration of Two,’” discusses another protagonist from *Discords*, and the ways in which her body acts “as a surface where discourses of identity interact with those of dress, class, and gender” and as “a site upon which performative femininity is exposed and critiqued” (2019: 90). Kelso praises the protagonist’s unrestricted physical strength in the final part of “The Regeneration of Two” as inscribed with power against prevailing patriarchal principles, and Gray credits New Woman writing that “asserts [the female body’s] corporeality in a world that requires its erasure” (Gray 2018: 201). My attention to tactility likewise explores the New Woman’s dissident physicality, but as more than a surface or a site upon which symbolic messages are inscribed or disrupted, as in both Gray’s and Kelso’s analyses. Rather, I posit that for Egerton the body is itself a significant source of power, and that tactility taps into this agentic and corporeal power to foster autonomy for the New Woman in line with her progressive principles.

The sense of touch has long been understood within Western culture as a source of power available to women in their confrontation with patriarchal values. Cultural historian Constance Classen has researched the history behind this gendering of the senses. While discussing a medieval myth in which it was believed that a woman’s seductive touch “threaten[ed] the visual power of men” (1997: 11), whose sight weakened after excessive coitus “by depleting the body of seminal fluid” (11), Classen writes that “women, with

their sensory wiles, had the ability to dethrone men, and male visuality from their position at the top of the gender and sensory hierarchy” (13). This remained true centuries later, when the New Woman’s rejection of patriarchal values in her fight for increased autonomy aligned her with the agentic and active properties of tactility, which has historically been considered an inherently feminine mode of perception. This underpins William Sharp’s review of *Keynotes* for *The Academy*, in which he writes that “there can be no question as to the sex of ‘George Egerton’. The touch of a woman is recognisable throughout” (1894: 143). Egerton’s writing puts into play women’s “sensory wiles,” drawing on evocatively haptic details authentically to articulate woman’s experience. The heroine of “A Cross Line” first introduces us to this technique:

“It is a wise disposition of providence that this untameableness of ours is corrected by our affections. We forge our own chains in a moment of softness, and then,” bitterly, “we may as well wear them with a good grace. Perhaps many of our seeming contradictions are only the outward evidences of inward chafing. Bah! the qualities that go to make a Napoleon – superstition, want of honour, disregard of opinion and the eternal I – are oftener to be found in a woman than a man. Lucky for the world perhaps that all these attributes weigh as nothing in the balance with the need to love if she be a good woman, to be loved if she is of a coarser fibre.”

(Egerton, “A Cross Line” [1893] 1983: 28)

The language of tactility used by Egerton here sets the tone for her inherently haptic negotiation of womanhood. She characterises women’s struggles through “moments of softness,” “inward chafing,” and “coarser fibres,” invoking conflicting textures and uncomfortable friction to articulate her heroine’s turmoil. Particularly with regards to her philosophy on maternity, Egerton draws on the primordial and foundational qualities of touch, attributed by Aristotle and characterising the sense thereafter (Paterson 2007: 7), to reach beyond the designs of civilisation. For Egerton, woman’s natural “untameableness” chafes against the contrastingly unnatural systems and laws of Victorian society; the primitivity of touch cuts through layers of inauthentic social and cultural codes by way of its intuitiveness and unrefined immediacy. The idea of a universally natural womanhood has, however, concerned critics such as Ann Heilmann, who argues that Egerton’s belief in the *ewig weibliche* “replicated rather than challenged patriarchal thinking” (2000: 45). I suggest, however, that Egerton’s notion of a shared maternity goes beyond the patriarchal role of reproducing biological offspring. Instead, I argue that Egerton applies, as Lyn Pykett also observes, “maternal feeling (as opposed to the mere fact of physical reproduction)” (1992: 174) to her characters, drawing further on the multi-faceted properties of touch, in particular its emotive qualities, to also champion motherly affect. As opposed to the conventional upholding of procreation as woman’s duty, Egerton’s valorisation of maternity is an exercise in fostering solidarity and understanding between women with varying experiences. By understanding Egerton’s maternal network in this way, I contest Heilmann’s argument that Egerton merely replicates patriarchal thought.

