

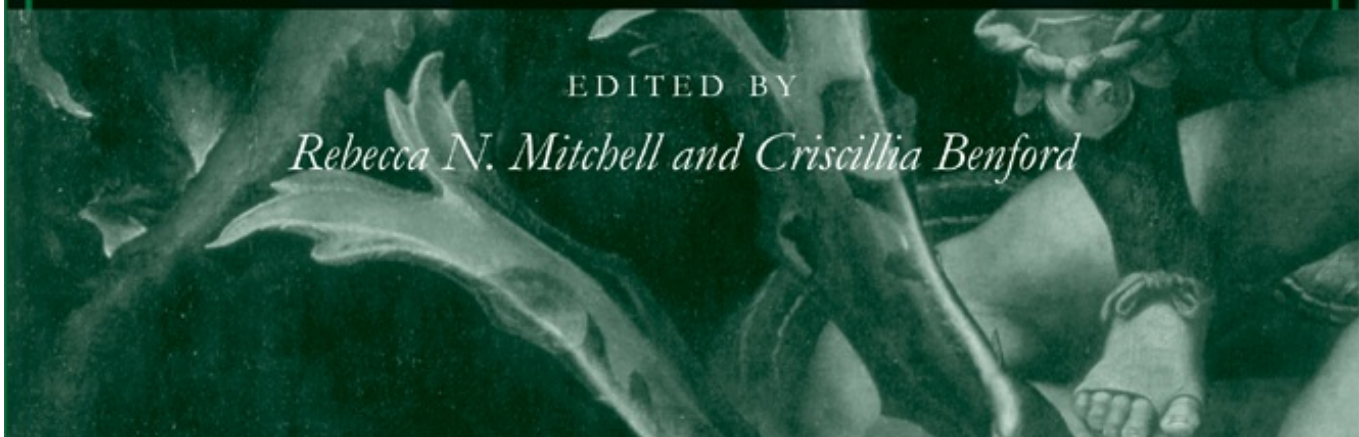


George Meredith

Modern Love and
Poems of the English Roadside, with
Poems and Ballads

EDITED BY

Rebecca N. Mitchell and Criscillia Benford





MODERN LOVE AND POEMS OF THE ENGLISH
ROADSIDE, WITH POEMS AND BALLADS

George Meredith

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Frontispiece: Portrait of George Meredith by Jacques Reich, pencil on paper, before 1910. Image courtesy of Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. MS Vault Shelves Meredith Notebooks 1–10, 10A.

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Note on the Text

In honor of the 150th anniversary of its first publication, *Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside, with Poems and Ballads* has been newly edited and annotated. Our goal has been twofold: 1) to return Meredith's poetic masterpiece "Modern Love" to its original textual context, allowing *Modern Love* to be received, once again, as a meaningful whole; and 2) to provide readers with a readable and reliable reprint of Meredith's second volume of poetry, one that is suitable for classroom use, scholarly work, and pleasure reading.

Our copy-text is Chapman and Hall's 1862 edition of *Modern Love*. To facilitate discussion of the kinds of revisions Meredith made to his poetry, we have collated the poems in this text with manuscript versions held by Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library and by the New York Public Library's Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, as well as the versions of the poems that appear in Constable's *The Works of George Meredith*, the last edition of these poems that Meredith saw through the press. Commonly referred to as the Edition de Luxe, Constable's *The Works of George Meredith* was edited by Meredith's son William Maxse Meredith and appeared in thirty-six volumes from 1896 to 1911. Meredith oversaw his son's work through volume 32. Meredith's poetry appears in volumes 29–31 (1898) and 33 (1910); these volumes are also titled *Poems, Volumes 1–4*. Poems that were first published in the journal *Once a Week* have been collated with the version published in that periodical. Readers will find the results of our collation work in our "Textual Variants" appendix.

Because, as Meredith's letters document, he and his son were imperfect proofreaders, we have also emended the text to reflect the hand corrections that Meredith made to presentation copies of the 1862 edition, where appropriate. We have refrained from making silent corrections, instead opting to note changes based upon these sources in our "Variants" appendix. In poems more than one page long, we include an ornament . . . to indicate when the page break in the current volume corresponds to a stanza break in the original.

We are indebted, as is any scholar of Meredith's work, to Phyllis Bartlett's *The Poems of George Meredith* (Yale University Press, 1978). Her edition, with its extensive notes and detailed variant readings, was a foundational resource for our work. Further, she narrates the composition and publication history of each poem; we have not reproduced those narratives here. We encourage anyone interested in further exploring these issues to consult Bartlett.

This edition includes a "Contexts" section designed to situate *Modern Love* within contemporary debates about poetics, sensory perception, and marriage. These supplementary readings have been reprinted faithfully, with few exceptions: when Meredith's verse is quoted, we have standardized the quotations to reflect the 1862 copy text. We reprint quotations of two lines or fewer; for longer quotations, we direct readers to the appropriate lines in the full poems. We have standardized notation of the title "Modern Love," using quotation marks when the sonnet sequence is cited and italics when the volume title is intended. We have also standardized punctuation order and removed quotation marks around block quotations. We have used [*sic*] sparingly, only in cases when an author's mistake might otherwise lead to readerly confusion. All other instances of variation in capitalization and spelling, as well as Victorian syntactic idiosyncrasies and penchant for misquoting, are rendered as in the originals. For corrected clarifications and versions of content-related misquotations, see footnotes.

In helping readers create a rich context for *Modern Love*, we hope that this edition will allow for a fuller appreciation of its "modernity," emotional complexity, and playful weirdness. We have annotated most obscure or confusing words, allusions, and some matters of historical context. Still, Meredith's poetry is infamously difficult; no amount of annotation can obviate the need for careful reading.

