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THE FICTION OF GEORGE MEREDITH (1828 - 1909)

AND ITS CONTEMPORARY READERSHIP:

MODES OF ADDRESS

by

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to the Department of English,
University of Glasgow,
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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements 2

Summary 3

Introduction 4

Chapter One: Exclusions and Inclusions: The Contemporary Readership and its Relationship to the Victorian Public 9

The Contemporary Readership 10

Meredith's Contemporary Reputation 25

Chapter Two: Address and Audience 43

An Essay on Comedy 45

The Ordeal of Richard Feverel 55

Sandra Belloni 58

The Egoist 62

The Amazing Marriage 79

Chapter Three: Address and Style 87

The Shaving of Shagpat 88

Farina 91

The Ordeal of Richard Feverel 93

Sandra Belloni 98

An Essay on Comedy 100

Meredith's Short Stories 102

The Egoist and the Glasgow Weekly Herald 109

Chapter Four: "Fair Dealing with Readers": Address and Values 137

Evan Harrington 139

Rhoda Fleming 144

	<u>The Adventures of Harry Richmond</u>	149
	<u>Beauchamp's Career</u>	154
	<u>One of our Conquerors</u>	166
Chapter Five:	Address and Popular Success: Three Studies	178
	Contemporary Divorce Reports	180
	<u>The Tragic Comedians</u>	186
	<u>Diana of the Crossways</u>	199
	"Modern Love"	217
Conclusion		229
Notes		231
Bibliography		247

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SUMMARY

This work identifies various modes of address in George Meredith's fiction in the light of a knowledge of the contemporary readership addressed. Chapter One discusses the nature of the Victorian reading public, and concludes that it was not homogeneous but fractured, with Meredith's readership being identified with an intellectual elite, rather than with a majority who shared what Meredith called "public taste". But, after a consideration of how Meredith's reputation was established, it becomes clear that this reputation masked the actual address which the novels made to their readers.

In the next three chapters, the thesis is then developed that specific patterns of address were used in Meredith's fiction to reach this divided readership. Chapter Two examines the devices by which this double address was achieved. Chapter Three considers address in relation to style; firstly by examining the style of Meredith's fiction in isolation, and then by making a direct comparison between <u>The Egoist</u> and popular fiction published in the same newspaper in the same year. Chapter Four extends the argument to consider address in relation to value systems the novels assume that their readers share. The work concludes with three case studies which use the findings of the previous three chapters, together with an understanding of the way in which contemporary divorce reports addressed their readers, to illustrate that Meredith's fiction was addressed not to the "Reader", as is usually supposed, but to a multiplicity of readers.

INTRODUCTION

The direction of my research came from an initial consideration of Meredith as a communicator. I had found that his celebrated _Essay on Comedy_[1] appeared to address its audience in a way which was quite contradictory. On the one hand it offered to educate the taste of an audience which it clearly identified as being in need of improvement; on the other hand its mode of address distinctly implied an audience which was already highly cultured, in Meredith's phrase, "a selecter world."[2] There is a familiar lecturing device whereby the phrase "as we all know..." actually means "I cannot be bothered discussing...," a device to enable an argument to move forward rapidly. But, in _The Essay on Comedy_ it is not a question of occasional casual short cuts: the divided address of the audience runs right through the _Essay_. Turning then to the novels with this feature of the _Essay_ in mind, I discovered that contradictions of address recur variously throughout Meredith's fiction, so much so that they amount to a shaping force.

Many studies of fiction avoid considering the way fiction is addressed - understandably, because nobody goes to fiction for the direct information for which we consult a phone book or a cook book. This avoidance has, however, all too often brought studies of fiction to a tacit acceptance of an untenable mode of communication - an author addressing the perennial and unchanging reader. Meredith's fiction provides a particularly vivid example of duplicities of

address which are not uncommon in nineteenth century fiction, and which are indeed implicit whenever fiction is put in circulation among a non-homogeneous readership. Recent Meredith studies have been almost forced to take this into account, but have sustained an unfortunate reluctance to abandon the myth of the universal reader addressed by an author who knows his universals.

Gillian Beer[3] and Mohammed Shaheen[4] both assume an anonymous and unchanging reader in their thematic analyses of Meredith. John Lucas's account of "Meredith's Reputation"[5] did concern itself with the contemporary readership of Meredith's novels; but, by taking over-literally the statements of a restricted group of Meredith's fans, he brought himself to the conclusion that Meredith's novels were the exclusive property of an intellectual coterie. Lucas did postulate, albeit schematically, a split in late nineteenth century culture, a split between "art and popularity" (p. 5); but he placed Meredith's novels as belonging only to the high sphere of art, untouched by the supposedly separate features of popular culture. Lucas's argument was not pursued through any analysis of the textual aspects of address, which might well have led him to some different conclusions.

Reader-response theory has informed one recent study, and to an extent the psychologising so common to this approach has been opened out to take account of historical considerations. In <u>The Readable People of George Meredith</u> by Judith Wilt[6], Meredith's contemporary reading public is

identified as including "second assistant book-keepers" as well as "university graduates" (p. 53); but Wilt's attention to history is brief to the point of being cursory. She moves quickly to a claim that there was a "Meredithian subplot," which aimed to unite disparate and different readers in a single "community of literacy" (p. 41). Wilt assumes this plot effectively succeeded, and she then proceeds to suggest that the "act of reading" raises all readers to the same level - perhaps a more extreme position and a narrower one than any advanced by Iser.[7] Her interesting exploration of several author-reader games in three of Meredith's novels is flawed by consistent reference to "the reader," a unified subject.

My work has explored the consequences of Wilt's historical perception, and I have examined the diversity of readership which she denied herself the opportunity to consider. Very far from considering a unified readership as a condition of their production, Meredith's novels employed a variety of modes of address to appeal to a fractured readership. Meredith's novels can thus be seen as more complex than the neat and absolutist division between "art and popularity" would allow.

My approach is historical and my argument progresses as follows. Chapter One makes an analysis of the contemporary readership of Meredith's novels and examines how his reputation was formed. Chapter Two singles out some of the devices whereby a divided readership was addressed. Chapter Three considers the relationship between style and address,

and Chapter Four relates address to alternative value systems which the novels evoke. Chapter Five takes three case studies to show that these aspects of address interacted differently, and that it has been on the basis of some specific interactions in this area that aesthetic esteem has developed variously.

My central focus has been Meredith's work, but my central concern has been as much with a larger aspect of nineteenth century culture - the position of fiction targeted on a heterogeneous readership. Along with studies of Meredith's novels, I offer analyses of some of his short stories and of his celebrated sonnet sequence "Modern Love." I also give detailed attention to writings which illuminate the specific nature of some of Meredith's strategies, writing such as divorce-reports, and popular fiction from the _Glasgow Weekly Herald_. By examining Meredith's fiction alongside writings which literary criticism has largely ignored, I hope to have at least re-opened the issue which is at once gestured towards and regrettably simplified in the simple "art and popularity" dichotomy.

No single existing system of literary terms has been adopted throughout. I have instead taken up whatever seemed the most useful tools to advance each stage of the argument. When I employ such words as "readership," "address" and "style" my meaning is defined and expanded in the course of the argument. There is an obvious initial debt to Pierre Macherey's _A Theory of Literary Production_[9] and some of the detail in my descriptive stylistics owes much to the work of

Roger Fowler.[9]

Recent developments in theory have been an important background to my work, but my first concern has been to map an uncharted aspect of literary history rather than to achieve a pristine theoretical position. I offer a contribution to knowledge rather than a final conclusion.

This work does share common ground with Rachel Bowlby[10] and Jacqueline Rose,[11] who have also advanced from the assumption that not all readers are the same. However, my concern has not been with either women's fictions (although Virago has claimed Meredith as its own), nor with a genre so audience specific as children's literature. But, as do both these scholars, I take a body of fiction which up till now has mainly been examined as expressing the single and unified viewpoint of an author of genius, and I instead attempt to read this work as it addresses disparate groups of readers.

The questions this approach raises are crucial once it is acknowledged that writing communicates, but they are also questions to which conventional literary syllabuses have till now given little space. Meredith has always given difficulty to the devisors of literary syllabuses, who have accorded him esteem while withholding attention. The significance that I claim for this work is that it puts at least some of these exclusions in question.

CHAPTER ONE

EXCLUSIONS AND INCLUSIONS: THE CONTEMPORARY READERSHIP OF MEREDITH'S FICTION AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE VICTORIAN PUBLIC

The novels of George Meredith, from _The Shaving of Shagpat_ in 1856 to _Celt and Saxon_ which was published posthumously in 1910, appeared over a period of years roughly corresponding to the second half of the nineteenth century and extending into the first decade of the twentieth.

During these years Meredith's novels acquired a reputation which centred around a mythic status, as "more honoured than popular"[1]. This reputation, nurtured initially by modest praise, frequently tempered by a suspicion of excessive cleverness, grew throughout the century and reached a peak just before the author's death in 1909, with the unrestrained adulation of an elite. Meredith's coterie of admirers, encouraged by the author's own critical statements and mock humble pose of a man writing in a wilderness, built this reputation for the novels on the supposed dichotomy between a Meredith novel and the fiction generally appreciated by popular taste.

The factors affecting the growth of this reputation are inextricably bound up with an understanding of the nature of the novels' readership. This readership consisted of a small subsection of the reading public, which was in turn a

small percentage of the public as a whole. Guided by reviews by leading critics of the day, response to the texts altered as the Meredith canon expanded.

This first chapter will consider the changing composition of Meredith's contemporary readership and subsequently look at its reception of the novels as they initially appeared. It is hoped that this study will help to explain the ambiguities surrounding the distinctive reputation which Meredith's novels acquired during his lifetime.

The Contemporary Readership

There are many problems in any endeavour to define the parameters of the readership of Meredith's novels. The size of the readership was influenced by a number of inter-related economic, educational and social variables. Any clear perception of a typical actual reader is partially obscured by a mass of conflicting statistics, resulting in many qualified and tentative statements. Information regarding the specific topics of literacy, publishing, circulating-libraries and literary periodicals helps to illuminate the issue.

The level of literacy in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century gives an indication of the size of the total pool from which readers could be drawn. Raymond Williams cites the record of the ability to sign the marriage register as evidence of the extent of literacy in Britain in the Victorian period, and quotes figures which

show an increase in the extent of this ability throughout the
century:[2]

	Men	Women	Total
Able to sign	%	%	%
1839	66.3	50.5	58.4
1873	81.2	74.6	77.9
1893	95.0	94.3	94.65

But there are different degrees to literacy. The ability to sign one's name bears little relation to the degree of literacy required to read a novel. Although education spread during this period with the passing of such legislation as the Elementary Education Act of 1870, which was the first seriously organized attempt at a national system of education for all children, it was usually of a minimal kind. Lawrence Stone emphasises that despite the fact that "after 1840 the growth of elementary education in Victorian England was so rapid that it took only another fifty years virtually to wipe out illiteracy altogether," "the upper levels of education remained extraordinarily elitist in scale and character."[3] The Victorian reading public can therefore be divided into a number of categories defined on the basis of literacy and general educational standards. If, as Raymond Williams suggests, only 3% of the population read a daily newspaper, then the percentage possessing the interest, or ability, to read a novel must almost certainly have been considerably less.

In the category of readers who were educated to only an elementary level, the prevailing taste was not for novel-length fiction, but for short sensational tales which appeared in weekly journals of a low educational standard, such as The Family Herald. By 1870, this periodical had a circulation of two hundred thousand, compared to a circulation figure of two thousand and five hundred for the Fortnightly Review[4]. Richard Altick sums up the taste of this readership:

> Some intellectually ambitious workers applied themselves to serious books, working their way through them slowly, attentively, and retentively. But the majority chose books and papers written expressly for an audience of semi-literates whose requirements were simple but demanding. Because they possessed virtually no general information, their reading matter had to be devoid of all but the most familiar literary and historical allusions, they could not be expected to waste time puzzling over any more recondite kind. And because their attention spans were short, they needed a running supply of excitements, brief and to the point, and sentences and paragraphs to match.[5]

Full of literary and historical allusions, discursively expanding to three volumes with sentences and paragraphs to match, replete with recondite puzzles of a most elaborate kind, Meredith novels were most decidedly not suitable for the semi-literate reader described above. This audience was lost in its entirety to Meredith, a primordial soup with which he did not concern himself, and which did not concern itself with him. He ignored this category of reader in his critical pronouncements and personal letters, sparing them the contempt he allotted to "public taste," as he termed

it[6], the taste of an altogether more educated, if to his mind just as unenlightened, section of society.

Lack of educational ability was only one factor in preventing the poor from becoming full members of the reading public. Poverty itself made such novels largely unavailable. Darko Suvin, whose article "The Social Addressees of Victorian Fiction 1870 - 1900" covers fairly closely the period during which Meredith was writing, deals with this question at length:

> From what we know about prices and incomes, I would hold that, at least until the mid-nineties, volume-length fiction was available for purchase to no more than c. 5 - 15% of British families. Perhaps 10 - 25% bought the penny parts and the cheapest reprints ... while rather more than half of the population did not buy fiction at all. As to the free public libraries, their borrowers seem to have made up c. 5 - 6% of the total population...Thus, people who read volume - length contemporary fiction at all came in Britain at the very best to 10 - 16%, or between one tenth and one sixth, of the potentially available public.[7]

Taking the "potentially available public" to mean all those who were literate (with the reservations already made and all due stress on the word "potentially"), we can see how this number becomes considerably reduced when one removes from it all those literate people who were unable to afford the 31s 6d price of the three-volume novel, or the annual guinea fee for the circulating library. Economic factors, therefore, as well as indirectly affecting the composition of the readership with regard to the level of education amongst the population, also directly affected the nature of

the readership by pricing novels out of the reach of the majority of people.

Meredith's novels, though often initially appearing in serial form, a fact which will be considered shortly, were then published in the standard three volume form at the standard price by Chapman and Hall and latterly by Constable. Novels in such a format, a luxury item for even middle-class readers, were of a prohibitive price to those on the poverty line, existing wholly outside their scheme of things. The three-volume novel was kept at an artificially high price throughout the century for what J. A. Sutherland calls "the dullest of literary reasons - because it was commercially safe:"[8]

> Overlong, overpriced and almost from the first overdue for extinction the three-decker at 31s 6d. which began with Scott saw out Thomas Hardy's novel-writing career. It is likely that the new novel, that most speculative of commercial ventures, was the most stably priced and sized commodity in the whole nineteenth - century market place.[9]

The stable, high-priced and enduring commodity described above inspired certain nineteenth century entrepreneurs with a desire to circumvent it, and open up the reading of fiction to a wider public. Mr Mudie's circulating library, which after due deliberation stocked select Meredith novels, is perhaps the most significant of these ventures.

With an annual fee of one guinea, the circulating library made novels accessible to the middle classes rather than to the poor.[10] However, the actual audience for

Meredith's novels was not made up of many of Mr Mudie's subscribers. The circulating library became an arbiter of taste in the nineteenth century. In 1860 Mudie's annual acquisition of novels was 120,000, making him the "largest single purchaser of novels in the world."[11] George Moore said of Mudie's:

> The librarian rules the roost, he crows and every chanticleer pitches his note in the same key...And in accordance with his wishes English fiction now consists of either a sentimental misunderstanding which is happily cleared up in the end, or of singular escapes over the edges of precipices, and miraculous recoveries of one or more of the senses of which the hero was deprived, until the time has come for the author to bring his tale to a close. The novel of observation, of analysis, exists no longer among us. Why? Because the librarian does not feel as safe in circulating a study of life and manners as a tale concerning a lost will...We must write as our histories, our biographies are written, and give up once and forever asking that most silly of all silly questions, "Can my daughter of eighteen read this book?[12]

That question was asked by Mudie's of _The Ordeal of Richard Feverel_, which was published in 1859. It was Meredith's first proper novel, preceded only by his idiosyncratic Arabian fantasy _The Shaving of Shagpat_ and the rambling German fairytale _Farina_. However, _The Ordeal of Richard Feverel_ was not deemed suitable for the eighteen year old Miss Mudie - Mudie banned the book. Described by Lionel Stevenson as "an extended personal essay in the guise of fiction,"[13] the novel is a prime example of what George Moore refers to as, "the novel of observation, of analysis."
The novel is a dramatised examination of a system of

education, a ponderous topic for the members of a circulating library. It is, however, full of incident and even the occasional "sentimental misunderstanding" and "singular escapes over the edges of precipices," or their equivalent. The factor which alienated this particular readership from the novel could be described as its unpredictability, as it unfolded within an unfamiliar discourse. "Immorality" was the alleged ground for the ban: it was claimed that the novel would "offend the modesty of its patrons"[14]; but Mudie's shelves never lacked a plentiful stock of seedy stories. The portrayal of Richard's corruption by Mrs Mount, unhampered as it is by sentimental apologies, is shocking only if it is read in a context of external propriety, with which sensational novels stocked by Mudie's did not concern themselves.[15] Yet the novel did have an element distressing for a reader habituated to Mudie's stock: its ending, which has an unexpectedness that can still surprise. Lucy's untimely death, which frustratingly occurs just as the reader has been led to anticipate complacently the certainty of a fulfilling conclusion, is disturbing in its perversity. The end of the novel leaves the reader a bleaker prospect, conjured up in these words: "Have you noticed the expression in the eyes of blind men? That is just how Richard looks, as he lies there silent in his bed - striving to image her on his brain."[16] This provides a contrast to the wedding feasts and accounts of multiplying families with which even the most sombre of Victorian tales tends to be resolved. The

texts of Meredith's novels continually confound and confuse the reader with sudden erratic moves which shake the standard patterns. For example: Diana's inexcusably excused exchanging of love for ready money in Diana of the Crossways; the very odd and capricious romantic career of the heroine of Sandra Belloni, who turns up again under several different names and amidst a host of unidentifiable characters in Vittoria; the hero's throw- away death in Beauchamp's Career.

It would seem that the deviations of Meredith texts from the most easily accessible variety of Victorian novel was one factor, among others, which lost for them the attention of the typical middle-class library subscriber, as Meredith complained in Sandra Belloni: "and away flies my book back at the heads of the librarians, hitting me behind them a far more grievous blow."[17]

The circulating library readers represented for Meredith the "public taste", frequently set up to be specifically derided in Meredith's novels. This readership, unlike the semi-literate reader, was not entirely lost to Meredith, but he did disclaim involvement with it. "Public taste" as excercised through the machinery of the circulating library was responsible for the great success of Mrs Henry Wood's East Lynne; a book which Meredith refused to pass for publication when he was publisher's reader for Chapman and Hall:

> It is in the worst style of the present taste. What a miserable colourless villain, Levison! The husband a respectable stick: the heroine a botched fool: all the incidents forced - that is, not growing out of the characters: and the turning point laughable in its probability. Why do you foster this foul taste? There's action in the tale, and that's all.[15]

For Meredith here, "present taste" is the antithesis of the matter and style of a worthwhile production. As Meredith's career went on, this divide was harped on obsessively in his letters, and it was emphasized, rather than ignored, in the construction of his own novels. The proposition that the texts were removed from the scope of a readership who were in fact indifferent anyway, turned into a pervasive pose.

I have been concerned so far with establishing who did not form the readership of Meredith novels, with eliminating from the total pool of readers those readers who had little or no contact with these novels. I will now consider the nature of the categories of readers for whom Meredith's novels were accessible.

One line of investigation which should result in precise statements about the composition of this actual readership, is an examination of the journals in which the novels were serialized, and a consideration of what might be included in a discussion of the journal reading public. Meredith's novels were serialized in the following periodicals:

The Shaving of Shagpat - no serialization

Farina - no serialization

The Ordeal of Richard Feverel - serialization in French only

Evan Harrington - Once a Week

Sandra Belloni - In French only, Revue des Deux Mondes

Rhoda Fleming - no serialization

Vittoria - Fortnightly Review

The Adventures of Harry Richmond - Cornhill

Beauchamp's Career - Fortnightly Review

The Egoist - The Glasgow Weekly Herald

The Tragic Comedians - Fortnightly Review

Diana of the Crossways - Fortnightly Review

One of Our Conquerors - Fortnightly Review

Lord Ormont and his Aminta - Pall Mall Magazine

The Amazing Marriage - Scribner's magazine

Celt and Saxon - Fortnightly Review

Out of sixteen novels only three, all early works, did not appear in serial form. Although Evan Harrington was the only one of Meredith's novels to be written primarily for serialization[17], serialization became, with each succeeding novel, an increasingly important means of bringing the novels before the public's attention. As six out of the thirteen novels which were serialized made their appearance in the Fortnightly Review, it is perhaps appropriate to start this survey with a consideration of that periodical.

Alvar Ellegard outlines clearly the problems of identifying the readership of individual periodicals, and

makes some modest proposals for tackling these problems:

> Scarcely any direct information on the characteristics of the readers of each periodical exists. Those were not the days of market research and readership surveys. Some clues, indeed, can be obtained from descriptions and advertisements in the advertisers' handbooks and directories of the time. But in the main the readership has to be inferred from the periodical itself: its general appearance, its price, its style and tone, its opinions and its contents.[20]

His examination of these aspects of the Fortnightly Review, found that it "appealed to an educated middle to upper class public, politically liberal-radical, with a rationalistic philosophical creed."[21] External features of the Fortnightly Review therefore suggest that the periodical in which several of Meredith's novels first appeared in serial form addressed a readership which took education for granted, a readership which held a particular set of views and values.

Ellegard's conclusion tallies with what we know of the Fortnightly Review's sponsors and writers. The periodical was established in 1865 by a small group of men, amongst whom were Frederick Chapman and George Henry Lewes, and was shortly afterwards bought by Chapman and Hall, who were Meredith's publishers throughout most of his career. John Morley, a close personal friend of Meredith's, was editor of the periodical from 1866 for fifteen years. During this period the Fortnightly Review became, according to John Mason, "the most distinguished journal of the late nineteenth century."[22] John Mason, in his article "Monthly

and Quarterly Reviews, 1865 - 1914," has labelled the periodical's readership the "emerging intelligentsia"[23], a view further confirmed when we turn to the journal's contents. The Fortnightly Review of Ist October, 1880 (New Series, No.28) , in which serialization of The Tragic Comedians began, is a typical issue. With the exception of an installment from Meredith's novel, the list of contents is made up almost entirely of religious and political articles. The articles are written with the intellectual seriousness which their titles suggest: John W. Probyn on "Religious Liberty and Atheism," Mark Pattison, "Industrial Shortcomings; An Address," James Randell on "Friendly Societies," Augustus Craven's "Narrative of the Fall of the Bastille" and T. E. Leslie on "Political Economy in the United States." A listing of contributors to the Fortnightly Review, compiled by a modern scholar, Walter Graham, reads like a roll call of late nineteenth century sages: "Walter Bagehot, Matthew Arnold, G. J. Whyte Melville, John Dennis, Moncure D. Conway, J. Addington Symonds, Grant Allen, Sidney Colvin, Alfred Austin, Edward Lowden, William Morris, Walter Pater, W. M. Rossetti, Leslie Stephen, and George Saintsbury."[24] Perhaps most telling is the circulation of the journal. Ellegard quotes Morley's estimation that each issue of the Fortnightly Review of 1870 went through a print run of two thousand five hundred copies, whereas each issue of the Family Herald, as has already been mentioned (p. 12), enjoyed a print run of two hundred thousand copies. Circulation figures further

confirm what is evident from its contents and habitual contributors - the Fortnightly Review was a publication addressing, what John Mason has termed, "a new aristocracy of intellect"[25]; consequently, the serialisations of Meredith's novels were addressed to an educated elite.

Other periodicals in which Meredith's novels were serialised - Once a Week, Cornhill, Pall Mall Magazine, Scribner's Magazine - although perhaps displaying less political and more literary influences, resembled the Fortnightly Review, in that they possessed a highly educated readership.[26] However, there is one apparently surprising exception to this - the serialization in 1879 of The Egoist in the Glasgow Weekly Herald.[27] This newspaper's usual literary serial was of a sensational or sentimental nature - "Moriarty in Exile" (1879) or "The Miser of Haselhow" (1880). The Egoist was sold to the Glasgow Weekly Herald without Meredith's knowledge, and a letter he wrote to Robert Louis Stevenson at the time records his disgust at the editor's change of title[28], which softened its stern philosophical appeal to a promise of character eccentricity on display; the title given to the serialization was "Sir Willoughby Patterne: The Egoist." The first installment of The Egoist appeared on 21st June, 1879, amidst reports of "Flute-band nuisance at Maryhill" and "Distress in Milngavie." At the price of one penny an issue The Egoist came to a readership who never could have afforded 31s 6d for a three-volume novel. However, as we shall see later (Ch. 3, pp. 109 - 137), unusual circumstances in the

development of the Glasgow Weekly Herald itself had brought about this association of a Meredith novel with a readership unused to Meredith's particular style of fiction.

The unexpected readership acquired by The Egoist was an exceptional occurrence; serialization otherwise did not bring Meredith's novels to the attention of a mass readership. The other periodicals in which the novels appeared each had a small homogeneous readership, not unlike the Fortnightly Review.[29] The first readership of Meredith's fiction was, then, self-consciously intellectual, educated above the average level in Victorian society, above that of Matthew Arnold's "philistine" middle-class [30], and above Meredith's own concept of the "public taste."

The manner in which the limited circle of Meredith's readers came to be regarded, and came to regard themselves, as an elite - with all the implications of the best and the chosen which that word implies - is a crucial function of the relationship between that readership and the novels. For a vivid example of how Meredith's actual contemporary audience was striving to count itself as an elite, we have only to consider the audience which assembled for the one public lecture which Meredith delivered. This lecture - later published in 1897 as An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit - was given in 1877 to members of the London Institution for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. The name of this organisation gives an indication of its purpose and the tone of its teaching. Its composition at the time of Meredith's lecture is summarised as follows by

Richard Altick:

> The narrowness or misguided ambition of the Diffusion Society's programme was most forcefully revealed by the gradual conversion of the mechanic's institutes...into semi-frivolous institutions dominated by the middle-class. But their continuing popularity in provincial towns, once their programme had been revised, showed how hungry ordinary middle-class people were for occasional snacks of literature and art. Here culture was brought down to the level of the common understanding and while many performances offered in its name were the very definition of vulgarization in its worst sense, they were at least a cut above both the printed pap and the strongly seasoned fare purveyed at rock-bottom prices, to the semi-literate masses.[31]

Meredith's lecture addressed itself directly to a desire for culture such as Altick describes. Despite his learned flourishes and grand design it was primarily a lesson in taste. The culture-hungry middle-class members of the audience and the self-improving working-men of whom their were many, according to Meredith's letter to the secretary of the Institution[32], heard from Meredith what they had to aspire to. The audience at the London Institution listened as they were offered an opportunity to become "citizens of the selecter world," (p.91) where acceptance depended upon the ability to appreciate a certain kind of literature, literature that was explicitly associated with civilisation and commonsense and intellect, the kind of literature which Meredith regarded himself as writing, and which was opposed to the "public taste." Membership of this elite, they were further counselled, did not allow for "public taste," which was dismissed as that of

"the idle empty laughers" (p. 15) who appreciated satire, irony, or just plain fun.

As a more ample analysis will demonstrate (Ch. 2, pp 45 - 55), the very style of Meredith's address in his lecture assumed an audience which wanted to see literature as culturally improving, socially uplifting, and somewhat exclusive. The wide range of experimentation in novelistic style and technique for which Meredith is noted was, as detailed analysis will show, constantly directed to a readership ambitious, like the lecture audience, to place itself within a deliberately created "selected world." The actual contemporary readership combined those who belonged to an intellectual elite and those who aspired to membership of such a select group.

Meredith's Contemporary Reputation

By the time of his death in 1909 Meredith's novels, and the author himself, had acquired a reputation for literary brilliance which was largely fabricated by the intellectual elite among his readership, and in particular by an identifiable coterie among that elite. Even while it remained an uninteresting mystery to the "populace," and to the "philistines,"[33] Meredith's fiction elicited an excessive and undiscriminating enthusiasm from Victorians laying claim to an eminence over and against "populace" and "philistines." Contemporary comment on his fiction had, as we shall see, two distinct manifestations; on the one hand there were the reviews, sometimes favourable, sometimes not: on the other hand Meredith was extolled and discussed by

disciples and proteges who were themselves engaged in developing a discourse which had existed outside mainstream Victorian thought on the novel, and who themselves aspired to eminence through this discourse.

This special discourse can be exemplified in the fervent admiration of Robert Louis Stevenson, who became a friend and frequent correspondent of Meredith's. In an essay entitled "Books which have influenced me," he pays this tribute:

> I should never forgive myself if I forgot The Egoist. It is art, if you like, but it belongs purely to didactic art, and from all the novels I have read (and I have read thousands) stands in a place by itself.[34]

Stevenson was given, not only to expressing a personal preference for Meredith's novels, but also to making critical comparisons with Shakespeare. He expressed the belief, for instance, that "the last interview between Lucy and Richard Feverel is pure drama; more than that, it is the strongest scene, since Shakespeare, in the English tongue."[35] Stevenson's was criticism with no middle-ground, no tempering of praise with reservations or doubt.

Further eulogies in the same vein as Stevenson's came from James Thomson. Thomson is quoted at length in J. A. Hammerton's compilation George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism[36], which was written just before Meredith's death, and which is in its own way an intense panegyric on the subject of Meredith's life and work. "Dolts who are not wearing out their knees before the Meredithian shrine," (p.

150) met, notes Hammerton approvingly, Thomson's disdain, and Hammerton associates himself with Thomson in appreciating "a pearl to which the grosser mob is indifferent". (p. 149) Thomson himself rises to even greater excess:

> George Meredith stands among our living novelists much as Robert Browning until of late years stood among our living poets, quite unappreciated by the general public, ranked with the very highest by a select few...For the rest, the causes of his unpopularity are obvious enough, and he himself, as he more than once lets us know, is thoroughly aware of them...Not only does he appeal to the conscience residing in thoughtfulness, he makes heavy and frequent demands on the active imagination - monstrous attempts at extortion which both the languid and the sentimental novel reader bitterly resent, and which, indeed, if they grew common with authors (luckily there is not the slightest fear of that) would soon plunge the circulating libraries into bankruptcy.[37]

The twists of superiority and sarcasm which mark this writing, "(luckily there is not the slightest fear of that)", indicate how the coterie comment developed its elite air.

