New Woman Writers, Authority and the Body

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Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

. . . power, to put it plainly, was what the modern woman craved.
—Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman*

With the Married Woman's Property Act in 1882, the repeal of the Contagious Disease Acts in 1886, and an 1891 act that denied men conjugal rights to the wives' bodies without their wives' consent,[1] late-nineteenth-century women (upper and middle-class white women in particular) were granted more rights and began to envision new possibilities for themselves. In particular, "New Women" began writing about their desire for increased women's rights.[2] These New Woman writers of the *fin de siècle* created a distinctly different body of literature that reflected their concerns about women's limited role in society. Although New Woman writers did not always agree on solutions to the problems that faced them, their texts did engage with common themes like marriage reform, social activism, motherhood, equality in education, sexual freedom and greater career opportunities.

New Woman texts also often offer new and progressive portrayals of women's authority as connected to strong physical bodies. In Sarah Grand's *The Beth Book*, the heroine discovers that she is married to a despicable man who is unfaithful, who works as a doctor at a Lock Hospital and who practices vivisection on innocent animals without a second thought. His combined disregard for her body, along with those of the women he treats for suspected venereal disease and the animals he tortures, is simply too much for Beth. She leaves to start a different life on her terms. Beth, like many other heroines in novels by New Woman authors, claims her body as her own and fights for the rights of others. The body is, in fact, of central importance in the New Woman's struggle for women's rights. It is one of the main sites of resistance as well as one of the first to be commented upon by critics. New Woman writers "author" their own bodies by acknowledging women's sexual desires;

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[1] Sally Ledger, *The New Woman*, p.11.
[2] Sarah Grand (Frances Elizabeth Clarke McFall) first used the tern "New Woman" in her 1894 article "The New Aspect of the Woman Question," published in the *North American Review*.

advocating rational dress for increased mobility; challenging the expectation that all women must want to become mothers; and by emphasizing the importance of healthy, active bodies and real appetites in girls. Essentially, they create a new identity for themselves through the construction of this new female body—one that projects power and freedom. It is this centrality of the body and quest for authority that the essays in this collection address.

As was evidenced by the large number of presentations on New Woman authors at the recent 18th & 19th-Century British Women Writers Conference held in Lexington, Kentucky, there is growing interest in the field of New Woman studies.[3] The essays in this collection add to current scholarship, focusing on themes ranging from the New Woman's relationship with Darwinian theory to athletics for women and the New Woman's navigation of urban life. The collection begins with Bryony Randall's exploration of George Egerton's short fiction and the ambiguities and anxieties with which the figure of the literary writer was imbued. Randall looks at the perceived threats to 'authority', narrowly and broadly defined, embodied in the New Woman, focusing on Egerton's "A Lost Masterpiece: A City Mood, Aug. '93." She examines the tension set up between the masculine voice of the narrator and the female figures encountered in the text in the context of an era of "art for art's sake" in which women's paid work was viewed as potentially contaminating the high art of the male establishment.

The collection moves next to Tracy J.R. Collins' essay on *In the House of My Pilgrimage*, an autobiography by Lillian M. Faithfull, in which Collins locates the New Woman's drive for equality in an early engagement in physical fitness, athletics, and sports. Abigail Mann then examines Mona Caird's complicated relationship with Darwinian theory as witnessed in her anti-vivisection pamphlets and *The Daughters of Danaus*. While New Woman scholars have acknowledged Sarah Grand's debts to Darwinian theory, Mann here offers new insight into Caird's own engagement with biological theory. Casey Cothran continues the conversation about Mona Caird by exploring the use of suffering as a tool of social protest in *The Daughters of Danaus.* Cothran argues that Caird's novel can be seen as part of a larger cultural examination of the violence

[3] The conference, themed "Speaking With Authority," included sixteen individual papers focusing on New Woman writers in addition to a special roundtable discussion on the New Woman between Teresa Mangum, Sally Mitchell and Ann Ardis.

enacted on women's bodies (by outside forces and by women themselves) in the decades both preceding and following the turn of the century.

The next two essays in the collection focus on the New Woman's relationships with texts and with other women. Donna Decker looks at Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and the ways in which the text inspired and informed George Egerton's *The Wheel of God*, examining the importance of reading in New Woman texts—both the reading of words and bodies. Kelly Hulander's insightful essay argues that the success and happiness of female protagonists in New Woman fiction, particularly fiction set in urban environments, depends heavily on the supportive relationships they either maintain or cultivate with other independent women. The collection closes with Tamar Heller's reading of Rhoda Broughton's *A Fool in Her Folly* as a metafictional exploration of the obstacles faced by the female author writing about sexuality before the advent of the New Woman. Heller illuminates Broughton's dissection of the psychological pressures faced by the woman writer who strives—but who, unlike the women of Woolf's generation, cannot yet succeed—in exorcising the Angel in the House.