Acknowledgments

The editors would like to thank the staff of Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, especially Eva Guggemos, Anne Marie Menta, Ellen Doon, and Timothy Young. A special thanks is due to the late Frank Turner, who championed this project from the start. The staff of the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the New York Public Library was also helpful in facilitating our access to Meredith's manuscripts, especially Dr. Isaac Gerwitz and Ann Garner.

Thanks to John E. Donatich, Dan Heaton, and Niamh Cunningham at Yale University Press. We also like to thank our assiduous copy editor, Kate Davis. Thanks also to Kathy Psomiades, for her valuable input on the proposal, and to Alison MacKeen, without whom this project would not have come to fruition.

Mrs. P. M. Sedgwick, great-granddaughter of George Meredith, generously granted permission from Meredith's estate to reprint pages from the holograph "Modern Love" manuscript held in the Beinecke Library. We sincerely thank her for this graciousness.

For permission to reprint Sir John Squire's translation of Baudelaire's "Causerie" from *Poems and Baudelaire Flowers*, we are indebted to his estate, and especially to his grandson, Roger Squire.

The letter from Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges appears by permission of Oxford University Press on behalf of the British Province of the Society of Jesus. The images from *Once a Week* and the edition of *Modern Love* inscribed to Robert Browning are held in Yale University Beinecke Library, which granted permission for their reproduction here.

We also thank Marty Gould for his inimitable wit and moral support. Criscillia Benford would like to thank Duke and Stanford Universities for their financial and practical support, as well as William Softky for his impressive power to amuse and his patience with having George Meredith as his rival for so very long. To the "old friends of her halts"—Danika Brown, Ljiljana Coklin, Susan Derwin, Anna Maria Jones, Marci McMahan, Ivan Montiel, Anna Tillett, and Kay Young—Rebecca Mitchell sends the "kind thanks" she owes them.

Abbreviations

- 1862 Meredith, George. *Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside, with Poems and Ballads*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1862.
- Beinecke The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
- Berg Interleaved “Copy 7” of Meredith’s *Poems* in the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature of the New York Public Library.
- EdL Meredith, George. *The Works of George Meredith*. Ed. William Maxse Meredith. London: Constable, 1898–1911. Known as the Edition de Luxe. The poems are contained in volumes 29–31 (also numbered 1–3), published in 1898 under GM’s supervision, and volume 33 (also numbered 4), published posthumously in 1910.
- errata “Errata in the Poems.” Bibliography and Various Readings. Volume 36 of *The Works of George Meredith*.
- GM George Meredith.
- Johnson Johnson, Diane. *The True History of the First Mrs. Meredith and Other Lesser Lives*. New York: Knopf, 1972.
- Letters Cline, C. L. *The Letters of George Meredith*. London: Oxford University Press, 1970.
- ms manuscript.
- NB A Early notebook belonging to George Meredith held by the Beinecke Library, beginning after endpaper with bookplate.
- NB B Opposite end of NB A.
- OaW *Once a Week*.
- PB Meredith, George. *The Poems of George Meredith*. Ed. Phyllis B. Bartlett. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978. Based upon Edition de Luxe versions, the poems from *Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside, with Poems and Ballads* are contained in volume 1.
- Poems Meredith, George. *Poems*. London: John W. Parker and Son, 1851.
- Stevenson Stevenson, Lionel. *The Ordeal of George Meredith: A Biography*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953.
- BEIN MSS 7 BEIN GEN MSS 7: George Meredith’s copy of 1862 edition with his ms corrections. Bookplate of Paul Lemperly, hand-corrected by Meredith.
- BEIN 862.1 BEIN Meredith 862, Copy 1: 1862 edition presentation copy inscribed to “Robert Browning from the author” in Meredith’s hand. Hand-corrected errata.
- BEIN 862.2 BEIN Meredith 862, Copy 2: 1862 edition corrected by GM. Cross-referencing these changes with those in the EdL and PB, these changes seem to be his revisions for the EdL. They are extensive and do not appear in any other presentation copy. Revisions are, alas, undated.
- BEIN 862.5 BEIN Meredith 862, Copy 5: 1862 edition presentation copy inscribed to “Mrs. Thomas Carlyle, from the author” in Meredith’s hand. Hand-corrected errata.
- BEIN 862.6 BEIN Meredith 862, Copy 6: 1862 edition autograph copy, corrected in Meredith’s hand.
- BEIN Purdy BEIN Purdy 433: 1862 edition presentation copy inscribed to William Virtue by GM with notation “Full of errata, too numerous to indicate,” though some are indeed indicated. Or

frontispiece: “Meredith’s 2nd book of poems. This is the original binding, and rare.”
~~(Copies are sometimes found in a much more modern-looking blue cloth binding, which
was used in later years for the copies sold after GM’s poetry had become appreciated.)~~