The comparison Thomson makes between Meredith and Browning was a common one, based on the similiar way in which their reputations developed. The vocabulary used by reviewers to condemn the early works of Browning, is almost identical to that used in later indignant outbursts against Meredith: "obscurity"[38], "talent deliberately perverted"[39], "bad taste"[40], "a curiosity and a puzzle"[41]. After this initial lack of comprehension, critical opinion as to the worth of Browning's poetry became divided. He was taken up and lauded, as Meredith was, by "a small band of devoted

admirers,"[42] while at the same time being generally regarded as "a poet without a public"[43], as a contemporary noted:

> Mr Browning is the poetic idol of men who give laws to cliques and coteries. The Athenaeum "kowtows" to him. Mr Ruskin quotes from him at length in obvious admiration. Even at the university, where new poets find little acceptance, his exquisite verses are set by enthusiastic professors to be rendered into Greek by the candidates for the Classical Tripos. And yet we are afraid that not one in ten of the people who subscribe to Mudie's have ever read a word of his writings.[44]

This reviewer, writing in 1863, describes the same divide between what was read "at the university," and what was read by "those who subscribe to Mudie's," that affected Meredith's own popularity. Influential members of the "perverse literary clique"[45] of Browning admirers, such as George Eliot and Swinburne, played an important part in establishing Meredith's reputation for "genius". The reasons they suggested for the lack of popularity of the two writers were similar; the works of Browning and Meredith could only be appreciated by the superior reader. George Eliot praised Browning for "a majestic obscurity', which repels not only the ignorant but the idle"[46], and Swinburne wrote that "He is something too much the reverse of obscure; he is too brilliant and subtle for the ready reader of a ready writer to follow"[47]. Both critics drummed up a following for the poet by crediting admirers with exceptional intelligence and good taste. Literary elitism reached a peak at the end of Browning's career with the

creation of the Browning Society, and, like Meredith, he received the unqualified adulation of an ardent up-market readership. Both Meredith and Browning had gained reputations as seers by the time of their deaths, and were valued not as entertainers, but for their "philosophy".

The creation of Browning's reputation in the 1860s and '70s demonstrates the power of a literary clique. Stevenson, Thomson, George Eliot, Swinburne, and like-minded individuals, such as W. E. Henley and James Barrie, were pleased to notice their own superior literary perceptiveness. This attractive elite, who presumed to know better than less able readers, helped to puff up Meredith's reputation towards the end of the century, and to provide the novels with a readership anxious to share in a secret.

Meredith's reputation by the end of his career was such that his eightieth birthday became a journalistic event. J. A. Hammerton celebrated the anniversary with a whole chapter:

> My purpose in this chapter is to compile from the forbidding mass of these newspaper criticisms and reports an account of the eightieth birthday that may possess some permanent value in the future as a record of a notable event in the career of a great author whose earlier and middle life had been as barren of public interest as his old age was embarrassed therewith.[46]

Other attempts to embarrass his old age included critical ventures with eulogistic titles and commentary which is breathlessly reverent. One such is <u>George Meredith: His Life, Genius and Teaching</u> (1913) by Constantin Photiades.[47]

The first chapter of this book consists of a description of a visit made by the author to Flint Cottage, where he sat at Meredith's feet. The copious wisdom Photiades gleaned there takes him twenty-four pages to recount. Like-minded studies by Hannah H. Lynch[50], Richard Curle[51], Richard le Gallienne[52], Elmer James Bailey[53], James Moffat[54] and M. Sturge Henderson[55], all helped to labour the point, elevating Meredith, by contrast with other mortals, for his "genius:

> I may say further, more particularly, that I have, in the main, concerned myself more with Mr Meredith's genius than his talent - if the distinction be not too old-fashioned - not the mass of his work, but only that part of it which I consider peculiarly his own.[56]

The "talent"/"genius" distinction, and the stress on what was "peculiarly his own", which Gallienne makes here, were recurrent features in these works, and contributed to the creation of the Meredith myth. The use of the word "genius" set Meredith's novels on a plane where actual analytic criticism was considered unnecessary, and almost insulting. Meredith's novels were to be appreciated for an indefinable something that was "peculiarly his own". This individual essence, this mark of "genius", became a touchstone of taste. Critics approached the word "genius" with caution once it had been used freely in influential circles, and they hesitated to dispute it for fear of displaying lack of intelligence through their failure to see it. As no external criteria were involved in the proclamation of this

genius, few hard arguments were entered in the debate, and the reputation of Meredith's novels became a question of distinction and taste.

Readers of Meredith's novels were rewarded in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, with the knowledge of their own good taste. Possession of this numinous quality of "taste" could be alleged because the novels were renowned for inaccessibility. Inaccessibility was not considered on material grounds - such as the high cost of the books - but was identified in the supposed complexity of their style. This was a view of Meredith's fiction shared by his admirers and his detractors. A hostile review from one of the contributors to <u>The Saturday Review</u> on <u>One of Our Conquerors</u> commented on "tortuous precosities" and "linguistic nightmares:" although this review ends with an unambiguous attack, "This is surely not the way to write,"[87] it shares with Meredith's admirers a focus on Meredith's manner of writing, his style.

The reviewers of Meredith's novels were divided during his career as to whether this was, or was not, the way to write, each critic coming down with firm conviction on one side or the other. The dichotomy can be perhaps summarised by the opposition of the two words "clever" and "genius," an opposition which continually recurs in contemporary criticism of the novels; for example, W. E. Henley wrote on the subject of <u>The Egoist</u>: "Mr Meredith's style, it seems to me, has always been his weak point. Like Shakespeare, he is

a man of genius, who is a clever man as well; and he seems to prefer his cleverness to his genius."[58] An unsigned review in the Saturday Review expressed the opinion, when discussing Vittoria, that "It is often so clever as to be on the verge of genius, but somehow we don't get on with it...," and talked of "Mr Meredith's very clever, though rather unreadable performance..."[59] Though Henley was a devotee, and the unknown reviewer a sceptic, both are confused as to where Meredith's cleverness ends and his genius begins. The word "clever" was used as a derogatory term. The dominant Victorian discourse was suspicious of what it saw as quick wit at the expense of sound moral sense. "Genius," on the other hand, was a far more elevating concept. "Genius" was romantically inspired and existed outwith the everyday sphere of reference. Allusive and evaluative criticism was then in vogue, particularly in any discussion of Meredith's novels.

Meredith's fiction was considered in the context of "genius" from the very beginning. George Eliot, in her review of The Shaving of Shagpat, his first publication, directly introduces the term: "The Shaving of Shagpat is a work of genius, and of poetical genius. It has none of the tameness which belongs to mere imitations manufactured with servile effort, or thrown off with sinuous facility." A Meredith novel is from the first, singled out in George Eliot's words, as "the apple-tree among the trees of the wood,"[60] and not, as he and his coterie were to insinuate and lament in later years, allowed to "languish in the

shades".[21]

Yet, very soon after that introductory rapture, the "buts" begin to appear. A review in The Westminter Review substitutes "clever" for "genius". It claims that the author in this novel has sacrificed "euphony and almost sense" to "much clever and vigorous description".[22] Although for many years this review was attributed to George Eliot, a regular contributor to The Westminster Review, its anonymity cloaked an advertisement for Meredith himself.[22a] Meredith's attempt at self praise through mock apology initiated a strand in critical thinking which ultimately worked against the popularity it sought. Cleverness became something to be more and more suspicious of, for it might baffle one's perception of the sense. As further novels in the Meredith canon appeared, the divide between those who favoured Mr Meredith's "genius" and those who scorned his "cleverness" increased. The "cleverness" of the novels came to be regarded by both the enthusiastic and the repulsed as a drawback in the bid for popularity, as is suggested by The Times review of The Ordeal of Richard Feverel: "But it is also very oracular and obscure in parts. Let us premise that Mr Meredith belongs to a class of fictionists who are more rare than welcome - more honoured than popular".[23] However, the divide in opinion was agreed in remarking a uniqueness based on complexity.

The myth of inaccessibility was fostered by those who claimed to see through the new clothes, those who preferred the word "clever" to "genius", and equally propagated by the novel's admirers. Admirers were happy to consider the novels inaccessible to the many because the few could then gain honour from their appreciation. This tendency was noted in contemporary comment:

> The taste for Mr George Meredith's later novels is a sentiment, personal, freakish, tiptoeing an impertinent superiority of glance. From a pinnacle of the supercilious it twinkles a cavalier stare: - below, the swinish; above - the stars. Georgioum sidus![64]

Such exaggerated rhetoric was frequently provoked by the Meredithian pose, which it mockingly parodies, and it was in particular the later novels, as the critic notes, that excited such diverse reactions, from adulation to loathing. The early novels which succeeded The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, such as Evan Harrington (1860), Sandra Belloni (1864), and Rhoda Fleming (1865), were given limited attention, which focused mainly on the vagaries of the plot, with some glances at the "display of intellectual pyrotechnics"[65]. Meredith's novels gained increasing popularity in the middle period of his career, with The Adventures of Harry Richmond (1871), Beauchamp's Career (1874), The Egoist (1879), The Tragic Comedians (1880) and Diana of the Crossways (1885). The latter two, like his sonnet sequence "Modern Love" (1862), perhaps gained some of their popularity from the salacious scandals from which they sprang. They were Meredith's versions of the popular pot-boilers, "a bending for a moment to catch the vulgar ear,"[66] of which even his fiercest detractors seldom accused him. Although Diana of the Crossways is the only one that could really be described as a popular success, all three present a special problem which will be considered in Chapter Five.

It was in the later novels that what was "peculiarly

his own" became most pronounced. The critics adopted positions at opposite extremes, as if unsure how to respond to the oddly unfamiliar discourses of Lord Ormont and his Aminta (1894), The Amazing Marriage (1895) and One of Our Conquerors (1890). In this uncertainty as to their personal responses, reviewers turned to more extensive discussion of Meredith's readership. Indeed, these novels constituted something approaching a crisis for the Victorian critic, whose stance of discriminating consumer usually feigned indifference to the market forces that shaped novels as a commodity. The following unsigned article in The Times in 1891 provides an example of this type of criticism:

> Mr Meredith, like Mr Browning, has his special circle of worshippers, who appear to adore his eccentricities as part of his genius. Is it too unkind to suggest that intellectual pride has something to do with this enthusiasm? Delighted with themselves for being able to distinguish magnificent shapes in it, they are pleased to imagine their admiration of the intricate pattern is a mark of superior understanding.[47]

This "special circle of worshippers" in the last decade of the nineteenth century, appear to have been those literary readers who were in pursuit of the beautiful phrase, aesthetes or decadents, involved in the intricacies of the text, who claimed to be indifferent to the social comment which mere mirroring of life might offer. William Watson describes Meredith in 1889 in the National Review as "the idol of the aesthetes, the darling of the superior people"[48]. Meredith's later novels provided ideal reading

material for these enthusiasts, gratified by "a literary manner which even in these days of affectation and strain is of unique perversity."[69] F. C. Thomson in his article "Stylistic revisions in One of our Conquerors" shows just how many stylistic refinements were made in the construction of this text.[70] The first few paragraphs of the novel present the reader with copious "puzzles in rattle-boxes."[71] A text containing a concentration of metaphors and allusions which alienated the majority of the reading public, would seem in its self-consciousness, and undisguised artificiality, a suitably purposeless puzzle.

Oscar Wilde, in his "Decay of Lying" (1889), used wit and irony to unmistakably identify Meredith's novels with the aesthetic ideal:

> But whatever he is, he is not a realist. Or rather I would say that he is a child of realism who is not on speaking terms with his father. By deliberate choice he has made himself a romanticist. He has refused to bow the knee to Baal, and after all, even if the man's fine spirit did not revolt against the noisy assertions of realism, his style would be quite sufficient of itself to keep life at a respectful distance. By its means he has planted round his garden a hedge full of thorns, and red with wonderful roses.[72]

Wilde ignores what many earlier critics had stressed - the political debates in _Beauchamp's Career_, the expose of character traits in _The Egoist_, the sombre, if sometimes obscure, analysis of relationships in _One of our Conquerors_, in favour of the "wonderful roses" of style; art rather than reflected images of life. This attitude marked the loss, if

there were any left by the 1890's, of those readers who read Meredith's novels for plot, character and story, and defined the inner elite as those who feasted on dandified prose.

A multitude of considerations, such as an educational standard, a specific kind of journal, a vociferous coterie, and an artistic approach, had therefore come to surround Meredith's novels, and by the end of the nineteenth century had cohered into a literary myth. This literary myth was important in attracting, or discouraging contemporary readers, and in many ways had just as much influence as the texts themselves in constructing a readership.

The myth, which was largely generated by critics, writing as they did of neglected genius and inaccessibility, was furthered by the public and private outpourings of Meredith's own imagination. An identifiable discourse gives continuity to The Letters. The question of readership is central. The texts are full of railings against the critics and contempt for "public taste". Exaggerated despondency alternates with impatient anger, and arrogance intermittently breaks through the excessive humility which was another favoured pose, as in this single sentence from a letter of July 1889: "But that is the old day of the leading by the ear to the pillory, where to receive the reviewers' addled eggs and flying cats, I keep it back."[73], or again in a letter in January 1882: "As for me, I work on up in my corner, and am passing from the pathetic of obscurity into the ludicrous, for who can help laughing to see an old fellow still stitching books that nobody buys!"[74]. The

bemoaning of a lack of popularity is not unwarranted: although Meredith's novels did acquire a contemporary reputation that left the author by no means an unknown, the readership for his novels was small - far smaller than that of similarly well-known literary figures, such as George Eliot, or of more determinedly popular authors, such as Mrs Henry Wood[75]: "my name is celebrated but no one reads my books,"[76] the author told Photiades. The Meredith myth was nourished by the novels' lack of popularity.

Raymond Williams defines the word "popular" in three ways[77], roughly summarised as: 1) the old radical sense of being "for the people;" 2) the established popular reading material of crime, scandal, romance etc.; 3) popular in purely market terms. Meredith's novels were "popular" in none of these senses. The novels were not concerned with the fate of the masses; they shunned the discourses which the mass readership most desired, and were consequently relatively unsuccessful in market terms. The texts revolved around country-house settings and middle-class or aristocratic characters, and their dominant discourse was defiantly unromantic. As is suggested by his constant bargainings with Chapman and Hall, and the demise of most of his novels after one or two editions, it was not financial success as a novelist that enabled Meredith to leave a modest fortune on his death: that fortune had been accumulated through inheritance, journalism, and his labours as a publisher's reader. Scorning the "popular" in its first two senses led to the "popular" in the sense which

Meredith sought - a large readership - eluding him.

The size of Meredith's readership was not greatly increased by translations of his work: the contemporary readership for Meredith's fiction remained almost wholly English-speaking. The novels were seldom translated during the author's lifetime, as Constantin Photiades complains in the senario he creates of his fellow-countrymen pondering their loss:

> If George Meredith is as entrancing as you say, why has he not been translated into French like Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, the sisters Bronte, Rudyard Kipling, or even as Mr Thomas Hardy? France gives generous hearing to foreign authors...How does it happen that Meredith was not more celebrated during his life-time?[78]

The readership was therefore of an insular nature. Meredith, in both letters and novels, attributed the smallness of his readership to the lack of taste of a public that was specifically English. He gave a new twist to the Celt/Saxon dichotomy, which Matthew Arnold earlier had taken from French criticism. Meredith identified "pulic taste" as that of the Saxons, the "squat Goths," who in <u>Celt and Saxon</u> are accused of "cattle-contentedness" and "carcase-dullness"[79]. Vaguely evoking a distant Welsh ancestry, Meredith used the word "English", like the word "popular," as a contemptuous way of referring to a potential, but unattainable, readership: "I am disdainful of an English public and am beset by the devils of satire when I look on it."[80] The readership he actually addressed was

set squaroly among this English public. It was a clever pose, identifying sensitive and intelligent readers (ie. those who appreciated Meredith's novels) with Celtic imagination; yet another means of implying that his readers stood out from the rabble of ordinary readers.

The readership who actually took up Meredith's novels with the most direct enthusiasm towards the end of his career were not usually associated with Welsh inspiration. A uniform edition of his work appeared in America in 1894 and was very favourably received. Meredith rewarded American discrimination with an aphoristic turn, at once cryptic and elitist: "It is curious that a writer despised in England should have struck the American mind: and of course the said writer inclines to think that it is because there is a mind."[81] His publisher's expansion into the American market provided a larger audience for Meredith's later novels than the narrow circle of the intellectual elite which constituted the greater part of the readership in Britain. The enthusiastic response to the novels in America showed itself not only in articles by complimentary critics, such as Flora Shaw in The Princeton Review and G. P. Baker in The Harvard Monthly, but also in large book sales.[82] Re-publication of the novels for an American market led to a readership for the earlier novels that they had never acquired when they were first published in England. Meredith delighted childishly in this turn of fortune: "I had heard of large sales over there, and a man of experience tells me it is nothing to what it will be.

But I confess the touch of American money has impressed me with concrete ideas of fame."[63] Meredith's appreciation of the touch of American money could be voiced in a business letter to his publishers, though not, of course, in the oracular wisdom dispensed to Photiades.

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In this chapter, it has been shown that the composition of the contemporary readership for Meredith's novels altered during the course of his literary career. When _The Ordeal of Richard Feverel_ was published in 1859, it was read by a diverse group of educated readers, eager for new works by new authors. As each new Meredith novel appeared the public began to acquire a cumulative knowlege of the "Meredithian," partly based on a familiarity with the texts, and partly founded on a reputation; on myths - the myths of inaccessibility, of unpopularity, of spiritual superiority - myths which like all other myths were neither true, nor untrue. These myths were manufactured by the actual readership, and were also instrumental in defining that readership. By the time _One of Our Conquerors_ was published in 1890, the readership had been pared down and had acquired definite parameters. Self-consciously aware of the rareness of their predilection for Meredith's novels, this readership discouraged new recruits by implying that the novels were

inaccessible to a wider public, but it thereby attracted others who wished to associate themselves with such a self-styled intellectual elite.

However, it was not only the success of Meredith's novels with an intellectual elite which formed the basis for the Meredith myths. Their failure to appeal to "public taste", and Meredith's subsequent reputation as a philosopher who stood completely outside the mainstream of Victorian fiction also mask the social address which the texts themselves make. The following chapters examine the constitution of those texts, to consider the actual modes of address - and the readers addressed - of Meredith's fiction.

CHAPTER TWO

ADDRESS AND AUDIENCE

In Chapter One, the conclusion was reached that Meredith's readership was drawn mainly from an intellectual elite. Meredith's reputation has led both contemporary and recent critics to go one step further in presuming from the nature of Meredith's readership that his novels were addressed exclusively to an intellectual coterie, and not to the mainstream contemporary reading public. David Skilton, for example, suggests that Meredith's novels, "tended to undermine standard Victorian orthodoxies."[1] The author of the Concise Cambridge History of English Literature perceives in the novels, "a rejection of the normal Victorian values in faith and life."[2] This tendency to regard Meredith's novels, whether the work of a genius or a crank, as lying outside the mainstream of Victorian fiction, has been strengthened by the confusion between the reader whom the texts appear to imply, and the actual contemporary reader addressed.

"I am bound to forewarn readers of this history that there is no plot in it"[3] - a typical address in a Meredith novel by the narrator to his readers, for despite pleas on behalf of "a poor troop of actors to vacant benches,"[4] the texts continually imply an audience. As many critics have commented, Meredith's novels are full of references to a clearly defined reader. Gillian Beer discusses the

"reader's role" in relation to several of Meredith's novels.[5] Judith Wilt devotes a book to what she believes was George Meredith's obsession "with the real and fictional Reader." (p. 3) She sees Meredith's relationship with the wider reading public as consisting of a series of attempts to convert readers from their ignorance. Both writers regard Meredith's principal concern as educating individual readers, ridding them of "sentimentalism and egoism" (Wilt, p. 8), civilising them so that they become fit readers for Meredith's novels. Gillian Beer comments that "the reader is forced to undertake simultaneously two contradictory roles: that of living through the experience and that of analysing it dispassionately" (p. 113), while Judith Wilt refers to the "raising up of the civilised reader" (p. 19). In this chapter, it is suggested that the implied reader, defined by Iser as "a construct of the text,"[6] was not a means of addressing individual readers, but rather part of a dual mode of address directed at expanding the readership for Meredith's novels.

Most of the characteristics of the implied reader who was a consistent presence in all Meredith's novels, are perhaps initially most clearly perceived, not in one of the novels themselves, but in _An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit_, the origin of which was discussed in Chapter One (pp 23 - 25). With this introduction, we will then turn to consider the use of the implied reader in four of Meredith's novels - _The Ordeal of Richard Feverel_, _Sandra Belloni_, _The Egoist_ and _The Amazing Marriage_. These novels have been selected for analysis because they

represent the early, middle, and late stages of Meredith's career.

An Essay on Comedy

The *Essay* is clearly a piece of literary criticism, but of a particular kind. Pierre Macherey distinguishes between two types of literary criticism - criticism as appreciation (the education of taste), and criticism as knowledge (the science of literary production). (p. 6) Meredith, in the tone of an urbane man of learning with an improving lesson to impart, attempts to educate his audience's taste. It is not a scientifically rigorous process; there are no close analyses of texts, which are handled cavalierly to illustrate the *Essay's* thesis. The argument is punctuated with flights of utter fancy - a pyramid of authors, Heine standing on Shelley's shoulders to equal the height of Aristophanes - anecdotes and extravagant metaphors.

The education of the taste of the actual audience, specifically defined in time and space, is initiated by the construction in the text of an ideal reader, who will possess the ability to respond to the Comic Spirit as the thesis of the text requires. The nature of this reader is defined by the use of several recurring words - "culture", "civilisation", "intellect", "social", "commonsense", "comedy". The premise of the *Essay* is a statement of the requirements for comedy. With the use of these words, or variations upon them, the narrator indicates the milieu in which the ideal reader exists:

> A society of cultivated men and women is required, wherein ideas are current and the perceptions quick, that he may be supplied with matter and an audience. The semi-barbarism of merely giddy communities and feverish emotional periods, repel him; and also a state of marked social inequality of the sexes, not can he whose business is to address the mind be understood where there is not a moderate degree of intellectual activity.(p. 8)

This is the "selecter world" (p. 91) - a utopia. Oppositions are set up between the actual world perceived at its worst - "semi-barbarism" - and the ideal - " a society of cultivated men and women." The rational - "wherein ideas are current and the perceptions quick" - is opposed to the irrational - "feverish," "giddy," "emotional." There is one further criterion, which in Victorian society was just as far, and perhaps further, removed from reality, that of equality between the sexes.

Here, three factors are presumed necessary to nourish the narrator's comic ideal - civilisation, the equality of women and intellect. Without these factors, you may have satire, irony, humour and possibly, as in Bagdad (p. 60), a lot of fun, but you cannot have comedy in its highest form. The narrator is concerned with civilisation and its consequences in two ways - their reflection in the internal world of the drama (his examples are almost all from the theatre), and their effects on the society which provides the author and audience. Comedies must contain civilised characters and matter to make you think. Such plays can only be created and communicate their ideas in a civilised, intellectual society.

The issue is confounded by the addition of another relationship between the civilised and the comic. If you

need civilisation to produce comedy, you also need a sense of the comic to be wholly civilised. Meredith offers his audience at the London Institution, an audience made up largely of working-men, the opportunity to become "citizens of the selecter world" (p. 91), where acceptance depends not on class, but on the ability to smile perceptively and politely: "Sensitiveness to the comic laugh is a step in civilisation. To shrink from being an object of it is a step in cultivation." (p. 93) Comedy is the "ultimate civilizer, the polisher,"[7] subtly refining appreciative audiences to fit them for the ideal world which Meredith suggests throughout his essay; a civilised, reasonable, humane world of wisdom.

The world which the implied reader inhabits is conjured up in the text in the lofty, supremely confident, and sometimes arrogant tone of the "Victorian Sage", as John Holloway describes it: "aphoristic generic sentences," "presupposing the reader's agreement," always "is," never "seems," or "appears," or "perhaps."[8]

This pose is at its most elaborate in the panegyric on the Comic Spirit, with the fauns and their silvery laughter in a "finely tempered" realm of "mental richness" (p. 88), as in the following lines: "If you believe that our civilisation is founded on commonsense (and it is the first condition of sanity to believe it)..." (p. 88) Every actual reader who values his appearance of sanity will be reluctant to disagree with the assumed acceptance of the implied reader, a reader who is identified with the refinement and subtlety of the Comic Spirit, with "unsolicitous

observation," "honesty and shapeliness," and dissociated from a multitude of uncivilised, ignorant and anti-social vices - "vanity," "conceit," "short-sightedness," "hypocrisy" (p. 89). The ideal reader, unlike many an actual reader, is neither a self-deceiver, an egoist, nor a fool. He is not a butt for the comic, but a perceptive observer of it. The ideal reader has an understanding of comedy in the special sense of the word as defined in the Essay.

In order to have this rapport with the Comic Spirit, the ideal implied reader must possess certain qualities. First and foremost, he must be civilised. To be civilised, to be polished, is to be beyond the corruption of public taste, which is with the "idle empty laughers" (p. 15). The tone of the first half of the Essay is censorious, for before explaining what the Comic Spirit is, he emphatically states what it is not. His moral and intellectual qualms about plays that attempt to do nothing more than entertain, remind one of Ruskin looking , and not laughing at the pantomime of "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," while he ponders upon a letter in The Times entitled "Effect of Modern Entertainment on the Mind of Youth."[9] For Meredith, "bad traditions" (p. 9) have created an atmosphere for comedy which is entirely opposed to the airy sphere of the Comic Spirit, dragging us down into the mud of a "vulgar society" - "impure," "dull," "raw," "cynically licentious," "immoral." (p. 9) Civilisation is associated with cultivation, with appreciating the right things - "High Comedy" instead of "Low Comedy" (p. 62), the poetic imagination of Shakespeare instead of the "South-Sea Island

manners" (p. 62) of most Restoration Comedies. Audiences who show enough delicacy to reject the vulgar, are to be treated to exhibitions of life amongst their social superiors, for "the middle class must have the brilliant, flippant, independent upper for a spur and a pattern." (p. 24)

However, although the aristocracy is the natural realm for the Comic Spirit to preside in, the civilised implied reader is not synonomous with the aristocrat. The civilised world of the Comic Spirit is not identical to the aristocratic societies which feature in the majority of Meredith's novels. The gulf between the "centres of polished barbarism known as aristocratic society"[10] and the "selecter world" (p. 91), between the aristocrat and the civilised implied reader, gives scope for the comic. The character of Sir Willoughby, civilised though his surface may be, is not the character of the implied reader, for he is a primitive beneath his polished veneer, an object for the comic, rather than a spectator of it, totally lost in it. The implied reader is never immersed in such a way, but superior in his civilisation and cultivation. Willoughby and his coterie, unmistakably High Society, fitting perfectly Veblen's description of the leisured class - "spending money time and effort quite uselessly in the pleasurable business of inflating the ego"[11] - no more represent the inhabitants of the "selecter world" (p.91), than do the individuals who contribute to Meredith's idea of public taste.

"Civilised" is closely connected in the vocabulary of

An Essay on Comedy with "intellect." The ideal reader responds with intelligence, rather than feeling. To be cultured is not enough, the reader must also possess "brainstuff:"[12] "Thus, for want of instruction in the Comic idea, we lose a large audience among our cultivated middle class that we should expect to support Comedy. The sentimentalist is as averse as the Puritan and as the Bacchanalian." (p. 64) Not all of the cultivated middle class possess intellect. The popular taste is with the "idle laughers" (p.15), with the "primitive Aristophanic comedy"(p. 74). The concept of the ideal reader is defined even more closely when, from the class of the cultured, is selected the subset of the intellectual.

The actual reader is coerced into associating himself with this intellectual implied reader, by means of a number of strategies, the most obvious of which is the "them" and "us" word game. "They," the English Public, are condemned from the beginning, and are obviously a category of reader to dissociate oneself from immediately, if one wants to maintain a belief in one's own good taste. "You" are given the benefit of the doubt, but are still in need of education. The discourse bullies the reader into identifying with the implied reader, by assuming the agreement of "us" and "we," and disparagingly looking down on the alien "they" who are placed firmly outside the educational scope of the discourse.

The hectoring tone is consistently maintained throughout the Essay. The ideal reader's reactions are described with complete confidence: "You must...," "You

will...," "You share...," "You become...," "You feel..." There is no question of choice. The text admits no possibility of disagreement; compliance is assumed. It is a question of good taste. The implied reader is privy to the proper knowledge: "I think it will be acknowledged," "You will have noticed," "No one would presume to say." By this means, the actual contemporary reader is presented with a series of tests. These taste tests are frequently prefaced by the words "If you...;" for example: "If you detect the ridicule, and your kindliness is chilled by it, you are slipping into the grasp of Satire." (p. 79) Sorting out the discerning believers in the Comic Spirit from the rabble of Satire enthusiasts is a rigorous process. The actual contemporary audience at the London Institution, who by their very attendance at such a lecture revealed their eagerness for self-improvement, must have felt themselves challenged to discard the earthy remnants of their own bad taste, as condemned by the Essay, and to rise to the ethereal heights of the intellectuals, to close the gap between themselves and the implied reader.

The discourse of An Essay on Comedy, which at first encompasses a deep pool of imaginary readers, moves on to sieve out all the unsuitable groups, so that it can finally imply the ideal reader without reservations. By the time we reach the premise, after only a few hundred words, the English Public as a general mass has been discarded, leaving us with the "cultivated middle class." (p. 64) From this civilised section of society, only those who possess a "moderate degree of intellectual activity" (p. 8) are

selected to keep company with the fauns and the silvery laughter.

Entry, however, is not assured, even for this elite. Another criterion is applied. The ideal reader must be a social animal. Sentimentalism, egoism, and what is called in the text "unreason," are anti-social traits:

> "The Comic poet is in the narrow field, or enclosed square, of the society he depicts and he addresses the still narrower enclosure of men's intellects, with reference to the operation of the social world upon their characters. (p. 85)

Lack of true social feeling, like the absence of civilisation and intellect, by making one a target for the Comic Spirit, prohibits one from citizenship of the "selecter world." (p. 91)

The social aspect of the implied reader is explored in The Essay through the definition of that wholly sociallly constructed virtue, "common-sense." The basis of the comic is "an esteem for common-sense" (p. 74); "our state of society is founded in common-sense" (p. 90). "Common-sense" is put forward in the discourse as the most important civilised social value - a touchstone created by a consensus of opinion in society. Of course, "common-sense" is not so much what the contemporary readership believed, as what the narrator suggests they ought to believe, what they would believe if they were members of the "selecter world" (p. 91). In setting up "common-sense" as a self-evident virtue, the narrator centralises ideas which are peripheral. The theory of comedy discussed in the Essay is specifically

defined, and common knowledge, only to the implied reader. By labelling the theory "common-sense," the narrator persuades the actual reader to accept the discourse as an obvious truth; to deny it is to put oneself outside the sphere of common wisdom.