CHAPTER ONE

GEORGE EGERTON'S "A LOST MASTERPIECE": INSPIRATION, GENDER, AND CULTURAL AUTHORITY AT THE *FIN DE SIÈCLE*

BRYONY RANDALL

George Egerton's short story with the unwieldy title "A Lost Masterpiece: A City Mood, Aug. '93" was published in April of 1894 in the first issue of John Lane's radical and short-lived quarterly *The Yellow Book*.[1] In the second issue, in an article entitled "The Yellow Book criticized", one Philip Gilbert Hamerton LL.D. acknowledges that the story "shows the same qualities of style" as displayed in Egerton's short story collection *Keynotes*, but ultimately dismisses "A Lost Masterpiece" as a failure, judging that "the subject is too unfruitful, merely a literary disappointment, because a bright idea has been chased away" (185). Perhaps subsequent readers have tended to agree with Hamerton–who, it should be noted, was explicitly invited to articulate negative judgments on the first issue by the editors of the *Yellow Book*, as an example of the magazine's intention to "welcom[e] dissent" (Stetz and Lasner, 11). Nevertheless, reactions similar to Hamerton's may in part explain why this short story has received so little critical attention and has not, unlike many of Egerton's other stories, been reprinted since its first appearance. But there are, perhaps, other reasons for its relative neglect even since the resurgence of interest in Egerton's work over the last couple of decades.

Egerton criticism has generally focused on the stories collected in *Keynotes* and *Discords*, published in 1893 and 1894 respectively. Those stories that have a clearly female narrator have been of particular interest, as they tend to enable Egerton to state most vividly the critique of sexual politics that is at the heart of her literary project. And female narrators are in the majority in Egerton's stories (only one of the stories collected in *Keynotes* and *Discords* has an explicitly male narrator); indeed, as Kate McCullough has noted, many of her stories involve a kind of "double"

female narrator, using "a narrative structured by one woman's telling of her story to another sympathetic woman", where the sympathetic woman is usually the story's primary narrator (207). By contrast, the gender of the narrator of "A Lost Masterpiece", whose brilliant "literary idea" is "chased away", is never actually stated. The few previous commentators on the story have tended to read the narrator as female–perhaps, even, simply assumed that the narrator is a woman (Stetz 28; Turner 153; Parejo leaves the question open, 23-24)–not surprising given the prevalence of female narrators in Egerton's work. However, I argue that Egerton's text actually invites us to read its narrator as, if not necessarily actually male, at least highly masculinized, and the way in which this masculinized figure articulates the experience of inspiration, as well as the experience of losing a literary idea, presents an intriguing exploration of the gender anxiety around masculine literary authority in the 1890s.

A summary of the story will give an early indication of some of the masculine aspects of the narrator–in particular, his/her depiction as that familiar figure of the *fin-de-siècle*, the *flâneur*. [2] "A Lost Masterpiece" begins with the narrator describing having returned to town from the countryside, responding to a "desire to mix with the crowd, to lay my ear once more to the heart of the world and listen to its life-throbs" (Egerton, "A Lost Masterpiece", 196). The narrator then takes a walk through the city (later shown to be London), but also makes use of the various means of transport available to the late nineteenth-century *flâneur*: he or she takes a short trip on a river steamer, and is laughed at by two young girls, smiles at "a pretty anaemic city girl" (192), observes the crowd with an ironic detachment, and mounts an omnibus. There the narrator's attention is taken by a woman walking along the pavement. All the while an idea for a "literary gem" (196) is being developed: while the narrator's "outer eyes" catch every external detail, his or her "inner eyes" see "undercurrents of beauty and pathos", out of which the idea is formed (190, 191). So far, so Baudelairean; a *flâneur* with literary aspirations becomes inexplicably fascinated by a female *passante*. However, in an uncharacteristically negative turn (uncharacteristic, that is, for depictions of the *flâneur*/*passante* relationship)[3], it is this woman who, in the narrator's words, "murders fancy" (196)–murders the "delicate creation of my brain, begotten by the fusion of country and town" (195), the idea or inspiration that has been evolving in the narrator's mind since the beginning of the story.

In addition to this depiction of the narrator as *flâneur*, the story features an interaction between the narrator and a woman on the street that figures the narrator as sexual predator. Further, the narrator betrays an undeniably misogynist attitude, using language about the women he or she

encounters entirely dissimilar from that used by Egerton's female narrators. These points, amplifying my sense of the narrator as masculine, will be discussed at greater length below. Here, however, we need to address the question of how to read this figure, whom I have been awkwardly designating "her or she".

If we are to follow previous critics in designating the narrator female, we need to find some rationale for "her" masculinized articulations and demeanor. One explanation might be that they form part of her depiction of herself as an inspired writer, and a genius. To be a writer of this sort involves discursive cross-dressing; a woman must speak in a masculine voice to be audible as this kind of writer. We can see how this cross-dressing might have been necessary, and might be ripe for Egerton's critique, if we consider Timothy Clark's argument that inspiration, as it has traditionally been figured, relies on an anticipated audience: "the scene of composition is already a prolepsis of recognition" (29). Clark goes on to observe the implications of this for women writers, namely that "[inspiration] may well not have been available to women for a long time in terms so easily recuperable as a stance of public authority", given that historically a woman may have been "unable to forsee fair recognition or fair reception, [having] few socially sanctioned images of authorship available to her" (33). Egerton is writing at a moment when, crucially, women writers were beginning to see the possibility of fair, or at least fairer, recognition. Similarly, it was part of the feminist movement with which Egerton was, at this time, so emphatically associated, to generate and circulate "images of female authorship" and work towards their being "socially sanctioned". In producing a figure of an inspired writer-to-be, laden with masculine traits–not least among which is the vivid anticipation of a joyful public reception, readers who "would flock to thank me" (Egerton, "A Lost Masterpiece", 194)–but whose gender is not made clear, and who thus may be a woman, Egerton seems deliberately to be drawing attention to the gendering of "socially sanctioned images" of authorship and thus literary authority.

