

# The Body as Interface: New Woman Identity in George Egerton's "The Regeneration of Two"

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"The Regeneration of Two" is a short story from George Egerton's (1859-1945) collection *Discords* (1894) and an example of New Woman fiction, a genre particular to the late-Victorian period. In her text, Egerton responds to the limiting narratives of traditional femininity through re-writing both textual and embodied narratives of women's identity. She uses discourses of materiality, clothing, and the body to critique traditional narratives of femininity, and to provide new ways to both represent and embody womanhood. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, an interface is "a surface forming a common boundary of two bodies, spaces, or phases", or "the place at which independent and often unrelated systems meet and act on or communicate with each other" ("Interface"). As gender is "an identity tenuously constituted in time ... produced through the stylization of the body ... [and therefore] must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler 140), the body and its stylization through clothing are interfaces for the performative signification of identity. In "Regeneration", the female protagonist's body acts as an interface upon which her identity and its signifiers are inscribed, performed, and transformed, and through which Victorian feminine identity and the construction of the ideal woman are critiqued.

The term "New Woman" was first coined in print by Sarah Grand and Ouida in two 1894 articles, "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" and "The New Woman" respectively, and referred to women who embodied new or previously unarticulated forms of femininity that challenged the status quo and championed female agency and sexuality. The New Woman was "variously, a feminist activist, a social reformer, a popular novelist, a suffragette playwright, a woman poet", while also "a fictional construct, a discursive response to the activities of the late-nineteenth century women's movement" (Ledger 1). Both in life and as a discursive and literary construct, the New Woman posed a challenge to the established order as she "threw certainties into dispute, threatened to disrupt family life as the Victorians liked to believe they had known it, and played the lord of misrule in a world turned upside down by her demands" (Gardiner 7). The New Woman and New Woman writing critiqued entrenched institutions of Victorian cultural identity such as marriage and the family, hegemonic masculinity, and morality, while also traversing the public and private spheres in a movement away from domesticity and towards the traditionally masculine worlds of work and politics. The New Woman identity thus both challenged and epitomised cultural anxieties.

One element of first-wave feminism was the Dress Reform movement, which sought to encourage the adoption of less restrictive clothing, recognising the role of clothing in maintaining women's secondary and domestic social position. The adoption of styles of dress such as bloomers was a key part of the New Woman's challenge to the status quo, as by moving away from traditional feminine clothing, she further posed a threat in blurring both visual and performative signifiers of gender. The archetypal New Woman adopted styles of dress that drew on masculine clothing: "a two-piece suit with a blouse ... custom made of wool by men's tailors rather than dressmakers" (Cooper 79) or "a skirt and ready-made shirtwaist, a new blouse style based on men's shirts" (79). This clothing allowed women to

perform physical work and move more freely than in more restrictive fashionable dress, which often included a boned bodice as well as a corset. This blurred the binary view of gender, which was upheld in part by dress. As clothing “made a clear distinction between male and female, and public and private spheres [...] dress was a vehicle for enforcing these boundaries” (Cooper 69), so by adopting elements of traditionally male dress, and thus signifiers of hegemonic masculinity, New Women subverted traditional gender performance.

Despite distancing herself personally from the term, Egerton’s writing clearly expresses New Woman sentiments in her exploration and vocalising of female sexual agency and identity; it disrupts traditional modes of writing both in form and content. Her *Keynotes* (1893) and *Discords* (1894) are collections of short stories that concentrate on women and their experiences, and in their structure as well as their subject matter, “destabilise[] the genre boundaries that divide the short story and the novel so that her books become hybrids of both ... in order to explore possible narrative structures outside of the conventional novel’s courtship plot” (Hager, “Community”). While *Keynotes* concerns itself with “the triumphant keynotes of women beginning to claim their own subjectivity”, *Discords* focuses on “the tortured discords between women’s needs for agency and the denial of that agency inherent [within codes of] Victorian femininity” (Hager par. 19). As Hager suggests, the first (“A Cross Line”) and final (“The Regeneration of Two”) stories in each collection frame the work, gesturing towards a transformation that occurs in the protagonists, and a crossing of boundaries between traditional and New forms of femininity (“Community”). In these collections, female sexuality and sexual agency is not only present – a subversive act in itself – but explicit. Egerton focuses on women who choose not to repress their sexual agency and desire but refuse to allow it to define or control them, and thus she “envision[s] sexuality as simply one note, not the keynote, in women’s lives” (Hager, “Community”). New Women’s writing “analysed the social and sexual choices of an emancipated woman”, and Egerton’s writing does this, describing “with a new vehemence and confidence the importance of honouring women’s sexuality” (Vicinus viii). Though meeting with criticism from conservative sources, Egerton’s *Keynotes* was praised in *Review of Reviews* for her articulation of women’s experience, having “crystallised her life’s drama, [and] written down her soul upon the page” (671). Egerton received letters from women who wrote that “they have often felt just like the uneasy woman in “A Cross Line,” and that they are glad to see their sensations made matter of record” (qtd. in Hager, “Community”). Egerton herself stated that she aimed to explore “the *terra incognita* of herself, as she knew herself to be, not as man liked to imagine her – in a word to give herself away, as man had given himself away in his writings” (“A Keynote” 58). The continual use of a nameless protagonist throughout both *Keynotes* and *Discords* also emphasises her striving towards providing a voice for the “universal” women. In her examination of aspects of female experience that had previously been either hidden within or written out of texts, Egerton’s writing provides a critique of Victorian literary and social conventions.