### **Maternal Networks in *Keynotes* (1893)**

Egerton’s first and arguably most well-known story, “A Cross Line,” introduces a character type that becomes familiar across her oeuvre: an enigmatic and bewitching woman whose thirst for adventure and intellectual stimulation is matched by her contradictory affections. She is caught in an adulterous affair with a man from the city who facilitates her wanderlust and craving for motion, while her husband ardently satisfies her sexuality despite frustrating her intellect with his “singular, soft monotony” (Egerton, “A Cross Line” [1893] 1983: 11). While the two men represent her irreconcilable desires for affection and freedom, the story concludes

with neither, instead valorising maternity through the protagonist's relationship with her maid, Lizzie. Having realised that she is pregnant, Egerton's protagonist confides in the only other woman in the story; Lizzie then confesses her own illegitimate maternity in response, cut short by her baby's early death. The tactile exchange occurs as Egerton's protagonist asks Lizzie, "Have you, have you any little things left?":

The latter goes out and comes back with a flat, red-painted deal box and unlocks it. It does not hold very much, and the tiny garments are not of costly material, but the two women pore over them as a gem collector over a rare stone. She has a glimpse of thick covered paper as the girl unties a packet of letters, and looks away until she says tenderly –

"Look, Ma'm!"

A little bit of hair inside a paper heart. It is almost white, so silky, and so fine, that it is more like a thread of bog wool than a baby's hair. And the mistress, who is a wife, puts her arms around the tall maid, who had never had more than a moral claim to the name, and kisses her in a quick way.

(Egerton, "A Cross Line" [1893] 1983: 35)

They share in the delight of the precious items, with both women appreciating their sentimental value irrespective of monetary worth. The white, fine, and silky hair, likened to "bog wool," indicates the simplicity and purity of maternal affection, which, like the natural wool, resists the forces of Victorian civilisation which, elsewhere in the story, Egerton berates for its "laws" and "systems" that render man "tamed" and "amenable" (28). The vague and ambiguous label of "little things" reinforces this elemental feeling, implying that language itself is insufficient, overly structured, and man-made, and hence incapable of articulating something so natural. Bill Brown's "Thing Theory" and the distinction he draws between a "thing" and an "object" further indicates the depth of meaning in this exchange. For Brown, an object is merely functional and material, whose utilization occurs as expected (2001: 5). A thing, on the other hand, can be defined as that which "is excessive in objects, [...] their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems" (5). The invested significance of these "things" as they embody the tragedy of Lizzie's motherhood establishes a metaphysical bond between Egerton's pregnant protagonist and the grieving mother. Together, they "pore" over the emblems, becoming totally captivated by the inexpensive items as if they were rare marvels. As well as signalling their absorption, "pore" also alludes to the permeable surface of the skin which, in addition to the tactile action of the homophone "to paw," emphatically reinforces the tactile nature of this shared intimate experience. For Egerton's protagonist, the confessional moment is stirring. Lizzie trusts her with the truth of her darkest moments and even endorses her contact with the child's belongings; this inspires strong emotion not shown elsewhere in the narrative. In reaching beyond the objectivity of the items, as well as the taming systems of society, this exchange creates a mutual ground upon which the two characters are rendered nothing more than "two women," transcending the class divide that typically dictates their relationship elsewhere in the story.