Therefore, and particularly given that Egerton herself eschews any explicit identification of the narrator's gender, the most productive position must surely be to follow her lead and eschew any attempt definitively to identify the narrator as either male or female, since the ambiguity around the gender of the narrator is a crucial part of what I will argue makes this story such a telling intervention into discourses of authority and writerliness, particularly where they intersect with gender, at this point in British literary and cultural history. Having said this, I will refer to the narrator as male in the course of this essay. This is primarily

for polemical effect: referring to the narrator as male throws into relief my argument that there is a gendered tension at the heart of this story which relies on a normative depiction of the literary genius as masculine–and thus, most likely in this context, male. But I would invite readers to see the terms "male", "he", and so on, here, as if in scare quotes. Egerton's refusal explicitly to articulate her narrator's gender position is a key element in what I argue is her thoroughgoing problematization of the concept of masculine literary authority in this story.

My reading of the narrator as masculinized is linked to a second crucial aspect of Egerton's narrative. There is, throughout, an ironic distance set up between the dramatized, first-person narrator and the implied author, as I will go on to indicate (for example, the narrator uses absurdly overblown and bombastic language to describe his own anticipated achievements; he also expresses disgust for a figure who closely resembles Egerton herself, clearly implying that Egerton is not identifying herself with her narrator).[4] Thus, while the piece can fairly be described, *per* Hamerton, as about "a literary disappointment", it is not at all obvious with what seriousness readers are supposed to take this disappointment. We assume that the author of the story would, as a writer, be genuinely put out by a literary disappointment. Yet the way that the narrator is gently mocked throughout the story seems to invite the reader to concur with Hamerton that it is "*merely* a literary disappointment" (my emphasis), of no great import. This distance between narrator and implied author bolsters my argument that the narrator is being set up as in some way the author's "other", not least in terms of gender. However, the self-reflexive gesture of having a writer as the central character brings author and narrator into proximity, thus generating a tension within this relationship–is the attitude of author to narrator antagonistic, or empathetic? Like the ambiguity over the gender of the narrator, this tension is ultimately irresolvable, and itself implies an anxiety about the status of literary writing. Buried in this ambivalent relationship between implied author and narrator we might detect Egerton grappling with the question of what claims literary writing might be able to make for its wider social and cultural impact, a point I will return to in my conclusion.

I am, evidently, going to disagree with Hamerton's overall assessment of "A Lost Masterpiece". On the contrary, I will argue that this story of "a literary disappointment" turns out to be extremely fruitful. Firstly, I examine the way in which literary inspiration is itself described in the story, and compare this with the reflections of one of Egerton's contemporaries, Robert Louis Stevenson, on this process or experience. I then go on to indicate how this experience or process, part of what defines

a writer as such, is inflected through gender in the text by examining closely the relationship between the narrator and the women he encounters, paying particular attention to the key female figure who, in Hamerton's words, "chases away" the narrator's "bright idea". This discussion will come to rest on what is also a jumping-off point, where I posit the importance to *fin-de-siècle* or early modernist literature of a particular conceptual nexus: that is, the relationship between work, women (or gender), and writing.[5]

Inspiration as Process and Egerton's Elf

Firstly, we should investigate what constitutes what I am calling the narrator's "inspiration" (since Egerton herself never actually uses the term). Four key images or metaphors appear as part of the narrator's description of this experience: the web, the pearl, the child, and the "elf". The first three images, the web, the pearl and the child, have more in common with each other than it might at first appear. Let us begin with the "fanciful web" being "spun" out of "delicate inner threads" (190), which is distinguished from the "outer self" that takes in, without (supposedly) analyzing, the details of the outside world. What is striking here is the use of a characteristically feminine activity to describe this process. Penelope's weaving is an obvious connotation, especially when the narrator goes on to congratulate himself on how he will "reveal to [the passers-by] the golden threads in the sober city woof" (193). We also cannot help but be reminded of Freud's "Femininity", where he muses on a possible relationship between women's only technical innovations, plaiting and weaving, and their desire to "weave" pubic hair to hide the shame of their genital lack (132). The use by a masculine narrator of this exemplarily–indeed, *per* Freud, definitively–feminine activity, to describe his own psychic activity, this narrator having been created by a female author, who herself used a male pseudonym, generates layers–or, better, a web–of gender disruption that is crucial in destabilizing narrative authority in this text.