Throughout the text, Egerton’s protagonist Fruen undergoes a “regeneration” through the self-fashioning of a new identity, using the body and its materiality as an interface upon which this new identity is constructed. Both in Victorian life and in texts, dress was crucial to the fashioning and signification of identity and femininity. Dress both “defin[ed] the parameters of feminine respectability” (Summers 21) and assisted in policing and maintaining the social order through its reflection of class and morality. Dress was an interface upon which conflicting yet co-existing markers of ideal feminine respectability and sexual desirability were performed, and through which women actively constructed a classed and gendered identity. Thus, within fiction, clothing “[can] be read as easily as any text”

(Summers 19) and plays a significant role in developing and portraying character. The coded references and languages of cloth and colour used within Egerton's text play a role in telling the narratives of the women beneath the dresses, being employed "symbolically, metaphorically and analogously in depicting the heroine's progression through the narrative as she negotiates contemporary modes of femininity and sexuality, literary representation and genre" (Seys 5). Victorian readers, and particularly female readers, would have been aware of these multiple and shifting meanings; as Christine Bayles Kortsch states, "in her work bag, the ideal [Victorian] woman reader carried not only shears and a needle ... [but also] a sophisticated knowledge of the social significance of clothing and of the etiquette surrounding even the simplest of garments" (55). Thus, clothing and its material characteristics and fashioning can be read as symbolically significant reflections of narrative, character, and identity, while also interfacing with contextual and ideological issues of femininity, sexuality, and morality.

In "Regeneration", images of clothing and of the active "making" of identity through self-fashioning are used to critique traditional expectations of women. Fruen is a wealthy young woman who, in physical appearance and mentality, conforms to the feminine ideal: "She is not unlike an illustration in a dainty magazine ... she is seductively attractive, a thing of piquant contrasts – the attractive artificiality, physical lassitude, and irritable weariness of a disillusioned woman of the world, and the eyes of a spoilt child filled with petulant query" ("Regeneration" 165). Despite her outward composure, her character expresses a sense of inner turmoil, stating that she wishes "to scream" (165), and that "she would give all she possesses for one hour's real happiness" (179). Fruen's discontented interior is contrasted with her image, and the language of self-fashioning is used to expose her performance of femininity as artificial and constructed according to social expectations. Her upper-middle-class identity is clear in her expensive and expertly made clothing: "her muslin gown, with all its apparent simplicity, is fitted by Parisian fingers" (179), and her physical description portrays her as the ideal beautiful but idle woman, "look[ing] so like a fashion-plate" with an "absurd" waist (243, 244). However, Egerton also demonstrates the superficial and performed nature of her femininity as "attractive artificiality" (164) that has been "powdered and painted" (244).

Throughout Part I, Fruen's body is a literal interface of conflicting expectations of women, a surface upon which the cultural signifiers of respectable femininity are applied to demonstrate their artificiality. Egerton emphasises the contrast between the real and the ideal woman: "the woman under that infernal corset" ("Regeneration" 188) and the femininity that Fruen performs. She "blushes through her powder" and when she has "an hysterical, uncontrollable fit of laughter", "it is as if one of the figures in a fashion plate in a lady's paper were suddenly to change its simper into a natural smile, and let its waist expand" (181). Egerton makes it clear that she does this for men, rather than for her own pleasure, as it had "grown natural to her to exact homage from every man" (182). As Emma Burris-Janssen states, "she is only able to recognize herself through the imagined gaze of an approving (and presumably masculine) spectator. Her body is an image, alienated from her subjective, embodied experience of it. All that it naturally possesses is overpowered by the role it is required to perform within the heteropatriarchal parameters of her society. Its frailty is cultivated, its physical "flaws" are constructed by the male gaze and then covered by corsets and powder, and all of this has resulted in a "nervous irritability" that reveals itself as the woman prepares to be seen—not to act" (par. 7). What is ostensibly "natural" or possessing "apparent simplicity" is artificial and not a true part of Fruen's self, but instead has "grown natural" to her to act in a cultivated manner (Egerton, "Regeneration" 179, 182). Her