George Meredith: A Brief Chronology

- 1828 Born in Portsmouth on 12 February.
- 1842–44 Studies at a school run by the Moravian Brothers in Neuwied, Germany.
- 1845 Is articulated to Richard Charnock (a London solicitor).
- 1849 First published poem, “Chillianwallah,” appears in *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* on 7 July.
Number 11 (the first of five numbers) of the “Monthly Observer,” a handwritten journal started by Meredith and his friends, appears in January; subsequent numbers appear in March, April, June, and July.
Marries Mary Ellen Peacock Nicolls on 9 August.
- 1851 Publishes *Poems* with John W. Parker and Son at his own expense in May.
- 1853 Arthur Gryffydd Meredith born on 13 June.
- 1856 Publishes *The Shaving of Shagpat: An Arabian Entertainment* with Chapman and Hall.
- 1855 Sits for Henry Wallis’s *Chatterton*, a painting exhibited to much acclaim at the Royal Academy in 1856.
- 1856 Mary Ellen and Wallis begin their affair sometime between July and August; by this time she is no longer living with George Meredith.
- 1857 Publishes *Farina: A Legend of Cologne* with Chapman and Hall.
Takes over “Belle Lettres” section from George Eliot in *Westminster Review* in April.
- 1858 Stops writing “Belle Lettres” for *Westminster Review* in January.
Harold Meredith (nicknamed Felix), son of Mary Ellen and Wallis, born on 18 April.
Mary Ellen elopes with Wallis to Capri that autumn.
Begins life-long friendship with Captain Frederick Augustus Maxse.
- 1859 Publishes *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* in three volumes with Chapman and Hall.
Mary Ellen returns to England without Wallis.
- 1860 *Evan Harrington* appears in *Once a Week* from 11 February to 13 October.
Publishes three-volume American edition of *Evan Harrington*.
Begins working for Chapman and Hall as a reader.
- 1861 Publishes three-volume English edition of *Evan Harrington* with Bradbury and Evans.
Mary Ellen dies (probably from Bright’s Disease) in October.
- 1862 Publishes *Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside, with Poems and Ballads* with Chapman and Hall on 28 April.
Shares Queen’s House in Chelsea with D. G. Rossetti, W. M. Rossetti, and Swinburne.
- 1864 Marries Marie Vulliamy on 20 September.
Emilia in England appears in *Revue des deux Mondes* from 15 November to 15 December.
Publishes an expanded, three-volume version of *Emilia in England* (renamed *Sandra Belloni*) with Chapman and Hall.
- 1865 Publishes *Rhoda Fleming* in three volumes with Tinsley Brothers.
William Maxse Meredith born to George and Marie on 26 July.
- 1866 *Vittoria* appears in *Fortnightly Review* from 15 January to 1 December.
- 1867 Publishes three-volume version of *Vittoria* with Chapman and Hall.
Moves to Box Hill, Surrey, his home for the rest of his life.

- 1870 *The Adventures of Harry Richmond* appears in *Cornhill*, illustrated by George Du Maurier from September 1870 to November 1871.
- 1871 Marie Eveleen Meredith born to George and Marie on 10 June.
Publishes three-volume version of *Harry Richmond* with Smith and Elder.
- 1874 *Beauchamp's Career* appears in *Fortnightly Review* from August 1874 to December 1875
- 1876 Publishes three-volume version of *Beauchamp's Career* with Chapman and Hall.
- 1877 Delivers "On the Idea of Comedy, and the Uses of the Comic Spirit" on 2 February; the lecture is published in *New Quarterly Magazine* that April.
- 1879 *Sir Willoughby Patterne the Egoist* appears in *Glasgow Weekly Herald* from 21 June 1879 to 10 January 1880.
Publishes three-volume version of *Sir Willoughby Patterne the Egoist* as *The Egoist* with Kegan Paul.
- 1880 *The Tragic Comedians* appears in *Fortnightly Review* from October 1880 to February 1881.
Publishes two-volume version of *The Tragic Comedians* with Chapman and Hall.
- 1883 Publishes, at his own expense, *Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of the Earth* (his first book of poetry since *Modern Love*) with Macmillan on 20 July.
- 1884 *Diana of the Crossways*, Meredith's first popular novel, appears in *Fortnightly Review* from June to December.
- 1885 Publishes three-volume version of *Diana of the Crossways* with Chapman and Hall.
Marie Meredith dies of cancer on 17 September.
- 1887 Publishes *Ballads and Poems of Tragic Life* with Macmillan.
- 1888 Publishes *A Reading of Earth* with Macmillan.
- 1890 Arthur Gryffydd Meredith dies on 3 September. Publishes *One of Our Conquerors* in three volumes with Chapman and Hall.
- 1892 Publishes *Modern Love, A Reprint, to which is added The Sage Enamoured and the Hones Lady* with Macmillan on 26 January.
Publishes *Poems: The Empty Purse, with Odes to the Comic Spirit, To Youth in Memory, and Verses* with Macmillan in October.
Is elected President of the Society of Authors.
- 1893 *Lord Ormont and His Aminta* appears in *Pall Mall Magazine* from December 1893 to July 1894.
- 1894 Publishes three-volume version of *Lord Ormont and His Aminta* with Chapman and Hall.
- 1895 *The Amazing Marriage* appears in *Scribner's Magazine* from January to December.
Publishes two-volume version of *The Amazing Marriage* with Constable.
- 1896 First volumes of Constable's Edition de Luxe issued.
- 1897 Publishes *Selected Poems* with Constable.
- 1898 Publishes *Odes in Contribution to the Song of French History* with Constable on 21 October.
- 1901 Publishes *A Reading of Life* with Constable in May.
- 1905 Becomes the twelfth member of the Order of Merit.
- 1909 Dies on 18 May.
Constable publishes *Poems Written in Early Youth and Last Poems*.

First volumes of Constable's *Memorial Edition* are issued.

1910 *Celt and Saxon* appear in *Fortnightly Review* from January to August, and in *The Forum* (New York) from January to June.

Constable publishes *Celt and Saxon* in volume form.

1911 Last volumes of Constable's Edition de Luxe are issued.

Introduction

“They,” said George Meredith to his friend Edward Clodd, “say this or that is Meredithian; I have become an adjective.”¹ “They” were the literary critics of Meredith’s day who had, toward the end of his life, turned from writing censorious reviews of his poetry and prose to writing countless articles and even a few books praising the work of “the sage of Box Hill.”² No longer deemed a menace to Victorian morality, George Meredith was by the end of the nineteenth century a venerated elder statesman of English letters. He succeeded Alfred, Lord Tennyson as president of the Society of Authors in 1892. Collected editions of his work began to appear in England and America in 1893. Numerous younger writers, including J. M. Barrie, Arthur Conan Doyle, Alice Meynell, and Robert Louis Stevenson, made pilgrimages to his home in Box Hill, Surrey, during the final decade of his life. And in 1905, King Edward VII made Meredith the twelfth member of the Order of Merit in recognition of his intellectual and artistic achievements. If “Meredithian” had once been an insult, it was no longer so.