The web mutates a few pages on into a "pearl", a "precious little pearl of a thought […] evolving slowly out of the inner chaos" (193). A pearl is beautiful, certainly, and natural; but at its heart is a piece of grit (or, according to modern science, a parasite). Thus it is a paradoxical object; it is perfect, but can only arise where there has been contamination. Literary inspiration relies, perhaps, on some kind of irritation or disruption. When the narrator goes on to describe his pearl as "a priceless possession, not to be bartered for the Jagersfontein diamond" (193), a further characteristic

springs to mind: a pearl reaches perfection in its natural state, unlike a diamond that must be cut and is thus to some extent man-made. The pearl goes on to reproduce spontaneously, to become "a whole quarrelet of pearls"–"Oriental pearls", of course (194). This pearl not only has the capacity to multiply itself, but we are also here reminded that it is unclear when a pearl may be said to be finished. A tiny pearl may be as perfect in its way as a large one; left to grow, does it become more perfect? Thus the pearl and the web taken together emphasize that what is being described is a process, not a moment. The idea emphatically does not come to the narrator all at once, in an ecstatic moment of inspiration. Rather it takes time to form; it is "spun into a fanciful web" (190), recorded in "delicate sure brushwork" (191); even by the time the "murderer" of the idea is first seen, the idea is still "evolving" (193), not complete and whole.

To round off this triumvirate of metaphors, we have the familiar comparison of a new idea with a new life, encapsulated in the ready-made phrase "brain-child". The narrator calls his idea "this darling brain-child, this offspring of my fancy, this rare little creation, perhaps embryo of genius that was my very own", and then "this dainty elusive birthling of my brain" (193). This further emphasizes that in this discourse of inspiration an idea must develop, evolve, rather than simply arriving fully formed all at once, since like a child it must pass through this "embryo" stage, be nurtured and given time to develop. And again, childbirth is, of course, inextricably associated with women. However, in keeping with the gender ambivalence of the narrator, the phrase "birthling of my brain" also evokes the image of Athene springing fully formed from the forehead of Zeus.[6] The female capacity for reproduction is, in this myth, arrogated by the male; such myths function to shore up male authority in the face of the power of female generativity. Egerton's choice of figurative language here draws attention to the gender anxiety implicit in key metaphors of literary inspiration.[7]

It is here that the story comes closest to the vocabulary and themes most familiar to readers of Egerton's other work. In stories such as "A Cross Line" and "The Spell of the White Elf" Egerton is much concerned with the physiological and psychological effects of pregnancy and childbirth on women. Egerton's explorations of female sexuality and physicality were radical for her time, and childbirth and motherhood emerge as integral to her understanding of femininity. Nicole Fluhr has drawn attention to the way in which Egerton depicts motherhood specifically in relation to writing, arguing that she "advocates a synthesis in which mothers' passionate engagement tempers and is tempered by artists' aesthetic and analytical detachment" (245). My reading of "A Lost

Masterpiece" might, however, appear to run counter to Fluhr's argument that Egerton's work "imagin[es] a mode of reproduction in which men play the most marginal of roles" (245), since I argue that in this story we see a masculine narrator experiencing something akin to childbirth in the process of literary inspiration. By contrast, actual mothers are evoked in negative terms by way of juxtaposition: on the last in a line of "grimy" barges that pass by the steamer on which he is travelling, Egerton's narrator tells us that "a woman sits suckling her baby, and a terrier with badly cropped ears yaps at us as we pass.…" (191). The nursing mother is thus associated with dirt, mutilation and the bodily. What remains, however, is a connection between the process involved in, albeit anterior to, writing–that is, inspiration–and an experience which approximates childbirth. By allowing a masculine writer to have this experience, Egerton is, at the very least, positing a refiguring of the idea of maternity in terms of its relationship to literary creation, which is at a broad level precisely that to which Fluhr is drawing our attention. While this story does not, unlike so many of Egerton's stories, focus on the maternal, reproductive female body, it remains, thus, emphatically a presence as a key metaphor for, perhaps even the *sine qua non*, of creativity.

There are two key points, then, to make at this stage about the range of images used to describe what happens when an idea for a literary work arises. Firstly, the emphasis is squarely on process, and this, it seems to me, is exactly what Egerton is trying to express about an experience of literary inspiration. That we never know exactly what the narrator's idea is amplifies this sense that process, rather than content, is key. Secondly, the images I have discussed are all associated with femininity, and yet are, I argue, presented through a masculine narrator. Thus the gendering of literary inspiration is challenged. While masculine literary and cultural authority relies on an association between inspiration and masculinity, the metaphors used by Egerton in this story to describe her narrator's experience undermine these associations, and, by implication, the authority which they seek to insure.

There is, however, yet another narrative layer to consider. The images of the web, pearl and child are further mediated in the person of what the narrator calls "The elf that lurks in some inner cell" (191). It is this elf, it seems, who is in fact doing the weaving, placing the brushstrokes, producing the running comment that generates the "pearl" of the idea. Elves and the like appear regularly in Egerton's fiction, most frequently to describe either a child or a fragile-looking young woman. For example, in "The Spell of the White Elf", the "white elf" of the title is a baby girl who is taken in and treated as her own by an independent working woman

writer. What the story emphasizes, however, is the woman's lack of conventional maternal feelings–she loves the child, is fascinated by it and kind to it, but throughout sees it as something mysterious, even magical, rather than something naturally hers or taken-for-granted–hence it is referred to throughout, and apparently quite seriously, as an "elf". Thus, while the whimsy associated with the word might make it difficult for contemporary readers, we see that, for Egerton, it seems usefully to convey something which is mysterious and inexplicable.