idealized femininity is entirely cultivated and constructed, and exposes the ideal as performative rather than natural, distinguishing between the “ideal” and “real” Victorian woman. This distinction begins to break down after Fruen meets her poet: it “strikes her as never before” that the powder she applies “accentuates her lines and makes her look horribly haggard”, so she “wipes it off carefully”, exposing her natural skin free from artifice or alteration (182). Like the strawberries Fruen and her poet eat that “are rather uncultivated ... but they are nice for all that, far better than the garden ones” (185), a clear theme runs throughout the text of the division between the ostensibly “natural” but cultivated, and the truly natural and authentic self.

In Victorian society, corsetry functioned as “a multi-functional discursive device”, being both signifier for the female body and sexuality, and the object by which these controversial and taboo subjects were shaped and controlled (Summers 3). The corset serves as a foundational interface both literal and symbolic, not only in creating a base for the fitting of clothing according to the fashionable silhouette, but as a key vehicle for the defining and controlling of women’s sexualities during the Victorian period. The corset accentuated the biological differences between the male and female body, asserting and maintaining the divide between the worlds of men and women, and the associations of femininity with delicacy and masculinity with strength. It also restricted a woman’s movement, limiting the physical activities or work that she was able to participate in and preventing the development of muscle, and reduced the amount of food she could eat. This both created and enforced the fashionable idleness, delicacy, fragility, and submissiveness of the ideal Victorian woman. Particularly throughout the *fin-de-siecle*, corsetry became the subject of extensive debate about its safety and necessity, and significantly, its moral, physical, and symbolic function in constructing and policing “acceptable” domestic femininity. Victorian femininity was “a subjectivity that obeyed a rigid code of moral as well as sartorial maxims which mutually and intimately inflected each other” (Summers 4), and the corset became both metaphor for, and enforcer of, these codes and maxims. As a form of bodily discipline, a physical garment and a textual metaphor, the corset can be read as an interface for the multiple forms of cultural control over women, being both physically restricted by her corset, and symbolically “girdled by discourses at pains to define her” (Talairach-Vielmas 6).

For the New Woman, corsetry symbolically confined women to limited and restrictive narratives, and many “resisted it specifically because of its role in female objectification” (Summers 5). Because of this, Dress Reform became a significant part of the New Woman movement. This reform sought to encourage modes of dress that allowed freedom of physical movement and comfort for both men and women, thus allowing the wearer to work and to exercise freely. The reform movement sought to promote styles of women’s dress that could be worn without corsetry or with less boning, and thereby minimising the health conditions and physical frailty associated with tight-lacing and corsetry. As Gail Cunningham states, “women were likely to remain the weaker sex as long as they were encased in whalebone and confined their physical activity to the decorous movements of the ballroom” (2). Two major societies for Dress Reform were The Rational Dress Society and The Healthy and Artistic Dress Union. The Rational Dress Society was founded in 1880 by Lady Harberton, and was established “to promote the cause of health, comfort and sense in dress, and especially in women’s dress ... condemn[ing] tight lacing, high heels, [and] all the garments which cramped movements” (Ewing 93). The Society “omitted corsets from its list of approved underwear” (93). Similarly, the Healthy and Artistic Dress Union was founded in 1890, and its associated periodical *Aglaia* aimed at “the propagation of sound ideas on the subject of dress” (Healthy and Artistic Dress Union i). The periodical looked towards Classical art and