Perhaps the rehabilitation of Meredith’s literary reputation should not have surprised him, since such a process had already occurred on a smaller scale with regard to his most enduring poem, the sonnet sequence “Modern Love” (1862). Consider, for instance, the about-face performed by the *Saturday Review*. In 1862, an unsigned reviewer dismissed “Modern Love” as a “sickly little peccadillo,” insisting that Meredith’s decision to write a vivid sonnet sequence that thematized infidelity and sexual desire was “a mistake so grave as utterly to disqualify [him] from achieving any great and worthy result in art.”³ Yet by 1901 another critic for the *Saturday Review* would take the greatness and worthiness of “Modern Love” as givens. “Modern Love,” this critic wrote, is “Meredith’s masterpiece in poetry, and it will always remain, besides certain things of Donne and Browning, an astonishing feat in the vivisection of the heart in verse.”⁴ Perhaps it should be no surprise, then, that on the occasion of Meredith’s eightieth birthday in 1908 the *Saturday Review* would offer the following breezy account of the shift in critical regard for the man and his work: “Everyone knows, and now everyone says, that Mr. Meredith is a genius, and supreme artist. There was a time when not everyone did know it, and when hardly anyone said it.”⁵

Such a revolution in critical regard is hardly unique in the annals of literary history, but the extreme reactions to “Modern Love” tell us something about the heterogeneity that animates the poem itself, not just about a fickle readership. “Modern Love,” and the volume in which it first appeared, derive much of its power from its juxtaposition of nostalgia and prescience, its allegiance to traditional forms and playful disregard of those forms. The sonnet sequence delineates a thoroughly ambivalent set of emotions, documenting a husband’s simultaneous desire for and repulsion from his estranged wife; the couple enacts a traditional Victorian marriage—sometimes literally acting out the parts, as in Sonnet XVII—all the while demonstrating the limitations of the institution. Similar contrasts are writ large upon the *Modern Love* volume as a whole: while “Modern Love” foregrounds modernity in its very title, the poems that surround it evoke forms and subjects from the past, from a rusticated rural England to Ancient Greece. Meredith deftly exploits the power of these and other contrasts in developing a unique voice that acknowledges the poetic discourse of his day and anticipates the sensibilities that defined literature for decades to come. One can trace the links between his verse and that of the Romantics, particularly John Keats, but also between his work and Charles Baudelaire’s as well as the Symbolists and Modernists who followed. Meredith’s verse does not fit comfortably under any single label, as it manipulates the defining traits of all of these movements, leading to an amalgam that resists easy definition or, some would argue, easy comprehension. No wonder he has been characterized as a Pre-Raphaelite poet, a Spasmodic poet, a Victorian poet, and a prototypical

Modernist poet.

Such plasticity is perhaps the characteristic of Meredith's verse oeuvre that ensures its enduring relevance. Unfortunately, much of that oeuvre is unavailable to today's readers. Though "Modern Love"—or more often excerpts from "Modern Love"—is frequently anthologized, the majority of the other poems in the *Modern Love* volume are available only in Phyllis Bartlett's 1978 *The Poems of George Meredith*, which is itself out of print. Returning *Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside, with Poems and Ballads* to print, on the sesquicentennial of its original publication, allows a new generation of readers to appreciate Meredith's early verse. Moreover, restoring the titular sonnet sequence to its original textual context allows for a richer interpretative experience. That "Modern Love" is not the first poem in the volume is just one of several indicators of the need to broaden the interpretive horizon that we have previously associated with it. As Isobel Armstrong warned in 1999, "the other poems in the *Modern Love* volume have been 'obscured' by the 'dominance of the titular poem in Meredith's reputation,'" a situation that "has paradoxically obscured the way in which 'Modern Love' itself might be read."⁶ Attention to what Neil Fraistat calls the "structural framing and symmetries, as well as the development of thematic progressions and verbal echoes among the poems" in a volume such as *Modern Love* allows readers to view it as a "poetic aggregate" or "contexture."⁷ Such an approach makes plain that "Modern Love" is both title and topic. Mixing age-old poetic tropes and structures with playful and innovative forms and images, Meredith meditates upon the relationship between idealized conceptions of romantic love and the physical sensation of sexual desire. Using similar strategies, Meredith also dissects the love of abstractions such as Country, Family, and Nature. Juxtaposing multiple versions of "modern love," the volume thus explores a range of contemporary sociocultural issues, including English cosmopolitanism, the so-called Woman Question, and the diffusion of democratic ideas about social equality.