The use of "common-sense" in the eighteenth century way, to mean the wisdom of rational, civilised men, is in unison with the reasonable tone of the whole essay. The Comic Spirit, anthropomorphised like some Greek goddess, sure of a world that can be brought to order, is a force for moderation, holding the balance between the pairs of extremes which are set up - the "non-laughers and the ever-laughing" (p. 10); the "Puritan" and the "Baccanalian" (p. 10); the "inveterate opponents" and the "drum-and-fife supporters" of Comedy. (p. 13) The implied reader - cultured, intellectual, social, possessing commonsense, and therefore scorning excess - treads a middle path between these extremes.

"Common-sense," as we have seen, is not the wisdom of educated Victorian society, but the wisdom which the discourse of the text implies is the ideal foundation for society. The discourse of social equality for women - "common-sense" to the implied reader - would not have seemed "common-sense" to the majority of contemporary readers who were still caught up with artificial and sentimental images of the ideal role for women. The views elaborated on in the text are less those of the status quo than they are constructed to seem. The implied reader is as likely to be a women as a man; "clear-sightedness," the feminine

equivalent of "common-sense," places her firmly on the right side of the divide.

The construction in An Essay on Comedy of an implied audience who were sophisticated enough to appreciate Meredith's name-dropping, from Aristophanes onwards, suggests at first that the actual audience addressed was of a similar kind. However, as we have seen (Ch.1, p. 24), Meredith was perfectly well aware that he was lecturing to a cross-section of the reading public. He used the implied reader as a means of addressing, not only those few who believed themselves to correspond to this ideal, but also the greater majority who sought to aspire to the only "unchallengeable upper class" (p. 91) which they were ever likely to be invited to join. As is indicated by the following lines, taken from a letter Meredith wrote two days after delivering his lecture, he was not so much interested in educating his readers as in preventing them from leaving before he had finished: "Audience very attentive and indulgent. Time 1hr. 25min. and no one left the hall, so that I may imagine there was interest in the lecture: Pace moderate: but Morison thinks I was intelligble chiefly by the distinctness of articulation."[13] The dual mode of address, operating through the construct of an implied reader, became for Meredith a means of capturing the attention and indulgence of a wider reading public. As with several other such attempts, the Essay was not a success - "The Secretary says I shot too high"[14] - and he never gave a public lecture again.

The Ordeal of Richard Feverel

With the example of An Essay on Comedy in mind, we will now consider The Ordeal of Richard Feverel (1859), Meredith's first novel, preceded only by two exotic fairytales The Shaving of Shagpat (1856) and Farina (1857). The atmosphere created by the narrative of The Ordeal of Richard Feverel is decidedly eighteenth century, rather than nineteenth. It has a picaresque plot, revolving around the education by trial of a well-meaning if impulsive young man, whose native milieu is rural, and who finds only corruption in the big city.

The implied reader in the novel can be clearly perceived in the tone which the narrator adopts in his direct addresses to the reader. This tone is associated with the lofty, mildly humorous (the faun's smile rather than the satyr's laugh), mock philosophic chapter titles: "Richard passes through his preliminary ordeal, and is the occasion of an aphorism," "In which the last act of the comedy takes the place of the first," "Celebrates the time-honoured treatment of a dragon by the hero." The narrator is cultured, superior, detached, and has an eye for the ironic. The narrative is peppered by words of wisdom from the fictional "Pilgrim's Scrip," with educated allusions (Richard and Lucy seen as Ferdinand and Miranda in an extended simile, for example), and with clever character sketches created with a minimum of well-turned phrases. The narrator looks down from the ethereal heights of the Comic Spirit with the confidence of one who knows what fools these

mortals be. His attitude to the events he describes is, in part, associated with the attitude of the character Adrian Harley, who, although himself satirized, is certainly the most knowing character in the novel:

> To satisfy his appetites without rashly staking his character, was the wise youth's problem for life. He had no intimates except Gibbon and Horace, and the society of these fine aristocrats of Literature helped him to accept humanity as it had been, and was; a supreme ironic procession, with laughter of Gods in the background. Why not laughter of mortals also? Adrian had his laugh in his comfortable corner. He possessed peculiar attributes of a heathen God. He was a disposer of men: he was polished, luxurious, and happy - at their cost. He lived in eminent self-content; as one lying on a soft cloud, lapt in sunshine. (vol.1, p. 56)

In this passage, the narrator obviously dissociates himself from the character he describes: "a disposer of men," "at their cost." Yet, as can be seen from the ironic tone of the description, the narrator does regard characters in the novel as something of "a supreme ironic procession." His society, the text implies, is among the "fine aristocrats of literature." He is "polished" and exudes an air of "eminent self-content."

A narrator of such culture and intellect, it is implied, is not addressing the public taste, but rather an equally civilised readership. The ideal reader in this partnership will have the education to prevent him missing any of the many literary allusions, without straining after them, and the wit to smile with perception and ease at the subtly comic.

However, the narrator's high-minded address masks a second address in The Ordeal of Richard Feverel to a much wider readership, as a critic noted on the novel's publication:

> A bargain is avowedly offered. If we eat so much flour, we shall have so many plums - if we will let the writer have his sermonizing out, we shall have a plot, a heroine, and many comic phrases.[15]

The novel does, as is suggested here, strike a bargain with both sections of a reading public which was at odds as to what they valued as "flour" and "plums". The intellectual elite were offered the opportunity to identify with the civilised implied reader, and accept "plot, heroine and many comic phrases" under the guise of an educational parable. At the same time, readers who, like the reviewer, regarded the narrator's aphorisms as mere interruptions in the narrative, were treated to a plot, which although it broke many of the rules they were familiar with, was of so sensational a nature as to be banned by the circulating library. The novel is packed with lively incidents - Richard's boyhood adventures, his courtship of Lucy, their separation, Richard's adultery and Lucy's death. These episodes provoke an emotional involvement on the part of the reader which runs counter to the narrator's detached tone. It is left to the reader to privilege the address he prefers.

Sandra Belloni

The plural nature of the reading public, which The Ordeal of Richard Feverel attempts to come to terms with, is openly discussed in Sandra Belloni (1864). The novel implies a dichotomy between a civilised readership and public taste through its use of two distinct narrators. One narrator addresses the general reading public, while the other narrator demands a more select audience. Each narrator provides a critique on the address of his counterpart. For example, in the following lines the Philosopher is seen by the romantic story-teller as an unwelcome intruder in the narrative:

> What the Philosopher means is to plant in the reader's path a staring contrast between my pet Emilia and his puppet Wilfrid. It would be very commendable and serviceable if a novel were what he thinks it: but all attestation favours the critical dictum, that a novel is to give us copious sugar and no cane. I, myself, as a reader, consider concomitant cane an adulteration of the qualities of sugar...We are indeed in a sort of partnership, and it is useless for me to tell him that he is not popular and destroys my chance. (vol. 3, pp 210 - 211)

There is just enough irony in this passage to allow the followers of the Philosopher to congratulate themselves on their superior taste, but it is not so heavy-handed as to alienate the many readers who agreed with the popular narrator in preferring "copious sugar and no cane." The Philosopher's narrative similiarly admits the possibility of satire. When the Philosopher indulges in what intellectual readers would regard as serious character analysis, he lays himself open to charges of pretension from the popular

narrator, as in the following lines:

> This waxes too absurd. At the risk of breaking our partnership for ever, I intervene. My Philosopher's meaning is plain, and, as usual good; but not even I, who have less reason to laugh at him than any body, can gravely accept the juxtaposition of suffering and cigars. And, moreover, there is a little piece of action in store. (vol. 3, pp. 304 - 305)

These satirical comments are less subtle than the opposing satire on popular fiction, in keeping with the reading skills and tastes of the two audiences addressed. This distinction has led most critics to believe that the Philosopher's narrative is priveleged in the novel. However, despite the fact that the Philosopher's narrative would appear to place that of the romantic story-teller, rather than the other way around, the novel is undeniably composed predominantly of "sugar," rather than "cane." Sandra Belloni can be read as a romantic adventure punctuated by farce. The capricious relationship of Wilfrid and Emilia provides the love interest and suspense, while the exaggerated foibles of the Poles and Mrs Chump provide the farce. It is a tale which exploits its chance of being popular, slipping frequently into melodrama. Emilia, the Cinderella figure, despised by the Ugly Sisters and courted unsuitably by her benefactor's son, moves from rags toward riches by means of her talent for singing. Although hampered by the peculiarly Meredithian vagaries of the plot, Sandra Belloni is enticing to public taste.

The Philosopher is, therefore, introduced to give intellectual credence to a story which would be placed

otherwise within the genre of popular romantic fiction. Irony is used for fear of too blatantly discouraging an audience whom the narrator has so clearly set out to catch, but his presence is necessary nonetheless, in order to keep up the pretence of a civilised and intelligent implied reader. The Philospher provides readers who associate themselves with this implied reader with a moral, which turns a fanciful tale into a fit object for study. Read in this manner, with the guidance of the Philosopher, Sandra Belloni becomes a parable on the subject of sentimentality, ripe for interpretation by an analytic mind. Emilia's sentimental ramblings become purely an object lesson in the weakness of the sentimental character.

This refined reader, whose perceptions it is implied reach higher than the heads of the possessors of public taste, is suggested, not only by the introduction of the Philosopher, but also by the use of several instructive chapter headings: "Showing how Sentiment and Passion take the Disease of Love," "The Pitfall of Sentiment," "Suggests that the Comic Mask has some Kinship with a Skull," "Contains a further Anatomy of Wilfrid." However, none of these chapters deliver the analysis, or teaching, which they so confidently announce. Instead, we are presented with further unhindered episodes in the farcical, or the romantic strand of the plot.

Sandra Belloni was praised by members of the intellectual elite amongst contemporary critics, such as Arthur Symons, for what was described as its "profound

seriousness of aim" and considered to be "weighted with intellectual seriousness."[16] Yet, in terms of "intellectual seriousness," the text of Sandra Belloni does not differ markedly from the text of Evan Harrington (1860), which was generally dismissed at the time with words such as "easy," "pleasant," "absorbing."[17] Snobbery as a comic vice in Evan Harrington is a fairly obvious and repeated source of amusement, rather than a complex subject for study. With its farcical strategems and set-pieces (eg. the scene in which "The Daughters of the Great Mel have to Digest him at Dinner"), and all the well-worn jokes about "snips,"[18] the novel is far-removed from the lofty ideal of the Comic Spirit. The narrator is too busy organising the coup which is to result in Evan being recognised by one and all as a gentleman, to pretend to be a philosopher. As for the Countess de Saldar de Sancorvo, she is definitely a clever figure of fun, but the response she provokes does not bear much relation to the "fauns" and the "silvery laughter" of An Essay on Comedy.

In Sandra Belloni, "sentiment" is treated in just as obvious a way as "snobbery" is in Evan Harrington. The majority of the novel's characters are just as much figures of chaotic fun as is the Countess in the earlier novel, but, through the inclusion of the "Philosopher", Sandra Belloni acquired a reputation for "a profound seriousness of aim." The novel, therefore, addressed itself to readers of popular fiction, while at the same time it solicited the admiration of the elite.

The Egoist

In The Ordeal of Richard Feverel and Sandra Belloni, we have seen the construct of the implied reader used as a means of addressing a readership which was not homogeneous, but fractured. It is, however, in The Egoist (1879), the first novel that Meredith published after propounding his comic theory, that the implied reader, as defined in An Essay on Comedy, is most distinctly inferred. For the first time in a Meredith novel, the main narrative is prefaced by a separate, and lengthy, discussion between the narrator and his implied readers. In "The Prelude" to the novel, the narrator creates the ambience within which the tale is told. He introduces the implied reader to the theme of the novel, the manner in which this theme will be treated, and, briefly, to the central character. This preamble also provides the reader with an exaggerated taste of the elaborate style which is consistently maintained throughout the narrative.

The constant use of the words "us," "we," "you," in "The Prelude," clearly implies a reader. In characterising this implied reader, "The Prelude echoes key words from An Essay on Comedy: "culture," "civilisation," "intellect," "social," "commonsense," "comedy." Using these words, the narrator outlines the qualities and conditions which are necessary to produce a proper reading of the novel. He suggests a compliance on the part of his implied reader with confident statements which admit no possibility of contradiction, as in these opening lines:

> Comedy is a game played to throw reflections upon social life, and it deals with human nature in the drawing-room of civilised men and women, where we have no dust of the struggling outer world, no mire, no violent clashes, to make the representation convincing. (p. 1, vol. 1)

"Comedy", as in <u>An Essay on Comedy</u>, is used as a touchstone to separate the clear-sighted from the indiscriminate followers of pure fun, and is again bound up with "social life" and "civilised men and women." The novel is intended to elicit a social response. Comedy is associated with man's role in society, with the nuances of social relationships. The novel takes as its source the "Book of our common wisdom", (p. 3, vol. 1) "our united social intelligence" (p. 4, vol. 1). Willoughby is "a gentleman of our time and country" (p. 6, vol. 1). Egoism is an anti-social vice. Victorian individualism has led to the appearance of "a race of little princes" (p. 22, vol 1), who share Willoughby's outlook: "bound in no personal duty to the State, each is for himself" (p. 22, vol. 1). The egoist cannot function in society and that makes him irredeemably comic. Lack of true social feeling prohibits the reader from citizenship of that "selecter world," introduced in the <u>Essay</u>.

The narrator assumes that he is addressing, not only a social reader, but an extremely cultured one, or at least a reader who is interested in acquiring culture. Comedy will act as "the ultimate civiliser, the polisher" (p. 5, vol. 1). The novel will provide an improving lesson for the reader. He is exhorted to be alert, in order to witness the

dissection of an egoist. The vocabulary appropriate to an improving tale, is pervasive - " perusal of the book of common wisdom" (p. 3, vol. 1), "value of a run at his heels" (p. 1, vol. 1), "minutest grains of evidence," "interrogate" (p. 1, vol. 1) "uncover ridiculousness" (p. 7, vol. 1), "correction of pretentiousness" (p. 5, vol. 1) "Listen, for comparison..." (p. 5, vol. 1). The reader is obviously expected to dissociate himself from those who value novel reading as no more than a pleasant pastime.

The style of "The Prelude" itself, suggests a readership for the novel only amongst those who have the necessary concentration for intellectual games. Devices such as circumlocution, extended metaphors, classical allusions, syntactic parallelism, personification and unusual collocations, contribute to the frustration of coherence on a semantic level. In the main narrative of The Egoist, as we shall see when we come to analyse the style of the novel in more detail (Ch. 3, pp. 109 - 137), these features of style do not occur in quite such a concentrated form. The style of "The Prelude" acts as a sort of challenge to the intellectual reader. After this introduction, the reader is never "thwacked with aphorisms and sentences and a fantastic delivery of the verities" (Sandra Belloni, p. 211, vol. 3) to quite such an extent again.

"The Prelude," therefore, can be seen as addressing itself to those readers who would wish to associate themselves with the cultured reader whom the narrator continually implies, to an intellectual elite and those who

aspired to membership of such an elite. This address must have been successful: The Egoist, of all Meredith's novels, was the one received with the greatest enthusiasm by the intellectual coterie among his critics. Robert Louis Stevenson hailed the novel as "didactic art,"[19] and agreed with the narrator of "The Prelude" that the novel was a parable and Willoughby Patterne an object lesson. Meredith's admirers did not, however, acclaim the novel soley because it appeared to address their intellect. Aesthetes, such as Arthur Symons, chose to stress another strand in the narrator's address to his readers, which exists alongside the didactic strain. Symons read with the preconception that "a work of art has but one reason for existence, that it should be a work of art, a moment of the eternity of beauty."[20] He wrote a preface to an edition of An Essay on Comedy in which he described Meredith as a "decadent" and "so deliberate an artificer."[21] Meredith was outraged and replied with the following rebuke: "That one which heads your version of my Essay on Comedy is entirely misleading, and to entitle me a "Decadent" is ludicrously childish."[22] Meredith had no time for Symons' "moment of eternity of beauty," for him "the life of the comedy is in the idea." (Essay,p. 93) However, despite Meredith's denials, "The Prelude" does offer aesthetes, like Symons, the opportunity to forget the lesson, to adopt a pose, and to play an aesthetic game.

At the beginning of The Egoist the narrator, as we have seen, initiates a relationship with the reader. He tells

him what he is going to read, and how he ought to read it. If the stress is placed on the first phrase of "The Prelude's opening sentence "Comedy is a game" (p. 1, vol. 1), rather than on the second which supplies the motive "to throw reflections upon social life..." (p. 1, vol. 1), then the nature of the narrator's invitation alters. Furthermore, the narrator's enthusiasm for playing the game is sustained throughout "The Prelude"; comedy is a "diversion" (p. 4, vol. 1), an "innovation" (p. 6, vol. 1), and an "escape" (p. 3, vol. 1). As we saw from his remarks in Chapter One, no critic of Meredith accepted the opportunity to "escape" more readily than Oscar Wilde. To illustrate his scorn for realism in fiction, Wilde fashioned the following comparison: "The nineteenth century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in the glass."[23] In "The Prelude", comedy is described as "an Ariel released by Prospero's wand from the fetters of the damned witch Sycorax" (p. 5, vol. 1). This ethereal "game" is opposed to the Caliban of realism:

> "I conceive him to indicate that the realistic method of a conscientious transcription of all the visible, and a repetition of all the audible, is mainly accountable for our present branfulness, and that prolongation of the vasty and noisy, out of which, as from an undrained fen, streams the malady of sameness, our modern malady."

Realism is to be discarded in the novel. There will be "no dust of the struggling outer world, no mire, no violent crashes, to make the correctness of the representation

convincing" (p. 1, vol. 1), nor "to woo credulity through the impressionable senses" (p. 1, vol. 1). The Comic Spirit has "not a thought of persuading you to believe in him" (p. 1, vol. 1).

William Ernest Henley recognised this rejection of realism in The Egoist when the novel was first published in 1879. He comments on the novel's characters in the following terms:

> "the atmosphere they breathe is as artificially rare as that of Orogon's parlour. To live with them you must leave the world behind and content yourself with essences and abstractions instead of substances and concrete things; and you must forget that such vulgar methods as realism and naturalism ever were."[24]

Henley, here, agrees with the narrator of "The Prelude" that the novel will be art, not life, and implies, perhaps with a hint of irony in his exaggeration, for Henley was not an uncritical admirer of Meredith, that this distinction will place a gulf between Meredith's novel and the "vulgar" realism of contemporaries such as George Eliot. Her last novel, Daniel Deronda (1876), like all of her later novels, had made a strong plea to the serious reading public. Therefore, in remarking on the new heights which Meredith's novel had reached, Henley was making a mock claim for the superiority of the aesthetes to the intellectuals.

The narrator's "Art," however, will not exist for its own sake. He informs his implied readers that his rejection of realism will enable them to pursue the novel's theme -

egoism - with greater clarity. Stevenson read this as a justification of "didactic Art," whereas Henley read it as merely an excuse for the fascination of "fine sayings, and magniloquent epigrams, and gorgeous images and fantastic locutions"[25]; for Henley, "the literary egoism of the author of Sir Willoughby Patterne appears to overshadow the amorous egoism of Sir Willoughby himself, and to become the predominating fact of the book."[26] For Stevenson, The Egoist is a parable; to Henley it seems "artificially rare," a pared down, finely constructed, artistic object.

We have so far seen how both these readings are invited by the identification of actual readers with the implied reader in "The Prelude". We will now look at the way in which this address is sustained in the main narrative of the novel. The novel may be the "drama of a suicide" (p. 8, vol. 1), but in the epigraph to "The Prelude," "Through very love of self himself he slew" (p.8, vol. 1), the lesson of this supposedly didactic novel is summed up before the narrative begins. The Comic Spirit and the laughing imps are ceremoniously introduced as critics whose viewpoint the reader is encouraged to share. They are supposedly objective commentators, at one remove from the action. By the conclusion of The Prelude, the reader is primed and ready for the play to begin, just as the "squatting imps in a circle grow restless on their haunches, as they bend eyes instantly, ears at full cock, for the commencement of the comic drama of a suicide" (p. 8, vol. 1). What is to follow will be a "drama", the reader is in the audience. He is a

spectator rather than a participant. He is aware that the narrative has been consciously constructed for his benefit.

The narrative whose rules have thus been so blatantly exposed, works consistently to keep credulity at bay. The setting is everywhere and nowhere - a country-house of no precise geographical location, or distinct description, but of very tightly defined boundaries. This spartan landscape is peopled by an economical cast of characters. In a three volume novel of 1010 pages, there are speaking parts for only a handful of characters, who together with only one or two other named characters, existing in the background, make up a very select society. The action in which these characters participate is very strictly defined in time as well as in space. The main sequence of events is concentrated within the space of a few days. There is no extraneous matter, no change of scene, no secondary chorus of characters, to pad out the novel into a believable representation. There are no distractions from the cleverness of the artifice.

The four main characters on whom our attention is thus focused, Willoughby, Clara, Laetitia and Vernon, are not enticingly believable figures, but to a greater or lesser extent symbols of certain attributes. Willoughby, for example, exists entirely as the perfect representation of the "Egoist." Each character has a similar label which, as would be impossible in a serious realistic novel, forms a comprehensive description of their character. Clara is "a dainty rogue in porcelain" (p. 75, vol. 1), Vernon is

"Phoebus Apollo turned fasting friar" (p. 16, vol. 1). These epithets are not introduced discreetly by the narrator, but are bandied about casually by the characters themselves. Willoughby, as the heading to Chapter 10 indicates, supplies his own title, and with undisguised irony blurts out the novel's theme, "Beware of marrying an Egoist, my dear!" (p. 185, vol. 1) There is no subtlety in this method of delineating character, all is writ large, all accessories are subsumed to the telling trait.

In a similar way, the reader's attention is drawn to the other symbols which pervade the novel. They lie on the surface of the narrative, and any which are in danger of going unnoticed are pointed out by the narrator, or the characters. For example, one group of symbols which is consistently foregrounded, is the one surrounding Willoughby Patterne's name. The willow pattern plate portrays a jilted lover. The idea of the plate introduces porcelain as a recurring symbol - Clara is a "dainty rogue in porcelain." Mrs Mountstuart points the significance of a broken porcelain vase that had been intended as a wedding present for Willoughby and Clara, just in case any reader has failed to notice the symbolic nature of the episode:

> Mrs Mountstuart handed the wretch a half-crown from her purse. Sir Willoughby directed the footman in attendance to unload the fly and gather up the fragments of porcelain carefully, bidding Flitch be quick in his departing.
>
> "The colonel's wedding present! I shall call tomorrow," Mrs. Mountstuart waved her adieu.
>
> "Come every day! - Yes, I suppose we may guess the destination of the vase." He bowed her off: and she cried, -

> "Well, now, the gift can be shared, if you're either of you for a division.' In the crash of the carriage wheels he heard, 'At any rate there was a rogue in <u>that</u> porcelain."
> These are the slaps we get from a heedless world. (p. 321, vol. 1)

Clara's romantic view of Willoughby, which by this stage in the narrative has been well and truly shattered, is represented in the broken vase, and emphasised by the echoing of the word "rogue."

Other conceits are employed, less for their pointed comment on the narrative, and more for the opportunity they allow for fantastical flights of fancy. The remark "He has a leg," which sticks to Willoughby throughout the novel, is elaborated on in three pages of pure fancy:

> "He has the leg of Rochester, Buckingham, Dorset, Suckling; the leg that smiles, that winks, is obsequious to you, yet perforce of beauty self-satisfied; that twinkles to a tender midway between imperiousness and seductiveness, audacity and discretion; between 'you worship me', and 'I am devoted to you'; is your lord, your slave, alternately and in one". (p. 20, vol. 1)

To say all that and more is to say nothing. It is extravagant word play of the kind which forms the substance of <u>The Egoist</u>. The novel thrives on conversation, requiring nothing more of the reader than that he appreciate the pun, the obvious allusion, the apt phrase. In such chapters as "Mrs Mountstuart's Dinner Party," "Conversation at a Luncheon Table," and "Clever Fencing and the Need for It," the dialogue is highly wrought, constantly drawing attention

to its artifice, and bearing very little relation to the rhythms and expressions of common speech in life. The narrator describes this kind of conversation as "wit and repartee suitable to the electrical atmosphere of the dancing-room, on the march to a magical hall of supper." (Vol. 2. p. 132) Such dialogue consciously solicits applause from its audience, as Dorothy Van Ghent suggests:

> On Meredith's style is imposed a somewhat desperate function of keeping author, characters, and reader in a state of awareness, not so much of what is going on, but of each other, a function of keeping us awake to the fact that we are reading a brilliant book by an exceptionally intelligent author about highly burnished characters - all of which the style makes us ever so ready to admit.[27]

The style of the text, with its showy cleverness, is overtly aiming for effect. The result is to demonstrate for the reader the novel's conscious art.

This technique, described by Virginia Woolf as "dancing-master dandyism"[28], is seen, not only in selected passages, but also in the manner in which the entire novel is constructed. The narrative focuses on Willoughby's courtship of Clara, and progresses through the grouping and regrouping of characters. All the various permutations are clearly identified for the reader in the chapter headings; for example, "Miss Middleton and Mr Whitford," "Clara and Laetitia," "Dr Middleton, Clara and Sir Willoughby." Alterations in these relationships are similarly sign-posted. Laetitia is still in subjection to Sir Willoughby's charms in Chapter Fourteen, "Sir Willoughby and

Laetitia," but she has arrived at a position of dominance by Chapter Forty-nine, which is significantly entitled "Laetitia and Sir Willoughby." The way in which the novel is structured is quite conspicuous. George Woodcock identifies, what he sees as, the formal nature of such an obvious structure:

> "The formal elaboration of <u>The Egoist</u>, paralleling the elaboration of conventions within which the appropriately named Patterne dances his pompous minuet of life, is characterised by the triangular groupings of characters: Willoughby - Clara - laetitia; Willoughby - Clara - Vernon; Clara - Vernon - Horace; Willoughby - Mrs Jenkinson - Clara. The shifting relations within and between such triangles are the choreography of the work as a whole."[29]

The words "dances" and "choreography" are particularly appropriate in a description of the text, as they imply an acutely conscious artistry. The reader is invited to spectate as the dance proceeds, and his attention is drawn at various points to the intricacy of the steps.

An analysis of one chapter, chosen because it indicates clearly the manner in which the reader is addressed, will show the nature of the novel's "choreography." Chapter Fourteen, entitled "Sir Willoughby and Laetitia," concerns a significant development in the relationship between the two characters. In order that the reader need be in no doubt, the chapter begins with a direct statement, made by the character Willoughby himself, of the purpose of the conversation which is to follow: "I prepare Miss Dale" (p. 252, vol. 1). Willoughby's pose is then described in three

sentences, the third of which moves away from the specific character by means of a simile. The following sentence is wholly concerned with the abstract, as are the next five paragraphs. These paragraphs form a flight of fancy on the theme of the BOOK OF EGOISM: "In the hundred and fourth chapter of the thirteenth volume of the BOOK OF EGOISM it is written: Possession without obligation to the object possessed approaches feclicity" (p. 252, vol. 1). This proverb is then elaborated: "For example..." (p. 252, vol. 1), "In all these cases..." (p. 252, vol. 1), "But there is one instance..." (p. 253, vol. 1), "as we shall see in our sample of one among the highest of them" (p. 254, vol. 1). We now turn back to the character Willoughby, but not to the specific point in the narrative where we left him, rather to a review of the history of his entire relations with Laetitia, which includes a lengthy extravagant simile on the subject of kings and cats. Having played all the intellectual games that can be played with that particular proverb, the narrator returns to the imaginary book for a fresh one: "Further to quote from the same volume of THE BOOK: There is pain in the surrendering of that we are fain to relinquish" (p. 255, vol. 1). This proverb sparks off an anecdote designed to illuminate it: "There once was a venerable gentleman..." (p. 255, vol. 1). From this digression, we turn back in the next paragraph to Sir Willoughby Patterne and Miss Dale, to a lengthy dissection of motives made clinical by the intrusion yet again of THE BOOK:

> The vision of his resolution brought with it a certain pallid contempt of the physically faithless woman; no wonder he betook himself to THE BOOK, and opened it on the scorching chapters treating of the sex, and the execrable wiles of that foremost creature of the chase, who runs for life. She is not spared in the Biggest of Books. But close it.
>
> The writing in it having been done chiefly by men, men naturally receive their fortification from its wisdom, and half a dozen of the popular sentences for the confusion of women (cut in brass worn to a polish like sombre gold), refreshed Sir Willoughby for his undertaking. (p. 257, vol. 1)

This abstract discourse serves to distance the reader, and to distract him from the impetus of the tale. It ends with a reminder of Willoughby's "undertaking," a signal that the dialogue is about to begin. The next sentence returns to the particularity of "Laetitia's faded complexion" (p. 257, vol. 1). Even the short description of the setting in which the conversation is to take place is not straighforward, but complicated by "the crossing of two express trains along the rails in Sir Willoughby's head" (p. 258, vol. 1).

The conversation that now begins is a game of words. The words one participant uses are examined and refined, before being batted back:

> "You have not been vexed by affairs to-day."
> "Affairs,' he replied,' must be peculiarly vexatious to trouble me. Concerning the country or my personal affairs?
> "I fancy I was alluding to the country." (p. 258, vol. 1)

The game is highlighted by the character's own explicit recognition of it. Willoughby regards conversation as

"a garden to stray into when he was in the mood for displaying elegance and brightness in the society of a lady; and in speech Laetitia helped him to the nice delusion" (p. 260, vol. 1). This dialogue is "display" and "delusion". Supposedly casual remarks have complex sentence structures, or contain carefully developed conceits. A phrase used at the beginning of the conversation may recur at a later stage. Willoughby loses himself in his own rhetoric. He quibbles over the use of a word, and deliberates upon the most ornate manner in which to express himself. Laetitia undercuts his "abstract elucidations" (p. 265, vol. 1) with her simple sentence, "I am in my thirtieth year" (p. 266, vol. 1), and thus wins that round of the game: "It was the jarring clash of her brazen declaration of it upon his low rich flute - notes that shocked him" (p. 267, vol. 1). The participants in this word game are acutely aware of the nuances of every word, and of the effect of the choice of one style of address over another.