This erasure of class difference constitutes Lisa Hager's criticism of "A Cross Line." Hager argues that presenting this "bonding over maternity as a positive ending" comprises a failure on Egerton's part to "acknowledge the extent to which the class difference between the two women creates a distance" (2006: para. 15). For Hager, Egerton's protagonist is inconsiderate of the "unequal position in which she puts her maid" when "command[ing] her to expose the emblems" (para. 15). As such, the protagonist of "A Cross Line" "inhibits the subversive possibilities" of female friendship as she "constantly reasserts her privileged position" (para. 14). Ultimately, Hager decries Egerton's protagonist as someone that "remains always the lady of the house who is untouched by those who are not of her

own race and class” (para. 13). I contest this interpretation and propose that a tactile reading of the final scene of “A Cross Line” revises Hager’s claims that there is a “distance” between the two women and that the protagonist remains “untouched.” Firstly, there is uncharacteristic hesitancy as Egerton’s protagonist stutters, “Have you, have you any little things left?” when asking her maid about her motherhood, which contradicts Hager’s suggestion of a “command.” Moreover, Lizzie exhibits an eagerness to share her precious possessions when she calls “Look, Ma’m!”, actively sharing the most personal of them all with the protagonist, who at this point had looked away to offer her maid some privacy; this again differs from Hager’s representation of the maid who, in her words, “does not volunteer her story about her child [or] offer to show her keepsake box” (para. 15). When delighting in the tactility of the delicate lock of hair, Egerton’s protagonist is faced with the tragedy that has befallen Lizzie – a tragedy exacerbated by the same oppressive structures that Egerton’s protagonist has already emphatically criticised for their “elaborately reasoned codes for controlling morals” (Egerton, “A Cross Line” [1893] 1983: 28). These structures delegitimised children born out of wedlock, ostracising mothers and their babies from society and very often forcing them to live in poverty. Egerton’s protagonist is deeply moved and impulsively kisses Lizzie, physically closing any distance between them and touching her affectionately to offer her an emotional outlet and overdue comfort. Egerton not only shows a mutual maternal ground here, but she also shows a middle-class woman palpably “touched” by the injustices faced by women less privileged than she. Egerton even, I argue, exposes class-based prejudice by contrasting her adulterous protagonist’s celebrated pregnancy to the lower-class woman’s tragic bereavement. One “is a wife” in the legitimate sense but not morally, having potentially conceived her child through her loveless affair, while the other has “never had more than a moral claim” to wifedom. Egerton’s protagonist has benefited from her privilege as a middle-class housewife, a lifestyle which has enabled her to live well and immorally, facilitating her adultery. She knows too that her child will benefit from a similar privilege when it is born – ostensibly – into the conventional marital unit. By contrast, Lizzie’s child – presumably conceived through a loving relationship, and hence more “moral” in Egerton’s code despite no marriage ties – had suffered impoverishment and premature death, while single mother Lizzie was forced to repress her grief because she lacked a legitimate claim to wifedom – a claim fabricated by unnatural “systems” of morality devised by Victorian Christianity. Contrary to Hager’s claim, the conclusion to “A Cross Line” is sensitive to the complexities of motherhood and class at this time, as Egerton’s tactile exchange depicts the subversive possibility of a maternal network as a source of comfort for diverse women and a challenge to societal hypocrisy and prejudice.

Egerton continues to explore the subversive potential of motherhood in *Keynotes* in “The Spell of the White Elf.” The narrator of this story complains about her wearisome work and reminisces about her childhood sweetheart, Hans Jörgen, whose marriage proposals she has repeatedly rejected, citing archetypal New Woman views: “I thought marriage a vocation” (Egerton, “The Spell of the White Elf” [1893] 1983: 69). While travelling from Norway to Hull, she befriends an English lady who is a successful scholar and whose adoration for her adopted child awakens the narrator’s own maternal yearning. The scholar tells the story of her adoption, which constitutes the story’s main action. Unique in its conception, her motherhood is also radical in the arrangement of her household, with inverted roles between husband and wife. As their journey comes to an end, the scholar wishes Egerton’s narrator an “elf” of her own (89). It is then revealed at the end of the story that she has reneged on her earlier aversion to marriage and reunited with Hans Jörgen. While this might initially appear to be a surrendering of New Woman values, I posit that the conclusion to “The Spell of the White Elf” actually depicts an assimilation of New Woman views with maternity, which takes on a radical form. The inverted roles of husband and wife and the continuation

of the scholar's flourishing career preserve this mother's New Womanhood and, after a tactile exchange of a medallion containing a picture of the child, Egerton's narrator consequently seeks her own "New Motherhood" of this kind. As in the final scene of "A Cross Line," this exchange functions as a kind of homosocial conception, whereby the conclusionary valorisation of motherhood is radically different to the patriarchal ideal.