the associated styles of dress “to substitute wholesome and natural garments for those which, for generations, have been injuring the health of the race” (Healthy and Artistic Dress Union 5), using both medical and aesthetic critique of contemporary dress to discourage readers from wearing certain garments. Corsetry had been a major point of controversy throughout the Victorian period for its impact on women’s health, reproductive capability, and morality, while *fin-de-siècle* feminism sought a movement exploring not only corsetry’s detrimental effects on women’s health, but also its contribution to preventing women from reaching their full potential. In the first issue of *Aglaia*, William Wilberforce Smith argues that “[t]his unmeasured damage to fitness, handicapping women in the race of life and hindering them in performing the best and noblest offices of their sex, probably constitutes the greatest of the evils of corset-wearing” (7). As the corset was “an absolute violation of our first principles, a crime against the law of beauty” (Holiday 15), the alternative clothing advocated by the movement involved “looser garments and no corseting ... [which] meant renouncing the desirable small and defined waistline, long considered a mark of femininity” (Cooper 79). In rejecting the traditional small-waisted feminine silhouette, the movement also rejected the narratives of feminine idleness and domesticity that this silhouette spoke of, and instead promoted clothing that “should be first comfortable, next pretty and becoming, and lastly fashionable if desired” (Dickson 10), and in turn, spoke of a new narrative for women that was based in a woman’s ability to work, to be independent, and to exist under her own terms.

*Aglaia* and the Rational Dress movement suggested an alternative form of beauty in clothing, wherein a garment’s beauty was conditional upon the ability of the wearer to carry out the activities required, a principle reflecting the New Woman belief in and need for women to be able to be independent and self-sufficient. Sophie Bryant, an Irish feminist, activist, mathematician, and pioneer of the bicycle, wrote in *Aglaia*,

no dress can be, under any circumstances, either beautiful, convenient, or healthy, which does not allow the utmost freedom of movement that is suited to the circumstances. Hence we must reject it at once all the fashionable styles that arrest the movements of the body and impede the motion of the limbs - the stiff corsets or boned bodices, that regulate the internal movements of breathing and prevent almost entirely the natural play of dorsal and other muscles (8).

The movement both promoted a style of dress that complemented physiology rather than restricting or changing it, but also promoted a new way of embodying femininity through clothing. *Aglaia* founder Henry Holiday states in his essay “The Artistic Aspect of Dress” that dress is “the outward expression of the Divine image in man ... If for any reason the body must be clothed, the clothing should be to the body as nearly as possible what the body is to the spirit” (13). Clothing is therefore a reflection of not only identity, but the way in which the individual chooses to embody their identity, and is thus an interface between identity, embodiment, and the social world the individual exists within. In “Regeneration”, Fruen’s looser clothing and abandonment of corsetry allows her to cultivate physical strength and to carry out her work, while also reflecting and facilitating her transformation into a powerful New Woman. While conventional Victorian narratives of femininity uphold these discourses of the symbolic confinement of the female body, in New Woman fiction, authors write against these traditions and rewrite women’s narratives according to new ideas of femininity and its embodiment.

Egerton’s text explores women’s “dual life” (“Regeneration” 198), distinguishing between the performed, surface-level self of idealised femininity, and the genuine and essentialist feminine self, “some bottom layer of real womanhood that [they] may not reveal ... through

the outside husk of our artificial selves” (198). This is traced in the structure of the text in two parts, in which Fruen grows from the former to the latter, with her body acting as an interface for the transformation and regeneration of self. Through a dialogue with the poet, in which Fruen is “shamed to the depths of her soul ... [for] the spots of rouge on her cheeks” (196-7), both Fruen and the reader are forced into realisation of women’s position as “merely the playthings of circumstances [and] contradictions” (198). It also portrays Victorian femininity as bound to the performance of its signifiers: by emphasising the distinction between inner “real womanhood” and of the ideal but “artificial selves” (198), Egerton proposes that ideal femininity is not innately found within women, but performed in order to fulfill a constructed ideal. However, Egerton also exposes women’s complicity in their own oppression, describing how women “have been taught to shrink from the honest expression of [their] wants and feelings as violations of modesty, or at least good taste” (198), and how the artificial and appearance-focused femininity this promotes makes them “half-man or half-doll” rather than allowing personal development into a “whole woman” (197, 252). Exposing this idealised, doll-like femininity as an empty performance critiques the marriage plot and the patriarchal systems that traditional narratives of femininity uphold and work within.

In contrast, Part II demonstrates Fruen’s self-fashioning as a New Woman, portrayed as being a “regeneration” both for her own growth and to help other women. Fruen has undergone a physical, mental and social “transformation” (“Regeneration” 232), running a commune of socially outcast women “going their own way to hold a place in the world in face of opinion” (232). The act of spinning wool is both narratively and symbolically significant, as the women spin, weave, and make their own woollen clothing from their own sheep. This process is explicitly stated as an act of self-fashioning, and of discarding their old identity in favour of a new, stronger and more independent identity that “find[s] new hopes and self-reliance in measure as they better their work” (206). Despite “few ladies spin[ning] now” (243) – a comment by Fruen’s poet that emphasises its unfashionableness – and weaving “after the old patterns, that are better than the new” (206), the women do so in defiance of social custom, and in a harkening back to a matriarchal social system untouched by patriarchal and restrictive social customs.