The action of the whole novel is concerned with just such confrontations as the one described above, in which characters fence with words, witticisms, definitions, epigrams, equivocations, recognising the power of a misunderstanding, an evasion, a promise or a lie. This can be seen in Clara's attempts to find the right words to convince Willoughby that she wishes to be free: "His ability to silence her was great: she could not reply to a speech like that" (p. 140, vol. 1), or in Mr Dale's attempts to work out the truth: "I may have mistaken Dr Middleton; he

has a language that I can compare only to review-day of the field forces" (p. 331, vol. 3). Remarks such as these draw attention to the way in which the characters speak. That Willoughby is an egoist, and Dr Middleton "a keen reader of facts and no reader of persons" (p. 237, vol. 2), is identified as much as anything in their manner of address: their "language," therefore, is foregrounded.

The characters' different modes of address to their listeners are undisguised exercises in striking the right attitude. Even the natural Clara in her various "petitions for release" (p. 269, vol. 1), becomes caught up in these linguistic strategems, adopting the pose at any one time which seems most likely to convince Willoughby to give her up. The narrator's address to his readers voices a similar self-conscious artifice. R. H. Hutton, a contemporary critic of Meredith's fiction, who was in general unsympathetic to what he saw as Meredith's literary affectation, nevertheless perceptively evoked the manner of the narrator's address in The Egoist:

> In fact, Mr Meredith often calls up an image of a handsome, witty, polished, juvenile cousin of Carlyle, in 18th century costume, with neat, powdered wig, lace ruffles, knee-breeches, and silk stockings, of keen and curious vision, but too courteous to be profound or stirring, who regards the world as a foolish piece of protoplasm, chiefly valuable as stuff out of which to cut epigrams and apt similes.[30]

In this image, Hutton captured the nuances of the narrator's tone, which enabled him to conjure up an implied reader with

whom the cultured elite, whether intellectuals or aesthetes, could identify. Mr Meredith's persona as an essayist - a less sombre version of Carlyle, with a nonetheless "keen and curious vision" of "our time and country" (p. 5, vol. 1) - is merged with that of Mr Meredith the wit, cutting "epigams and apt similes" with all the flair that had won Wilde a name for himself at Oxford, in the five years preceding the publication of The Egoist.

The above analysis of the implied reader in The Egoist leads us to conclude that the novel addressed a coterie readership. However, the novel is less remote from contemporary popular fiction than the narrator in "The Prelude" would have his cultured readers believe. Meredith, ever aware of the requirements of his market, recognised the compromise that had to be made, as he makes clear in the following lines from a letter:

> My Egoist is on the way to a conclusion. Of pot-boilers let none speak. Jove hangs them up, on necks that could soar above his heights but for the accursed weight.[31]

Meredith may have referred to his novel as a "pot-boiler" in a private letter, as long as he referred to it as "a comedy in narrative" on the front page of the first edition. In a similar way, the high-minded "Prelude," and all the other examples of the wit and wisdom of the narrator's address and the characters' concversation, mask a second strand in the narrative, which was addressed to the popular taste.

Clara and Willoughby's comic courtship dispels the air

of intellectual discourse exuded by "The Prelude." As we have seen, identifying the comic flaw is a simple process, allowing the reader's attention to be given to watching the characters become embroiled in an interesting and humourously handled plot. If the subtleties of particular lines have to be left to the intellectuals to decipher, then the farcical nature of such encounters as "Mid-night: Sir Willoughby and Laetitia; with Young Crossway under a coverlet," remains easily accessible. Without the gloss acquired for the novel by its highly polished narrator, the novel could potentially be read as much as a "comic drama" for readers who required primarily to be entertained, as it was a parable for intellectuals, and a game for aesthetes. The fact that this dual address succeeded with a coterie readership, but failed with a wider reading public, can only be explained when we come in Chapter Three to compare Meredith's concept of a "pot-boiler" with several contemporary examples of the genre. If the novel's style legitimated "comic drama" as reading material for an elite, it at the same time rendered it inaccessible to the popular taste.

<u>The Amazing Marriage</u>

An awareness of the relationship between address and audience has been found to be an important constituent in all the Meredith novels discussed so far. However, in <u>The Amazing Marriage</u> (1895), Meredith's last novel (apart from the early, but unfinished <u>Celt and Saxon</u>, published

posthumously), the issue is foregrounded to such an extent that it vies for attention with character and plot. Meredith worked on The Amazing Marriage intermittently from 1879 to 1895, a period during which the plurality of the reading public became increasingly marked. Meredith's final response to this problem, after years of attempting, and failing, to address both sections of this readership, was to exploit a technique which he introduced, as we have seen, in Sandra Belloni - the use of two distinct narrators to address two different audiences. Dame Gossip and the "literary surgeon" (p. 151) narrate different episodes of the same tale. The reasonable, educated narrator, who is capable of ordering and analysing events, and of providing motives and detailed personalities for his characters, is frequently interrupted by Mistress Gossip, the incarnation of Meredith's impression of the popular imagination - "feeding popular voracity with all her stores" (p. 388), telling her racy tale with relish and exclamation marks.

Each narrator implies a different audience. Dame Gossip is clearly addressing the popular taste. She introduces her narrative with the words "Everybody has heard" (p. 5), and proceeds in a breathless, colloquial, "she said to him and he said to her" way, to unravel well-known tales within well-known tales. Her whole story is founded on hear-say - "some say," "they say," "as you can imagine," "as he was called," "the story goes." Popular ballads and treasured relics are cited to authenticate the facts - "a publican at Kew still exhibits one of their hats"

(p. 5). She claims to be recounting for the entertainment of her audience what everybody knows from the evidence of their own eyes and ears.

However, the story of the Old Buccaneer and Countess Fanny is not a simple folk-tale, a chapter from the "Book of Common Wisdom" (_The Egoist_ p. 3, vol. 1). It is a piece of sensational journalism. The beautiful fun-loving Countess and the amorous naval hero walk straight out of the gossip columns of the gutter press. The story, full of sly insinuations and double entendres, is manipulated to heighten the sentiment and excitement. The destitute wife becomes the Whitechapel Countess, reported to have been seen selling vegetables in a greengrocers. The narrator fantasises around a few dubious facts to satiate her thirst for events, romance, and a good strong plot, becoming overwhelmed at times by her own invention - "Only to think of her, I could sometimes drop into a chair for a good cry" (p. 4). The play that the Dame quotes as being a version of the famous elopement that has roused the popular imagination to fever pitch, is hardly more theatrical than the Dame's own supposedly factual account:

> The stage-piece is called _Saturday Night_, and it had an astonishing run, but is only remembered now for the song of _Saturday_, sung by the poor coachman and labourers at the village ale-house before he starts to capture his wife from the clutches of her seducer and meets his fate...'The ravished wife of my bosom', he calls her all through the latter half of the play. It is a real tragedy." (p. 13)

Here, the characters and action have been wrought into a romantic cliche. Dame Gossip obviously approves - this melodrama is "a real tragedy." It is what the public wants - it had "an astonishing run." Dame Gossip dishes up descriptions of the Countess's physical attributes, and lists of Kirby's naval adventures, because she believes this is what her audience are hungry for. She takes great pride in knowing her reader:

> For it is an infant we address, and the story-teller whose art excites an infant to serious attention succeeds best; with English people assuredly, I rejoice to think, though I pray their patience here while that philosophy and exposure of character block the course along a road inviting to traffic of the most animated kind." (p. 551)

Dame Gossip's implied reader simply wants to be kept awake and entertained with "story," rather than "philosophy."

However, The Amazing Marriage also provides us with an alternative vision of the reader to the one implied by Dame Gossip, one that is closer to the cultured reader we have identified in earlier novels. Dame Gossip's meanderings are suddenly extinguished by a more sober narrator, who dismisses them as being "against good taste and commonsense" (p. 257). As we have seen in An Essay on Comedy, both words, "taste" and "commonsense," are important in Meredith's vocabulary as criteria for dividing the discerning from the ignorant, the elite from the rabble. These two qualities provide entry into the "selecter world" (Essay, p. 91). Dame Gossip, who lacks these assets,

renders herself vulnerable to the polite smiles of the civilised man of learning. She has revealed herself to be one of the "idle empty laughers," (Essay, p. 15) who know nothing of the subtleties of the Comic Spirit, the fauns and the silvery laughter. The Philosopher in his "anatomical lectures" does not envisage the reader to be Dame Gossip's wide-eyed child. He derides her attitude:

> The end in design is to win the ear by making a fuss, and roll event upon event for the braining of common intelligence, until her narrative resembles dusty troopings along a road to the races." (p. 389)

The Philosopher does not address a reader who can be deluded by "fuss," who judges a tale on the number of events, and the speed at which they succeed each other. The Philosopher's reader, it is implied, is clear-sighted allowing him to make his narrative ponderous and analytical. He analyses events and characters, stresses nuances of thought and feeling, and continually asks the question which Dame Gossip never asks, - why? In describing the Welsh landscape, discussing Woodseer's philosophy, and detailing subtle changes in the relationship between Carinthia and Fleetwood, the narrator makes use of the familiar Meredithian technique, a "passion for phrase-making," which J. M. Barrie suggested had led to the novels being "as over-dressed as fingers hidden in rings."[33] For example, Fleetwood having complacently convinced himself that he is immune to the attractions of his wife's nature, is described

thus:

> He might be likened to the doctor's patient entering the chemist's shop, with a prescription for a drug of healing virtue, upon which the palate is as little consulted as a robustious lollypop boy in the household of ceremonial parents, who have rung for the troop of their orderly domestics to sit in a row and hearken the intonation of good words. (p. 239)

This is a complex sentence which is not immediately accessible to the reader; a simile which will not stun with its vividness, but one which provides a pause in the plot - yet one more watering place on that "dusty road to the races" (p. 389). Chapters with titles such as "In Which Certain Changes May be Discerned," "In Which the Fates are seen and a Choice of the Refuge from Them," or "Below the Surface and Above," are discursive, full of digressions, moral discourses, meditations and flights of fancy. In the chapter "Mountain Walk in Mist and Sunshine," the clouds turn from pythons to peacocks to fish (p. 45). Mountains and sunsets are poor material for the gossip; character is, and ought to be a mystery; philosophy is a dangerous element from which a story requires to be rescued; and as for phrase-making, she has a "detestation of imagerial epigrams" (p. 428).

We are, therefore, presented in <u>The Amazing Marriage</u> with two narrators, implying two distinct kinds of readership. Judith Wilt, who sees Dame Gossip and the analytical novelist as representing, not a dichotomy in the readership, but a "serious conflict over the best, the most

humane look on life," accords the two narrators equal weight in the narrative - "Meredith proposes the marriage of both looks to us" (p. 212). For Gillian Beer the device "is part of the substance of the novel's meaning, at times running parallel to the conflict between Carinthia's instinctive actions and Fleetwood's complex motives for inaction" - "There is thus no final authority to whom we may turn for our reading of events. The reader becomes the arbitrator." (p. 172) Both critics make the assumption that the novel is addressed to "us," "the reader," and not to a fractured contemporary readership who could never arrive at a consensus of opinion as to the merits of the two narrator's and the two tales they tell; such a consensus between high culture and public taste would indeed have been an "amazing marriage." The two narratives are in fact addressed, not only to two implied readers, but to two reading publics. This is not, however, to agree with Wilt or Beer that neither of the narratives is privileged. The analytical novelist clearly places the Dame's narrative; he has seized control of a novel which she may only interrupt. His narrative forms forty out of the novel's forty-seven chapters. With the body of the narrative against it, Dame Gossip's interludes are seen as subordinate to the novelist's sober analysis of character and action. This weighting of the balance in favour of an intellectual readership, seen in terms of the proportion of the narrative addressed to them, is reinforced by the nature of the address each narrator makes to his implied readers. The

novelist's scorn of popular taste is matched by the popular narrator's distaste for philosophy, but, in Dame Gossip's lack of respect for her own readers, a critique of popular fiction and its readers is distinctly implied. The novelist can describe Dame Gossip's approach as requiring "the braining of common intelligence", but, when she boasts that "it is an infant we address," the novel's dual address is disrupted, and her narrative becomes a critique on public taste. Her narrative, unlike the narrative of the romantic story-teller in Sandra Belloni, exaggerates features of popular fiction to the point of parody. The novel's address to readers of popular fiction has become less urgent, while its address to an intellectual readership has become more so. The difference in emphasis, as regards the two readerships, between Sandra Belloni (1864) and The Amazing Marriage (1895), reflects the changes that had occurred in thirty years in the composition of Meredith's readership.

CHAPTER THREE

ADDRESS AND STYLE

In Chapter Two, it was shown that Meredith's novels used the construct of an implied reader to address a readership which was not homogeneous but plural. However, as we saw in Chapter One, the novels (with the notable exception of Diana of the Crossways, which will be discussed in Chapter Five) failed in their attempt to address public taste, and were then taken up by an intellectual elite. Style is the feature most frequently held responsible, by both contemporary and modern critics, for this neglect on the part of the majority of readers. The connection is, however, seldom explored in any detail. Instead only passing reference is usually made to what most critics are content to describe as "eccentricity" and "obscurity"; "compression and knottedness of language,"[1] in Jack Lindsay's words.

In this chapter, we will look at the development of style (where "style" is taken to mean "a selection from a total linguistic repertoire")[2] in the novels and short stories preceding The Egoist, the novel which first prompted critics to describe Meredith's style as "Meredithian".[3] In an attempt to identify the similarities and dissimilarities between this style and that of public taste, a comparison will then be made between The Egoist and other fiction published in the popular newspaper in which the novel was

originally serialized, the Glasgow Weekly Herald.

The Shaving of Shagpat

The Shaving of Shagpat (1856) was the first of Meredith's fictions to be published. It is not a novel, but rather an oriental fantasy in the tradition of the Arabian Nights, a number of translations of which had appeared in the previous two decades.[4] Many of the familiar story-telling techniques from the earlier Arabian tales were adopted in order to make the Victorian imitation convincing. The main narrative is made up of a collection of loosely connected adventures, concerning a large and diverse cast of characters. A summary of the plot, attempted by Meredith's contemporary, James Moffat[5], runs to several pages. Inserted in the main narrative are several digressions, in the form of self-contained secondary stories.

From the first, the narrator endows the narrative with the quality of folklore:

> Now the story of Shibli Bagarag, and of the bali he followed, and of the subterranean kingdom he came to, and of the enchanted palace he entered, and of the sleeping king he shaved, and of the two princesses he released, and of the Afrite held in subjection by the arts of one and bottled by her, is it not known as 't were written on the finger-nails of men and traced in their corner-robes? (p.1)

This one long simple sentence previews the tale, and proclaims its fame and antiquity. It is made up of several clauses of similar structure, joined together by the simple conjunction "and." The simple, almost monotonous

accumulation of clauses suggests an oral history, rather than a contrived literary fable.

This impression is reinforced by the succeeding paragraphs. Out of the sixty-nine paragraphs in Chapter One, forty begin with one of the words "now," "and," "then" or "so." The narrative moves quickly, concentrating on events, with no philosophical reflections on the action, except for those provided by supposedly familiar poets, whose words of wisdom are served up in snappy couplets: "Ripe with oft telling and old is the tale,/But't is of the sort that can never grow stale".(p. 1) This is clearly the style of the dedicated story-teller. The vocabulary is familiar, and the images are drawn from the rich source of all the world's well-known stories. The following passage provides an example of this style:

> Now, the nights and the days of Bhanavar were even as this night, and she was as an unquiet soul till the appointed time for the meeting with her lover had come. Then when the sun was lighting with slant beam the green grass slope by the blue brook before her, Bhanavar arrayed herself and went forth gaily, as a martial queen to certain conquest, and of all the flowers that nodded to the setting, - yea, the crimson, purple, pure white, streaked-yellow, azure, and saffron, there was no bird fairer in its hues than Bhanavar, nor bird of the heavens freer in its glittering plummage, nor shape of loveliness such as hers. Truly, when she had taken her place under the palm by the waters of the lake, that was no exaggeration of the poet, where he says...(p. 33)

The rhythm of this passage evokes the language of the Bible. Echoing and parallel clauses add a lyrical quality to sentences which are otherwise simple enough to concentrate the reader's attention on the narrative. The adjectives are

common ones used in familiar collocations - "green grass," "blue brook." Archaic idioms are used to give a sense of timelessness to the tale - "yea," "arrayed herself," "went forth." The list of colours adds in an undemanding way an extra dimension to the description, and a few more pleasant sounds to the poetry of the whole.

The tale continues in this vein, meandering through such chapters as "The Talking Hawk" and "The Lily of the Enchanted Sea," until the oft predicted conclusion is reached: "So was shaved Shagpat, the son of Shimpoor, the son of Shoolpi, the son of Shullum, by Shibli Bagarag, of Shiraz, according to preordainment" (p. 377). The Shaving of Shagpat is precisely what it claims to be in its subtitle, "An Arabian Entertainment."

Contemporary reviews were in agreement with this analysis of The Shaving of Shagpat. The style was commented on for the most part as being no more than, in the words of The Critic, "a pleasant manner of telling a tale."[6] When the critic in The Spectator complained of the work's "cleverness,"[7] he was referring to the complexities of the plot rather than to the language. George Eliot, in a very enthusiastic article on The Shaving of Shagpat, praised the style for its simplicity: Nothing can be more vivid and concrete than the narrative and description, nothing fresher and more vigorous than the imagery."[8] G. H. Lewes endorsed this view: "the language is simple, picturesque, pregnant - not ornate inanities addressed to the ear."[9] All the adjectives used to describe this earliest example of

Meredith's style suggest the opposite of "eccentricity" and "obscurity."

Farina

The Shaving of Shagpat was followed by Farina (1857). Farina, like the earlier work, was written in imitation of a particular type of fiction, in this case romantic adventure with a medieval setting. Both tales later came to be associated in the mind of the public as forming Meredith's apprenticeship. Mary Sturge Henderson, writing in 1907, makes a typical remark in her commentary on these two works: "He has shown unusual agility in catching the idioms of alien languages; he is, we suspect, training himself to speak in his own."[10] However, allowing for "the idioms of alien languages," the style of Farina differs from that of The Shaving of Shagpat in ways which are significant for a study of Meredith's style.

The narrative of Farina is structured by the "now," "and," "so," of the story-teller, but the language in which this story is told is more elaborate than it was in the previous tale. The effect is no longer one of unadulterated simplicity. Each chapter contains several passages of extravagant description in the style of the following:

> A full flood of moonlight burnished the knightly river in glittering scales and plates, and rings, as headlong it rolled seaward on from under crag and banner of old chivalry and rapine. Both greeted the scene with a burst of pleasure. The gray mist of flats on the south side glimmered delightful to their sight, coming from that drowsy crowd and press of habitations; but the solemn

glory of the river, delaying not, heedless, impassioned - pouring on in some sublime conference between it and heaven to the great marriage of waters, deeply shook Farina's enamoured heart.(p.330)

In this description, familiar collocations of the green grass/blue sky type have been replaced by unusual ones - "knightly river," "drowsy crowd." In the first sentence, three words (scales and plates and rings") are used to describe one phenomenon. The sentence ends with an unexplored and obscure metaphor - "under crag and banner of old chivalry and rapine." The third sentence is a long and complex one, punctuated by five commas, a semi-colon and a dash. Again, three similar expressions ("delaying not, heedless, impassioned") are used in place of one to elaborate on the initial description. The passage culminates in a rather fanciful and exaggerated image, conjured up in the high-sounding phrases "sublime conference" and "marriage of waters."

This elaborate style provoked contemporary critics to do for the first time what they would henceforth do out of habit; they commented on the style of a Meredith novel as being that text's most significant feature. In their criticism, the first indication of a particular tone, which became common in later criticism, can be identified. The critic in The Saturday Review, for example, expresses dissatisfaction with what he saw as some of the excesses of style in Farina:

> We also feel inclined to quarrel with Mr Meredith's word-painting. Certainly Mr Ruskin has a great deal to answer for, as no one now can describe simply and temperately, but must keep us to the Ruskin level, and put on his colours thick and bright.[11]

The critic, having established the nature of his "quarrel", then finished the article with a mock appeal to Farina's author:

> We wish Mr Meredith would not insist on giving us so much for our money. We should prefer a chaster article; and we can only hope that an author who has so many excellent qualities will when he next comes before the public, choose a better subject, and cut down by one-half his estimate of what is due to himself and his readers in the way of fine language.[12]

The critic made allowances for the author's "many excellent qualities", but questioned the self-conscious nature of the "fine language", and presumed that this was not what the public wanted. With the publication of his second work of fiction, the peculiarities of Meredith's style began to be identified, and the affect of this style on the reader to be discussed.

The Ordeal of Richard Feverel

Meredith's first full-length novel, The Ordeal of Richard Feverel (1859), was a departure from the earlier tales, not only in terms of plot and setting, but also in terms of style. The relationship between the narrator and

the implied reader was discussed in Chapter Two; the various styles of address will now be considered in more detail.

The novel has a contemporary English setting, a plot containing all the suspense connected with a hero and heroine who experience many advances and reversals of fortune, an assortment of comic characters and a tragic ending. The feature of the novel which attracted most critical attention, however, was its "philosophy." A reviewer in The Leader commented: The Ordeal of Richard Feverel can be designated less as a novel than as a philosophical criticism upon the various methods of educating children."[13] This confusion between fiction and "philosophical criticism" on the part of a contemporary critic was provoked by a particular philosophical style which was to recur in Meredith's later novels.

An analysis of Chapter Twenty-nine, "In Which the last Act of a Comedy Takes the Place of the First," illustrates what is meant by Meredith's "philosophical style." The chapter begins with an entirely abstract address by the narrator to the reader on the subject of Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon. The style of this address is highly rhetorical, for example: "There they have dreamed: here they must act. There lie youth and irresolution: here manhood and purpose." (p. 282, vol. 2). These two sentences have parallel structures, "There...here..." Each sentence is make up of two opposing clauses which balance each other - "dreamed" being opposed to "act," "youth" to "manhood," "irresolution" to "purpose." A fictitious work, The

Philosophical Geography, (p.282, vol. 2) is then referred to as an authority on the subject, and the information that it is "about to be published" is included in parenthesis to give the source credibility. The paragraph continues with a fanciful conceit arising from the personification of fate as "Madam Fate" and "Universal Fate" (p.282, vol. 2). It ends with an aphorism taken from another imaginary book: "I subscribe to that saying of THE PILGRIM'S SCRIP: "The danger of a little knowledge of things is disputable: but beware the little knowledge of one's self!" (p. 282, vol. 2). In this sentence, the narrator's presence is directly underlined by the use of "I." The whole paragraph creates the impression of a cultured narrator addressing a similarly cultured audience for the benefit of that audience's improvement.

The second paragraph moves away from this general address by introducing in the first sentence the novel's central character: "Richard Feverel was now crossing the River of his Ordeal." (p.284, vol. 2) However, as is indicated by this sentence, the paragraph is not concerned with the immediate action of the narrative. The metaphor of the "River" has been retained, but its application has been narrowed down to an elucidation of the "Ordeal" of the hero, instead of that of the whole of the human race. The second sentence expands on the metaphor of the first, two lands on either side of the river representing Richard's past and future lives. There then follows a few sentences of reflection upon Richard's thoughts and feelings, which ends with an extravagant comparison between Richard and Caesar.

The rest of the paragraph consists of a rhetorical question, an aphorism, a metaphor, and the narrator's reminder that it is he, and not the hero, who has thus contemplated the hero's conscience. These two philosophical paragraphs introduce the action, which is announced by a return to the here and now at the beginning of the third paragraph: "It was a soft fair day" (p. 285,vol. 2). The rest of the chapter is concerned with the next episode in the narrative, written mainly in dialogue.

This pattern, paragraphs of aphoristic wisdom introducing the main thread of the narrative, occurs frequently in <u>The Ordeal of Richard Feverel</u>. However, these polished prefaces do not give way entirely to a plain style. Interspersed with passages of dramatic dialogue, and paragraphs which move the action forward are lyrical passages which elaborate at length on the narrative. The chapters in which the young hero and heroine fall in love - "An Attraction," "Ferdinand and Miranda" and "A Diversion Played on a Penny Whistle" - are paricularly rich in examples of this style:

> Sweet are the shy recesses of the woodland. The ray treads softly there. A film athwart the pathway quivers many-hued against purple shade fragrant with warm pines, deep moss-beds, feathery ferns. The little brown squirrel drops tail, and leaps; the inmost bird is startled to a chance tuneless note. From silence into silence things move. (p. 42, vol. 2)

In this passage, there are no loud rhetorical effects or discordant sounds, no long rambling sentences or complicated punctuation. A sense of harmony is created by the soft

sibliant sounds. The images are apt and vivid; they require no long explanations, unlike several of the images in the philosphic passages. Members of Meredith's coterie readership, such as Photiades, were as fulsome in their praise of his "poetry" as they were of his "philosphy":

> The poet is recognised in George Meredith by his fervent effusions, which overflow - even in his stories - in so impetuous a flood, in glittering imagery, in vast and labyrinthine interludes which flow along like orchestral accompaniments in our modern operas, like the strophes and anti-strophes of an ancient choir. It is not only in _The Ordeal of Richard Feverel_ that he interpolates a "diversion upon a penny whistle," but he does the same in each of his novels, from _The Shaving of Shagpat_ to _The Amazing Marriage_.[14]

Here, Photiades, in the confident tone of unashamed exaggeration (Meredith's imagery does not just flow, it "overflows," in a "flood," not a stream, and in passages which are not simply long, but "vast and labyrinthine"), distinguishes Meredith's novels for their poetic interludes. Meredith's lyrical style, like his philosophical style, addresses intellectuals and aesthetes, such as Photiades, in such a high-minded way, that they are persuaded that they are reading a novel of far greater weight than that of popular fiction. The majority of the reading public, whose taste was not for "poetry" or "philosophy," could quickly pass over these interludes, in favour of the plainer style of the dialogue, and the easily accessible narration of events. The novel's lack of appeal to popular taste on its publication was due, not to its style but, as we saw in Chapter One (pp 7 - 8), to its failure to present

sensational events in a way in which Mr Mudie and his respectable readers would find acceptable. Samuel Lucas, writing in The Times[19], was struck by the "strange contrariness" of the style of the novel, and described it as "very oracular and obscure in parts...so crystalline and brilliant in its principal passages". This variation in style in the novel promoted a dual mode of address, which was not successfully carried through in relation to the novel's subject matter.

Sandra Belloni

The juxtaposition of opposing styles, identified in The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, is openly discussed in Sandra Belloni. In Chapter Two the role of the two narrators in addressing a divided readership was examined - the duality of this address can be seen in the different styles which these two narrators adopt. The style of the Philosopher's narrative is consistently mannered, as in the following lines:

> We, are subject, he says, to fantastic moods, and shall dry ready-minted phrases picture them forth? As for example, can the words "delirium", or "frenzy", convey an image of Wilfrid's state, when his heart began to covet Emilia again, and his sentiment not only interposed no obstacle, but trumpeted her chrms and fawned for her, and he thought her lost, remembered that she had been his own, and was ready to do any madness to obtain her? "Madness" is the word that hits the mark, but it does not fully embrace the meaning. To be in this state, says the Philospher, is to be ON THE HIPPOGRIFF; and to this, as he explains, the persons who travel to Love by the road of sentiment will come, if they have any stuff in them, and if the one who kindles them is mighty.

> He distinguishes being on the Hippogriff from being possessed by passion. Passion, he says, is _noble strength on fire_ and points to Emilia as a representation of passion. (p. 365)

The Philosopher, here, self-consciously discusses his choice of words, analysing their precise meanings, in an attempt to convey the sobriety and thoughtful ness of his descriptions, in comparison to the supposedly racier style of the novel's principal narrator. The style of this ironic digression - the use of an obscure mythological figure in a metaphor, the use of capitals and italics for emphasis, the inclusion of an aphorism, and the way in which the fiction is exposed by the suggestion that a character is merely a "representation" (a feature in the whole novel focused in frequent allusions to Thackeray's _Vanity Fair_) - foregrounds, what Photiades termed, Meredith's "Art".

However, by far the greater part of _Sandra Belloni_ is written in the style which the Philosopher scorns, the style of sentimental romance, which slips easily into farce; as in the following speech from Emilia:

> You are not cruel. I knew it. I should have died, if you had come between us. Oh, Wilfrid's father, I love you! - I have never had a very angry word on my mouth. Think! if you had made me curse _you_. For, I could! You would have stopped my life, and Wilfrid's. What would our last thoughts have been? We could not have forgiven you. Take up dead birds killed by frost. You cry: Cruel winter! murdering cold! But I knew better. You are Wilfrid's father whom I can kneel to. My lover's father! my own father! my friend next to heaven! Oh! bless my love for him. You have only to know what my love for him is! (pp. 96 - 97, vol. 2)

Emilia's speech demands very little of readers' comprehension. It is composed of a succession of short, simple sentences, punctuated by exclamation marks, to convey increasing excitement. The vocabulary is limited largely to words of one syllable, and imagery limited to the single pathetic and easily accessible metaphor of the lovers seen as "dead birds killed by frost." This style does not surprise, or provoke readers, but rather allows them to follow a series of well-rehearsed steps.