The scholarly lady is far from the ideal Victorian mother, certainly no Angel-in-the-House. She recounts her story, beginning with an illness that rendered her "one of the barren ones" (78). When it transpired that her troubled relative was unable to care for her new-born, the lady adopted it. The child actually shares a physical likeness to its adoptive mother, which is accounted for by a vague gesture to pseudo-science: the biological mother had intensely disliked the lady, and this emphatic feeling had imprinted upon her unborn child an uncanny resemblance. Nicole M. Fluhr offers a queer interpretation of this likeness, suggesting that "the simultaneity of pregnancy, quarrel, illness, and sterility" and the "women's emotional engagement" in effect "generates the child that one of them will bear and the other will raise" (Fluhr 2001: 255). Fluhr designates this a kind of homosocial reproduction and suggests that Egerton's narrator experiences a similar spiritual conception by the end of the story as a result of her contact with the elf's mother (256). In accordance with Fluhr, I suggest that a tactile exchange engenders the narrator's own homosocial conception when, towards the end of their journey, the lady asks, "Would you like to see her?" (Egerton, "The Spell of the White Elf" [1893] 1983: 89). The narrator assents:

She hands me a medallion, with a beautifully painted head in it. I can't say she is a pretty child, a weird, elf-like thing, with questioning, wistful eyes, and masses of dark hair; and yet as I look the little face draws me to it, and makes a kind of yearning in me; strikes me with a "fairy blast" perhaps.

(89)

She engages with the medallion in a predominately visual way. She describes the appearance of the elf and narrates, "as I *look*..." (emphasis mine). However, the effect, or "spell," is itself haptic, felt as a "strike" and "blast," and as pulling her closer. This hapticity is reiterated prior to the exchange when the lady remarks that the child "rules us all with a touch of her little hands" (89). The explicit physicality of the "blast" and the intimacy of touch combine to emulate intercourse, which subsequently "makes" something "in" her. She conceives a yearning for a child that prompts the narrator to reunite with Hans Jörgen. The tactile exchange is therefore responsible for their future children. The end of "The Spell of the White Elf" verifies this, as, before she has even reunited with her prospective husband, the narrator confesses to having already purchased baby clothes; she "couldn't resist them" (90). Unable to deny her desire for a child any longer, she overcomes her aversion to marriage as a "vocation," which she now sees as offering her the freedom to liberate her awakened maternal desires.

The reunion with Hans Jörgen and the narrator's anticipated motherhood has, nonetheless, brought Egerton more criticism. Iveta Jusová, for example, criticises the conclusion of "The Spell of the White Elf" as a "contamination of an otherwise unconventional household by a convention-enforcing lifestyle" (2005: 64). On the contrary, however, I posit that motherhood in "The Spell of the White Elf" is predicated on a very unconventional lifestyle, as the scholar explains:

I am a writer by profession – oh, you knew! No, hardly celebrated, but I put my little chips into the great mosaic as best I can. Positions are reversed, they often are now-a-days. My husband stays at home and grows good things to eat, and pretty things to look at, and I go out and win bread and butter. It is a matter not of who has most brains, but whose brains are most saleable.