As “our most basic text for the reading of self”, the body and its shaping both speaks of individual identity, and influences its fashioning (Gilbert 5). The bodily restrictions of corsetry and of clothing are not merely “form[s] of external control”, but rather become “internalised to the extent that the subject is fashioned from the inside no less than from the outside” through the “creation and cultivation of distinctive modes of behaviour and systems of belief” (Warwick and Cavallaro 15). Egerton’s story explicates this through her heroine’s transformation into “new womanhood” through her rejection of these forms of control (“Regeneration” 246). As Fruen states, women’s “varying moods [are] bound up with the physiological gamut of our being” (198) – namely, the fact of the woman’s body as physically bound and restricted shapes their individual subjectivity and self-concept. As a metaphor for women’s confinement within patriarchal norms, as well as their own complicity within that system, Egerton’s story understands “the disciplinary practices of femininity ... as aspects of a far larger discipline, an oppressive and inegalitarian system of sexual subordination” (Bartky 75). To become a “whole woman” (Egerton, “Regeneration” 252), Egerton demonstrates that Fruen must not only cast off the corsetry and clothing that restricts her, but also the beliefs and internalised systems of control that have bound her life, thus rejecting “the form into which custom had fashioned [her]” (241).

In contrast to the culture that claimed corsets would help the wearer “look a better woman, feel a better woman, be a better woman” (*Woman’s Life* 291), Egerton’s heroine becomes a “grand woman” by “throw[ing] aside those infernal stays” (“Regeneration” 231). Egerton demonstrates how Fruen is able to reach her full potential through abandoning her corset: on a literal level, this would allow her to physically develop her muscles and to perform the work she wishes to undertake, and on a symbolic level, it reflects the freeing of her mind to consider other women’s experiences, and her rejection of patriarchal systems of oppression. As a New Woman text, Egerton’s story clearly lays out the ways in which these forms of feminine discipline hinder women both physically and psychologically. She also explores the development that can occur from rejecting them: as Fruen states, she wished “to see what significance the physical changes in [her] body had from where the contradictions of [her] nature sprang”, namely, “to find [her]self” through transforming her mental and physical form (241). Egerton asserts the strength of Fruen’s physical body in Part II, and her being “a grand woman” is directly attributed to her having “throw[n] aside those infernal stays [and] tak[ing] exercise” (231). Fruen is described as “glowing ... look[ing] a different being from the anaemic woman of three summers ago” (203): she “looks very big”, being “tall and gracious and strong” (211, 232). Her growth is as much spiritual and emotional as it is physical, a reaction against the diminishing body of the domestic angel of Victorian fiction, where fragility, smallness, and incorporeality are the ideal. Her physical freedom becomes a breaking free both from the literal restriction of the corset, and from the socio-cultural formations of the female body that held women within limited narratives of disembodied femininity. Egerton suggests a mode of femininity based on personal and physical strength rather than delicacy: in contrast to the fashionable ideal, it is possible to be a “whole woman” without a small waist, and without conforming to visual signifiers of ideal femininity. The representation of Fruen’s “big and bonny” (225) form also subverts class identity: her physical strength and assertive corporeality challenge the feminine delicacy, frailty, and idleness expected of upper-class women. In choosing not to wear a corset, then, Egerton’s heroine works within the performative language of dress in her rejection of traditional narratives and patriarchal systems of power. However, she also works outside of it, in choosing to shape her identity and physical form as literally unbound by, and thus unrestricted by these narratives.

