

GEORGE EGERTON
[MARY CHAVELITA DUNNE]
(14 December 1859–12 August 1945)

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George Egerton [born Mary Chavelita Dunne] was one of the most celebrated short story writers of the 1890s, her often controversial work being taken as the epitome of the views of the “advanced” New Woman. The facts of her life are sometimes difficult to be certain about, since during her lifetime she put out several differing “official” versions of her biographical details.

Mary Chavelita Dunne was born in Melbourne, Australia, daughter of a vagabond Irish Catholic army officer, John J. Dunne, and his Welsh Protestant wife Isabel George Bynon. As a young girl her family migrated among Australia, New Zealand, and Chile, and she witnessed some of the incidents in the New Zealand wars against the Maoris. However, “Chavvy” (a nickname) grew up mostly around Dublin, commonly describing herself as “intensely Irish.” Her mother died in 1875, leaving the 16-year-old Mary Chavelita to take care of her younger siblings and to cope with bailiffs and other distresses that arrived because of the actions (or inactions) of a talented but inept father. She had hoped to study art, but family finances did not permit it. She taught and studied in Germany for about 2 years, beginning in 1875, then worked for a time as a nurse in Dublin, London, and New York, before eloping in 1887 with Henry Higginson, a bigamist and friend of her father (he is listed as H. H. W. Melville in her *Who’s Who* entry). Married in 1888, they lived in Norway, where she was introduced to the work of Ibsen, Stringber, and Nietzsche, all of whom later became a prominent influence on her own writing. She also met the novelist Knut Hamsen (fictionally recorded in her story “A Cross Line”), whose novel *Hunger* she translated in 1890 (published, 1899) and to whom she dedicated her first book, *Keynotes*. She left Higginson, moved to England, and in 1891 married Egerton Tertius Clairmonte, a minor Canadian writer. She adopted her pseudonym in tribute to her mother (whose maiden name was “George”) and to her husband. She and Clairmonte lived in Ireland, had one child, and she soon found she had to support her husband with her own writing. She eventually divorced Clairmonte in 1901 (her “official” account has both husbands dying). In that same year she married Reginald Golding Bright, a theatrical agent fifteen years her junior. Egerton was a founding member of the Irish Genealogical Research Society; and in her *Who’s Who* entry she listed languages (she spoke several), dialects, needlework, and genealogy as her recreations. She died in Crawley, Sussex, in 1945.

Her first collection of short stories, *Keynotes* (1893), was sensationally successful (in both America and the UK), outspoken and daring in its treatment of the women, and one of the most influential volumes of New Woman literature in the late nineteenth century. Published by John Lane, with whom Egerton probably had an affair, and with an arresting



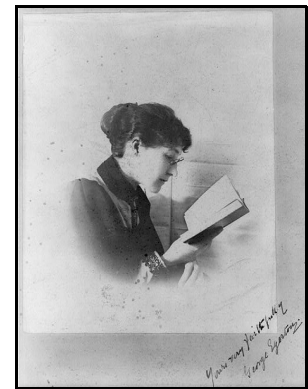
George Egerton

frontispiece by Aubrey Beardsley, its success led to several more collections, all with musical titles—*Discords* (1894), *Symphonies* (1897), and *Fantasies* (1898). She also produced *The Wheel of God* (1898), a semi-autobiographical novel, *Rosa Amorosa: Love Letters of a Woman* (1901), which also drew on her own experiences, and *Flies in Amber* (1905), another collection of short stories. Her stories present women at psychologically significant moments, often at points of crisis, on the brink of suicide, suffering from alcoholism, or beset by sexual problems. In the twentieth century she wrote several plays, including *His Wife's Family* (1908), *The Backsliders* (1910), and *Camilla States Her Case* (1925), and translated or adapted the work of various European playwrights, among them Pierre Loti, Judith Gautier, and Henry Bernstein. Egerton's plays attracted the interest of prominent actresses but failed to win either commercial success or critical approval. After the turn of the century, her fame faded rapidly; indeed, in the twentieth century her work probably received its greatest attention in Scandinavia and Germany.

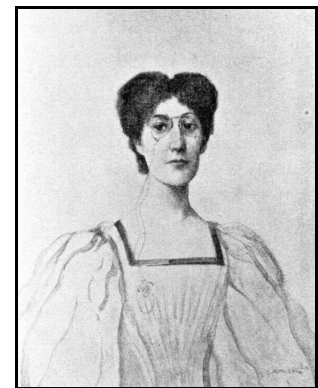


George Egerton 1890s

Nevertheless, Egerton's influence on the culture of the 1890s can hardly be overestimated. Although her stories often show women crushed under lamentable circumstances, Egerton passionately believed in the potential of a woman's spirit, and her work was crucial to the establishment of a feminist literary voice in the 1890s, not to mention giving great impetus to the "New Woman" movement in Britain. Unlike Sarah Grand, who confined her attention to the improvement of women's lot within marriage, Egerton emphasized the importance of honoring women's right to express their sexuality freely, and she regarded "respectability" as a male, even patriarchal, construct. As a consequence, she was often vilified. *Punch* satirized her as "Borgia Smudgiton," and a *Blackwood's* critic classed her (along with other New Woman writers) as an "erotomaniac." Yet her work was not as licentious as that of some other *Yellow Book* contributors (most notably, Beardsley). Egerton was, in fact, a more complicated and paradoxical figure than she might appear, believing deeply in the power of motherhood even as she undercut the dangerously romantic and reactionary "Angel in the House" paradigm, or critiquing the constructed nature of gender roles while championing a decidedly essentialist concept of the nature of woman. Even so, she clearly wrote about the physical and emotional realities of life in a way that was shocking to most bourgeois Victorians. Her work almost invariably exposes the lasting damage caused women by ignorance and generally reveals the destructive and ungovernable nature of human passions when diverted from their natural courses. Thomas Hardy acknowledged Egerton's influence, especially in his construction of "New Woman"



George Egerton 1890s



1890s Drawing of Egerton

character Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure* (1895).

Egerton's work was also revolutionary stylistically, often described as "proto-modernist." Her experiments with form and content anticipated the high modernism of writers like James Joyce and D H Lawrence; her novel *The Wheel of God* has sometimes been taken to be a rudimentary template for Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Not least, Egerton's contemporary Holbrook Jackson credited her with being the first person to mention Friedrich Nietzsche in English literature (in her 1893 *Keynotes* collection), three years before the first English translation of Nietzsche's works