(Egerton, “The Spell of the White Elf” [1893] 1983: 79-80)

Their household is an inversion of Victorian convention; she is the breadwinner and a professional, while her husband grows food, looks after the baby, and decorates the home. Moreover, Egerton’s scholar is not an instinctual mother. She expresses jealousy of her maid Belinda, an expert in baby talk, for which she herself confesses, “I couldn’t manage it” (85). Her husband, too, has “a stock of baby lore” (88) that far surpasses her own, inverting their roles further. This contradicts accusations of essentialism and orthodoxy in Egerton’s valorisation of motherhood, as she is shown to celebrate characters who lack the so-called “maternal instinct” and to validate the motherhood of women who are not biological mothers. The folkloric reference to the changeling in the titular “elf” is likewise a tactic for differentiating Egerton’s sanctified “New Motherhood” from traditional and patriarchal definitions. The changeling is a supernatural being believed to have been exchanged for a human child; Egerton’s elf likewise disrupts the biological ties used to gatekeep motherhood to instead champion the love of an adoptive family. The mythical reference also establishes the child as an unknown and alien entity, which serves to highlight the mother’s lacking maternal instinct, extending motherhood further beyond conventional and essentialist paradigms. Conversely, it also upholds the child as a magical and treasured being, showing the scholar to be a doting and contented mother despite her uncertainty.

Egerton’s “New Motherhood,” then, preserves all that the New Woman has stood for, enabling women to expose and critique social prejudices, to continue following their ambitions, and to maintain their independence, as this mother’s unchaperoned presence on the ferry indicates. She also contradicts patriarchal claims of woman’s inherent domesticity. Fluhr attests to this, observing that “while the story’s point is that the child has a transformative effect on the writer, [...] it is the extent to which the child does not make a difference that I find striking”; the lady’s work continues as before, “the child makes ‘such a difference *in the evenings*’” (Fluhr 2001: 87, Fluhr’s emphasis). Of course, this arrangement is enabled only by the “New Man” who happily exchanges his traditional role with his wife’s, and by wealth, which permits the employment of a maid. As such, this arrangement appears largely unattainable, particularly given that, as Tara MacDonald’s recent work on the New Man observes, “he remained, even by the 1890s, a figure of the future, a kind of utopian model that was difficult to achieve” (2015: 20).

Yet, I posit that it is on the premise, or promise, of such a “utopian” model that Egerton’s narrator seeks a family. This, specifically, is the type of motherhood that she yearns for and these are the conditions upon which she is likely to construct her marriage. As I have established, Hans Jörgen offers to liberate her repressed maternal yearning, but, I suggest, without necessitating the sacrifice of her independence. Indeed, the scholarly lady recognises something in the narrator’s descriptions of him, remarking plainly to her, “I like your Mr. Hans Jörgen,” commending him as someone who “has a strong nature and knows what he wants; there is reliability in him” (Egerton, “The Spell of the White Elf” [1893] 1983: 78).

Hans Jørgen has the makings of a New Man, making the seemingly unattainable and utopian lifestyle of the scholar more viable for Egerton's narrator. Egerton's scholar also contradicts MacDonald's claim that the New Man was a "figure of the future" by positing that positions are "often" reversed "now-a-days" (80). Contrary to Jusovà's criticism, "The Spell of the White Elf" is a story precisely about the reproduction of unconventional lifestyles, which multiply throughout Egerton's maternal network to suggest that New Motherhood is in fact within reach. Indeed, it is significant that the narrator is herself an orphan who was raised by an older cousin rather than her own biological mother, further evidencing the extent to which Egerton constructs a varied web of eclectic New Mother-figures.

### Radical Mothering in *Flies in Amber* (1905)

The eclectic web of New Mothers in "The Spell of the White Elf" is extended even further in *Flies in Amber's* short story "Mammy". Set in Dublin, "Mammy" depicts the motherliness of a brothel madam, Mrs Sylvester. The story follows this rambunctious woman, affectionately known as "Mammy," as she cares for a young girl dying of consumption, ensuring her physical comfort through luxurious linens and securing her medical attention. The girl, desperate for salvation for her alleged sins as a sex worker, is abandoned by the Catholic Church. It refuses to send a priest to Mammy's brothel to read her last rites. Mammy then determines to ease the girl's turmoil by taking her to the cathedral herself, where she can pass away peacefully.