Through the growth and strength of her heroine’s body, Egerton breaks free from patriarchal rhetoric by resisting reductive explanations of femininity and of the female body. Fruen’s physical body is present and significant both to the narrative and throughout the narrative. Her physical form is described regularly throughout the text using a literal, observational tone that writes against the tendency of Victorian novels to utilise a “rhetoric of feminine description aimed at erasing the female body through endless series of metonymies ... that annihilated the heroine’s physicality” (Talairach-Vielmas 39). In Part I, Fruen is described thus: “She is far above the average height, and as she lifts her rather long, bare arms to reach down a gown, every action is full of grace. She has sloping shoulders and a long, deep chest; she looks slight of hips ... She looks at herself in the long glass with a kind of satisfaction ... then gives a pleased nod over her shoulder at her own image” (Egerton, “Regeneration” 171). It is also significant that Fruen gazes “pleased” back at herself, reclaiming her body and its image from the narrator’s gaze. Her body is a literal and physical presence described with limited metaphor, and in Part 2, Egerton describes her not for her beauty or desirability, but for her physical strength and vitality now that she “belong[s] body and soul to [her]self” (241). Egerton describes Fruen’s “supple figure ... look[ing] so strong, so capable” (244), with a “restrained energy in the very way she stands”, and who “stands as tall as [the poet]” (203, 248). Instead of drawing upon existing images of women, such as that of a “fashion-

plate”, Egerton rewrites Fruen’s narrative through rewriting her body for its corporeality and physical ability. Egerton thus uses Fruen’s body as an interface not only through which to comment on existing and restrictive narratives of femininity, but also through which to transform them into new and more liberating narratives.

In the text, clothing and the self-fashioning of identity through clothes become significant in the “regeneration” of identity. As Madeleine C. Seys states, “[d]ress identifies the heroine and sets her on a narrative trajectory; yet, it also provides the means for her to refashion herself and her story. The changes in colour, texture, and style of dress represent her narrative development” (1). Egerton utilises the language of cloth to further her heroine’s narrative, evoking the sartorial symbolism of colour and textile to uphold or subvert the existing meanings and narratives of each sartorial element. Fruen’s clothing reflects her development and the changes in her body, “tall and gracious and strong, in her crimson, homespun gown, with large clear eyes shining steadily, and her clear skin flushed” (Egerton, “Regeneration” 232). Egerton again draws upon spinning as a metaphor for self-fashioning, with Fruen’s woollen dress becoming a symbol of her transformation and re-shaping of identity, and the act of learning to spin as an act of self-discovery and self-actualisation: “The wool in my gown holds all my first attempts [at spinning] – I like it; I span an awful lot of thoughts into it, much of my old self, and when it was finished I was new” (243). Identity and clothing become analogous upon the bodily interface, with metaphors of self-fashioning not only transforming Fruen’s identity through dressing differently, but with Fruen’s clothing becoming her identity, the act of spinning and making her dress a conscious act of re-fashioning the materiality of who she is. Thus, the changes in her clothing are not only a manifestation of her growth and new identity, but also further Fruen’s growth in an active re-fashioning and regeneration of identity.

In Part I, Fruen wears a “broad lilac and white stripe[d] ... muslin morning gown” (“Regeneration” 164). Muslin, and specifically, white muslin, is a symbolically charged textile that evokes “ethereality, innocence, youthfulness, purity and virginity” (Seys 31). As a cloth that remained fashionable throughout the nineteenth century, literature reflected this in its heroines’ dress, whose white muslin gowns bore the cultural meanings that the textile came to symbolise. Within Victorian literary conventions, the young, unmarried heroine is typically dressed in a white muslin gown to reflect her pure and “unmarked” sexuality, angelic beauty, and innocence. Used in conjunction with lilac, however, Egerton weaves multiple layers of meaning into the material of Fruen’s dress. The striped muslin of white and lilac reflects Fruen’s duality and the performative nature of dress and femininity, demonstrating how women use “deliberate calculation of dress” to perform desirable femininity (Egerton, “Regeneration” 194). On one hand, Fruen wears the colour of innocence and purity, but this is striped with lilac, “a colour frequently adopted for mourning, and is expressive of gravity, sorrow, and sadness” (Audsley 47). While this also reflects Fruen’s position as a widow, the contrast between the colour of a widow in mourning with that of an unmarried, virginal woman creates a tension between Fruen’s world-weary interior, and her performed exterior of childlike, “doll”-like femininity (Egerton, “Regeneration” 199). As the poet states, “she who flaunted the white banner of purity calculated the cut of her evening frock, and enticed men to walk under her banner by the whiteness of her breast” (193): the symbolic significance of colour as an indicator of character can equally be used falsely, as the colour white, with its connotations of purity and virginity, may be used to enact an artificial appearance of respectable femininity. Egerton draws upon conventions and implicit knowledge of cloth and colour in order to demonstrate their performative nature in relation to models of ideal femininity.