An Essay on Comedy

The style of The Ordeal of Richard Feverel and Sandra Belloni, despite interludes of "philosophic criticism" and "poetry," did not preclude those novels from appealing to public taste. In Meredith's later novels, however, the style of the Philosopher was increasingly privileged. The peculiarities of this particular style clearly distinguished meredith's novels from popular fiction. In An Essay on Comedy, published as an article in 1877, around the mid-point of Meredith's career, the style which acts as a touchstone in determining who does and who does not belong in the ideal world of wisdom referred to throughout the Essay, is the style of the Essay itself. The principal passage in the Essay provides the best example of this style:

> If you believe that our civilisation is founded on common-sense (and it is the first condition of sanity to believe it), you will, when contemplating men, discern a Spirit overhead; not more heavenly than the light flashed upward from glassy surfaces, but luminous and watchful; never

> shooting beyond them, nor lagging in the rear, so closely attached to them that it may be taken for a slavish reflex, until its features are studied. It has the sage's brows, and the sunny malice of a faun lurks at the corners of the half-closed lips drawn in an idle ovariness of half tension. That slim feasting smile, shaped like the long-bows, was once a big round satyr's laugh, that flung up the brows like a fortress lifted by gunpowder. The laugh will come again, but it will be of the order of the smile, finely tempered, showing sunlight of the mind, mental richness rather than noisy enormity. Its common aspect is one of unsolicitious observation, as if surveying a full field and having leisure to dart on its chosen morsels, without any fluttering eagerness. Men's honesty and shapeliness in the present does; and whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, prentensious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate; whenever it sees them self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice, are false in humility or mined with conceit, individually, or in the bulk - the Spirit over-head will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit. (p. 88)

This is an over-wrought piece of prose. One clause is refined by the next in carefully balanced and lengthy sentences - the second last sentence being one hundred and sixteen words long. The tone is so controlled that a potentially contentious statement can be seemingly thrown away in parenthesis - "and it is the first condition of sanity to believe it." Such is the degree of control that the extravagance of a twenty-one word list can be contained within the semblance of rational argument. The passage begins with a premise, "If you believe...you will...," and continues in "but" and "nor" and "whenever" to elaborate on,

and substantiate, this premise. It ends with the confident last statement, foregrounded by its directness, "That is the Comic Spirit." The image of the faun is pursued through a concentration of metaphor and simile and unusual collocations - "sunny malice," "idle ovariness," "humanely malign." Balance is achieved through the rhythm, parallels and echoes - "idolatries," "vanities," "absurdities,"; "drifting," "congregating," "planning," "plotting."

An Essay on Comedy attempts to provide a justification for this kind of style. The thesis of the work is that if the reader cannot appreciate the "mental richness" (p. 88) of such writing then it is an indication that he lacks all the virtues which are the mark of a civilised man. The reader is coerced into desiring entry into an exclusive group, a group defined by its powers of discernment, civilisation and concentration. The test of these powers is the ability to appreciate a certain style. It is a confident style, which, while suggesting a minority audience, does not suggest an eccentric one.

Meredith's Short Stories

At the end of the 1870s, Meredith published three short stories in the New Quarterly Magazine: The House on the Beach (January,1877), The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper (July 1877), and The Tale of Chloe (July 1879). Because these stories appeared contemporaneously with An Essay on Comedy, they have generally been taken up by critics as useful examples of Meredith's comic theory, rather than for their other interest. Each text, however,

makes its own contribution to our understanding of the address and style of Meredith's novels. In particular, it will be interesting, at this point in the chapter, before carrying out a comparison between the serialization of _The Egoist_ and short stories serialized in the same popular newspaper, to consider the style of Meredith's own short stories.

The House on the Beach is subtitled _A Realistic Tale_. This claim prompts the question: "realistic" for whom? This story is the only piece of Meredith's fiction which is devoid of any trace of aristocratic character, setting or even allusion. Instead the tale turns on the maxim: "The eccentricity of common persons is the entertainment of the multitude."[16] A contemporary critic described the story as being "a study of lower middle-class persons in a lower middle-class setting."[17] Such "lower middle-class" readers would find the characters and props "realistic" in a story of an ex-tradesman turned bailiff in a small sea-side town.

Readers who regarded themselves as being of a slightly higher class were given ample opportunity to distance themselves, and to look down upon lower middle-class mores and manners, for Tinman the bailiff is a figure of fun. He is a small town man with small town ambitions, and pretensions above his station. Too "high-stepping" (p. 110) by half, he has not the proper perception of the steps on the ladder, and does not realise that he is aiming too high: "Once an esquire, you are off the ground in England and on the ladder. An esquire can offer his hand in marriage to a lady in her own right; plain esquires have married

duchesses! they marry baronet's daughters every day of the week" (p. 111). Any reader can appreciate, as the character of Tinman does not, that there are "esquires" and "esquires," and that a character coming so directly from a "marketing mother" (p. 110) has quite a distance yet to climb. Tinman's aims do not conflict with the aims of the middle-classes: "to do like the rest of his countrymen, and rise above them, to shake them class by class as the dust from his heels" (p. 112), but they are couched in such comically exaggerated terms that they allow the reader comfortably to escape inclusion in the satire. Tinman's over-weening social ambition is mixed up with the comic flaws of pettiness and greed, and any critique of social-climbing is lost in the laughter elicited by Tinman's ever larger dinner parties and ever cheaper wine. Laughter from the other middle-class characters, all of who are admirably sane, accompanies the bailiff's fall. For a middle-class reader there was no need to feel that the values of his class were in question: it is purely the ineptitude with which they are practised by a man outside the middle-class which is ridiculous. Later readers[18] have seen Tinman less as a comic original and more as a historical and social type, with his dream of building a "Sailor's convalescent Hospital at Crikswich to seduce a prince with, hand him the trowel, make him lay the stone" (p. 115).

The text of The House on the Beach solicits a middle-class audience. Only they would recognise the actions of the characters as being "realistic." They could

appreciate, as neither the aristocracy nor the poor could, the nuances of social class with which the central character is obsessed. They are not, however, alienated by being forced to read the text as a critique of their own social class, for the character's flaws are presented in too comic a manner to produce anything other than an attitude of superiority in the reader. At the same time, the style of the introduction to this "realistic tale," which places Tinman's story as a comic parable of the kind elevated by <u>An Essay on Comedy</u>, advertises it as worthy of the cultured reader's attention. The aphoristic wisdom of the first paragraph, which culminates in a statement of the stories moral, "these must learn from it sooner or later that they are uncomfortably mortal" (p. 109), begins to give way in the second paragraph to a description of Tinman's behaviour at a fish auction. After this opening, the occasional appeal to "Readers deep in Greek dramatic writings" (p. 112), serves to sustain the dual address.

<u>The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper</u> is set in "a gentlemanly residence" (p. 256) just "beyond the immediate suburbs of London" (p. 255). This house is inhabited by the character of General Ople who is accorded a thoroughly middle-class pedigree and middle-class values: "Comfort, fortification, and gentlemanliness, made the place, as the General said, an ideal English home" (p. 256). In establishing his station in life the General is given, as well as the love of a comfortable home life, the "sentiment of humble respectfulness toward aristocracy" (p. 257), and an admiration for wealth. His character is contrasted with

the character of Lady Camper who is a member of the aristocracy, and thus of "superior station" (p. 258) to the General. Lady Camper is seen, for all her superiority, as being "eccentric" (p. 260), whereas General Ople, for all his faults, is seen as being "one of us" (p. 265). The reader is expected to relate to the values and manners of the character of the General, rather than those of the aristocrat. In the story, Lady Camper launches a scathing attack on those values and manners, and mercilessly caricatures the General. Yet the reader's respect for the General is not diminished. He remains a "loyal gentleman" (p. 299), while her satire is perceived as being cruel. The sense of self-satisfaction, which is located in the text as being specifically middle class, is implicitly enhanced. The narrator's consistent tone of detached humour, in relating "how it came to pass that a simple man and a complex woman fell to union after the strangest division" (p. 345), does, however, allow a superior reader a position from which to look down upon both Lady Camper's satire and Genral Ople's self-satisfaction. The style allows readers to perceive the story as either an amusing farce, or a sophisticated comedy of manners.

The eccentricity against which middle class values are to be affirmed is, in the case of The Tale of Chloe, not a feature of character but of genre. As in The Amazing Marriage, popular fiction is parodied. This parody, which forms the whole of the first chapter, includes a summary of the sentimental history of "the illustrious gentleman who was inflamed by Cupid's darts to espouse the milkmaid, or

dairymaid, under his ballad title of Duke of Dewlap" (p. 3), and a sample of the ballad itself. This chapter ends with an ironic swipe at the taste for this type of fiction: "A living native duke is worth fifty Phoebus Apollos to Englishmen, and a buxom young lass of the fields mounting from a pair of pails to the estate of duchess, a more romantic object than troops of your visionary Yseults and Guineveres" (p. 7). This parody of the "popular taste" at first seems to indicate an intended readership other than the mainstream one, a readership who appreciate the narrator's classical allusions, and share his sense of superiority. It further suggests that the following tale will reject the traditions which it mocks.

The style of the main text of The Tale of Chloe, however, belies its introduction, for it can be comfortably read as a sensational tragedy of the kind popular with the mass-reading public. It contains the character types familiar to readers of popular mid-Victorian fiction - the elderly noble, married to the young country maid with "the melting blue eyes and the cherry lip" (p. 28); the villain - "a foreign-looking gentleman wearing moustachios" (p. 47), the heroine - "a lady who squandered her fortune to redeem some ill-requiting rascal"(p. 12). The plot also relies on familiar conventions - the young duchess attempts to run away with the villain, and is only prevented at the eleventh hour by the suicide of the heroine. Chloe's selfless death leads the lovers to repent their folly, and repeatedly to exclaim "No more of love!" (p. 104), while the Master of Events in the tale "indulges in verses above the grave of

Chloe" (p. 105). It is a plot which combines sentiment and sensation. The text provokes a heightened suspense in the reader, which culminates in the melodramatic scene where the duchess finds Chloe's body: "desperately she pulled, and a lump descended, and a flash of all the torn nerves of her body told her that a dead human body was upon her" (p. 101). This tale, which contemporary critics, such as Barrie, described as "tragic,"[19] touches at such points on the macabre traditions of the horror story. It ends with a burst of pathos:

> To this day, when I write at an interval of fifteen years, I have the tragic ague of that hour in my blood, and I behold the shrouded form of the most admirable of women, whose heart was broken by a faithless man ere she devoted her wreck of life to arrest one weaker than herself on the descent to perdition. (p. 104)

This sentence is constructed entirely out of phrases common to tales of this type; "heart was broken," "wreck of life," "descent to perdition." It offers readers nothing more than familiar cliches.

The style of The Tale of Chloe legitimates for an intellectual readership a pleasure in a genre of fiction it ought to despise as lowly. At the same time, the style implies an intended readership who can readily accept the conventions of plot and rhetoric within which it operates. Such a readership, as with the readership for the other two short stories, could be made up of the members of Mr Mudie's circulating library.

The Egoist and The Glasgow Weekly Herald

The style of Meredith's fiction has in this chapter so far been discussed in isolation. However, an analysis of the relationship between Meredith's style and the address his novels made to readers must take into account the style of other contemporary fiction. The serialization of The Egoist in The Glasgow Weekly Herald offers us an opportunity to make a comparison between Meredith's style and that of the popular taste. It was suggested in Chapter Two (p. 78) that The Egoist was in some respects a "pot-boiler," but the limitations of this description with regard to Meredith's novel become obvious when we come to consider the style of an unashamed example of that genre.

This discussion will begin by establishing the features of style common to serial stories published in the newspaper in the same year as The Egoist, before examining an editorial from the newspaper, advertising the supposed dissimilarity of the Meredith novel. From this, we will learn not only about the differences the editors perceived between Meredith's novels and the usual serials, but also about the effect that they expected these differences to have on their readership. Finally, a detailed comparison will be made between The Egoist and one of the serial stories in particular, in order to establish whether or not these differences did actually exist.

The Glasgow Weekly Herald, founded in 1864, was as has already been mentioned, during its first ten years, nothing more than an inexpensive adjunct to The Glasgow Herald, summarising the week's news.[20] The addition of serial

stories was one way in which the newspaper could begin to acquire an independent identity. Seven stories appeared in 1879 prior to the serialisation of <u>The Egoist</u> - "Archie Graham's Peerage,"[21] "My Study Chair: A Strange Tale,"[22] "Lizzie Wardrope's Luck,"[23] "Moriarty the Exile,"[24] "Doctor James or the Dead Witness,"[25] "Nannette: A Story of Sedan"[26] and "The Ards House Mystery."[27] As is suggested by their titles, these stories belong to three related genres of nineteenth centurey popular fiction; romance, adventure and mystery. "Archie Graham's Peerage" and "Lizzie Wardrope's Luck" are rags to riches tales; "My Study Chair," "Doctor James" and "The Ards House Mystery" are all tales of suspense with supernatural happenings and mysterious murders, and the remaining two are concerned with the adventurous progress of the hero and heroine as they overcome various ordeals.

Each of the stories is held together by its plot which tends to follow a common pattern. In each case, there is only one easily identifiable thread to the narrative. There are no subplots, or lengthy preambles to introduce the characters, or set the scene. The plot begins to unfold immediately, with a well-worn phrase such as "a strange thing happened to me," and the reader is drawn into it at once. Thereafter the narrative progresses through a quick succession of incidents towards a climax, when the mystery is resolved, or the lovers reunited. The mystery stories contain more peaks and troughs than the others, to heighten the suspense. Tension is built up at several points in the narrative with lines such as, "And this is what we

saw...,"[28] "We soon had it open, and this is what we found within...,"[29] "My heart stood still and my knees literally knocked together..."[30] The reader is encouraged to read on, as he is in all these seven stories, by the desire to find out what happens next.

Every stage of each story follows a narrative pattern which must have been familiar to regular readers of the newspaper, and yet these routine devices still work to arouse the reader's curiosity, and involve him in the telling of the tale. Part of the attraction for the reader in reading these serials must have been his secure knowledge that everything would work out well in the end, that the familiar path of the narrative would lead to a satisfying and happy ending. A happy ending appears to have been an essential ingredient. In all the stories the action is carried through to a complete and cheerful conclusion, with predictions of rosy futures for all the leading characters, and no loose ends.

The common features in the plotting of these serials can be illustrated more clearly by a description of the plot of one of the stories, "Lizzie Wardrope's Luck." This serial is a reworking of the Cinderella story, and direct references are made to this in the text. The reader knows the general way in which the narrative will progress before he has finished Chapter One. He knows what to expect, and is not disappointed, for the story contains the usual number of turns of fortune, with the usual results. The good-natured daughter of an ill-natured father marries an actor and runs away from home to meet him. They are

accidentally separated. She lives in poverty with her child. Meanwhile, the actor has make his fortune abroad and taken on his real title of Sir Arthur. He returns home and the couple are reunited by chance, "so that everyone was left happy and contented" (Feb.,8th, 1879, p. 4).

This familiar plot is peopled by a variety of stock characters. There is a pure and good heroine, an ugly sister, a wicked, miserly father and a dashing romantic male lead: "an interesting mustachioed, scapegrace, with good looks and an engaging manner" (Feb., 8th, 1879, p. 4). Trite phrases such as this provide the only clues to the characters of the hero and heroine, Lizzie and Arthur, and the minor characters are barely sketched in. Neither Lizzie's, nor Arthur's, characters develops during the course of the serial, only their external circumstances change. They move from place to place, time passes, and they become richer. No psychological reason is given for the behaviour of any of the characters, everything revolves around the mechanism of the plot.

This treatment of character is a feature common to all seven serials. When one has finished reading any of these stories, one has a clear recollection of the outline of the plot, but no distinct impression of the characters. Five of the serials contain the main character's name in the title, but none of them are character studies. The characters are necessary to initiate, and participate, in the action to which they are subordinate, but they are analysed in no greater depth than any of the inanimate objects, the furniture and fittings, which clutter up each narrative.

Archie Graham, Moriarty and Nannette, all behave just as the plot requires, and the reader would expect.

The predictability of plot and characters in the serials is reinforced by the manner in which the tales are told. A regular reader, familiar with plot patterns and stock characters, would read these stories quickly and easily, but to avoid any difficulties, the narrator is always present to direct the reader. In four out of the seven stories, there is a first person narrator, who addresses the reader, explains any fact of the action which may be in doubt, and links chapters with short reminders of what has happened already. In "Moriarty the Exile," for example, the title character recounts his adventures, and his direct addresses require the reader to supply very little from his own imagination. Moriarty explains at each stage the form the next part of the narrative is to take: "Before continuing the narrative of my adventures, I must describe the events which forced me to abandon the land of my birth."; "That reminds me I have not yet related the cause of my compulsory expatriation." (Feb., 15th, 1879, p. 4); "We are over the last jump now, and on the flat. Ahead looms the judge's post, and beyond that the stand house. Let me gather my characters well together for a final sprint." (May 10th, 1879, p. 4); "I may as well here state for the benefit of my readers...But Ivora has stopped me at this point. She says I am beginning to twaddle, that I have written enough, that I must bring matters to a conclusion, in fact, that she will allow me only to say two words more" (May 10th, 1879, p. 4). The tone of the narrator in these

extracts is confidential. This creates an impression which resembles an oral story-teller speaking to his listeners. Phrases such as "That reminds me" and "I am beginning to twaddle," and the suggestion that the narrator is being interrupted by his wife as he writes, means that the reader is continually aware that he is being told a tale. The implication is that this tale, as with an oral tale, is at that moment in the process of being created, and not structured like a piece of literature.

A similar relationship between the narrator and his readers is established in the other three stories which have first person narrators. The general effect of this device is to make the narratives extremely easy to follow. The narrator assumes the readers' sympathy, that they share similar values, and that all allusions will be familiar. In case any aspect of the story should be in any doubt, the narrator explains clearly his thoughts, feelings and actions at each stage of the narrative, as in "My Study Chair" when the narrator responds to some strange happening with the question, "What did it mean? I asked myself" (Feb. 1st, 1879, p. 4), and then goes on to supply several answers.

In the other stories which have third person narrators, the narrator is also used to establish the story-telling convention. Doctor James is narrated in a straightforward manner. The emphasis is on a chronological sequence of events, with the narrator providing all the necessary links in the action, as in the following lines:

> Some weeks passed away, and Dr James Beeton was moving among his patients and acquaintances as serenely, and with as much acceptance as ever. If a few at first felt inclined to hold back on

suspicion, his unnoticing suavity, and the force of example, overcame their hesitation and brought round the old relations. (May 17th, 1879, p. 4)

In this concluding passage to the story, everything is clearly explained in such easily understood terms as "suspicion," "force of example" and "hesitation," and satisfactorily resolved so that the "old relations" are restored.

In supplying motives for the characters, the narrator commonly resorts to platitudes, rather than suggesting something original, which would challenge the reader, as in the following passage from Nannette:

> There are certain moments of mental conflict or victory, when the soul shines out in the human face and gives it a grandeur or a grace which it never knew before. It was so with Nannette. Never before had the sweet beauty of her features been so marked as at that moment in which she knelt under the dim light before that picture, whose sustaining smile gave such a strength to her lingering soul. (May 24th, 1879, p. 4)

In these lines, the narrator's banal comment on the human soul provides the gloss on what is really a simple adventure story. Such remarks represent an obvious attempt to elevate the tale in the readers' eyes, rather than serious reflections. Attempts at philosophy on the part of the third person narrator usually descend into sentiment. A cosy, sentimental tone predominates, as in the final paragraph of the story:

> Merrily rings the hammer in Pierre's workshop in the dear old square, morning, noon and night. Merrily rolls many an old song in rising and falling cadences, to keep time with that willing hammer of honest work. Pierre asks who has a right to sing in all fair France if he has not?

Who is happier than he? He has a wife richer than rubies, more precious than refined gold; a wife of spotless fame, and a noble, queenly soul. He has three little laughing boys, and the youngest can lisp his father's name. In the bright days of summer he can look out from his workshop door and see his little ones playing by the fountain, where, long ago, he saw the dawn of a noble love in their mother's eyes. This is why Piere Arnand mingles labour with song."(May 31st, 1879, p. 4)

This description of a happy domestic scene is laden with sentimental cliches. The word "merrily," which begins the first two sentences, sets the tone for what is to follow. Pierre's work, his wife and his children, are all idealised - "honest work," "willing hammer," "richer than rubies," "queenly soul," "noble love," "three little laughing boys." All these cliches enable the narrator to conclude, rather smugly, "This is why Pierre Arnand mingles labour with song." This summing up emphasises the simplicity of the preceding description. The narrator's role has been to smooth over any inconsistencies, or difficulties, in the action of the story, and not to expose or discuss them.

The different tones, described above, are adopted by the narrators of the seven stories in varying degrees. Each narrator has a mixture of tones - confidential, sentimental, philosophical, heavily ironical - which are roughly blended. The one function of the narrator which remains constant throughout, and is common to all of them, is that of creating the illusion that the adventure, romance, mystery, however outlandish, actually happened. The predominant tone of the narrators is that of accurate recorders of events. The reader is encouraged to believe in the fiction.

The reality of the story is perhaps most effectively implied by the first person narrators. Each of the four stories with such a narrator has a frame which establishes the personality of the narrator, and suggests that his narrative will be an authentic memoir. "The Ards House Mystery," for example, is presented as an extract from a policeman's account of a case. The narrator introduces the story in a matter-of-fact tone in the following passage:

> "The Ard's House Mystery" as it was called, made some noise at the time, but the circumstances are now, I dare say pretty well forgotten, so I may as well set down here what I knew about the matter. This is indeed all there was to know, and more than anybody else knew, for I happened to be intimately mixed up in it. (June 7th, 1879, p. 4)

It is suggested here, that the narrator will provide nothing more than a factual account of events which were once common knowledge, with the addition of a little inside information. Colloquial phrases, such as "made some noise at the time," "I may as well" and "mixed up in it," reinforce the impression of an individual's recollections. The plain voice of the policeman is maintained throughout the narrative, and the story is framed with a final reminder of its supposed authenticity: "I need not prolong my story. The result many will remember."

The illusion of reality, created in this way, is further sustained throughout all the stories, by the inclusion of seemingly superfluous details regarding the characters' surroundings. A disproportionate amount of space is devoted to describing, for example, the door a

character entered by, or the appearance of the furniture. "My Study Chair" is concerned with ludicrous supernatural happenings, but the mystery springs forth from a realistic background, as is shown by the following lines:

> "Retiring to my study, which I had furnished with a table, a couple of common chairs, and a book shelf, I seated myself at the desk, laid out my papers, and proceeded to make copious memoranda. After having been so seated for about a quarter of an hour, a strange thing happened to me". (Jan 11th, 1879, p. 4)

As in the other stories, "a strange thing happened" after a degree of normality has been established. The narrator is presented as an ordinary man in ordinary surroundings. The reader is therefore predisposed to involve himself with the tale.

The depiction of the reader's reality is taken one step further in three of the serials, by the addition of details of local colour. "Archie Graham's Peerage" is subtitled "An Edinburgh Story," "Moriarty the Exile" is described as "A Tale of Modern Glasgow," and "Lizzie Wardrope's Luck" is also set mainly in Glasgow. In each of these stories, local buildings are mentioned by name, while the characters' movements could be plotted on street maps. Of the seven stories, only one has a setting which would be totally unfamiliar to the majority of readers, Nannette: A Story of Sedan, and this tale is full of details which reader's would believe to be realistic in context.

The features of the seven serials, analysed above, have

enough in common - in plot, narration and style - to reflect the formula to which they were written. The appearance of The Egoist directly after the serials described would have presented a sharp contrast to readers of The Glasgow Weekly Herald. The editor was aware of this contrast, and, two weeks before the serialisation of Meredith's novel, the newspaper's editorial was concerned to "let the readers know what to expect" from the new serial (June 7th, 1879, p.6). The editorial was made up of paragraphs selected from the last number of The British Quarterly Review, "regarding Mr Meredith's previous works."[31] The quotations chosen indicate the editor's attitude to The Egoist, and the response he expected from his readers. They provide an opportunity to make a comparison, almost point for point, with the formula already outlined.

The main aim of the editorial appears to have been to present Meredith as a "philosopher, poet and humorist." Each of these three was in turn given due consideration in relation to the novels. In outlining these three roles, the article confused the author with the narrators of the novels, as in the following lines:

> As a philosopher, he stands outside his creations and the world he places them in, and notes with tranquil, impartial, never unkindly, sarcasm all the weak points of classes and individuals.

Here, the tone of the narrator is described. The key phrase is "he stands outside his creations." A few sentences later, the words "calm observer" and "critic" are used to identify this "Philosopher." These words create an

impression of a narrator with a very different role from the one prescribed in the formula. The narrators of the other serials place no distance between themselves and the action. They are either characters of the same type as they are describing, or else, sympathetic reporters, who never discriminate, except in a simplistic way, between good and bad, happy and sad. Meredith's narrator, it is suggested, is in control, providing a seemingly objective commentary on events.

The reader was further prepared for the different tone of The Egoist by the next lines of the article: "He does not in general deal in pathos, though often one sharp touch will betray what he knows of the deepest depths of suffering." In admiring the lack of "pathos," the article scorns an invariable ingredient of the formula. A lack of sentiment will be most noticeable in the normally most sentimental section of the serial, at the end, for "little is he addicted to giving us a close of perfect satisfaction." This is in contrast to the uniform closure of the formula.

This indication as to the tone of the new serial is followed by a quotation which stresses the differences in the nature of the plot and characters:

> Entangled social and personal relations are his forte, for he studies the laws which underlie their phenomena and produce their various combinations. As was once said of Mr Browning, he 'takes little account of the stock passions'. That is, he does not care to exhibit characters and actions merely in their elementary form. He traces their development from various causes, he shows them rooted in exceptional conditions, or in conflict with other motives and circumstances, and finally analyses the outcome of all this with a great insight and touch, while never losing sight

of general laws and the resultant phenomena."

This directly states how far from the formula the new serial was expected to depart. The usual serials were entirely dependent on the "stock passions," "social and personal relations" were never complex, but always presented in their "elementary form." The words "analyses" and "insight" emphasise the greater seriousness of Meredith's novels. They suggest a level of meaning quite beyond that of the other serials. The phrase "general laws and resultant phenomena" suggests that the characters and actions in the novel will have wider implications, that a moral can be drawn by setting them in the context of human life as a whole. If these plaudits did not alone distinguish Meredith's novels for the newspaper's readers from the ephemeral tales, which they were used to, then the comparison to Browning (a common comparison, as we saw in Chapter One, pp. 27 - 29) would have clearly identified Meredith with high culture.

The next aspect of Meredith's novels which the editorial focused on was the style. The discussion centred on Meredith's reputation as a "Poet":

> "We have said that Mr Meredith is a poet, and it needs not to refer to the glowing and vigorous verse which he has written to satisfy ourselves that the very essence of the poetical inspiration is in him. It breathes through single phrases and through whole passages of beautiful nature-painting, and in the imagery which accompanies his analysis of mental conditions, and especially the conditions of feeling. But this imagery is not the imagery of what we must call the sentimental (chiefly feminine) novel writing

> of the present day, limited, that is, to the purely emotional kind, with fancy relations between the immediate atmospheric conditions and the subjective moods of the moment."

This passage points a contrast in style between the new serial and the usual formula. In the seven serials looked at, there are no memorable "single phrases." There are very few attempts at "nature-painting," imagery, or any other poetic effects, except as is suggested, in sentimental passages. The account in these lines of the imagery in "novel writing of the present day" accords with the impression made by the quotation from the ending of <u>Nannette</u>, for example. The next lines expand on this contrast by linking a "poetic" style with the intellectual quality of a novel:

> There is a backbone of strength through all his play of fancy, for it is all strictly in aid of that searching analysis which forms the groundwork of the whole. This combination of poetic perception with philosophic thought, so conspicuous in George Eliot also, is essential to creative intellect of the highest order, though the thinking need not be gone through before the reader's eyes.

Meredith's fiction is here invested with a collection of high-sounding qualities; "a backbone of strength," "searching analysis," "poetic perception," "philosophic thought," "creative intellect of the highest order." These claims quoted in an editorial designed to "let the readers know what to expect" suggest that the editor regarded the contrast between <u>The Egoist</u> and the serials which preceded it as being extreme.

The final aspect of Meredith's novels selected for comment - comedy - is one which relates to <u>The Egoist</u> in particular:

> To say a word on Mr Meredith's humour, it may be defined as the philosophy of the comic. It is very peculiar, almost unique; in style it is marked by a certain laborious conscientiousness, a painstaking gravity which seems to be carefully searching for the exact words that may fit his meaning and produces at last a sense of the most appropriate absurdity. The grotesque may sometimes be carried a little too far; but on the whole Mr Meredith's own phrase of 'thoughtful laughter' will well express the sensations that his pleasantry excites.

Once again a quotation has been selected which uses elevated language to describe a feature of style that had no counterpart in the usual serials. It is stressed that the comic style of Meredith's novels is "very peculiar, almost unique." Certainly "painstaking gravity" and "thoughtful laughter" do not fit the familiar formula, which depends on well-worn jokes for comic effect.

Through the presentation of these extracts in the editorial of <u>The Glasgow Weekly Herald</u>, the newspaper's readers were led to expect a serial with almost the opposite qualities to those which they were used to. The editor, James Stoddart, was anxious to create the impression that his newspaper was moving up-market.[32] He therefore acquired the serial rights to a new novel by the supposedly most cultured and literary of novelists, and quoted as many as possible of the current cliches to advertise Meredith's reputation.

James Stoddart's editorial, as we have seen, advertised Meredith's novel on the specific grounds of its dissimilarity to his newspaper's usual serials. However, it is only by making a detailed comparison between the style of "Sir Willoughby Patterne: The Egoist"[33] and the style of one of these stories that we can establish whether or not readers were indeed presented with "what they were led to expect." If passages from "Archie Graham's Peerage" are set alongside passages from The Egoist, like being compared with like - dialogue,for example - then the full extent of these dissimilarites begins to emerge.

"Archie Graham's Peerage," has been chosen out of the seven stories because its central theme, the folly of pride, corresponds to that of The Egoist. The plot of "Archie Graham's Peerage" revolves around the hero's reversals in fortune with regard to social status and love; losing one to find the other. The first person narrator, the hero's confidant, puts the emphasis firmly on narrating the various episodes in this simple plot; character and setting are subordinate.

The occasional descriptive paragraphs which do, however, punctuate the narration of the action, have a brisk functional tone, as if they have been conjured up because it is felt that they are somehow required. The following descriptive passage represents one of the longer diversions from the strictly mapped out path of the plot:

> The front of the house was a delightful picture. The low cottage walls were brown and covered with roses, white and pink, and yellow - that climbed over the porch up almost to the eaves, and hung in

sweet luxuriance round the casements. At each side of the door grew a fushia bush, a mass of brilliant bloom, all summer long the murmurous haunt of bees. Right in front of the house was a square of green sward, and surrounding that lay the garden and patches of shrubbery where blackbirds and mavises piped from morning till night...Beyond the garden lay a varied prospect. The eye ranged over cultivated fields and rich pasture land, studded here and there with dark patches of wood, till far in the horizon the ground rose into low hills, with softly-rounded outlines. It was not a grand landscape certainly; but in all its details, as well as in its general effect, the impression it conveyed was one of perfect peace and repose. And peace and repose were the feelings I always connected with life at Inverton. (Jan 18th, 1879, p. 4)

This scene is described to the reader in a matter of fact way, which suggests that it is just what the narrator saw, just as "the eye ranged over" it. No similes are used in the description. The landscape does not seem to be anything else; it simply exists as it is. The feelings and thoughts of the narrator are not involved in the description. They are separated from the scene, and stated simply and clearly at the end of the paragraph.