Egerton criticises the prejudices of organised religion in much the same way that she criticises class-based prejudice at the end of "A Cross Line" in *Keynotes*: by articulating the realities of lower-class women. In "Mammy," Egerton elevates the position of the sex worker by aligning Mammy with the ancient Greek "hetairi" [sic] ("Mammy" 1905: 41), who lived luxurious lives and were distinct from prostitutes, albeit associated with sex work through their presence in the symposium (Kennedy 2015: 64). As Simone de Beauvoir describes, *hetairae* were

free to make disposal of themselves and of their fortunes, intelligent, cultivated, artistic, they were treated as persons by the men who found enchantment in their company. By virtue of the fact that they had escaped from the family and lived on the fringes of society, they escaped also from man; they could therefore seem to him to be fellow human beings, almost equals.

(de Beauvoir 1949: 580)

The marginalisation of this calibre of women from mainstream society distanced them from certain aspects of misogynistic oppression, particularly the degradation of purportedly respectable women as lower-class citizens. Mammy is certainly "free to make disposal of [her]self and of [her] fortunes," embodying de Beauvoir's *hetairae*. She uses this freedom to help another woman in her time of need, exchanging her wealth and instrumentalising her agency to bring peace to the consumptive girl. Mammy is therefore another reincarnation of Egerton's radical motherhood, which her nickname makes clear, as she combines her greater freedoms and matriarchal position with motherly devotion.

Surrounded by "rich bedding and many dainty accessories" which had been carried to her sickbed with "lavish generosity," the dying girl is well looked after in the brothel. Through her vocation, Mammy is well-connected, with "clever members of the [medical] faculty amongst her friends," and she ensures that "the girl had the benefits of their skill" ("Mammy" 1905: 42, 45). As well as providing through financial and material means, Mammy's care-giving is physical, epitomised in the "soothing touches of her big, well-cared-for white hands with many rings flashing on the capable fingers" (45). Egerton portrays

Mammy as hands-on, taking executive action to ease the girl's physical pain and prioritise her comfort. Mammy's touch is vastly different to the objectifying, exploitative, and violating touch that one might assume typifies the experience of a late-nineteenth-century sex worker; the madam's tender tactility revokes this degradation and reinstates the girl's humanity. After the girl cries for someone to "fetch a priest!" (44), the local priest sends forth the excuse via messenger that "the Cardinal's away, and none of the fathers can come without a speshul [sic] permit" (46). Determined to grant the girl her dying wish, Mammy decides to take the girl to the church. With no vehicles available due to a nearby fire at a whiskey distillery, she has but one choice: to carry the girl across Dublin. The journey exhibits Mammy's boundless strength and power, as she amplifies her "hands-on" motherliness and embarks on a physically demanding excursion to fulfill the girl's prayers for inner peace.

Hardening herself for the arduous journey ahead, Mammy's eyes "flashed and narrowed, her lips tightened resolutely" (46). She stands the girl up, "a slip of a thing, five feet at most, wasted to a shadow" (47), and dresses her, drawing on her stockings, putting her arms through the sleeves of a red silk gown, and tying it "crosswise about the frail body" (47). With the girl's arms secured around Mammy's neck, she calls for a quilt to be tied around their joined bodies to keep them bundled together, locking them in an intimate embrace that resembles the cradling of a new-born baby. She then "lift[s] her burden" (47) and makes her way. Their journey spans several pages, dominating the comparatively short tale (at fourteen pages in total, "Mammy" is the shortest by a considerable margin in *Flies in Amber*). O'Toole writes that "while Mammy's struggle to save the girl's soul is raised to the level of Christian epic, there is nothing mythical about the scene; if anything, the woman's corporeality is all too vividly depicted" (O'Toole 2017: 25). Egerton does not romanticise the scene, instead employing some of her most strikingly embodied and visceral description:

Mammy breathed heavily and the veins in her forehead swelled, one vein making a "V" as it rose; her neck flushed into purple patches at the nape, where the girl's hand were clasped convulsively – it burned as if held by an iron band; and her stays gripped her heart to bursting point, as the ugly cathedral pile loomed ahead of her.