A Meredithian Life

The germs of these themes likely came from Meredith's own background, though the details of his early life are as obscure as his most idiosyncratic metaphors. Meredith was a private man who drew from his own life for his creative work yet remained averse to providing biographers with accurate information about his childhood and adolescence. No doubt some of this reticence was due to embarrassment. Social status and class were troublesome forces in Meredith's life from the beginning, and this is perhaps why the figures of the social climber and social outsider appear throughout his oeuvre. He was born in Portsmouth on 12 February 1828 to Augustus Meredith, a reluctant tailor, and Jane Eliza Meredith (née Macnamara), the daughter of an innkeeper. Despite their lower-middle-class status, the Merediths were a proud family who traced their lineage back to Welsh princes. Meredith himself was not immune to the stories his father liked to tell of their royal ancestry. The sons of the other Portsmouth tradesmen gave him the nickname "Gentleman Georgy" in consequence of his well-made clothes and affable yet aloof demeanor.⁸ Financial hardship loomed on the horizon, however. Augustus had inherited a popular shop that specialized in naval uniforms from his own flamboyant father, Melchizedek Meredith. Melchizedek—the model for *Evan Harrington's* "The Great Mel"—was handsome and dashing, though an indifferent businessman. Along with Melchizedek's shop, good looks, and deep pride, Augustus had also inherited his father's spending habits. Making matters worse, the business that Melchizedek bequeathed to his son was not nearly as prosperous as it had seemed. When George was nine, Augustus declared bankruptcy, losing the family business and home. Thanks to a small inheritance left to him by his mother (who died when he was five) and her sister, young George was still able to attend the Moravian Brothers school in Neuwied, Germany, from 1842 to 1844, an experience that not only erased his Hampshire accent, but also provided him with

cosmopolitan outlook, profoundly shaped his progressive views on the education of women as well as his more retrograde ones about male courage, and planted seeds for his philosophical interest in nature.

These interests would later sound as keynotes in his creative work, and the writerly phase of his life began around the same time that he met the woman who inspired “Modern Love.” When Meredith returned to England he was introduced to Richard Stephen Charnock, a London solicitor with literary ambitions. Soon the two men were involved with a manuscript journal called the “Monthly Observer” to which they and a small group of friends were the sole contributors. The only woman belonging to this group was a young widow and mother named Mary Ellen Peacock Nicolls. She was witty, intelligent, and beautiful, like so many of the heroines Meredith would later create. George and Mary Ellen married on 9 August 1849, the same year that George published his first poem, “Chillianwallah,” in *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*. After a brief honeymoon in Germany and a short residence in London, the young couple settled in to The Limes in Weybridge, Surrey. They were inspired by the new surroundings and the creative energy derived from the community of writers, artists, and musicians living there. Mary Ellen wrote her own poetry, published articles and reviews, and collaborated on a cookbook with her father, the English satirist Thomas Love Peacock. George read widely—including the works of Tennyson, Keats, and Shelley—and “applied himself to a course of self-training in poetic forms,” particularly the English and Scottish folk ballad.⁹ Under the guidance of the poet Edmund Hornby, Meredith began to bring more “modern ingredients” to bear on his poetry. Soon he published his first collection, *Poems* (1851). Although the volume was published at his own expense, it was relatively well received.

Despite these successes, and despite George and Mary Ellen’s much-noted physical attraction to each other, their marriage was a volatile one haunted by poverty and filled with sorrow and resentment. The money that the couple earned from their writing was not enough to support them comfortably. No doubt Meredith’s refusal to allow Peacock to obtain for him an appointment in the East India House exacerbated household tensions. Moreover, Mary Ellen was continuously pregnant, giving birth to several stillborn children between 1850 and 1852; their son, Arthur Gryffydh Meredith, was not born until 13 June 1853. Living in a small home with frustrated ambitions and decreasing sympathy for each other, George and Mary Ellen, according to Mary Ellen’s daughter from her first marriage, “sharpened their wits on each other”¹¹ and began to isolate themselves socially. By the end of 1856 the couple spent more time apart than they did together. Yet when a pregnant Mary Ellen left him for the Pre-Raphaelite painter Henry Wallis in 1858, Meredith was devastated. Although he never forgave her, prevented her from seeing their son, and would in later years imply that she suffered from hereditary madness,¹² Meredith never sought to divorce her. As the excerpt from John Paget’s essay on English divorce law makes clear (see “Contexts”), to have attempted to do so would have likely amplified the scandal and may not have even resulted in a legal separation.

The trials of their marriage served as inspiration for the emotional currents in much of his later prose and verse and the seductive, lively, progressive, and intelligent Mary Ellen seems to have been the model for Meredith’s most notable female characters, including the wife in “Modern Love.” Written in the wake of Mary Ellen’s premature death in 1861, “Modern Love” unquestionably recalls Meredith’s experiences with her. To this day, many scholarly assessments of the poem are built upon the assumption that it is autobiographical, with some critics ascribing the power of the poem—and its continued popularity—to the emotional precision that could only be drawn from experience. Yet while the Victorians understood the sonnet form as “a site of privileged autobiographical utterance,”¹³ to understand “Modern Love” *only* as thinly veiled autobiography risks undervaluing its ironic distance and its narratorial ambiguity, and its position within the volume.

Unillustrated and containing a total of twenty-three heterogeneous yet thematically linked poems, *Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside, with Poems and Ballads* was published on 28 April 1862 by Chapman and Hall in a small print run. It was Meredith's second volume of poetry. He dedicated it to Frederick Maxse, a naval officer and reformer he had met toward the end of 1858, who would become his lifelong friend and advocate. By this time, Meredith was regularly publishing poems in Samuel Lucas's journal *Once a Week*, many of which were illustrated by artists connected with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (see [figs. 3, 5–8, and 10](#)). Nine of these poems—"The Meeting," "Juggling Jerry," "The Old Chartist," "The Beggar's Soliloquy," "The Patriot Engineer," "The Head of Bran," "Autumn Even-Song," "Phantasy," and "By the Rosanna"—were collected in *Modern Love*. The titular sonnet sequence, first referred to as "The Love-Match" in 1861, was the result of relatively quick work. By January 1862, Meredith sent Maxse proofs of thirty-six of the final fifty sonnets, but then called "A Tragedy of Modern Love." Three months later, upon its publication, the title was truncated to "Modern Love."