Comparison with another *fin de siècle* author, with whom Egerton might seem to have little in common, will be of assistance in focusing on the specific use Egerton makes of the "inner elf" here. Robert Louis Stevenson uses an image strikingly similar to Egerton's "inner elf" in an essay of 1892 entitled "A Chapter on Dreams". In this essay, which basically purports to describe Stevenson's own experience of literary (or indeed not-so-literary) inspiration, Stevenson posits the existence of "little people", or "some Brownie, some familiar", who, sometimes in collaboration with the author, and sometimes totally independently, come up with the idea for a story, often presenting it in the form of a dream (187). The writer–in this case, Stevenson himself–will awake from a dream to find that the building-blocks of a plot have been generated by these "little people" (sometimes plural, sometimes singular). The writer will then usually amend the story slightly to make it suitable for public consumption. This is particularly because, Stevenson says, "my Brownies have not a rudiment of what we call a conscience" (188); so, for example Stevenson had to add the "moral" elements of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* himself (though he does not detail what these were). Stevenson's "little people" may begin as part of an extended metaphor, first appearing as "the little people who manage man's internal theatre" (182), but by the end of the essay Stevenson has developed his Brownies into beings which themselves have fully developed personalities–or rather, a collective personality; they are, he says "somewhat fantastic, like their stories hot and hot, full of passion and the picturesque, alive with animating incident; and they have no prejudice against the supernatural" (189). Similarly, Egerton's "elf", while less fully developed than Stevenson's, appears as multi-talented and vividly alive, as we see in this litany of active verbs in the continuous present describing its activity: "now throwing […] now recording […] touching […] making" (Egerton, "A Lost Masterpiece", 191). In both instances, the labor of inspiration is carried out by highly active and industrious semi-mythical beings, which are both internal to the writer himself and markedly separate from him.

What, then, is at stake in making this claim, that one's literary inspiration is, in some senses, not one's own, though it comes from inside oneself? Firstly, it is worth noting that this model brings us back to the reproductive female body. Glossing Kristeva's discussion of pregnancy, Fluhr notes that for mothers-to-be, "their future children are both them and not-them"; (248) in a very concrete sense, not their own, but coming from inside them. This reinforces the absent presence of the maternal body here as central to Egerton's conception of inspiration. But there are a number of further ways in which this paradoxical figure might be read. Stephen Arata draws attention to the obvious Freudian reading of Stevenson's essay–the description of the Brownies as "hot and hot, full of passion", and so forth, cries out to be read as the irruption of the id, of otherwise suppressed desires, through the respectable surface of the writer's personality. As Arata puts it, "It seems especially appropriate that Edward Hyde should spring from a dream, since like the Brownies he is so easily identified with the raging energies of the id" (48).[8] But, as Arata points out, the Brownies are also un-Freudian in that they have "developed what can only be called a business sense" (48); they have an eye to the dreamer-writer's bank-book, they respond to his economic need. Thus the responsibility for the dirty business of business, as well as of passion, the supernatural, the amoral, and so on, is more or less abdicated–that is the Brownie's realm, outside the control of the dreamer-writer. Most importantly for my purposes, both Egerton's and Stevenson's little people are emphatically connected with industriousness, with labor, with work: Egerton introduces her "elf" by saying that it (the gender is unclear) is "very busy" (191); Stevenson's little people "labour all night long" (183). My assumption is, therefore, that there is something important about the writer (by this I mean Egerton's narrator, Stevenson's dreamer) distancing himself from work, from labor. The obvious model is that of the distinction between the capitalist and the worker. While the former may have authority, the latter, ultimately, has power–to down tools if nothing else. Thus it is in the mind of the writer; it is as if the writer-capitalist has to placate his brownie-elf-workers by acknowledging and containing their power, and thus retaining his authority.

This figuring of literary inspiration as requiring a distance from, and indeed regulatory censoring of, the (potentially chaotic) contributions of the "workers" indicates a more general anxiety in British literary culture of the time about the perceived threats posed to literary authority by the increasing professionalization of writing.[9] No-one expressed this anxiety more vividly than Stevenson himself. One might have expected him to welcome wholeheartedly the success of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which

gave him financial independence and liberated him from his father's oppressive control. However, Stevenson was so distressed at the idea of writing professionally that, in a letter to Edmund Gosse, Stevenson says that "we [professional authors] are whores, some of us are pretty, some are not", and "like prostitutes [we] live by a pleasure" (cited in Arata, 49). The prostitute is, of course, the Ur-working women. Stevenson's analogies thus bring together the class dimension of this anxiety with its gender dimension, and map onto a tension which has been observed in the literary culture of the period; that is, as Elana Gomel has put it with reference to Oscar Wilde, in "the challenge to the (male) *auteur* presented by the (female) popular hack" (78). The image of the "(female) popular hack" was of course itself a product of the professionalization of writing during this period, and the concomitant increase in female writers. Female hacks appear in stories such as Henry James's "The Next Time", also published in *The Yellow Book*, in order to be distinguished from the struggling male literary genius. While the literary genius, in James's story, ultimately fails, we are clearly encouraged to sympathize with him and sneer at the successful female author of three-decker novels, which sit on her shelves like–of course–"sets of triplets" (227). There are no characters explicitly identified as female hacks in Egerton's story; but there are a number of women who, at various levels, present a challenge to the masculine literary authority embodied in the narrator. Those who present the strongest challenge are, as I will go on to discuss, in some ways analogous to the female hack (and indeed the prostitute) in being, explicitly or implicitly, working women, and in one case a working woman with a particularly difficult (difficult for the narrator, that is) relationship with writing.