A second time she halted at the enclosed railings, and gasped hoarsely; the sweat broke through powder on her face, but no merciful Veronica met her on her way. Two men stood aside to let her pass, and a mounted constabulary man reined his horse and sat watching her as a sentinel.

The girl whimpered. On once more; the very pavement seemed to rise in mockery and hit her in the face; she ceased to feel her feet or hear aught save the agonising throb and quiver through her own frame.

(Egerton, "Mammy" 1905: 46-7)

The senses combine to convey Mammy's exertion, with the deafening sound of her pulse and the visibility of her veins adding to the exhibition of her power. With such a heightened sensitivity towards her own frame, with her body at its limits, Mammy's physical effort resembles childbirth. Internal body parts, such as the veins in her forehead, protrude to the surface, refusing to remain contained. Her sweat, too, surfaces above her powder, as her devotion supersedes her image. The lack of boundaries between Mammy's body and the girl's body parallels the assimilation of a mother's body with her child's during pregnancy, as Mammy's body becomes instrumentalised to serve the needs of her offspring. This demanding act of life cements the familial-like bond between the two women (albeit in this case the end, rather than the beginning, of life). Mammy's autonomy, granted to her as part of the elevated *hetairae*, is directed towards the fulfilment of the girl's dying wish – the delivery of her soul to God.

Once they reach the cathedral, Mammy re-employs her nurturing tactility, rousing the girl with more “tender touch” (Egerton, “Mammy” 1905: 49) after laying her at the foot of the altar. Egerton draws parallels between Mammy and the “tender outstretched palms of the Virgin maid” (49), whose presence soothes the girl, inspiring a “smile of ineffable content” (50) moments before her last breath. Associating the brothel madam with the Eternal Mother Mary through their similarly tender tactility is a subversive statement from Egerton, drawing further on the idea of a shared womanhood that encompasses Mary and elevates the brothel madam by association, while conversely disparaging the lofty notions of Catholicism. To this end, Mammy exclaims, “by God, if Christ would not come to the sinner, I am a strange one to bring the sinner to Christ!” (50); her blasphemy asserts her superior morality, exposing the hypocrisy of a religion that fails to show mercy to all of God’s children equally, and is instead merely another vessel of patriarchal oppression. As in the ending of “A Cross Line,” here the contact between two women defies cultural definitions of morality and instead champions an instinctive and inclusive moral code, in which the needs of diverse women are prioritised and shared throughout a maternal network. To complete the exchange, Mammy hands a roll of one-pound notes to the priest, noting that, “I’ve done my part, now you do yours. That will bury her” (50). Having cared for her as a hopeless girl who came to Dublin’s red-light district, “The Manto,” “as scores of others – pretty, delicate, madly reckless” (45), Mammy sees to it that the girl dies in peace and that she will have a dignified burial place. Throughout, Mammy acts with motherly devotion and utilises her autonomy and greater mobility to aid others. In so doing, she goes a step further than the preservation of New Woman qualities seen in “The Spell of White Elf”. While the *Keynotes* story shows that one can be both a mother and an independent New Woman, Mammy shows that independence and maternity can, and ought to be, unified. That is, that one’s maternity is enhanced by one’s New Womanhood and one’s New Womanhood advanced by maternity. Mammy is a better mother figure because she is capable and autonomous; she is likewise a better New Woman character because she uses her greater freedom to aid those in need. This reconciles Egerton’s valorisation of maternity with the vision of motherhood proffered by other New Women writers like Sarah Grand, who argues that “the sacred duties of wife and mother will be all the more honourably performed” (1894: 274) once women achieve greater freedom, as well as aligning Mammy with the *samhällsmoderlighet* (“collective motherliness”) (Register 1982: 605) of late-nineteenth century Scandinavian feminism, of which Egerton was likely aware following her time spent in Norway. As opposed to biological motherhood, collective motherliness is, for proponent Ellen Key, an ideal state of womanhood powerful enough to transform society from its hypocritical and patriarchal state (604) and the “apex of personal development and cultural empowerment for women” (Ljung-Baruth 2019: 134). Mammy bears a close resemblance to this empowering notion of social mothering.