The description builds up gradually, one clause following logically on from the one before it, to add another piece to the picture. None of the sentences draws attention to itself by being excessively long, or excessively short. Five out of eight of them are of a similar length, having thirty-two, twenty-three, thirty-one, thirty-four, and thirty words each, and the other three are shorter with nine, seven and fourteen words. This gives an impression of controlled regularity. The choice of adjectives does nothing to disturb this even surface. They are almost all familiar ones, placed where they would be

expected, in common collocations - "rich pasture," "dark patches," "softly-rounded outlines," "brilliant blooms." Simple adjectives of colour predominate - "The low cottage walls were brown and covered with roses, white and pink, and yellow." The phrase "murmurous haunt of bees" stands out, because "murmurous" is the only adjective in the passage which is less than entirely obvious, coming as it does from the area of sound rather than sight. The effect this landscape has on the narrator is at last referred to briefly and unimaginatively, in the repetition of a stock phrase. The landscape creates the impression of "peace and repose", therefore the narrator associates the feelings of "peace and repose" with the place. No attempt has been made to suggest that the landscape is presented as coloured by a character's mind. The narrator is simply a reporter of what he sees.

Descriptive passages in _The Egoist_ are of a very different kind to the one above, and fulfil a different role in the narrative. The plot of _The Egoist_ centres far less on what the characters do, and far more on what they say and think. The fall of Willoughby is plotted through the subtleties of other characters' responses to him at different points in the narrative. His fate does not, as Archie's does, depend on a lost will turning up within the next few columns. Passages of description are not digressions, but an integral part of the narrative. The character's thoughts and feelings, concerning his or her surroundings, are always the focus of interest, as in the following paragraph:

> She had a curiosity to know the title of the book he would read beneath these boughs, and grasping Crossjay's hand fast she craned her neck, as one timorous of a fall in peeping over chasms, for a glimpse of the page; but immediately and still with a bent head, she turned her face to where the load of virginal blossom, whiter than summer-cloud on the sky, showered and drooped and clustered so thick as to claim colour and seem, like higher Alpine snows in noon-sunlight, a flush of white, her eyes perched and soared. Wonder lived in her. Happiness in the beauty of the tree pressed to supplant it, and was more mortal and narrower. Reflection came, contracting her vision and weighing her to earth. (p. 216, vol. 1)

This is not a seemingly factual description of an imaginary scene. The description is presented as having been processed in the character's head, and is all bound up with her response to what she sees. In contrast to the first passage, this passage is made up of sentences of very different lengths. The first sentence consists of ninety-seven words, and is followed by a sentence of only four words: "Wonder lived in her." This short sentence, conveying the high point of the character's emotion, is foregrounded by being placed so sharply in contrast to the much longer sentence which precedes it.

This description, unlike the last, relies on similes to bring much more into the paragraph than a bare account of the scene would allow; everything relates to something else, creating a much richer effect. There are three similes in the first sentence alone - "as one timorous of a fall in peeping over chasms," "whiter than summer-cloud on the sky," "like higher Alpine snows in noon-sunlight." In the first passage, an unusual collocation stood out amidst a collection of familiar ones. In the second passage, the

opposite is true - "virginal blossom" seems ordinary in comparison to the more vivid images. The accumulative effect of using three adjectives - "showered and drooped and clustered" - where one would do, contributes to the clarity of the image. Verbs in the passage work as hard as the adjectives in bringing the description to life; "perched" and "soared," for example, are words not usually used to describe the movement of the eyes.

The description in the earlier passage was constructed, as the corresponding sketch would be drawn, stroke by stroke. The construction of this passage is less obvious. The first long sentence rushes along, clause upon clause, to the word "soared." The climax is reached in the "wonder" of the next sentence, which then gradually dies down in the next two sentences, becoming "mortal and narrower," "contracting" and "weighing her down to earth."

This passage does not form a digression from the main plot or themes, as the descriptive passage from the other novel does. It is, on the contrary, integral to events. The description of a tree is elaborated on to become a description of Clara's state of mind. The reader of "Archie Graham's Peerage" could skip over the descriptive passages without feeling he was missing anything. This passage from <u>The Egoist</u> demands the reader's attention; no word or image can be anticipated.

The above commentary on descriptive passages from the two serials, draws attention to markedly contrasting features of style. Is the same true for passages of dialogue? The opening lines from "Archie Graham's Peerage"

provide a good example of its style of dialogue:

> 'Well, Archie, old fellow, how are you to-night? It's an age since I last saw you.'
> 'You may well say that,' replied Archie.'I expected you up every evening last week, but I suppose logarithms and revisionary bonuses have kept you away. I am very glad to see you, for I have most astounding news to give you. Sit down, like a good fellow, in your own big chair at the other side of the fire there. You are not in a hurry, are you?'
> 'Oh, no', I said. 'Just for fear you might forget me altogether I made up my mind to favour you with my company to-night.' (Jan 11th, 1879, p. 4)

This conversation does nothing more than initiate the plot. The most important phrase is "I have most astounding news to give you"; the rest is just the necessary padding, providing stage directions and briefly sketching the scene. There is nothing startling about the language; it serves to impart information rather than to attract interest. The dialogue consists of a string of common exchanges - "You may well say that," "...how are you to-night," "Sit down, like a good fellow." It is an attempt at colloquial speech, but its very ordinariness makes it sound stilted.

The following piece of dialogue from <u>The Egoist</u> produces a very different effect:

> 'I judge by character', he said to Mrs Mountstuart.
> 'If you have caught the character of a girl said she.
> 'I think I am not far off it.'
> 'So it was thought by the man who dived for the moon in a well.'
> 'How women despise their sex!'
> 'Not a bit. She has no character yet. You are forming it, and pray be advised and be merry; the solid is your safest guide; physiognomy and manners will give you more of a girl's character

> than all the divings you can do. She is a charming young woman, only she is one of that sort.'
> 'Of what sort?' Sir Willoughby asked, impatiently.
> 'Rogues in porcelain.'
> 'I am persuaded I shall never comprehend it.'
> 'I cannot help you one bit further.'
> 'The word rogue!'
> 'It was dainty rogue.'
> 'Brittle, would you say?'
> 'I am quite unable to say.'
> 'An innocent naughtiness?'
> 'Prettily moulded in a delicate substance.'
> (p. 80 - 81, vol. 1)

In this dialogue, no attempt is made to imitate natural speech; supposedly casual remarks have complex sentence structures, or contain carefully developed conceits, and metaphors are used and discussed throughout. The conversation is concerned with finding the correct metaphor to describe Clara. The two characters refine each other's comments, with stage directions being pared down to enable quick exchanges. It is an intellectual game, which focuses the reader's attention on the individual words, rather than on their general sense. All is not on the surface, as it is in the dialogue in "Archie Graham's Peerage." Here, seemingly flippant or cryptic remarks are integral to the plot of the novel. The phrase "dainty rogue" proves significant in view of what happens to Clara in the novel. Willoughby's confidence that he has "caught the character" of Clara, which quickly turns to bewilderment, "I am persuaded I shall never comprehend it," and his desire to replace the word "rogue" with the phrase "innocent naughtiness," indicate the role that he is set to play.

The style of the dialogue in "Archie Graham's Peerage" is noticeable for its ordinariness; the style of <u>The Egoist</u>

draws attention to itself because of its cleverness. Both passages attempt to represent a conversation, but for different purposes, as is reflected in their opposing styles.

Comparisons between passages of description and dialogue in the two serials have supplied numerous points of contrast in style. The area of narrative in the serials where the contrast is perhaps most extreme, however, is where the internal drama of the novel is worked out. In _The Egoist_, much of the weight of the narrative is placed upon passages in which the characters reflect upon their thoughts and feelings. In "Archie Graham's Peerage", such passages are rare, isolated, inconsistent, and subordinate to the demands of the plot. The following paragraph from the opening eposode of the serial, indicates the level at which the character's consciousness is presented throughout:

> It was certainly an astonishing turn of fortune, and of course I was bound to congratulate Archie upon his good luck. Somehow, however, the words of congratulation stuck in my throat, but not from envy, heaven knows! I could not feel altogether glad at the news. For some years Archie and I had been to one another like brothers, and I seemed to see the end now to our close friendship and all our easy, pleasant intercourse...Our old life, with its hearty ways and the many mutual sympathies begotten of our friendship, was gone for ever. (Jan. 11th, 1879, p. 4)

In this passage, a first person narrator attempts to convey a fairly simple idea, one which the reader would readily understand. There are no subtle nuances in his analysis, nothing need be inferred, all is logically and clearly explained. The reader's attention is further relaxed by the

unimaginative phrasing: "dear to the soul," "beneath the dignity," "gone for ever," "mutual sympathies," "turn of fortune," "stuck in my throat," "heaven knows," "such simple pleasures." These stock phrases are strung together in a predictable way. There are no similes or complex rhetorical devices. One sentence simply follows on from another, requiring little effort on the part of the reader.

The above passage would be quickly passed over in a reading of the serial. It helps the reader to form an impression of the narrator, of the tone of his narrative, and of his relationship to the central character. However, this impression is no stronger than a general sense that the narrator is good, his tone is benign, and the other character is his friend. The following passage from The Egoist, in which a character also reflects on events, achieves a much more subtle effect:

> "Miss Middleton owed it to Sir Willoughby that she ceased to think like a girl. When had the great change begun? Glancing back, she could imagine that it was near the period we call in love the first - almost from the first. And she was led to imagine it through having become barred from imagining her own emotions of that season. They were dead as not to arise even under the form of shadows in fancy. Without imputing blame to him, for she was reasonable so far, she deemed herself a person entrapped. In a dream somehow she had committed herself to a life long imprisonment; and, oh terror! not in a quiet dungeon; the barren walls closed round her, talked, called for ardour, expected admiration." (p. 179, vol. 1)

In this paragraph, the character's thought process is represented in detail - "she ceased to think like a girl," "she could imagine," "she was led to imagine," "barred from

imagining her own emotions." The passage begins calmly with a direct statement of the character's dilemna. This is followed by a rhetorical question, which invites reflection - "glancing back." These reflections begin by being "reasonable," exact and discriminating - "the period we call in love the first - almost from the first" - but then break out into "terror," away from argument and into imagery. The metaphor of the prison - "entrapped," "imprisonment," "dungeon", "barren walls" - becomes particularly vivid in the final three phrases - "talked, called for ardour, expected admiration" - bringing Willoughby, as they do, forcibly back into the picture. The language used here is far removed from the familiar phrases of the first extract. More is expected of the reader's concentration. The sense of a sentence such as "And she was led to imagine it through having become barred from imagining her own emotions of that season," is not immediately obvious on a first reading. The word "it" relates back to the second sentence, and refers to the time when the "great change" had begun, while "that season" is "the period we call in love the first." Individual words are accorded more importance in this passage, and the reader must follow the text more closely, than when reading the first passage, where the narrator's thoughts are expressed in a commonplace way.

These two styles have the effect of giving the two serials distinctly different tones, as if they are addressed to different groups of readers. The contrast in tone can be clearly heard in the final paragraph of each serial. "Archie Graham's Peerage" has a typical "all's well that

ends well," happy family ending, towards which th plot has obviously been working from the beginning:

> Years have gone by since then, and have sped so quickly that I sometimes can hardly believe my eyes when I see the children that now gather round Archie's table. Mary and he are still as much sweethearts as they were in their young days at Inverton, and their home is one of the happiest in Christendom. Love there is lord of all, and the house is filled with the sunshine that beams from honest and kindly hearts."(Jan 25th, 1879, p. 4)

This idyllic scene, all love and sunshine, is described in a banal way - "Years have gone by...," "happiest in Christendom," "honest and kindly hearts." There is no sense of the narrator distancing himself from what he is describing; he is completely involved - "I can hardly believe my eyes". He makes no criticism, nor suggests any possibility of discord.

In <u>The Egoist</u> the emphasis is entirely different:

> So, and much so universally, the world of his dread and his unconscious worship wagged over Sir Willoughby Patterne and his change of brides, until the preparations for the festivities of the marriage flushed him in his country's eyes to something of the splendid glow he had worn on the great day of his majority. That was upon the season when two lovers met between the Swiss and Tyrol Alps over the Lake of Constance. Sitting beside them the Comic Muse is grave and sisterly. But taking a glance at the others of her late company of actors, she compresses her lips.
> (p. 353, vol. 3)

This passage contains only an oblique reference to the happy ending. The lovers' happiness is very carefully balanced by the spectacle of Willoughby and his "change of brides." The

narrator's tone is completely devoid of sentiment. He places himself at a very definite distance from the scene, philosophically pointing out the universal implications of events, and associating himself with the lofty viewpoint of the Comic Muse, the personification of an abstract concept. By referring to "her late company of actors," the narrator blatantly exposes the fiction. The tone is one of polite amusement as he packs the puppets back in their box.

In both passages, the manner in which the narrator addresses his readers implies that those readers share his perceptions and attitudes. The implication is that the reader of "Archie Graham's Peerage" unthinkingly accepts a superficial evaluation of events, and is satisfied with platitudes and cliches, whereas the reader of The Egoist adopts a superior smile and distances himself intellectually from events.

"Archie Graham's Peerage" and The Egoist appeared in serial form in the same newspaper within months of each other. As we have seen, the style of The Egoist demanded that readers adopted a different method of reading than the style of "Archie Graham's Peerage" had required. The newspaper's readership could not have been expected to have altered its composition entirely over such a short space of time, even if such a dramatic change had been thought desirable, considering that the other features in the newspaper remained the same during 1879. Publication of The Egoist gave The Glasgow Weekly Herald a more literary appearance, not because it appealed to a completely new audience, but because it addressed the same readership in a

different way. The experiment does not appear to have been a success. It provoked no response in the newspaper's correspondence column, and the week after the serialisation of <u>The Egoist</u> came to an end an new serial, "The Miser of Hazelhowe," written to the familiar formula, began.

CHAPTER FOUR

"FAIR DEALING WITH READERS"

ADDRESS AND VALUES

In discussing the address Meredith's novels made to contemporary readers, I have so far focused on the role of the narrator, and the style of the novels. In this chapter, I will expand the argument to take account of the values and attitudes which the novels assume that their readers share. "fair dealing with readers" (p. 19, vol. 1) is promised in one of Meredith's most successful novels, One of our Conquerors. The setting is unashamedly middle-class, its milieu is business, and not the aristocratic milieu Meredith's intellectual coterie usually associated with him (as surveyed in Chapter One). One of our Conquerors is the successful culmination of a strand in Meredith's work, which associates him with an unlikely bed-fellow - Samuel Smiles, an association much overlooked, because the liaison calls for a revision of those critical views which accepted Meredith's novels as offering a "critique of the contemporary world."[1] I am not here arguing for a bourgeois Meredith, However, collusion with middle-class moralizing became an element in some of the patterns of double address, which are a constant feature of his novels.

Samuel Smile's Self-Help (1859)[2] successfully addressed itself to the mass-reading public. Social historians have attributed the book's wide popularity and enormous sales[3], not only to its appeal for the self-improver, eager to learn the secret of becoming "an employer of labour and a thriving man" (p. ix), but more significantly to its affirmation of values which dominated the way in which the industrial and commercial classes saw themselves. The book's heroes are "Men of Business" (p. 263) and "Leaders of Industry" (p. 27); the values which won them success were "industry," "perseverance," "self-culture," the "upright performance of individual duty," and the proper "use" rather than "abuse" of money (p. ix). After awarding the laurels to obvious commercial successes, such as Josiah Wedgewood, Smiles then goes on to interpret the achievements of an assortment of historical characters, from Michaelangelo and Mozart to Napoleon, in terms of this catalogue of Victorian virtues. By using these case studies to illustrate a series of oppositions (for example, industry/art, industry/the peerage), Smiles is able to construct a hierarchy which places the "man of business" (p. 263) on the highest rung. In the following extract he sets up one such opposition:

> Hazlitt, in one of his clever essays, represents the man of business as a mean sort of person put in a go-cart, yoked to a trade or profession; alleging that all he has to do is, not to go out of the beaten track, but merely to let his affairs take their own course. "The great requisite," he says, "for prosperous management of ordinary business is the want of imagination, or of any ideas but those of custom and interest on the narrowest scale." But nothing could be more one-sided and in effect untrue, than such a definition. Of course, there are narrow-minded

> men of business, as there are narrow-minded scientific men, literary men, and legislators; but there are also business men of large and comprehensive minds, capable of action on the very largest scale. (p. 263)

Here, in dismissing the literary intellectual's view of the "man of business" - "nothing could be more one-sided" - Smiles is confident that his readers share his suspicion of Hazlitt's cleverness. Two value systems are set in opposition, in order to reaffirm the readership's own assumptions.

If, as has been shown in previous chapters, Meredith's novels were addressed to both sections of the reading public - not only to an intellectual coterie which appreciated Hazlitt's "clever essays," but also to a wider readership, who bought Self-Help in their thousands, because they could identify with the attitudes it expressed - then, that address had to incorporate two distinct value systems. In analysing five Meredith novels - the early Evan Harrington (1861) and Rhoda Fleming (1865), The Adventures of Harry Richmond (1871) and Beauchamp's Career (1876) from the middle period of Meredith's career, and the later One of our Conquerors (1890) - chosen because their thematic opposition between trade and the aristocracy brings the problem into focus, we will see how this double address developed.

Evan Harrington

Every biography of Meredith leans, to some extent, on the supposedly autobiographical nature of Evan Harrington.

George, the son of Augustus, who owned a tailor's shop in the High Street, Portsmouth, so improved his position through a mixture of talent, money, reputation, bluff and conceit, that, by the end of his life, he was welcoming the aristocracy to Box Hill on equal terms. Meredith's preoccupation with his social status has been well-documented. In the following lines, taken from a letter he wrote to a friend in 1886, a certain uneasiness can be detected behind the usual bravado:

> In origin I am what is called here a nobody and my pretensions to that rank have always received due encouragement by which, added to a turn of my mind, I am inclined to Democracy, even in Letters, and tend to think of the claims of others when I find myself exalted.[4]

Meredith may have been a "nobody", a member of the commercial classes who formed the mass-reading public, but as a man of letters his circle was formed from an intellectual elite. The ambiguity of his position enabled him to understand the attitudes of both groups of readers.

In _Evan Harrington_, the hero is, as Meredith was, caught uneasily between two worlds. Evan "writes himself tailor" (p. 171) in one chapter and "calls himself gentleman" (p. 184) in the next. On his journey towards self-knowledge, Evan is offered a number of paths. He can return to the shop and forget all his aspirations, or he can follow his sister, the Countess, and pretend to be what he is not; he can mimic the idle aristocracy, as represented by Hamilton Jocelyn, or he can align himself with the natural

gentry, as represented by Rose and Lady Jocelyn. After a number of false moves, he makes the right choice, and is reconciled with Rose.

This _bildungsroman_ is addressed to both sections of Meredith's readership. The aspirations of the industrial and commercial classes are parodied for the benefit of the intellectuals in the gross vulgarity of the Countess. In contrast, the heroes desire for self-improvement proves to be a noble and legitimate one, once he accepts the Samuel Smile's virtue of the "upright performance of individual duty" (p. ix). If the hero's origins are unmistakeably in trade, then the heroine, the novel's touchstone of good, is an aristocrat. However, like Evan, she has her comic counterparts, who provide a critique on the aristocracy. Rose's natural grace which she shares with her mother may make them fit members of the "selecter world," (_Essay_, p. 91) but the rest of their family are diseased relics of an earlier era. Evan's origins in trade can be seen as fitting him far better for a worthwile place in society, than do the aristocratic origins of the rich, stupid and superfluous Hamilton Jocelyn, serving to reassure the majority of readers that the son of a "snip" can be the equal of the born gentry. These readers would readily accept the narrator's assessment of the tailor's worth, as seen in the following lines of direct address, which is strengthened because it arises out of the forced admiration of the aristocrats:

> Well might they think that there was something extraordinary in these Harringtons. Convicted of Tailordom, these Harringtons appeared to shine with double lustre. How was it ? They were at a loss to say. They certainly could say that the Countess was egregiously affected and vulgar; but who could be altogether complacent and sincere that had to fight so hard a fight? In this struggle with society I see one of the instances where success is entirely to be honoured and remains a proof of merit. For however boldly antagonism may storm the ranks of society, it will certainly be repelled, whereas affinity cannot be resisted; and they who, against obstacles of birth, claim and keep their position among the educated and refined, have that affinity.(p. 350)

Here, even the Countess's vulgarity is provided with an excuse. The novel may have been a comedy of manners to Meredith's intellectual coterie, satirizing bourgeois pretensions and aristocratic snobbery, but for a wider reading public it offered comic solutions to what was a real problem - "so hard a fight," a "struggle." Furthermore, a hero who won through "against obstacles of birth," by "proof of merit," in the face of those who scoffed at "Tailordom" and all it stood for, reaffirmed their faith in their own attitudes and values.

The comedy in Evan Harrington is played out against a background removed from the hectic busyness of the Victorian city. After a brief introduction to the shop, the action moves to "the English country-house of an offshoot of our aristocracy" (p. 125). This rarefied setting, common in one form or another to most of Meredith's novels[5], addressed the novel to both the intellectual coterie, and to the wider reading public. It contributed to the sense of superiority and culture which Meredith's admirers both attributed to his

novels, and also claimed for themselves as readers. On the other hand, the industrial and commercial classes, despite their willingness to see the aristocracy as a breed under threat, and their idyllic worlds as being flawed, could not but be fascinated by the depiction of the aristocratic landed classes, who retained, in mid-Victorian society, their social magnetism, even though their political power had decreased. The majority of readers may have had a somewhat critical attitude to the aristocracy itself, but they still retained a conspicuous enchantment with its traits and trappings. The aristocracy still represented the highest of the steps on the social ladder. F. M. L. Thompson specifies the steps as "trade, a fortune, the acquisition of an estate, a baronetcy, membership of Parliament, and finally a peerage."[6] "Lady Rosely of Beckley Court" (p. 10), a character on a high rung, possesses all the glamour which a title and pedigree affords. One has only to look at the popularity of "silver-fork" novels amongst Mr Mudie's subscribers[7], to appreciate that the majority of readers would not share E. M. Forster's later qualms about "the home counties posing as the universe."[8] Remoteness from their daily lives was a fascinating rather than an alienating factor, especially when the hero in this scenario has risen from their own rank. For the intellectuals, this remote upper-class setting represented a civilised sphere for the Comic Spirit to operate in: for Mr Mudie's subscriber's, it represented the land of wish-fulfilment.

Rhoda Fleming

If Evan Harrington offered the industrial and commercial classes reassurance as to their social merit, then Rhoda Fleming offered them a similar reassurance as to the right-mindedness of their moral values. Readers were promised a "plain story,"[9] revolving around the conventions of the familiar fallen woman tale which was so popular with the Victorian mass-reading public, and this indeed is what they found: "The tragedy of the story is the fate of Rhoda's beautiful sister Dahlia, who has been led astray by a well-born young London lover,"[10] wrote one reviewer; and another picking up on the story finds easily identifiable material: "the story is of a poor girl, abandoned by her lover, who marries a despicable man in order to appease her Puritan family."[11] Both descriptions by contemporary critics show how the characters can be easily read as recognisable stereotypes - "poor girl," "well-born young London lover," "Puritan family." The novel does lend itself to re-telling in such terms. There is the Kentish family of Chapter One: "stiff, solid, unobtrusive men, and very personable women" (p. 7, vol 1); the safe harbour from which Dahlia, the flighty daughter, "having a disposition to rise" (p. 14, vol. 1) drifts towards the "mystic city of London" (p. 14, vol. 1). The well-bred men she meets there are of two distinctive types; her lover, Edward, who, given to "dissipation and indulgences" (p. 86, vol. 1), tempers these vices with melodramatic remorse. He is "composed of better stuff" (p. 86, vol. 1) being the son of a banker:

> ...the Sir William Blancove, Baronet, of city feasts and charities, who, besides being a wealthy merchant, possessed of a very acute head for banking, was a scholarly gentleman, worthy of riches. His brother was Squire Blancove, of Wrexby; but between these two close relatives there exists no stronger feeling than what was expressed by open contempt of a mind dedicated to business on the one side, and quiet contempt of a life devoted to indolence on the other. (p. 83, vol. 1)

Here, the "man of business" and the gentry are again opposed, with the banker as the obvious superior of the idle Squire. Algernon, the second type of London gentleman, whose function it is to highlight Edward's redeemable features, is the son of Squire Blancove, the indolent aristocrat, and is therefore typically an "easy tripping sinner and flippant soul" (p. 85, vol. 6).

Set in opposition to the two villains of the piece is the necessary hero, possessing the virtues of "perseverance," "industry" and "self-culture." He enjoys the love of the novel's heroine, the eponymous Rhoda Fleming, whose strength of character is all along compared with the weakness of Dahlia, her fallen sister. Added to these main characters are an aristocratic lady of dubious reputation, a foolish miser uncle, and a couple of aged comic farm-hands, so there is a more than sufficient pool of elements for the construction of a Victorian tale of the popular kind.

This is not, however, the only way in which Rhoda Fleming could have been read by contemporary readers. For the intellectual's, it was possible to construct Dahlia, rather than Rhoda, as the novel's heroine, and thus read the

novel, in the words of one modern critic, as "a scathing attack on the superstitions of respectability."[12] It is not difficult to see Rhoda as a very flawed and unsympathetic heroine. Her rigid moral code, which sees her sister's salvation in terms of marriage at all costs to the first man that will take her, causes more trouble for all the other characters than Dahlia's initial fall. But this ambiguity is not foregrounded sufficiently for it to threaten the preconceptions of the contemporary middle-class readers for whom the novel was first of all, and most obviously, an uncomplicated moral tale, which confirmed rather than contradicted their "superstitions of respectability." There are many occasions when the narrator's comments reaffirm a straightforward moral conclusion, and milk the proper degree of sentiment from the situation, as in Chapter Thirty when Robert sees the destitute Dahlia:

> The young man who can look on them we call fallen women with a noble eye, is to my mind he that is most nobly begotten of the race, and likeliest to be the sire of a noble line. Robert was less than he; but Dahlia's aspect helped him to his rightful manliness. He saw that her worth survived.
>
> The creature's soul had put no gloss upon her sin. She had sinned, and her suffering was manifest. (p. 240. vol. 2)

The "sin" and the "suffering" of the woman, and the "nobility" of those who cast a compassionate eye on such sin and suffering, are terms familiar in the rhetoric of mid-Victorian morality. It would have been an easily assimilated scenario to Victorians who believed themselves morally obliged to aid such women, while emphasizing the sin

and only partially mitigating the suffering. The description of the sinner which follows the description of her plight is equally in tune with Victorian sentiment:

> The colourlessness of her features helped to it, and the off little close-fitting white linen cap which she wore to conceal the stubborn-twisting clipped curls of her shorn head, made her unlike women of our world. She was dressed in black up to the throat. her eyes were still luminously blue, and she let them dwell on Robert one gentle instant, giving him her hand humbly.
> (p. 241, vol. 2)

This passage contains all the markers necessary for the middle-class Victorian reader to construct an image which was acceptable in his moral scheme of things. The character is "unlike women of our world" for the fallen woman could never be taken back into society. Her actions had brought down a barrier between herself and other women. She is dressed in the Puritan clothes of penitence - "close-fitting white linen cap," "dressed in black up to the throat" - and has abandoned any attempt to look attractive - "colourlessness of her features," "shorn head." She cannot look anyone in the face, and her movements are perforce "gentle" and "humble."

The whole of the novel is pervaded by such moral rhetoric; in just one single chapter we find the following examples: "My sister is a Christian and forgives" (p. 249, vol. 2), "Now, when you can show him your husband, my dear, he'll lift his head" (p. 247, vol. 2), "Say, Dahlia was false, and repents, and has worked with her needle to subsist, and can, and will, for her soul strive to be clean"

(p. 250, vol. 2). For the intellectual elite, this might suggest parody, seeming so over-wrought as to invite ironic reading, as in fact exemplifying hypocrisy and false values. But within the idiom of popular Victorian fiction, it can be taken at face value.

The last chapter, in particular, lends itself to an empathetic reading by the vast majority of the mid-Victorian reading public. The novel moves towards closure with the usual concise summary of the characters future lives:

> There were joy-bells for Robert and Rhoda, but none for Dahlia and Edward.
>
> Dahlia lived seven years her sister's housemate, nurse of the growing swarm. She had gone through fire, as few woman have done in like manner, to leave their hearts among the ashes; but with that human heart she left regrets behind her. The soul of this young creature filled its place. It shone in her eyes and in her work, a lamp to her little neighbourhood; and not less a lamp of cheerful beams for one day being as another to her. In truth, she sat above the clouds. When she died she relinquished nothing. Others knew the loss. Between her and Robert there was deeper community on one subject than she let Rhoda share. Almost her last words to him, spoken calmly, but with the quaver of breath resembling sobs, were: "Help poor girls.[13]

The family circle revolves around the novel's moral hero and heroine. Society's future rests with the morally strong. Dahlia is allowed a place on the edge of this circle, but she does not linger on for long. She has been, in all but the literal sense of the word, "dead" ever since she suffered her fall - "hearts among the ashes," "she sat above the clouds," "When she died she relinquished nothing." Dahlia's sin has been forgiven, but it can never be forgotten. She can never be fully accepted back into the

circle. She wanders about instead, engaged in that virtuously Victorian activity of cheerful good works and then, suitably repentant to the last, she is satisfactorily tidied away. Her dying words have the moral triteness of a sampler text. They provide the required moral lesson, while being familiar enough not to disturb in any way comfortable Victorian moral values.