In contrast, Part II sees Fruen abandon muslin for crimson wool, and later, white wool. Having spun and woven her own “crimson gown, with its long full folds and tiny border of sable” (“Regeneration” 211), Fruen embodies an active position in the construction of her own identity, and the colour and textile further this narrative. As George Ashdown Audsley states in his 1872 text, *Colour in Dress: A Manual for Ladies*, the colour red is “strong” and “warm ... beyond every other”, so is “a fit symbol for ... pomp and power” (44), evoking Egerton’s use of the colour in portraying Fruen’s growth towards strength and self-determination. The colour also speaks of “active sexuality” (Seys 77), reflecting Fruen’s assertive femininity; she “has witched the men of the district to help her in many ways” (Egerton, “Regeneration” 212) and has abandoned the corset and the angelic ideal for the subversive matriarchal power of a “Snow Queen” or “witch” (225, 237). At her first appearance in Part II, Fruen “has on a red ski (snow-shoe) costume, hussar-braided jacket, full-pleated skirt, and knickerbockers tucked into the top of her sealskin boots” (203). This outfit is reminiscent of the Bloomer costume proposed by American dress reform activist Amelia Bloomer in the 1850s, namely “a simple bodice approximating fairly closely to what was in vogue, with a slightly flaring skirt which reached well below the knees, but under this were seen baggy, Turkish-style trousers reaching to the ankle” (Ewing 64). Throughout the 1890s, the divided skirt and the Bicycle suit became popular among dress reformers (Crane 346), with trousers remaining a significant and enduring symbol of New Womanhood. Fruen’s knickerbockers represent both her challenge to gender roles in “wearing the pants” and adopting masculine signifiers, and a sign of her physical fitness and freedom to move, while also a symbolic ability to traverse boundaries as she pleases.

Fruen’s change to “a long soft white woollen [gown]” before forming a free union with the poet performs a similarly subversive action (Egerton, “Regeneration” 251). While the change in her gown’s colour suggests “both simplicity and a closeness to nature which, in this Scandinavian winter, appears as all white around them” (D’hoker 532), it is also placed in the narrative as a wedding gown. As a gown made of wool, the textile of the New Woman, and a gown celebrating their free union, the dress draws upon sartorial conventions in order to subvert the traditional marriage plot further, and to pose the free union as the ideal equal relationship for the New Woman. In addition to the wool having been woven out of “much of [Fruen’s] old self” (Egerton, “Regeneration” 243), thus contributing to and being the literal fashioning of her new identity as a “whole woman” (252), a significant part of the sartorial symbolism stems from the connotations of wool as a textile. As noted earlier, wool is a fabric associated with New-Womanhood, being the material of rational dress as well as a signifier of masculinity, and thus an appropriation of the “associated political, intellectual and sexual freedoms” (Seys 145). Fruen shifts from wearing muslin, the cloth of unmarried, innocent young women, to wool, the textile of the New Woman, and in this shift Egerton further demonstrates her growth from innocent ignorance to enlightened awareness and self-knowledge. Through the use of symbolically significant textiles and their material fashioning, Egerton further develops Fruen’s “new womanhood” and explicates how clothing, cloth, and colour reflect and construct identity through enactment and subversion of gender norms and social constructs (Egerton, “Regeneration” 246).

In writing Fruen’s body into the text by focusing on her physicality and corporeality, Egerton subverts the Angel in the House narrative. Rather than being the domestic angel “that haunts Victorian representation of women” (Michie 90), she is described by men as “a great strong silver witch” (Egerton, “Regeneration” 237), “lillemor (motherkin)” (225), “Princess” (230) and “Queen” (225). In contrast to the passive angel, or the “child” Fruen is described as in Part I (165), these names of royalty, respect, and of otherworldliness all speak of distinctly

feminine and matriarchal forms of power and authority. In Fruen's transformation, Egerton demonstrates the possibilities for women's futures outside of patriarchal systems, drawing upon ancient knowledge and "old" ways of living, giving a sense of possibility that the world already contains all that is required to achieve this utopian future (231). Egerton writes to push the boundaries that "confine women so strictly within the position of non-subject ... [so women may] move toward a space that allows for the expression of their own desires, not the desires that men would grant them" (Hager, "Piecing Together" vii). Fruen's relationship with the poet acknowledges this: "his love, no matter if it be his whole love, will not fill her life completely" (Egerton, "Regeneration" 248). In direct opposition to the Victorian ideal of the submissive, domestic angel-wife, whose life and duty is to dote upon her husband and family, Egerton writes a distinctly New Woman heroine whose life is not consumed or defined by her relationship to men, and whose passion for work, relationships with other women, and duty to her own individual development take precedence. Thus, as the text liberates its female characters from the confines of traditional narratives, Egerton writes a vision of a distinctly feminine and feminist utopia to weave new narrative possibilities for the women in her stories.