The Women of "A Lost Masterpiece"

The first women in Egerton's story appear alongside the narrator on the river steamer, and are characterized by elements stereotypically (and indeed misogynistically) associated with women. The first is revealed gradually, as if in the corner of the narrator's eye, through the "hideous green" of her "velveteen […] sleeves" (Egerton, "A Lost Masterpiece", 190), the language mocking women's vain and superficial interest in clothing, yet at the same time asserting the narrator's expertise (he can identify the material as velveteen) and judgment (the green is "hideous") in this area. The "young ladies" on the narrator's other side are equally scathingly represented, the three key phrases being "supercilious giggle", "audible remarks" and "personal appearance" (190). Again, women's superficiality is emphasized, as well as, here, their inappropriate behavior–

one could imagine the phrases appearing in an etiquette manual for young ladies, describing behavior to be avoided (and doubtless associated with the lower classes). Thus Egerton deftly outlines her narrator's negative view of women. But while he judges them and looks down at them, at the same time he is himself aware of being looked at, remarked upon, and judged; on the surface, the narrator asserts his authority, but ultimately he cannot control the extent to which he is himself an object of scrutiny.

Having descended from the boat, the narrator then smiles at "a pretty anaemic city girl" (192). However, this smile turns immediately to antagonism; the narrator "only remembered that she was a stranger when she flashed back an indignant look of affected affront" (192). We note that the affront is only "affected"–like the girls on the steamer, this woman is superficial; the narrator sees through her attempt to perform the socially suitable response, and if the affront is only "affected" then her genuine response is, the narrator implies, doubtless one of gratification on having been smiled at by this man-about-town. The last word is given on this encounter when the narrator makes, significantly, his only explicit utterance in the whole story: he dismisses this moment of social awkwardness, and with it the woman herself, by saying "'Go thy way, little city maid, get thee to thy typing.'" (193). If it comes to affectation, this is rather a case of the pot calling the kettle black, as the use of the archaic "thou" form, together with the pastoral formulation "little […] maid", only serves to reinforce the image of a rather self-satisfied dandy, bound up with his sense of creative genius, and finally calling out to an unknown woman in the street in cod-Spenserian terms. The picture is frankly absurd, even in the context of Egerton's tendency to melodrama in some of her dialogue, and reinforces the distinction between the narrator and the implied author. The use of "thou" also, of course, implies intimacy, which reinforces my reading of this as an exchange between (masculine) sexual predator and (feminine) prey–albeit where the potential victim is ready to show her claws.

Most interesting for my purposes, the "city maid" is dismissed to her "typing." This tells us a great deal about how the narrator perceives this woman. She is, firstly, utterly modern and, symbolically at least, in the vanguard of gender politics. As Leah Price and Pamela Thurschwell have recently put it in their collection of essays on secretaries, "turn-of-the-century feminists associated standing up for one's rights with sitting down at one's desk" (4). She is also thus independent, probably unmarried, and needs to work for a living. She is therefore the kind of woman at whom it is legitimate to shout in the street: "As a typist," Morag Shiach notes, "the woman worker becomes available, visible and sexualised" (77). Finally, if

she is a typist, she presents a profound challenge to the category of "writer". Price and Thurschwell make the point that the advent of the typewriter reinforced the separation of the mechanical, physical process of writing from the cognitive process required in its composition. Indeed, they note, "[i]t could be objected that nothing but semantic coincidence links 'writing' in the sense of producing material marks with 'writing' in the sense of composing verbal content" (2). Certainly the figure of the dictation secretary drives a wedge between these two senses of the term. Price and Thurschwell encapsulate this distinction where they cite Truman Capote's dismissive remark on Jack Kerouac, "That's not writing. That's typing", and gloss it thus: "The opposite of genius is typist" (2). And yet, typing does remain fundamentally a form of writing; this might be only in the sense of "producing material marks", writing of the mechanical variety, but, of course, it cannot be restricted to this kind of writing, and may also include "composing verbal content".

Returning to our narrator, we find that we can shed light on this overdetermined articulation of his superiority–"Go thy way little city maid, get thee to thy typing"–by viewing it as a response to the threatening presence of another writer; for, as I have indicated, the typist must be a writer of a sort. In order to insure his genius, the narrator must distinguish himself from this "little city maid": by using the familiar, and indeed literary, "thou" form; by sending her on *her* way, to be distinguished from his; and most importantly, by identifying her as a "typist"–genius's other. There is also some anxiety aroused, perhaps, by her "affected" affront. Typists, ideally, do not pay attention to content, but mechanically transcribe whatever is being dictated, or set out before them in longhand. But this one is, apparently, a dissembler; what does this imply for her relationship to her employers' texts? Does she "affect" not to read what she is writing, when all the while she is in fact reading it and, perhaps, contaminating it? The women the narrator comes across are thus becoming increasingly challenging; the ill-dressed lady and the giggling girls were easily dismissed, it seems, but this "little" typist has generated the need for a rather more emphatic assertion of difference.