Dahlia's last words, "Help poor girls," would have a more disturbing effect on readers who resisted the dominant Victorian discourse of external propriety. The narrator makes a point of emphasizing that Dahlia has "gone through fire." In one sense it is the Puritan Rhoda who is outside the circle, unable to share in the "deeper community" between Robert and Dahlia. For the intellectuals, the "plain story" becomes the tragedy of a woman who suffers unjustly as the victim of the misguided values of her society - "the strongest thing in English letters since Shakespeare died," in R. L. Stevenson's words.[14] Depending on the contemporary reader's own moral preconceptions, Dahlia is either a sinner against the codes of her society, or the victim of the misguided values of that society. It can be seen in the above extract that the narrator addresses himself to both these attitudes. His middle-class moralizing is tempered by hints of the darker side of that moral scheme.

The Adventures of Harry Richmond

In Evan Harrington and Rhoda Fleming, the majority of the contemporary reading public could have perceived their

own ideology, the values and attitudes of the industrial and commercial classes, as being privileged in the text. The Adventures of Harry Richmond went a step further - it offered those readers the opportunity to witness the complete construction of a middle-class man.[14A] The novel spans the growth of Harry Richmond from childhood to manhood. It plots Harry's gradual disillusionment - from childish wonder to youthful contempt - with his father's aristocratic dreams, through to his final rejection of those dreams, and acceptance of life as it has to be lived.

The novel employs first person narration. The first chapter, which concerns the melodramatic kidnapping of the young child by his father, is written in the third person, to indicate that the child's hazy memories have been clarified by subsequent stories, but from the second chapter onwards all the adventures are related by the developing character of Harry Richmond himself. Readers have a role in the text as interpreters of events which the child narrator can only hint at: "I could understand that my father was disapproved of by them, and that I was a kind of shuttlecock flying between two battledores but why they pitied me I could not understand."[15] Unlike Evan Harrington and Rhoda Fleming, the novel has no third-person narrator to address readers with an authoritative verdict on events. Harry's immaturity makes his own analysis of his character and behaviour obviously unreliable. His development is therefore open to different interpretations, which are dependent to a large extent on readers' own

presuppositions.

Readers are able to plot Harry's progress as he moves back and forwards between the influences of two worlds. Intoxicated at times by his father's fantasies, he is sobered by his responsibilities to his grandfather. The contrast between these two influences on Harry is just one of several oppositions in the text. The opposition between the father, Richmond Roy, and the grandfather, Squire Beltham, is one between glittering aristocratic sham and stable bourgeois values. The Squire is described as "a curious study to me, of the Tory mind, in its attachment to solidity, fixity, certainty, its unmatched generosity within a limit, its devotion to the family and its family eye for the country" (p. 226, vol. 2). He embodies all the treasured Victorian values, whereas Richmond Roy can offer Harry nothing that is solid or secure - the scarlet livery, the fine houses, and the expensive education all vanish at a moment's notice.

This opposition between two characters leads on to an opposition between two ways of life - adventure/financial respectability. Richmond Roy allows money, all of which he wheedles out of other people, to slip through his fingers, whereas the Squire knows the value of money:

> You may not be aware that your grandfather has a most sagacious eye for business. Had he not been born a rich man he would still have been one of our very greatest millionaires. He has rarely invested but to double his capital; never speculated but to succeed...He knows how to go on his road without being cheated. For himself, your grandfather, Mr Harry, is the soul of honour.
> (p. 25, vol. 2)

Having "a sagacious eye for business" could be equated with being "the soul of honour" for one of Samuel Smile's readers. For him, Squire Beltham would be the novel's touchstone of good.

Another aspect of this opposition between two schemes of values is the choice of two heroines which the novel provides. Ottilia, whom Harry worships for the greater part of the novel, is a German princess. Beautiful, intellectual, excessively refined and other-worldly, she is as near to perfect as it is possible to be. Janet, whom Harry eventually marries, is stable, sensible, and ordinary. Janet would be a more familiar heroine to middle-class Victorians. The character of Ottilia would be too foreign and exotic an ideal of womanhood. Harry's eventual recognition of Janet's worth could be read by the contemporary reading public as a recognition of the proper Victorian values.

These proper Victorian values are introduced directly in a central scene in the novel through the character of the German professor, who undertakes to further Harry's education. The character voices a vitriolic attack on English society: "You have such wealth! You embrace half the world. You are such a little island! All this is wonderful. The bitterness is, you are such a mindless people" (p. 78, vol. 2). However, opportunities are provided in the text for the Victorian reader to avoid the challenge of such statements. The character's outburst is met with the narrator's comment: "So on, against good taste

and commonsense" (p. 83, vol. 2). To be at odds with such sound principle's as "good taste" and "commonsense," is to be beyond the pale, and if this does not put the character's remarks into their proper perspective, then they can accept them, as the narrator does, as a "jealous outburst of Continental bile" (p. 88, vol. 2). Readers who stood outside the mainstream of Victorian society, and dissociated themselves from the attitudes and values of the "mindless people," could read the narrator's remarks as being a naive confirmation of the Professor's criticism, but for the "you" who are under attack, Harry's retort could be read complacently at face value.

The Adventures of Harry Richmond in this way addresses both sections of the reading public. The intellectual elite achieved ambiguity by reading against the devices which provide closure. For them, the journey the character makes, which begins with adventure and all the joys of the imagination and ends in settled security, could have been regarded as a negative one. Photiades, for example, devotes an entire chapter entitled "George Meredith's Genius" to describing the novel in terms of the "strange paths, and fairy lands, where a commonplace novelist would never venture"[16], and for him Richmond Roy is the strongest presence in the novel. However readers among the industrial and commercial classes could see the path which leads to the "responsible position of a British husband and father" (p. 224) as being an honourable one, and the novel as having a moral which reaffirms their own values.

The novel's ending promotes this ambiguity. Harry and Janet return to Riversely as man and wife, but only to see the house burn down before their eyes. It is possible to see this ending as simply Harry's break with his past, the banishement of Richmond Roy's dreams from Harry's stable new world. However the fire also invites a less reasurring interpretation. Richmond Roy may have been destroyed, but so too is Riversely Grange, which has represented security for Harry in the novel from page one. As Gillian Beer notes, "the safe harbourage of Riversely Grange is seen to be as ephemeral as Richmond Roy's majesty" (p. 76). What Harry is left with at the end of this final adventure is for the reader to infer. Whether the novel's last words, commenting on Richmond Roy's disapearance, "He was never seen again" (p. 298, vol. 3), would have represented an optimistic or a pessimistic ending for contemporary readers depended on their values and attitudes.

Beauchamp's Career

Beauchamp's Career (1876), like the Adventures of Harry Richmond, concerns a child's growth to manhood in contemporary society. However, Beauchamp's career has nothing of the picaresque romance about it - all the choices Beauchamp makes are sombre ones. Meredith described Beauchamp's Career (1876) as "philosophical-political," with "no powerful stream of adventure,"[17] a description which partly invites us to consider the nature of the audience it addressed. In its first chapter, there is an announcement

of a political theme:

> This day, this hour, this life, and even politics, the centre and throbbing heart of it (enough, when unburlesqued, to blow the down off the gossamer-stump of fiction at a single breath, I have heard tell, must be treated of: men, and the ideas of men, which are - it is policy to be emphatic upon truisms - are actually the motives of men in a greater degree than their appetites: these are my themes. (p. 6)

An immediacy, evident in the phrase "This day...," places the commentator here, as if in direct communication with the reader. In the solutions it provides to the "philosophical-political" problems it poses, the text can present its answers as applicable to questions which engage that actual readership. A pact is offered to the reader in the use of the word "ours."

Nevil Beauchamp, the novel's hero, is an aristocratic radical, dedicated to the cause of the poor. His frenzied career throws him into contact with various aspects of an England in a state of flux. Contemporary ideas are in conflict with those which are essentially mediaeval, and the collision of interests between different sections of the community is leading to an increasingly important struggle for political power. Therefore, instead of one uniform image of English society, Beauchamp's Career portrays several different "Englands," several distinctive positions from which events can be viewed. Each position is associated with a leading character. Oppositions are set up between the landed aristocrat, the radical thinker, the

rising Manchester man and the rich drone, with Beauchamp standing outside these oppositions for what is ideally, and, in the light of his "career," naively, right.

In the working out of these oppositions, it is implied that readers share the superior viewpoint of the narrator, through the use of the words "we," "our," "us," which pervade the text. Readers have the opportunity to associate themselves with the narrator's opinions, and dissociate themselves from the target of his "ambitious shafts": "I shoot my arrows at a mark that is pretty certain to return them to me" (p. 10, vol. 1). Readers among the industrial and commercial classes could quite comfortably see themselves as being one of the "People" in the novel, a term which becomes more clearly defined as the narrative unfolds. The "People" largely escape ridicule. In Chapter One, in which the narrator describes England's confused reaction to the threat of war from France, the "People" are the tax-payers, the embodiments of sound-sense in comparison with press and Government, within whose machinations they are caught up: "Will you not own that the working of the system for scaring him and bleeding is very ingenious" (p. 9, vol. 1). The "People" are not the ones in control, the powers that be.

Neither are they the poor. The poor exist in the shadowy background of _Beauchamp's Career_, as objects to be argued over, cursed, pitied or lauded, but they do not participate in the action. They have no spokesman among their own number. The novel has a radical hero, but its

politics are not radical in any way which would seriously offend a conservative Victorian reader. The serious problems of the poor are only articulated selectively at second-hand. The only one of the "bread and cheese people" whose fate is impressed upon us, is that of the "insignificant bit of mudbank life" (p. 339, vol. 3), whom Nevil dies to save. It can quite comfortably be seen as a sorry bargain, with the stress on the word "insignificant." To the character of Everard Romfrey, "in mind a mediaeval baron, in politics a crotchety unintelligible Whig" (p. 25, vol. 1), the poor are his loyal serfs, to be protected as a part of his estate; almost as important to him as his hares and his birds. To the character of Beauchamp, with his "faith in the future" (p. 267, vol. 2), and ultra-radical programme to open museums on Sundays, they are the inspiration of his knight errantry. Dr Shrapnel, Beauchamp's radical sponsor, tells him: "You and I and some dozen labour to tie and knot them [the poor] to manliness. We are few; they are many and weak" (p. 190, vol. 2). The poor in the novel are the passive subject of an argument between two ideologies. No reading of the novel could privilege the opinions of the semi-literate poor. They were not included in the audience that the novel addressed.

If the "People" did not incorporate the poor, what the narrator calls "the legs of the country" (p. 43, 1), neither do they include "the head" (p. 43, vol. 1), the landed aristocracy. The aristocracy are the main object of satire in the novel. A mainstream audience could read _Beauchamp's_

Career as an attack on the power of the aristocracy, and a call for an increase in their own power. This was an issue of great importance to the industrial and commercial classes in 1876. By the 1870's the power of the landed interest was already in decline, as F. M. L. Thompson states: "The principle of inherited authority, which had been on trial throughout the nineteenth century, was at last found wanting by the educated public." The aristocracy retained its status only with the consent of the middle-classes, "who form the real and efficient mass of public opinion."[18] Political, economic and administrative power were in the control of, as Carlyle termed it in Past and Present (1845), the "industrial aristocracy."[19] Carlyle presents a critique of a parasitic class in the process of decay:

> The bough that is dead shall be cut away, for the sake of the tree itself. Old? yes, it is too old. Many a weary winter has it swung and creaked there, and gnawed and fretted, with its dead wood, the organic substance and still living fire of this good tree; many a long summer has its ugly naked brown defaced the fair green umbrage; every day it has done mischief, and that only; off with it, for the tree's sake, if for nothing more; let the Conservatism that would preserve cut it away. (p. 222)

The landed aristocrat is "dead wood," and has no part in furthering the prosperity of the country. Samuel Smiles writes of the need for the Peerage to be "fed, from time to time, by the best industrial blood of the country - the very liver, heart, and brain of Britain" (p. 202). The Victorian industrial and commercial classes, assured as they were of

being the "liver, heart and brain of Britain," were not going to pay uncritical homage to their social superiors.

Beauchamp's Career focuses this distrust of the landed class through its characterization of Everard Romfrey. He is portrayed as having an innate, unquestioning sense of the superiority of his class, and an anachronistic belief in its right to govern:

> The conversation he delighted in most might have been going on in any century since the Conquest. Grant him his not unreasonable argument upon his property in game, he was a liberal landlord. No tenants were forced to take his farms. He dragged none by the collar. He gave them liberty to go to Australia, Canada, the Americas, if they liked. (p. 28, vol. 1)

In dismissive dealings with all his opponents, he demonstrates an overwhelming confidence that his opinions represent views that prevail in his society. He proposes to passionately defend this position, a collection of archaic codes, and to "fight for every privilege his class possessed" (p. 45, vol. 1). In Chapter Three, Romfrey has a speech which is a xenophobic attack on the "cotton-spinners":

> ...they were binding us hand and foot to sell us to the biggest buyer, and were not Englishmen but Germans and Jews, and quakers and hybrids, diligent clerks and speculators, and commercial travellers, who have raised a fortune from foisting drugged goods on an idiot population.
>
> He loathed them for the curse they were to the country. And he was one of the few who spoke out. The fashion was to pet them. We stood against them; were half-hearted, and were beaten; and then we petted them, and bit by bit our

> privileges were torn away. We make lords of them to catch them, and they grocers of us by way of a return. 'Already,' said Everard, 'they have knocked the nation's head off, and dry-rotted the bone of the people.' (p. 41, vol. 1)

The majority of the reading public, made up as it was, from "diligent clerks and speculators," would take a different view from the Romfrey , as to who had "dry-rotted the bone of the people," and would read such passages as satirical critiques of the class which the fictional character was taken to represent.

If Everard Romfrey is, for a post-Carlyle readership, "dead wood" in Beauchamp's Career, then who is "organic substance"? Not Dr Shrapnel and his fellow radicals. The character of Shrapnel can be regarded by the mainstream reader as being as extreme and inflexible in his views as Romfrey is, preaching about the future as Romfrey does about the past, in speeches of opposing bias, but similiar intoxicated passion. Beauchamp's concern for humanity, and his honest self-sacrificing efforts to bring Dr Shrapnel's golden future a little nearer the present, make him the novel's undoubted hero, whatever the disposition of the reader.

However, it is also clear that Beauchamp's story is the "exhibition of a hero whom circumstances overcome" (p. 60, vol. 1). His idealism can easily be dismissed by the reader as being too fragile to survive in a practical world. He is not "substance" or "fibre." At the end of the novel he is, both literally and metaphorically, swept away by the

tide. He saves one life, rather than the abstract millions he dreamt of saving. The future does not lie with Beauchamp or with his kind of heroism.

In Beauchamp's Career, those readers who share the values and attitudes of "the diligent clerks and speculators" (p. 41, vol 1) are offered the opportunity to infer that the strength and stability of the "tree" lies with the character of Blackburn Tuckham, the middle-class Manchester lawyer. He survives the tale in a better condition than anyone, marrying Cecilia, the prize that Beauchamp is too indecisive to capture, proving that new money can win old rank. Where Beauchamp is cavalier, Tuckham is sensible, often to the point of banality: "A safe percentage of savings is the basis of civiisation" (p. 128, vol. 2). This may not be an inspiring motto, but it is a sound Victorian value. The character of Tuckham stands in the centre of the novel, between Romfrey and Shrapnel, as the representative of common-sense, the sense of the majority of the Victorian reading public.: "He invoked commonsense, instead of waving the flag of sentiment in retreat" (p. 130, vol. 2). These readers regarded their own wisdom, "common-sense," as being dominant in society, and all less soundly-based social values as being mere "sentiment." They were optimistically progressing, rather than in retreat.

Tuckham has "an air of solidity" (p. 283, vol. 2) and is "authoritative in speaking" (p. 283, vol. 2). This solidity and authority is never successfully challenged in

the novel by any of the other characters. None of the ideologies propounded dents Tuckham's confidence in his own:

> None despises the English in reality. Don't be misled, Miss Halkett. We're solid, that is the main point. The world feels our power, and has confidence in our good faith. I ask for no more...
> My aim for my country is to have the land respected. For that purpose we must have power; for power wealth; for wealth industry; for industry internal peace: therefore no agitation, no artificial divisions. All's plain in history and fact, so long as we do not obtrude sentimentalism. Nothing mixes well with that stuff - except poetical ideas!
> (pp. 183 - 4, vol. 3)

This speech is a consummate expression of the ideology of the Victorian business class. The text contains some of the key words and phrases in their vocabulary - "power," "wealth," "industry," "solid," "in reality," "good faith," "internal peace." The statements are emphatic, admitting no possibility of contradiction: "All's plain in history and fact," "that is the main point." This confidence is bolstered up with national pride, "None despise the English," and characterised by egoism, "I ask...," "My aim..." For Meredith's intellectual coterie, Tuckham's speech could be read as satire. His confidence undeniably verges on complacency. His assertion that "all's plain", obviously exposes the limitations of his viewpoint. However, the system of values so clearly articulated by Tuckham in this speech, though denigrated by radical and aristocratic characters alike, never really loses its authority; no other credible system of values is shown to

exist. The novel can be seen by bourgeois readers as confirming the claim that "the lead of men of property is in most cases sure to be the safe one" (p. 127, vol. 2). Commonsense, perceptive laughter, and soundness of heart, are identified with the industrial and commercial classes in the novel; not with the aristocrats, the idealists, or the poor. The taxpayers, the Manchester men, the "concrete mass," are the "People" whom the novel appears to address. They could read this supposedly radical novel without having to accommodate any uncongenial ideas.

However, one more aspect of the relationship between the "People" and the aristocracy needs to be taken account of, if their relationship in the novel is to be reflected accurately. Beauchamp's Career incorporates a paradox which we have already identified in Evan Harrington - the middle-class's ambivalent regard for titled nobility. Despite the confidence which Blackburn Tuckham and his peers exuded, the aristocracy still had the power to impress them. Everard Romfrey can be seen to possess redeeming features, which are just as much identified with his rank as are his faults. His brutal whipping of Shrapnel is motivated by his chivalry to women. He believes that Shrapnel has slandered Rosamund Culling's character. The act is essentially that of a primitive savage, but it is given the gloss of the motive of a noble knight, protector and gentleman, a representative of generations of heroic ancestors. The gloss is all the more seductive because the sensational violence happens between chapters, and we are only concerned

with the cause and effects. When Romfrey discovers his mistake, his code of honour forces him to make a sincere apology. His behaviour towards Beauchamp is erratic, but generous, and, despite his deep disapproval of Beauchamp's politics, he never severs the dynastic connection. Although aristocratic characters in the novel, such as Cecil Baskelett, who baits Dr Shrapnel by publicly reading the radical's personal letter to Beauchamp, cannot be seen as being other than weak and vindictive, Romfrey nonetheless, however dislikeable, displays the features of a noble gentleman.

Everard Romfrey needs to be such an ambiguous character because the middle-class reader retained his respect for the class which he aspired, however distantly, to join. Samuel Smiles in Self-Help uses the peerage as the ultimate carrot to encourage his self-improving readers. In Chapter Seven, entitled "Industry and the Peerage", he quotes numerous examples of, "sons of attorneys, grocers, clergymen, merchants, and hardworking members of the middle class" (p. 216), who became peers, to prove his supposition that "No class is ever long stationary. The mighty fall, and the humble are exalted. New families take the place of the old, who disappear among the ranks of the common people" (p. 203). A middle-class Victorian reader, therefore, while not wishing to see the aristocracy hold political power, did wish to see its social standing maintained.

The fact that Beauchamp's Career addressed itself in part to the sympathies of the mainstream reading public has

been overlooked by modern critics. They have followed the lead of Meredith's intellectual contemporaries, in reading this "philosophical-political" novel as a dramatic statement of the author's radical sentiments. Jack Lindsay believes that Meredith was "knitting energies for the next large-scale extension of struggle,"[20] and Gillian Beer that "the novel suggests that heroism can now find useful expression only by engaging in the corporate struggle to change society radically" (p. 93). Radicalism was a familiar discourse to the "new aristocracy of intellect"[21] who read the Fortnightly Review, the periodical Beauchamp's Career was first serialized in. This periodical, discussed at greater length in Chapter One (pp. 19 - 23), had a long association with "radicalism, religious, political and social dissent"[22]. For readers of the Fortnightly Review, who appreciated what was described as the "crusading zeal"[23] of many of its contributors, Nevil Beauchamp was an appropriate and sympathetic hero. Beauchamp's defeat reveals to them not his individual weakness, but the sickness of his society and the need for "corporate struggle." Blackburn Tuckham and his kind thus become victors by default. These enthusiastic admirers of Meredith's radical vision were disturbed in 1893, when extracts were published of the weekly leading articles Meredith had written for The Ipswich Journal, a Conservative newspaper, between 1860 and 1868. In these articles, he had apparently "written in support of political principles he did not accept," in order to "pay tradesmen's bills."[24] One

only has to look at the text of Beauchamp's Career to realise that this double address was not confined to Meredith's journalism.

One of our Conquerors

If Beauchamp's Career could be seen to reaffirm the values of the industrial and commercial classes, then those same values would seem to be under attack in One of our Conquerors, published fifteen years later in 1891. Meredith himself regarded the novel as being a commentary on the contemporary scene, "a close observation of the modern world,"[25] and "a presentation of the atmosphere of the present time."[26] The novel takes one of Smile's "men of business" as its focus for this analysis of the "modern world", and plots his fall from the peak of success. Readers of the Fortnightly Review, in which the novel was first serialized, primed by Ruskin, Morris and Arnold to despise "life in the National Shop"[27], were ready to appreciate a critique of such a hero. The time was right for a ruthless dissection of "one of our conquerors" for the benefit of the intellectual coterie, whom Meredith was aware formed most of his readership by 1891. However, the novel is not addressed to this coterie readership alone. In analysing One of our Conquerors we will see how this critique was executed without alienating the wider reading public, for whom the "man of business" as such was not a natural opponent.

The title of the novel immediately addresses itself to

the entire contemporary reading public. Victor Radnor is "one of our conquerors." Readers are thus encouraged to recognize the central character as a recognisable member of their own society. At the same time, he is not one of "us." Radnor is set apart as "conqueror," not only from the intellectual coterie, but also from the vast majority of readers amongst the industrial and commercial classes who have never attained such success. The word "conqueror" can be perceived satirically - Radnor conquers through his material power, rather than his spiritual power - or as a simple statement of fact, as a latter day example of one of the success stories that Smile's had popularized thirty years previously. The title invites the same "interest which all more or less feel in the labours, the trials, the struggles and the achievements of others" ("Preface", p. iii). The reader becomes the spectator of the fate of a character who, however much part of the "present time," is at one remove from their own lives.

The critical distance which the title allows the reader to put between himself and the central character is encouraged by the constant undermining of realism in the novel. One of our Conquerors takes contemporary life as its theme, but, like The Egoist, it does not give the illusion that it is reflecting that world as the majority of readers would see it. From the beginning of Chapter One, the reader knows what is going to happen in the novel. The first sentence sums up in metaphor the progress of the whole narrative. Introduced as "A gentleman, noteworthy for a

lively countenance" (p. 1, vol. 1), Victor Radnor literally falls and is laid "flat amid the shuffle of feet" (p. 1, vol. 1). This sentence portends Radnor's fate. He falls from the peak of success, and experiences the collapse of his entire world. The metaphor is made obvious to the reader. The character himself is seen to recognise the significance of this fall. It shakes his confidence, and awakens in a man, "who had never hitherto missed a step, or owned to the shortest of collapses" (p. 8, vol. 1), the idea that he is not invulnerable. This "idea" haunts him throughout the novel, and is only grasped entirely, as Chapter One foretells, "nigh upon the close of his history" (p. 18, vol. 1). Readers are presented with the entirely unrealistic precept that "a tumble distorts our ideas of life" (p. 9, vol. 1).

There then follows a discourse, the first of many, in which Radnor tries to reassure himself as to "England's grandeur, vitality, stability, her intelligent appreciation of her place in the universe" (p. 10, vol. 1). The intellectual coterie would have appreciated immediately the hollowness of Radnor's rhetoric. However, the image which follows of "the Foreigner, jealous, condemned to admire in despair of outstripping, like Satan worsted" (p. 12, vol. 1) is too exaggerated to elicit the approval of even the mainstream reader. In tone, Radnor's speech is closer to the mad ramblings of Everard Romfrey, than to the composed sobriety of Blackburn Tuckham. When the character describes the industrial scene before him, and then asks "Surely a

scene pretending to sublimity?" (p. 13, vol. 1), readers, however much they might identify with the general idea behind Radnor's remark, having taken account of the "mounds of steam" and "rolls of brown smoke" (p. 13, vol. 1), must realise that Radnor is overstating the case. The narrator quickly follows with a direct address to readers, in case the irony has gone unnoticed: "Commerce invoked is a Goddess" (p. 13, vol. 1). Radnor then makes another statement which readers can easily perceive as being unsatisfactory: "And how of the Law? But the Law is always, and must ever be, the Law of the stronger." (p. 16, vol. 1) Even Smiles's, what ever his book set out to illustrate, had to provide a gloss to apologise for not having devoted enough space to failure, and admitted that "the best of men may fail in the best of causes" ("Preface", p. 5). Radnor's speeches accommodate the presuppositions of the intellectual coterie. Readers among the industrial and commercial classes would not recognise their principles in his wild rhetoric.

Such rhetorical and ironic remarks provide a commentary on the condition of society which runs through the whole of <u>One of our Conquerors</u>. In Chapter Five, in particular, the theme is foregrounded. The chapter contains a story within a story, in the form of excerpts from the fictitious "nationally interesting Poem, or Dramatic Satire, once famous THE RAJAH IN LONDON (London, Limbo and Sons, 1889)', now obliterated under the long wash of Press-matter." (p. 66, vol. 1). The narrator presents this satire as a foreign

traveller's tale, in the tradition of such works as Flora Tristan's London Journal.[28] He includes circumstantial evidence of its publication and enthusiastic reviews. It is written in the present tense to increase the illusion that it is an immediate commentary on events. Contemporary readers are given an analysis of English society from the supposed viewpoint of one of the conquered. It is a "national portrait" which culminates in the inquiry "But can they suffer so and live?" (p. 68, vol. 1). The narrator then intervenes to underline the point:

> "For this London, this England, Europe, world, but especially this London, is rather a thing for hospital operations than for poetic rhapsody...Mind is absent, or somewhere so low down beneath material accumulations that it is inexpressive, powerless to drive the ponderous bulk to such excisings, purgeings, purifyings as might - as may, we will suppose, render it acceptable, for a theme of panegyric, to the Muse of Reason." (p. 72, vol. 1)

This rhetoric conveys one view of society out of the several which the text offers up for readers to consider. This denounciation is clearly set in opposition to Radnor's lyricism on the subject of England's grandeur. The Rajah's opinions being "dramatic satire" are not to be left undisputed, but they are endorsed by the narrator, and are therefore privileged. However, although this denunciation of the values of the conqueror - "mind" subordinated to "material accumulations" - is offered up for the appreciation of the intellectuals, "London, England, Europe, the world" is too diffuse a target, for the attack to

seriously challenge the attitudes of the wider reading public. The foreign traveller's tale acts more as a digression for those intellectuals who pride themselves on being above involvement with "the enchanted horse of the tale" (p. 19, vol. 1), a piece of "dramatic satire" to create the illusion of serious social comment.

The "two main questions" which Meredith's admirers believed that <u>One of our Conquerors</u> confronted were, in the words of one reviewer, "England and Mammon, and England and Women."[29] The novel appeared to them to work, as <u>Beauchamp's Career</u> does, by a series of oppositions. Various approaches to each question were represented by different characters, and discussed in conversations between these characters. Radnor represented the Optimist, with his outdated mid-Victorian belief in the rightness of society: "Naturally he was among the happiest of human creatures; he willed it so, with consent of circumstances; a boisterous consent, as when votes are reckoned for a favourite candidate" (p. 22, vol. 1). Such optimism was no longer acceptable to the intellectual elite. Leslie Stephen wrote in 1876: "There is a deep sadness in the world. Turn and twist the thought as you may, there is no escape. Optimism would be soothing if it were possible; in fact it is impossible."[30] At the other extreme from Radnor's optimism, is the unrelieved pessimism of Colney Durance. Through his character a very bleak appraisal of late Victorian society is voiced:

> "Beaten by the Germans in Brewery; too! Dr Schlesien has his right to crow. We were ahead of them, and they came and studied us, and they studied Chemistry as well; while we went on down our happy-go-lucky old road; and then had to hire their young Professors, and then to import their beer." (p. 75, vol. 2)

In this paragraph, the criticism is focused on the erosion of Britain's lead in commerce, upon which the optimism of earlier decades had been founded. In these debates, as one of the characters is seen to perceive, "Society was being attacked and defended" (p. 86, vol. 2). However, the narrator does not agree fully with either of these viewpoints. Durance can only derive "compensation from the acid of his phrases, for the failure to prick and goad, and work amendment" (p. 46, vol. 2). Pessimism can help to identify society's ills, but it affords no cure. A compromise is suggested in the character of Dartrey Fenellan. His view is presented as being the balanced one. He neither ignores nor wallows in the problems of his society, but rather puts forward proposals for change. His attitudes are never undercut by the narrator, as those of the other two characters are. At the end of the novel, it is Fenellan along with the heroine whom the narrator promises will have the prospect of a brighter future in a better world.

These oppositions between different attitudes are made obvious to the reader through direct addresses by the narrator: "The three walking in the park, with their bright view, and black view, and neutral view of life, were a

comical trio." (p. 85, vol. 2), "For Victor Radnor and Colney Durance were the Optimist and Pessimist of their sociey" (p. 83, vol. 2). The debate is foregrounded and the contemporary reader, having been primed by the narrator, is involved in deciding upon the rights and wrongs of the argument.

Within the general debate about the nature of contemporary society in <u>One of our Conquerors</u>, there exists a more particular discussion about the role of women in that society. This discussion is, as with the general one, carried on through oppositions between characters, with the intervention of the narrator to directly encourage the reader to endorse one view rather than another. Women of two generations are seen in contrast to one another. Nataly and Nesta, mother and daughter, are shown to have been brought up in different societies with different values. Nataly, despite having defied convention in her youth by running away with Radnor, has been in all other respects a submissive and placid wife. Only in one chapter does the reader see "Nataly in Action", as Chapter 25 is significantly titled. Her subservience, the narrator tells us, has clearly been bad policy. Her quiet compliance has contributed to Radnor's downfall and her own internal disease. The narrator unequivocably condemns the popular ideal of womanhood: "She is the enemy of Nature - Tell us how? She is the slave of existing conventions - And from what cause? She is the artificial production of a state that exalts her so long as she sacrifices daily and hourly

to the artificial" (p. 141, vol. 2). The character of Nesta is set in contrast to all these "artificial" and, as the intellectual coterie must have regarded them, outdated virtues. She is a late Victorian heroine, "one of the modern young women who have drunk of ideas" (p. 70, vol. 2). She represents bravery, directness, freshness, vitality. The narrator rewards these qualities with the prospect of a happy life that has been denied to the older and more timid woman. The debate, which centres on the opposition between the new and the old ideal woman, is extended in the opposition between the two relationships which the women form, and in the opposing attitudes of the two male characters.