In "Regeneration", Egerton breaks down class distinctions, collapsing patriarchal hierarchy into a communal utopian world in which "woman" becomes a universal, essentialist category. Egerton represents cross-class relationships between women, such as between Fruen, her maid and friend Aagot, and Gunhild, the cowherd. The collapsing of class distinctions into the universal, essentialist idea of "womanhood" and women's shared experiences is typical of New Woman fiction, and Egerton's text "situates women's relationships with other women, particularly of different classes and ethnicities, as being of primary importance in women's lives ... No longer buying into conventional moral definitions of the "good" or "bad" woman, these women can begin to construct their agency without denying the difference and agency of women different from themselves" (Hager, "Community" 2). Despite the white, upper-middle-class Fruen largely conforming to the primary model of Victorian women's subjectivity, Egerton demonstrates the limitations this places on women's ability to form relationships with women from outside their social position, "and the possibilities once women's subjectivities begin to resist [the] unitary and static nature [of Victorian white, upper-class femininity]" (Hager, "Piecing Together", vii). While in Part I, Fruen dismisses Aagot as "You northerns" and "you folk up here" (Egerton 168), in Part II, she "espouse[s] the cause of all women" (205), calling Aagot "her loyal companion" and the women of the commune "sisters" (212). In recognising and writing the accounts of women from non-hegemonic class and cultural groups, Egerton acknowledges further narratives and identities of women outside of traditional possibilities, and as Lyn Pykett notes, allows her "to emphasise multiplicity and to focus on differences (between women) as well as difference (as a universal, essentialist gender category)" (173).

Egerton provides a critique of society and of women's position that not only dismantles the gendered and classed hierarchies at the heart of late-Victorian society, but also reconstructs and regenerates this world to demonstrate the possibilities and potential for women in the face of these challenges. Egerton explores new narrative possibilities and ways of embodying femininity, "provid[ing] alternative models on which women could focus and which could act as a measure of both their achievements and their potential" (Stubbs 112). Through Fruen's body and its material construction via clothing and corsetry, Egerton examines the restrictions of women's conventional narratives, and the gender norms and ideals they reflect and respond to. Egerton's text exposes the nature of Victorian gender roles and the angelic feminine ideal as performative, exploring how the body and its boundaries become a literal

interface upon which to actively shape and represent feminine identity via dress. By representing Fruen's body in literal language, and resisting its reduction to metonym, Egerton makes her physical body and her new assertive femininity powerfully present, both in the narrative of her growth towards self-realisation, and structurally, in the tracing of her growth throughout the text.

In "Regeneration", Egerton thus uses Fruen's body as an interface upon which to explore the construction of women's identity. As a surface where discourses of identity interact with those of dress, class, and gender, the body becomes a site upon which performative femininity is exposed and critiqued. Dress operates as a key visual and performative signifier of class and class-based identity, and as Fruen creates and adopts new styles of dress and abandons her corset, so does she cast off her old identity and the restrictions of the corset, allowing her body to be made "new" by existing free of the disciplinary practices of femininity (Egerton, "Regeneration" 243). Egerton challenges taken-for-granted assumptions of the nature of femininity, explicating its supposedly "natural" form as a construction bound to the subordination and control of women. Dress and corsetry play a similar role in the text, showing the minimising of bodily form via physical manipulation as a "perform[ance] [of] gender and class through slenderness" that hinders a woman's physical, psychological, and social development into her full potential (Silver 22). Egerton thus exposes "nature" as an arbitrary concept that is defined by culture and bound to deep-seated ideals and beliefs, rather than speaking of any truth: it is "something defined by culture as the place where culture's most cherished ideas and ideals can be kept safe from history ... [nature is] culture's label for the cultural formations it wants to make inaccessible to social change" (Ardis 100-1). What is ostensibly "natural" may be constructed according to norms that a given social system relies on for its operation; in Victorian Britain, this was the hierarchical, discrete, and deep-seated system of gender and class that the cultural movements of the *fin-de-siècle* challenged. In this way, through rewriting women's narrative possibilities, Egerton poses the female body within the text as an interface upon which to present her critique of both cultural ideals of femininity, and the fictional and ideological systems and conventions that function to create and maintain these ideals. Thus, the female body and femininity become central not only to the text itself, but also to a narrative of New Womanhood allowing greater possibilities for women.

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