The next woman our *flâneur* encounters will be even harder to see off. Having mounted a bus, a "foreign element" (Egerton, "A Lost Masterpiece", 194) passes across the narrator's field of vision, in the form of a hurrying woman. This woman infuriates the narrator by hurrying along the pavement and never being finally overtaken by the bus on which he is sitting. He seems unable to ignore her presence, and indeed the sight of her "recalls" something to him, an exotic scene at the Corcovado (195). Yet he is unable to work out why this woman should evoke this image,

and it is this inability to work out the connection that seems ultimately to be fatal to his literary idea. In particular, he becomes fixated on the word "*pompier*", from a song in French that is being sung in the exotic landscape evoked by the sight of this woman (195). He is himself in the dark about the meaning of the word, asking "What in the world is a *pompier*?" (195), but is "convinced *pompier* expresses her in some subtle way–absurd word!" (196). As Ana Parejo Vadillo has explained in her discussion of "A Lost Masterpiece", "'L'art pompier,' or official art, is a term applied to the nineteenth-century French neoclassic tendencies in painting. By extension, the term refers to any literary work that is outmoded, pretentious or ridiculous" (24). Parejo Vadillo goes on to argue that the narrator thus "seems to suggest that the figure of the *flâneuse*/streetwalker is outmoded" (24), by comparison with the narrator's own highly modern use of river steamer and omnibus. However, this reading does not take account of the ironic distance between narrator and author in this story, alluded to in my introduction, which I can now flesh out.

As I noted above, the narrator's response to the hurrying woman does not comply with the standard *flâneur/passante* relationship in that she murders his thought rather than providing inspiration. In a further modification of the standard model, here the narrator's fascination with the woman is characterized by disgust; far from being entranced by her beauty, he is repelled by the woman's "elbowing gait, and tight skirt shortened to show her great splay feet" (196), drawing attention to her physicality (and in so doing perhaps evincing a misogynistic disgust at the female body already indicated in the narrator's description of the breast-feeding mother, mentioned above). In particular, it is the woman's pace that distresses the narrator: "It annoyed me, for I could not help wondering why she was in such a desperate hurry" (194). The woman is described as ugly, busy, intrusive, even somewhat masculine. She thus fully complies with contemporary negative stereotypes of the New Woman; indeed, *Punch*'s cartoon of a New Woman sitting legs akimbo on a throne, brandishing the key to learning and reading Ibsen, was apparently based on Egerton herself, and was produced in the issue of 28 April 1894 precisely as a response to the publication of *The Yellow Book* (De Vere White, 28). It is here that the ironic distance between implied author and narrator is particularly evident: Egerton is unlikely, we assume, to be identifying wholeheartedly with a narrator who is repulsed by a character which resembles her, or a category of persons she is supposed to exemplify. If, then, we place the use of the term *pompier* in this context, we might note that Egerton has in fact been building up a picture of the

narrator himself to which the term would be entirely apt. The level of his pretension has, for example, been expressed a few paragraphs before where he rails against the woman's disruption of his "web of genius, undoubted genius" (Egerton, "A Lost Masterpiece", 194), that "is to bring *me* kudos and make countless thousands rejoice" (195). The analysis is, perhaps, simple: we see in others what we most fear in ourselves. By insisting that the word "*pompier*" is associated with this ugly, hurrying woman, the narrator is distancing himself from the possibility that his genius, his "work", is bombastic, pretentious, and thus valueless.[10]

Parejo Vadillo goes on helpfully to articulate the paradox at the heart of this story; namely, that while railing against the woman's having "murdered" his story, "the omnibus rider 'finds' a new masterpiece (i.e. the story we are reading), which, strangely enough, restores to the *flâneuse*/streetwalker her heroic character" (24). While acknowledging the validity of this argument, and agreeing that some affirmation of the walking woman is thus implied, I suggest that there are two problems with Parejo Vadillo's reading. Firstly, this apparent inscription of the walking woman as hero(ine) of the story cannot neutralize the negative gender stereotypes to which Egerton draws our attention throughout the story. Secondly, and most importantly, her description of the New Woman walker as *flâneuse* obscures the distinction between this hurrying female character and the narrator.

Certainly, recent scholarship has challenged the idea that *flânerie* is an exclusively male category. Deborah L. Parsons's *Streetwalking the Metropolis* is the most important critical work in this regard; Parsons insists that the concept of the *flâneuse* is not, as previous scholars such as Janet Wolff had insisted, "rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century" (cited in Parsons, 4). This does not, however, mean that the *flâneur* and the *flâneuse* perform exactly the same activity, being different in gender only. (Indeed, Parejo Vadillo's qualification "*flâneuse*/streetwalker" indicates her own caution around the use of the term.) On the contrary, as Parsons notes, "a mode of expression can be seen to develop in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that emphasizes observation of the city yet is distinct from the characteristic practice of the authoritative *flâneur*, comparable instead to the marginalized urban familiarity of the rag-picker" (6). However, while positing the possibility of an alternative *flânerie*, Parsons agrees that both *flâneur* and *flâneuse* are characterized by their "observation of the city". This is certainly what the narrator is engaged in; however, he figures the walking woman as doing the opposite–hurrying along "untiringly", oblivious to her surroundings.