“Mammy” likewise extends the non-essentialist maternity established in “The Spell of the White Elf.” Mammy represents a mother figure who provides for other women throughout and at the end of their lives, rather than upholding motherhood as something that exclusively serves future generations. As such, for Egerton, motherhood is not only extended beyond biological children, but it is not restricted to children at all. Just as Lizzie in “A Cross Line” is comforted by Egerton’s heroine, Egerton’s heroine confides in Lizzie. Just as the narrator of “The Spell of the White Elf” is raised by her cousin and awakened by the scholarly lady, the scholarly lady is reliant on her maid Belinda and indebted to the elf’s biological mother.

Likewise, Mammy looks after the dying girl with her own “well-cared-for hands,” as Egerton gestures to the motherliness Mammy herself has received, likely through the companionship of her fellow *hetaerae*, who sometimes lived and dined together (Kennedy 2015: 65). Egerton’s characters thus exist in a network that they contribute towards and benefit from in equal measure. Her quintessential female characters are therefore not “New Women” who surrender their freedoms for their children, but rather “New Mothers” who care for others and strive for a freer world for all women.

## Coda

The scenes which engender Egerton’s “New Motherhood” discussed in this article all pivot around moments of tactile exchange. This plot device recurs across Egerton’s writing, not just in the radicalisation of maternity that I have established here, but also elsewhere, in the negotiation of heterosexual relations and familial tensions, as well as in her characters’ experiences of place. Egerton’s writing is sensitive to the properties of touch and the power unlocked by the tactile, and, as I have shown, she utilises this throughout her writing as a means for teasing out her feminist ideas. To appropriate Sharp’s review of *Keynotes* (1894: 143), the touch of women is prevalent and instrumental throughout Egerton’s short fiction.

As well as sustaining this investment in hapticity throughout her fiction, Egerton translated it into her personal life. In 1895, facing the decline of her career in the wake of the Wilde trials, Egerton appealed to her publisher John Lane by gifting him a re-wrapped, hand-sewn, and personally dedicated presentation copy of *Keynotes*. Serving as a reminder of her genius and the success she brought for The Bodley Head, this gift sought to restore Egerton in Lane’s favour at a time when his trophied author seemed prematurely past her best. For my purposes, it is significant to note that Egerton chose green satin as the material with which to cover the book. Margaret D. Stetz attests to the sensual tactility of this fabric in her article “Keynotes: A New Woman, Her Publisher, and Her Material”:

The rich, velvety satin that she chose had (and retains today) a sensuous “hand.” It was entirely in keeping with the style of the hand that had written *Keynotes*’s self-consciously erotic stories [...]. The very fabric of Egerton’s covers seemed to invite such extra-literary and wholly un-ladylike stroking and purring. To give such an object to a man to whom she was not married was a sexually bold act.

(1997: 93)

As well as sexually bold, this act was authorially bold, as Egerton suppressed the Beardsley cover which proved so detrimental to her reputation and replaced it with what Stetz classifies as “an unqualified statement of authorial ownership”: the initials of her pseudonym, “G. E.” (95). She thus turns the cover “into her venue for restating, at least to the publisher, that the subject matter was her self” (95) and not the “wholly irrelevant” (94) erotic illustration by Beardsley. Stetz’s insight into this cover corroborates my claim that Egerton is keenly alive to the transgressive power of tactility. Here, she employs tactile exchange as a means through which to assert her authority. As in her fiction, the sense of touch and the exchange of objects offer the ground upon which her feminism can play out, where she, and her characters, can find empowerment.

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