Since its initial release in 1862, "Modern Love" has stood apart from the other poems in the volume, receiving the lion's share of scorn and—later—of praise. That said, the poem's situation within the collection is as important as the poem itself; Meredith was particular about how he ordered his poems, giving his publishers careful instructions. As its full title suggests, *Modern Love* is divided into several parts. Preceding the sonnet sequence are "Grandfather Bridgeman" and "The Meeting." Following "Modern Love" is the "Roadside Philosophers" section, comprising "Juggling Jerry," "The Old Chartist," "The Beggar's Soliloquy," and the "Patriot Engineer." The remaining poems in the volume fall under the heading "Poems and Ballads," an organizational strategy that suggests that "Grandfather Bridgeman" and "The Meeting," along with those poems spoken by Meredith's Roadside Philosophers, are to be understood collectively as "Poems of the English Roadside." As a group, these poems balance the abstractions of the later poems in the collection as well as the structural and thematic difficulty of "Modern Love." That said, one must not dismiss the Roadside poems because of their accessibility; the feelings of regret, anticipation, religious faith, and unsanctioned love that define these poems also define "Modern Love" as well. Although contemporary reviewers described the Roadside poems as "wholesome," Meredith himself called them "flints perhaps, and not flowers."¹⁴ Indeed, despite the seemingly stark differences in tone, form, and content between "Modern Love" and the Roadside poems, Meredith saw them as united by frank depiction seated in observation and experience: "Thus my Jugglers, Beggars, etc., I have met on the road, and have idealized but slightly. I desire to strike the poetic spark out of absolute human clay."¹⁵ The Roadside poems are not caricatures or fanciful idylls; they depict characters attempting to reconcile their traditional lifestyles and ideologies with a changing world.

The Critics Respond

The Roadside poems were favorites among the Victorian critical establishment. J. W. Marston, writing in the *Athenaeum*, called them "wholesome" and claimed to have turned to them with a "sense of relief," and the critic for the *Saturday Review* suggested the Roadside poems showcased the "rapid and vigorous style of composition" which was Meredith's "real forte."¹⁶ To the extent that early reviews praised the Roadside poems ("Juggling Jerry" and "The Old Chartist" were especially admired), they protested against the others. "Modern Love" received the most attention and the most sharply derisive reviews. Critics did not merely dislike the sequence; they reviled it, finding it an affront to prevailing moral and aesthetic sensibilities. More than a few contemporary critics resorted to the rhetoric of disease to justify their negative response to the sonnet sequence's subject matter. Answering Meredith's claim in Sonnet XXV that "these things are life: And life, they say, is worthy

the Muse,” the *Saturday Review*’s critic objected, “A more flimsy sophism could hardly be devised. The Muse is undoubtedly concerned with all forms of life, but these things are decay, and deformity and death.” It would be just as reasonable, the critic concludes, “to compose a sonnet to the gout or an ode on the small-pox.”¹⁷ The *Athenaeum* was slightly more measured. Good poetry often reveals “the diseases of our nature,” its critic admitted, yet in so doing, such poetry shows “the virtue of the antidote”; the problem with “Modern Love” is that it shows us “disease, and nothing else.”¹⁸

In addition to Meredith’s choice of content, reviewers responded negatively to the poem’s stylistic obscurity, a trait that they associated with the so-called Spasmodic school of poetry. Made popular by poets Alexander Smith, Sidney Dobell, and Philip James Bailey, Spasmodic poetry sought to evoke visceral responses in readers by advancing the Romantic cultivation of heightened sensory perception and subjective points of view. It was initially welcomed by writers such as George Henry Lewes, Arthur Hugh Clough, and George Gilfillan, who praised its edifying vividness. Others regarded Spasmodic poetry with suspicion and even derision, characterizing it as egoistic, overwrought, and dangerously focused on the body. The Spasmodic display of embodied emotions was viewed by some critics as science masquerading as art. Coventry Patmore, for instance, claimed that poets had no business writing about “the facts of science” unless they related those facts to “universal truth and permanent humanity.”¹⁹ “Mere physical interests are best discoursed in prose,” Patmore insisted. More common objections were leveled at Spasmodic obscurity, not its physical specificity: according to this line of reasoning, poetry that appeals to a reader’s sensory experience or organic reactions, opposed to a reader’s intellect, often does so at the expense of clarity. Charges of Spasmodic obscurity thus became synonymous with charges of self-indulgence or writerly laziness. J. W. Marston contrasted the “real force and imagination” that he found in some parts of “Modern Love” with the “spasmodic indistinctness” that he felt characterized most of it.²⁰ R. H. Hutton, writing for the *Spectator*, complained that the energy of Meredith’s verse was not produced by “intellectual courage or “buoyancy of spirit,” but rather by “a spasmodic ostentation of fast writing.”²²

Although Hutton’s comment implies that Spasmodism was anti-intellectual and unsophisticated, recent critical reappraisals suggest otherwise. Jason Rudy writes that Spasmodic poetry “operated very much within the mainstream of mid-Victorian philosophy and social science,”²³ a claim supported by the selections from the work of Bain, Johnson, and Wilson included in the “Contexts” section of this volume. And, as Herbert Tucker has demonstrated, the Spasmodists’ interest in “embodied intuition” and their efforts to lyricize narrative were taken up by a number of now-canonical Victorian poets²⁴—including George Meredith, particularly in “Modern Love.” Putting Victorian critiques of the movement into sociopolitical perspective, Tucker reminds us that “the premium that spasmodic poetry placed in theory on subjective power, and exemplified in the rolling fluency of its creative practice, bespoke cultural values” that many Victorian conservatives associated with Chartism as well as “sexual and other kinds of emancipation.”²⁵