Further, Parsons observes that there remains an identifiable set of practices which defined, at this point, the "authoritative *flâneur*" (6). Among the most important of these are the *flâneur*'s sauntering pace and his purposelessness. This is made clear in, for example, Rachel Bowlby's classic discussion of the *flâneur*, and in particular her analysis of Louis Huart's 1850 text *Le flâneur* in which Huart explicitly excludes from the category of *flâneur* he "who walks fast" (198). Parsons too notes that "The *flâneur* walks idly through the city, listening to its narrative" (3). Indiscriminate wandering, idling, listening to the narrative of the city–its "life-throbs" (Egerton, "A Lost Masterpiece", 196)–are certainly behaviors displayed by the narrator. By contrast, the hurrying woman would seem to have some purpose, some clear aim in mind, something to achieve, perhaps. Indeed, it is the woman's pace one which first caught the narrator's attention by arousing his annoyance: "It annoyed me," he says, "for I could not help wondering why she was in such a desperate hurry" (194). He goes on to ask himself "What is she hurrying for? We can't escape her" (196), and finally laments that "My brain is void, all is dark within; the flowers are faded, the music stilled; the lovely illusive little being has flown, and yet she pounds along untiringly" (196), revealing the extent of his egocentricity as he marvels that she keeps walking even after she has achieved this murder–this must have been her aim, he implies, so what can her purpose in continuing to hurry possibly be? Therefore, even taking into account Parson's critique of the idea of an exclusively male *flânerie*, Egerton's hurrying woman remains, in terms of her function within the story, the diametric opposite of the traditional *flâneur*.

The distinction between the insouciant, wandering male writer, strolling around the city in the confident hope of receiving inspiration from his "elf", and the woman striding purposefully along in pursuit of some specific end, maps directly onto the tension between "the (male) *auteur*" or genius and "(female) popular hack" discussed above. Thus, while the hurrying, purposeful woman of Egerton's story is not necessarily a writer, she is certainly contiguous with a discourse which, in the era of art for art's sake, seems to have constructed women's (paid) work as purposeful, and thus not only contaminated, but potentially contaminating. As we have seen, it is elves, or Brownies, who conduct the morally dubious, difficult, laborious "work" which forms the foundation for, while being emphatically distinct from, the morally refined, authoritative "work" of the writer proper. Further, we remember that the metaphors Egerton employs in her story to express the elf's work are dense with associations of femininity, revealing the (female, proletarian) power on which the writer's authority relies. Set in this context, it is hardly surprising to find

that in Egerton's story, typists, hurrying women–women with jobs, with a purpose, who work–are potentially fatally threatening to masculine genius.

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As Egerton's story draws to a close, it continues gently to mock its narrator, but also seems to involve some self-mockery on Egerton's part:

> Does she realise what she has done? She has trampled a rare little mind-being unto death, destroyed a precious literary gem. Aye, one that, for aught I know, might have worked a revolution in modern thought; added a new human document to the archives of man; been the keystone to psychic investigations; solved problems that lurk in the depths of our natures and tantalise us with elusive gleams of truth; heralded in, perchance, the new era; when such simple problems as Home Rule, Bimetallism, or the Woman Question will be mere themes for school-board compositions—who can tell? (196)

The absurdly overblown ambition of the narrator is revealed as he builds clause after clause, imagining giddier and yet giddier heights of achievement for the lost literary gem. And yet, the underlying question seems to be one which, surely, must concern all writers–must have concerned Egerton herself–namely, what is the work that literature can do? The literary piece might, the narrator supposes, have "worked a revolution"–answered the Woman Question, no less. But the paragraph raises the question of what kind of "work" writing is, ultimately–compared to, for example, the work of the typist, or indeed the prostitute. As a working woman writer, Egerton certainly distances herself from her pompous narrator. And yet she must, to some extent, also be identifying with him as a fellow literary writer (or someone who aspires to be one)–implying that she in turn distances herself from, for example, the "little city" typist, or even the figure of the bustling New Woman. We thus return to my suggestion that, whatever the gender of the a writer, they must perform a particular kind of masculinity, one that clearly distinguishes them from working women, in order to be able to figure themselves as experiencing the inspiration that insures a work of literature. But Egerton's refusal in her story explicitly to articulate the gender position of her narrator, together with this varying degree of ironic distance between narrator and implied author, finally undermines any attempt firmly to locate narrative "authority" within this highly experimental text. In so doing, "A Lost Masterpiece" reveals and challenges the gendered, class-based limitations of "socially sanctioned images of authorship" (Clark 33) in the literature and culture of the period.

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Notes

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[2] Any use of the term *flâneur* with reference to gender needs to take account of Deborah Parsons's argument that "the concept of the *flâneur* itself contains gender ambiguities that suggest the figure to be a site for the contestation of male authority rather than the epitome of it" (5-6). Nevertheless, Parsons agrees that the literature and culture of the time presents us with a "characteristic practice of the authoritative *flâneur*" (6). This authoritative *flâneur*, susceptible to contestation