Freighted with intertwining aesthetic and political meanings, the label “Spasmodic” nevertheless functioned as shorthand for poorly written poetry. This seems to be the way poet Algernon Swinburne understood Hutton’s use of the term. Rebuking Hutton’s old-fashioned and thoughtless response to *Modern Love*, Swinburne described “Modern Love” as a serious and “progressive poem” displaying “the finest and most studied workmanship.” He exhorted readers to value poets such as Meredith for writing verse that looked beyond the “nursery walls.”²⁶ Swinburne’s praise of the sonnet sequence did not come at the expense of the Roadside poems, however. He found “The Beggar’s Soliloquy” and “The Old Chartist” to be particularly “valuable,” commending them for their “completeness of effect,” “exquisite justice of style,” and “thorough dramatic insight.”²⁷

Swinburne’s assessment of “Modern Love” was, as it turns out, prophetic. And while this critic

resuscitation has been welcomed by those who admire the sonnet sequence, the remaining poems in the volume—which were almost universally regarded as superior to “Modern Love” in early reviews—have fallen into obscurity. To this day, scholarly considerations of Meredith’s verse oeuvre reflect and perpetuate this lopsided approach.

The Roadside Poems

The structure of the volume itself—with the sharp contrast between the homespun warmth and formal familiarity of the “Poems of the English Roadside,” the experimental and progressive feel of “Modern Love,” and the richly textured abstraction of many of the other poems—may well have led critics to evaluate the work comparatively. If critics regarded “Modern Love” as needlessly obscure and focused on a needlessly prurient topic, the Roadside poems served as a counterpoint, offering easily accessible verse detailing rustic, wholesome characters; it is no surprise that many contemporary critics regarded the Roadside poems as the best in the volume. Contributing to this sense of accessibility is a general lack of the formal innovation that often appears in Meredith’s more-complex poems. Most of the Roadside poems eschew literary allusions and imagistic or sensual description in favor of contemporary or recent events—such as the Crimean War or Chartist uprisings—that would have been widely if not intimately known by readers, and most adopt comfortable and familiar patterns of meter and rhyme. These poems attempt to absorb the diction and rhythm of working-class speech, creating metrical irregularities that some thought unwitting.²⁸ “The Road” is a rich trope associated with cross-class encounters, chance, and adventure; thus, the Roadside poems as a group seem to comprise a kind of poetic exploration of the world beyond the libraries, bedrooms, and dining rooms of “Modern Love.” If there is a sensibility uniting these poems, it seems that of a uniquely Englishness conferred through their speakers, social outliers though they may be. Notions of direct patriotism, expressed often by speakers who have left England, permeate the poems: “Grandfather Bridgeman” offers a glimpse of the experience of a soldier injured in the Crimean War, as related through the expectations and longing of those at home; the title character of “The Old Chartist” having returned to England after a life of exile in Australia following a conviction for inciting a Chartist riot, muses that after all, England is still his “dam”; and in “The Patriot Engineer,” an expert waxes nostalgic on the greatness of the oaklike English character to bemused British passengers in his boat.

The nature of the national character gives way to its singular incarnations in “The Meeting,” “Juggling Jerry,” and “The Beggar’s Soliloquy.” “The Meeting,” a brief encounter between erstwhile lovers, is a scene perfectly at home in a Thomas Hardy novel. “Juggling Jerry,” a favorite among early readers, details the final thoughts of an old carnival performer. His metaphysical theory figures a god in terms he knows best: as a great juggler who must keep a number of spheres moving continuously. Thus imagining himself as part of a cosmic continuum, the juggler elevates himself to an equality with all other individuals. In “The Beggar’s Soliloquy,” the beggar stands outside of a church pondering the seeming disconnect between Christian charity and the unwillingness of those he entreats to give him money. In each instance, the context is always expressly English: the juggler revels in the English countryside of willows, sheep, and “thatch’d ale-houses,” and even the beggar at the church imagines his plight in the binary terms of the Conservative and the Radical, and takes pride in his passing connection with the “Lord Mayor o’ London,” whose title he invokes for effect.

The Roadside poems represent Meredith’s deployment of the dramatic monologue, a peculiar Victorian form that multiplies voices and perspectives while purporting to be the utterance of a single speaker. The form developed at the same time as theories of the mind and consciousness were exploding, “driven,” as Linda Hughes writes, “by intensified interest in introspection as both

philosophical and scientific method.”²⁹ Meredith’s use of the form, then, subtly unites the Roadside poems to the introspective, sense-based explorations of other poems in the volume. Moreover, like the form of “Modern Love,” the formal qualities of the Roadside poems are also an expression of Meredith’s ambivalent embrace of Modernity. On the one hand the quotidian narrative situations of these poems establish their contemporary-ness, yet on the other, they suggest a class- and location-based nostalgia, one that regards rural people from the lower classes as a source of national strength because they live perpetually in a more innocent time.

On “Modern Love”

The relative innocence of the rural lifestyle depicted in the Roadside poems is emphasized through the subject and title of the sonnet sequence “Modern Love.” Simply put, the sonnets tell the story of a marriage in crisis, precipitated by the husband’s realization of his wife’s infidelity. The sonnets detail the husband’s ambivalent feelings about his wife, working through his alternating sense of physical attraction and emotional repulsion. In between moments of introspection and reflection, touchstones of plot arise: the wife—called “Madam” throughout the poem—focuses her attention on household matters to assuage her guilt (V); the husband finds a letter his wife has written to her lover (XV); the husband and wife host a dinner party, convincingly playing happily married host and hostess (XVII); the husband takes a mistress—whom he calls “Lady”—of his own (XXXII); the wife and the mistress meet (XXXVI); the husband and wife attempt to resume sexual relations (XLII); finally, the wife commits suicide (XLIX). Complicating an easy understanding of the plot is the frequently shifting narratorial perspective: some sonnets present the husband’s point of view, others employ a third person narrative stance, and in some cases multiple perspectives are used in the same sonnet.

Meredith’s adaptations of the sonnet form demonstrate the way he leverages formal choice to further his thematic interests. Perspectival shifts are only one of his deviations from the traditional sonnet form, a form so heavy with history that understanding its provenance is essential to recognizing Meredith’s interventions. One of the oldest poetic forms in English verse, the sonnet was brought from Italy to England in the sixteenth century by Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503–1542), who translated sonnets written by the poet and humanist Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374) and circulated them among his aristocratic friends in manuscript form. The credit for inventing what we now call the “Shakespearean” sonnet pattern, named after the man most believed to be the greatest practitioner of the form in English, goes to Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (ca. 1517–1547), another sixteenth-century English translator of Petrarca’s sonnets. The English sonnet is traditionally regarded as a fixed closed form that follows a normative rhyme scheme and consists of fourteen lines in iambic pentameter. Nevertheless, sonneteers have tinkered with it from the beginning—a situation that led some English poets/critics, among them Leigh Hunt, to refer to the Petrarchan pattern as “the Sonnet Proper” or “the Legitimate Sonnet.”³⁰ There are now numerous acknowledged variants of the sonnet form, including the Spenserian, the caudate sonnet, the curtal sonnet, the enclosed sonnet, and the reversed sonnet, among others.³¹

To obtain a better grasp of what’s at stake in Meredith’s idiosyncratic variant of the sonnet form, it is useful to think more carefully about the two most popular sonnet patterns: the Italian/Petrarchan and the English/Shakespearean. As with any closed form, the Italian and English sonnet patterns establish a tight relationship between formal structure and content—usually a single idea, articulated in several stages. Normative rhyme schemes draw attention to a sonnet’s functional parts, enhancing the reader’s ability to chart the development of its argument. In the Italian pattern, for instance, a sonnet fourteen-line stanza divides into two semantic units: an eight-line octave and a six-line sestet that begins with a “volta” (turn) in thought. The octave is further subdivided into two four-line quatrains.

and the sestet is subdivided into two three-line tercets. A poet may use syntax and grammar to draw attention to or detract from these subdivisions. As a whole, the octave states a dilemma or proposition and follows a brace rhyme scheme of *abbaabba*. The sestet, the first line of which enacts the volta, offers a solution to the dilemma or confirmation of the proposition and follows a *cdecde* or *cdcdcd* rhyme scheme. In contrast, the Shakespearean pattern—*abab cdcd efef gg*—invites the poet to articulate her sonnet's controlling idea in four stages. Each of three quatrains describes the sonnet's dilemma or central proposition in different ways, highlighting variations in content by introducing new rhyme schemes. A rhyming couplet concludes a Shakespearean sonnet.

The "Modern Love" sonnets are sixteen lines long and feature four rhyme schemes (*abba cddc efghhg*), each of which signals a new shift in thought. At least one contemporary assumed that Meredith was using a version of the caudate form, a form of the sonnet that we now associate with Gerard Manley Hopkins. Taking its name from the Latin *cauda* (tail), the caudate sonnet adds a "tail" (two tails) of a half line plus a couplet to the traditional fourteen-line sonnet. Hopkins, a contemporary of Meredith, used this form to create strikingly weird poems that defy nearly every aspect of the conventional sonnet. His poem "Harry Ploughman" and his letter to Robert Bridges describing his intentions in writing "Harry Ploughman" can be found in the "Contexts" section of this volume. Meredith denied using this form for his "Modern Love" sonnets.³² Indeed, the "Modern Love" sonnets are better understood as combining aspects of both the Italian and the Shakespearean sonnet. The extended length allows them to appropriate the Shakespearean organizational pattern while avoiding the glibness sometimes associated with concluding couplets. And, as a formal structure, the sequence as a whole draws heavily from the formal conventions of the Petrarchan pattern, though multiple readings are likely necessary to grasp how "Modern Love" recycles Petrarchan conceits and conventions to dissect Victorian "sentimental passion."³³

The Victorian reader would have had no difficulty identifying these conceits and conventions, although they may be obscure to most twenty-first-century readers. To understand not only why Meredith would have regarded the sonnet form as an effective dissection tool, but also the kinds of ideals against which the husband in "Modern Love" struggles, one must familiarize oneself with the conventions. Petrarchan sonnets purport to be confessional and are conventionally associated with an ennobling love. The speaker in such sonnets is usually a man; his sonnets address a cold, beautiful and unattainable woman who is, of course, not his wife.³⁴ The poet-lover may idealize his beloved, reproach her for her indifference, plead with her, reflect upon his own poetic activity, and/or reflect upon his feelings and thoughts about his unrequited love. The poet-lover often spiritualizes his desire, making his love object an inspiration for faithfulness and adherence to the moralized codes of behavior associated with courtly love. He is inspired by her beauty and purity and bewitched by her eyes, bosom, lips, and hair. He will, over the course of many lines, draw elaborate parallels (for example, the poet-lover is a ship in a storm, the lady is a sun), paradoxes, and oxymora. By the end of the sequence, the poet-lover may, thanks to his lady's angelic purity, become a better man and earn his place in heaven.

Meredith's poet-lover meditates upon the real-life actions that correspond to these Petrarchan conventions. For instance, in Sonnet XXIX: "Am I failing? for no longer can I cast," the speaker reworks the beloved-as-sun convention, troping the despondency that he feels about his relationship with his blond mistress as an inability to "cast / A glory round about this head of gold" (lines 1–2). Moreover, as Cynthia Tucker explains, by repeatedly citing Petrarchan conventions, Meredith is able to highlight the gap between "the ideals which sonnets normally celebrated" and the reality of unrequited love, allowing Petrarchan "standard expressions of woe" to "become unmetaphored and moved into a bleak and untraditional reality."³⁵

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