There are, however, ambiguities in the way both women are treated in the novel. Readers can see Nataly's misery as being the result, not of her inaction, but of the one move she made to step outside the bounds of convention - her elopement with Radnor. Nataly's tortured conscience casts a shadow over the whole novel:

> Nataly's untutored scruples, which came side by side with her ability to plead for her acts, restrained her from complicity in the ensnaring of a young man of social rank to espouse the daughter of a couple socially insurgent - stained, to common thinking, should denunciation come.
> (p. 121, vol. 2)

No other character successfully challenges "common thinking" on this subject. The other characters share Nataly's fear of the consequences "should denunciation come". Nesta may

be a freer spirit, but as with all Meredith's heroines - for example, Clara in The Egoist and, as we shall see in Chapter Five, Diana of the Crossways - this freedom leads directly to the security of marriage. The opposition of Nataly and Nesta is, in many ways, no different to that of Dahlia and Rhoda in Rhoda Fleming. The weak, passive one falls, suffers the agonies of her position in society and finally dies, while the strong pure woman marries happily and is the one left to face the future as the novel ends. One of our Conquerors offers far less of a challenge to the morals of its respectable middle class readers than Meredith's admirers claimed.

This interpretation of the role of Nataly and Nesta in the novel suggests that One of our Conquerors offered the wider reading public an opportunity to read against the schemes that the intellectual coterie imposed upon it. Chapter Two opens with a direct address to readers - a statement of the form the narrative will take:

> The fair dealing with readers demands of us, that a narrative shall not proceed at slower pace than legs of a man in motion; and we are still but little more than midway across London Bridge. But if a man's mind is to be taken as a part of him, the likening of it, at an introduction, to an army on the opening march of a great campaign, should plead excuses for tardy forward movements in consideration of the large amount of matter you have to review before you can at all imagine yourselves to have made his acquaintance.
> (p. 19, vol. 1)

The narrator explains that what readers have so far learnt of Radnor is only an introduction. His character is set up

as a subject of study. This character will not be a mere symbol of the values and attitudes of his class, set up to be ridiculed, as in Chapter One. Radnor will be provided with an individual history and psychology. The intellectuals may have read _One of our Conquerors_ as a discourse on the problems of contemporary society, but the novel invited the wider reading public to read it as a complex character study.

Read as a character study _One of our Conquerors_ could be seen to quite comfortably reaffirm the values of the business class, which the intellectuals read it as satirizing. Radnor's wealth stem's not from his business acumen, but from his marriage as a young man to a rich old widow. His elopement with Nataly, and all its consequences, followed on from this first wrong move. Radnor is haunted throughout the novel by "a small band of black dissentients in a corner, a minute opaque body, devilish in their irreconcilability, who maintain their struggle to provoke, discord, with a cry disclosing the one error of his youth, the sole bad step chargeable on his antecedents" (p. 33, vol. 1). This initial "bad step" is perpetuated by Radnor in his failure to face up to his conscience, and take some of the blame for what has happened. The deed may not be as black as Colney Durance paints it - "entering into bonds with somebody's grandmother for the simple sake of browsing on her thousands" (p. 74, vol. 1) - but Radnor, his own strongest advocate, cannot himself provide a convincing explanation, preferring a sentimental interpretation of his

own history, which culminates in the confident statement: "No Fenellan I have nothing on my conscience with regard to the woman" (p. p. 55, vol. 1). He is right up to the end presented as "a histrionic self-deceiver" (p. 94, vol. 1). Radnor's tragedy could be seen as stemming from his sacrifice of "a slice of his youth to gain it (money) without labour" (p. 74, vol. 1), and all the lies and prevarications that follow. In this, he fails to meet the most important of Smile s' criteria for his heroes, "the upright performance of individual duty" (p. ix). As in all the novels we have looked at in this chapter, the novel does not address itself exclusively to the attitudes of the intellectual coterie, who in their admiration claimed it as their own.

CHAPTER FIVE

ADDRESS AND POPULAR SUCCESS

THREE STUDIES

Diana of the Crossways was Meredith's sole popular success, reaching a third edition within three months of its publication in February, 1885.[1] The novel was recognised by a contemporary critic to have "made better headway with the public than any of its predecessors." The reason given for this popularity was that Meredith had attempted "to do something different from his usual line."[2] What is the difference between *Diana of the Crossways* and its predecessors which enabled it to address itself successfully to popular taste?

Diana of the Crossways is most easily distinguished from Meredith's other novels by the notoriety of its subject matter. The contemporary public perceived the novel to be based on the life of Caroline Norton, a famous figure from the recent past. The novel's publication therefore revived one of the most sensational scandals of the first half of the nineteenth century, that caused by the 1836 divorce case against Caroline Norton in which her husband cited Lord Melbourne. Why did Meredith draw on this material fifty years after the event?

The most common contemporary response to this question, endorsed by recent critics, is to view the scandal as the

focal point for an analysis of women's position in society. The novel's central theme is identified as being a contrast between a woman's character and the way in which society describes her. The public persona of Caroline Norton, one of the most written about women of her time, whose career was "still alive in people's memory,"[3] provided an easily accessible symbol of this dilemma. Lorna Sage puts forward this type of interpretation in her introduction to the novel. After supplying a brief biography of Caroline Norton she writes; "Most of this Meredith uses, trying to find a plausible, living version of the woman who might have lurked behind the anecdote and gossip."[4] The novel, it is here suggested, uses the scandal as no more than a necessary starting point in serious pursuit of "a living version of the woman."

Such interpretations take their cue from what the narrator implies in the manner in which he addresses the reader. He adopts a lofty tone and persistently defends himself from any accusation of scandal-mongering, dissociating himself from the "stone-hurling urchin."[5] The reader is pressed to sustain a similar sobriety: "It is a test of the civilised to see and hear, and add no yapping to the spectacle" (p. 4, vol. 1). The novel promises a serious analysis of character, not a sensational reworking of an old tale.

However, it will be argued in this chapter that Meredith's choice of subject matter, and its treatment, were not entirely determined by the high-mindedness implied by

the narrator which its critics have generally accepted. In fact the evidence suggests that in using a divorce case as his main material Meredith was addressing his novel to an already established market; and he developed the topic in the way most likely to appeal to this readership.

Contemporary Divorce Reports

Newspaper reports of divorce cases again illustrate that the late nineteenth century reading public was plural. Divorces began to be reported in the newspapers after the 1857 Divorce Act, when divorces rose from the four per year obtained by Parliamentary proceeding to over two hundred per year.[6] By 1885, such reports had developed their own particular styles, and were at the height of their popularity with the public. Allen Horstmann, in his study of Victorian divorce, stresses the amount of exposure that these reports were given in the newspapers, and the avidity with which the public fed upon them:

> "The flood of corruption which was being poured over the land" - Lord John Manners' words describing the newspaper reports of divorce trials - summarised the views of many. Queen Victoria, writing to Lord Campbell about censoring the reports, was not amused. The cases, she penned "are of so scandalous a character that it makes it almost impossible for a paper to be trusted in the hands of a young lady or boy. None of the worst French novels from which careful parents would try to protect their children can be as bad." Besides corrupting youth the reports, some thought were worse than the pornography previously purveyed in London's Holywell Street, attacked by the Obscene Materials Act of 1879"[7]

These "scandalous" reports, however, addressed their readers in a style which clearly separated them in the minds of the majority of the reading public from "the pornography previously purveyed in London's Holywell Street."[8] Their very appearance in reputable newspapers like The Times lent a certain respectability to these reports. This sense of respectability was strengthened by the adoption of the factual tone of the serious articles on the same page. This tone of propriety and informativeness lent credence to the argument that newspaper readers were participating in a nationwide watch-dog committee, safe-guarding the sanctity of marriage. Allen Horstmann identifies the readers of these reports as "Respectables" (p. 169), and provides the following analysis of their motives:

> Efforts to reduce the newspaper coverage of trials - due to their salaciousness - were opposed, even by opponents of divorce, such as Richard Malins, because secret or unreported trials would remove that check upon the violation of the marriage vows which the fear of publicity now supplied. With such a rationale, the press freely published the exotic and erotic details, claiming it all as a public service (even as they also enhanced sales). (p. 99)

Horstmann, here, suggests that a pretension to a noble motive, "a public service," made readers feel more comfortable in their curiosity, and thereby furthered the newspapers more practical aim; "enhancing sales." The style of reporting divorce cases therefore had to reflect the readers' sense of decency, without detracting from the sensational aspect of the subject which aroused the readers'

interest. The following extract from a report in <u>The Times</u>, 16th February, 1885, the date on which <u>Diana of the Crossways</u> was published, shows how it was done:

> Mrs Helen Maude Wodehouse, whose maiden name was Brooke, sought the dissolution of her marriage with the Rev. William Wentworth Wodehouse on the ground of his adultery and cruelty. The respondent denied the charges and further pleaded condonation, which was denied by the petitioner. Mr and Mrs Wodehouse were married in June, 1878, at Kensington, and there are two children of the marriage. The respondent is rector of Disington, near Whitehaven, in the County of Cumberland. Mrs Wodehouse, in her evidence, stated that she and the respondent cohabited as man and wife until July 28th 1884, and lived under the same roof at the rectory till August 19th in that year, when the respondent left her in their house, where she remained up to the 23rd when her father took her away from it, she not being able to obtain any food from the kitchen after the departure of her husband...A medical gentleman gave evidence to the effect that, speaking to him of a child born to Mrs Wodehouse last year, the respondent said he did not believe it was his child...A witness was then examined to show that on his own promises Mr Wodehouse had been seen acting in a very suspicious manner with the other servant mentioned in the petition; but his lordship observed that, as adultery with one woman was admitted by the respondent, it was scarcely worth while for counsel representing the petitioner to trouble themselves about the other case of the same nature.

Here, the style turns a portrait of extreme domestic misery into reading material for "Respectables," through a controlled use of legal language. A series of accusations and insinuations are presented as simple matters of fact, recounted in the name of justice. A tale of "adultery and cruelty" is told in unemotional terms, for example: "respondent," "cohabited," "condonation," "petitioner."

Names and dates are stressed, but with no hint that suffering might lie behind these particulars. Mrs Wodehouse may have starved in the vicarage for four lonely days, in so pitiable a manner that her father had to rescue her, but the phrase "she not being able to obtain any food from the kitchen" directs attention away from her feelings, foregrounding and factually explaining, paternal intervention, without suggesting solicitude.

On closer reading, what The Times reported as fact amounts to little more than gossip and hearsay. Witnesses do no more than provide such dubious pieces of evidence as that, "Mr Wodehouse had been seen acting in a very suspicious manner." Further gossip gets its credence from the designation of a witness as "a medical gentleman," a designation with respectable and scientific associations. This highly respectable gentleman does no more than repeat malicious rumours, but the reader is not encouraged to assess reliability, merely to accept his credentials and read on. The report closes with a statement which claims a high-minded refusal of superfluous speculation in favour of straight facts. However, what it actually does is to draw the reader's attention to the potential for further scandal lurking in "the other case of the same nature," which has mysteriously been established on apparently no factual grounds whatsoever.

In this short passage, a rather sad story is shaped to feed the readers' appetites for sensation. It elevates itself in readers' minds by its tone of simply reporting a

respectable legal proceeding for the supposedly moral reason that the public has a right to know. The reader need feel none of the guilt which might follow an enjoyment of sensational novels - an interest in reports of divorce cases was no more culpable than the interest a magistrate takes in a disturbance of the peace.

The above report contains one more interesting feature. The respondent is a rector; a rector, although a member of the middle classes, had a role in society which was set apart from that of the majority of readers. Allen Horstmann suggests that the "Respectables" preferred to read about scandals which were at one remove from their own lives, as was Rev. Wodehouse's, and as also were sordid accounts either of the lower classes or of the aristocracy, engaged in crimes which could simultaneously be condemned and enjoyed at a safe distance. He identifies this attitude in the following way:

> 'Immorality was the taint of the upper and the necessary disease of the lower classes.' The value of feeling superior to 'dissolute aristocrats' and 'over-tempted plebians' pushed Respectables into tolerating hypocrisy. Indeed as that hypocrisy reinforced those feelings of superiority respectability gained by emphasising the hypocrisy. (p. 169)

Divorce reports derived their popularity from their double-edged technique of providing elements of sensation, while also supplying the reader with a respectable reason to be interested. It was possible to enjoy all the most salacious details, and still pretend to a sense of outrage.

Readers of the popular divorce reports in the respectable newspapers were therefore treated to safe contemporary scandals which exploited their hypocrisy.

In turning now to Diana of the Crossways, with the example of these reports in mind, the novel can be seen to appeal to the hypocrisy of the reading public using a similar technique. The dedication, which Meredith attached to subsequent editions of the novel, is one of the most obvious indications that he was aware that a scandal, handled in a particular way, would prove a powerful attraction to readers:

> A lady of high distinction for wit and beauty, the daughter of an illustrious Irish House, came under the shadow of a calumny. It has latterly been examined and exposed as baseless. The story of Diana of the Crossways is to be read as fiction.

This epigraph creates a more subtle effect than would at first be supposed. Although it emphatically denies any connection between the novel and Caroline Norton, the very denial establishes the connection. Moreover, the facts about this unnamed actual woman that are stressed are those which are developed in Meredith's fictitious portrait of Diana: "wit and beauty, the daughter of an illustrious Irish House." The "calumny" referred to is Caroline Norton's supposed betrayal of a political secret, an accusation which had been largely dismissed at the time, but which was revived by the publication of Diana of the Crossways. The claim that a rumour that had long lain dormant has now been

"examined" casts a suspicion which survives the conclusion that it has been "exposed as baseless". The need for an author to protest the obvious fact that his novel is fiction alerts the reader to the other manner in which the novel had been read, as thinly disguised biography. Rather than dispelling the conjecture surrounding Diana of the Crossways these few lines reawaken interest in scandal past.

The Tragic Comedians

Diana of the Crossways was not Meredith's first use of scandal to attract readers to a novel. In The Tragic Comedians, published immediately prior to Diana of the Crossways in 1880, he similarly introduces a series of fictional events with a reference to a historical episode. The novel is subtitled "A Study in a Well-known Story." The story referred to is as sensational as that connected with Caroline Norton. It concerns the love affair and death in a duel of the German socialist leader Ferdinand Lassalle. These scandalous events had occurred only sixteen years before, and had been recounted as recently as 1879 by the other leading participant, Helene von Racowitza, in her autobiography.[9]

However, despite its scandalous subject matter, The Tragic Comedians was not a popular, or critical success, and was largely regarded as something of an eccentric mistake.[10] The novel's failure with the reading public suggests that the success of Diana of the Crossways was not due to the use

of scandal alone, but rather to the way in which that scandal was treated. An analysis of the structure of The Tragic Comedians, "the real process of its constitution," (p. 49) to quote Pierre Macherey, before we look in detail at Diana of the Crossways, will throw light on the construction of the later novel, whose popularity suggests that Meredith learnt from his mistakes.

The Tragic Comedians is an odd novel. It is easy to make impressionistic statements about the novel's intensity, its slightly strange subject matter, its intermittent obliqueness, its un-Victorian quality, to explain away this oddity, but how are these impressions actually produced?

Before looking at the text in detail, some obvious features of the general construction of the novel need to be noted. The Tragic Comedians is a short novel by the standards of the time - only 210 pages in the first edition (compared to the 429 pages of The Egoist and the 515 pages of Diana of the Crossways).[18] Related to the length, is the question of the small number of characters - two lovers, two friends, two parents, a rival and the occasional chaperone. Such a limited cast indicates an exclusive concentration on a central sequence of events, with no subplot, no chapter length digressions, no picaresque roamings from the point. The setting too is pared down to a functional minimum. Wholly European, it is claustrophobic in its confinement to an assortment of aristocratic drawing-rooms - Elective Affinities, minus the bedrooms, corridors and landscape gardens, and with only one couple.

The 210 pages of the text are divided up into nineteen chapters. The Preface (which does not appear in the original serialisation) and the final chapter, act as bookends, short rhetorical essays which place the action, setting up what is to follow as a subject for study, and finally concluding the lesson. The other chapters centre on the action from the point of view of Clotilde, or from that of Alvan, or on both characters in dialogue. Chapters in which Alvan and Clotilde meet (4, 6, 7, 8,) tend to be crisis points which serve to move events into another phase. The rest of the chapters reflect upon, or anticipate, these events; six focusing on Alvan, seven on Clotilde. The narrator constantly undercuts the pretensiousness of the thoughts given to the lovers, cancelling out the sugar coating of romance and heroism which their reflections attribute to events. The Clotilde chapters are mainly to be found in the first half of the novel before the final meeting, whereas the Alvan chapters are mostly in the second half. Clotilde is directly introduced in the first three chapters, while Alvan appears only through hearsay, an object of curiosity for both the reader and the character of Clotilde. At a mid-way point, Chapters Eleven and Twelve, Clotilde's position is presented. The succeeding chapters present Alvan's position, and by juxtaposition foreground the misunderstanding, incongruities and incompatibilities in the relationship. Chapters Thirteen, Fourteen, Fifteen and Sixteen, focused on Alvan's reactions, build up a frenzied tension which culminates in a duel. Much of the potential

for sensation inherent in a fictional duel is then, difused as the narrative focus shifts, first of all to a dialogue between the Baroness and Tresten (Chapter Seventeen) and then to Clotilde's confused response (Chapter Eighteen). The duel is therefore refracted, not reported, in keeping with the over-all essay-like stance of the novel which proclaimed itself a "study." Pronounced from the Preface onwards as being inappropriate and insecurely founded, optimism fades before half the story is told; the latter part of the novel is a protracted analysis of decline which has already been predicted.

Instead of aiming at enigma and narrative excitement, the novel moves through discursive layers established in its very first chapter. The subtitle and Preface are shot through with vocabulary which claims didactic worthiness for what is to follow: "expository," "examination," "critical acumen," "problem," "educated," "lesson." The effect of a lesson is developed in Chapter One by a movement back and forward from the story of Clotilde to statements of general application, such as that made in the first sentence: "An unresisted lady-killer is probably less aware that he roams the pastures in pursuit of a coquette, than is the diligent Arachne that her web is for the devouring lion"(p.4). The second sentence follows on, "At an early age Clotilde von Rudiger was dissatisfied with her conquests, though they were already numerous in her seventeenth year,..."(p.4). "Coquetry" is the introductory word to Clotilde's character. The fourth sentence begins by telling us this, but in the

second clause turns to a discussion of coquettes in general which lasts for the remainder of the first paragraph: "Nature had disposed her to coquetry, which is a pastime counting among the arts of fence, and often innocent, often serviceable, though sometimes dangerous, in the centres of polished barbarism known as aristocratic societies,..."(p.4). A similar shift happens in the second paragraph. The first sentence begins "Clotilde's..."(p.5), the next "She was..."(p.5), the third "In France..."(p.5) Then this paragraph too continues in aphorisms: "Vigilant foresight is not so much practised where the world is less accurately comprehended."(p.6); "Young people of Clotilde's upper world everywhere, and the young women of it especially, are troubled by an idea drawn from what they inhale and guess at in the spirituous life surrounding them, that the servants of the devil are the valiant host,..."(p.6); "The world is the golden apple..."(p.6). The link is made between Clotilde's actions and those of women in life, but not in such a way as to directly involve the reader with the character.

Roger Fowler has analysed the use of generalization in promoting illusionism. In his discussion of the use of "generic sentences" in George Eliot's novels, Fowler suggests that through these sentences "the reader cumulatively builds up a picture of the stock of 'common sense' (ie. ideology) on which George Eliot depends in presenting and evaluating the world of her characters."[11] In The Tragic Comedians, "generic sentences" do not

encourage the reader's involvement with the world of the characters, but rather serve to remind the reader of the illusion. They are to be passed over quickly, rather than pondered on, and sustain the idea of "a study" without, as Fowler suggests George Eliot's aphorisms do, "making very direct appeal to the reader's concurrence.." (p. 120).

Identification with the characters is discouraged throughout the novel. The seventh paragraph of Chapter One is concerned with "Clotilde," "She," "Her" (p.9); the eighth paragraph extrapolates from this "Young women have been known to turn from us altogether,..." (p.11). Between the particular and the general is the sentence, "So far, as far as she can be portrayed introductorily, she is not without exemplars in the sex" (p.11). The character is set apart from the reader as an object of study, an "exemplar." Any illusion of reality is undermined by the bluntness of "portrayed introductorily." A similar device is used in Chapter Five: "Clotilde was of the order of the erring who should by rights have a short sermon to preface an exposure of them, administering the whip to her own sex and to ours, lest we scorn too much to take an interest in her" (p.59), and again in the last sentence of the novel, "But as we are in her debt for some instruction, she may now be suffered to go" (p.258). The story continues to be pervaded by the discourse of the parable.

A further instance of distancing the reader by laying bare the fiction is found in the third paragraph of Chapter One (p.6). In contrast to the preceding paragraphs, this is

a paragraph of lively action with an array of verbs - "sprang," "siezed," "snatched," "pinched," "flung," "rose," "saluted," "jumped." The agitation these disarmingly evoke might on its own dissolve analytic distance if the description were not prefaced in such a way as to emphasise its imaginariness: "Say (for Diana's mists are impenetrable and freeze curiosity) that Clotilde was walking with Count Constantine...The scene at all events is pretty, and weaves a fable out of a variety of floating threads" (p.6). Such interventions, highlighting the aspect of aesthetic composition, are frequent.

The tone of the narrator is part of the rhetorical complexity of the text. Most of the sentences in Chapter One are long and elaborate. Some shorter, simple sentences are interspersed with these (11 sentences out of 83 have under 10 words) further highlighting the complexity. Sentences like the fifth one in paragraph two (with its 89 words, the longest in the chapter) are on a first reading difficult to comprehend, not merely because of length, but in their accumulation of clauses:

> "Young people of Clotilde's upper world everywhere, and the young women of it especially, are troubled by an idea drawn from what they inhale and guess at in the spirituous life surrrounding them, that the servants of the devil are the valiant host, this world's elect, getting and deserving to get the best it can give in return for a little daring audacity, a flavour of the Fronde in their conduct; they sin, but they have the world; and then they repent perhaps, but they have had the world." (p.6)

The second clause refines the first - "Young people "/"young women" - as the fifth does the fourth - "the servants of the devil"/"this world's elect" - and the seventh the sixth - "a little dashing audacity"/"a flavour of the Fronde in their conduct." In the same way, within the third and sixth clause there are two verbs together - "inhale and guess at" and "getting and deserving to get." That this sentence "means" that to be a little daring when you are young can be fun is irrelevant. It is an elaborate con coction, which communicates more than a literal meaning.

The parallelism with which the above sentence ends ("but they have the world"/"but they have had the world") is a crucial rhetorical device in this text. The "as she to him he to her" relationship of Clotilde, Prince Marko and Alvan is first suggested two chapters before Alvan is directly introduced, in the seventh paragraph of Chapter One:

> She to him was what she sought for in another. As much as she pitied herself for not lighting on the predestined man, she pitied him for having met the woman, so that her tenderness for both inspired many signs of warm affection, not very unlike the thing it moaned secretly the not being. For she could not but distinguish a more poignant sorrow in the seeing of the object we yearn to vainly than in vainly yearning to one unseen. (p.10)

This paragaph contains several parallel phrases - "she pitied herself"/"she pitied him," "the man"/"the woman," "seeing"/"unseen," "yearn to vainly"/"vainly yearning." These patterns give a sense of balance, of an even-handed

argument, an analytical study. Numerous examples of this feature occur, and are especially prevalent when there is greatest emphasis on the action as an object for study. There are two very long sentences in the last chapter, one 96 words in length and the other 94 words in length. (pp.256 and 257) These two sentences expand the simple statement which opens the chapter, "Alvan was dead" (p.255), as does the last sentence of the third paragraph, beginning "That mass of humanity..." (p.256), with its list of oppositions "good"/"evil," "generous"/"mutinous," "passion for the future of mankind"/"vanity," "magnanimity/"sensualism," "reckless indiscipline"/"high judgement," "chivalry"/"savagery," "solidity"/"fragmentariness." These highly-mannered sentences freeze any emotional response that the reader may have been encouraged to make by the announcement of Alvan's death at the beginning of the chapter.

Imagery is a further element of the text which defers immediate comprehension. More than one simile, or metaphor, may appear in a single sentence, or across several sentences, illuminating the topic. The discussion of coquettes beginning Chapter One uses figures in this way (p.4). Here is a further example: "As for that wandering ship of the drunken pilot, the mutinous crew and the angry captain, called Human Nature, "fantastical" fits it no less completely than a continental baby's skull-cap the stormy infant" (p.1). This sentence begins with a metaphor and ends with a simile. Here is a further, and more convoluted,

instance of multiple figures in one sentence: "...it was his violent earnestness, his imperial self-confidence that she feared, as nervous people shrink from cannon: and neither meeting, seeing, nor hearing of him, she began to yearn, like the child whose curiosity s refreshed by a desire to try again the startling thing which frightened it" (p.60). The reader is here required to make two comparisons within the course of one sentence. Neither simile is in itself difficult to comprehend. Following so closely upon each other, however, they complicate the narrative, without providing any vivid insight into the character's thought process which would compensate for the complexity. The text is often dense and difficult to unravel in this way, as it moves in and out of images. Perhaps this is what the writer of an article in The Atheneum on the subject of The Tragic Comedians was referring to, when he described Meredith's style as the "congested".[12]

Such density of imagery as appears in The Tragic Comedians is possible because images are often only suggested, and not fully explored. The effect is not unlike that of getting the answer to a crossword puzzle, and being left to find the grid that accommodates the clues. Neologisms evoke associations with puzzling intersections: "cardisophistical" (p. 86), "fleshly-bulgy" (p. 11), "ghost-poisoned" (p. 57), "wolf-gnawed" (p. 74), "daisy-minded" (p. 173), "legitimately-satiated" (p. 223), "providence-guided" (p. 248). The text itself describes such puzzles as baffling its main characters. The phrase

"Clotilde's short explorations in Dot-and-Dash-land" (p.169) refers to the areas where people's thoughts become unclear, or too horrific to contemplate articulately; thoughts which are represented in fiction by dots and dashes. A similar formation appears in Chapter Four, the phrase "a prolonged and determined you-and-I" (p. 57) to describe Alvan and Clotilde's first meeting.

The Tragic Comedians is full of playful patterns and fanciful images, which perhaps account for what can be termed the "exotic" nature of the novel. Some are decorative, resembling the running tags emblematically defining characters in Dickens' novels. However, where Dickens used this device for its evocative short hand effects (the Veneerings in _Our Mutual Friend_ and the Barnacles in _Little Dorrit_) in _The Tragic Comedians_ it does not condense an impression, but elaborates associations beyond the point, rather than to the point; for example, Prince Marko is frequently referred to as the Indian Bacchus, a title which does nothing to illuminate his role in the novel. Further dandification occurs in dialogue or in stream of consciousness passages, where conceits and puns and rhyme take fancy to new limits. When Alvan and Clotilde meet in Chapter Four they have "a series of skimming discussions, like swallow-flights" (p.39). Elsewhere it is said that "Clotilde entered into the extravagance with a happy simulation of zest" (p.35), and that she "put on a playful frenzy" (p.23). All these phrases accurately describe the dialogue in the novel; speeches such as the following one

which display a certain absurdity and futile energy:

> "Wine of the grape is the young bride - the young sun-bride! divine, and never too sweet, never cloying like the withered sun-dried, with its one drop of concentrated sugar, that becomes ten of gout. No raisin-juice for us! None of their too-long-on-the-stem clusters! We are for the blood of the grape in her youth, her heaven-kissing ardour". (p. 47)

The exclamation marks, "sun-bride" as opposed to "sun-dried," "young"/"withered," "too-long-on-the-stem," "heaven-kissing," together produce a highly stylised piece of prose which has abandoned all pretence of naturalism.

Dialogue like this turns the characters into emblems. That Alvan and Clotilde's behaviour is deluded, is suggested by their inappropriately extravagant forms of speech. That Clotilde's fancies are pretensious vacuities, is underlined as they are deflated by the narrator's mock-heroic comments, bathos and sarcasm:

> ...Prince Marko had recognised her by miraculous divination, he assured her he could have staked his life on the guess as he bowed to her. Adieu to Count Constantine. Fate had interposed the prince opportunely, we have to suppose, for she received a strong impression of his coming straight from her invisible guardian;...She struck, like fate, one blow. She discovered that the prince, in addition to his beauty and sweet manners and gift of song, was good; she fell in love with goodness, whereof Count Constantine was not an example:" (pp. 7 - 8)

Throughout the novel, the same non-naturalistic effect is produced by making the character's speech and thought

exaggeratedly arch in expression. Clotilde is shown to be capricious and silly: "It is he! not he! he! not he! most certainly! impossible! - And then it ran: If he, oh me! If another, woe me!" (p.27), and, in Chapter Seven, as shallow in her playful response to a serious problem: "I will compose a beautiful, dutiful, modest, oddest, beseeching, screeching, mildish, childish epistle to her" (p.94). Again and again, the perspective requires the reader to notice the manner of her diction, there are no grounds for any illusion of listening in on a naturalistic conversation.

In a similar way, the lack of balance of the character Alvan, as Clotilde slips away from him, is conveyed in mad rhetoric:

> "Fish, fool, fish! and fish till Doomsday! There's nothing but your fool's face in the water to be got to bite at the bait you throw, fool! Fish for the flung-away beauty, and hook your shadow of a Bottom head!" (p.142)

Alliteration and repetition, here, give a form to nonsense. There is no need to ransack this rhetoric for some sort of sense, or "truth." It is one of the fantastical little games played in <u>The Tragic Comedians</u> that look more towards <u>Alice in Wonderland</u>, than Mrs Gaskell.

The "Preface" of <u>The Tragic Comedians</u> advertises both a "lurid catastrophe" (p.3), and (as with the divorce reports) grounds for respectable interest. There is the promise of a story whose "last chapter" will be "written in red blood" (p.2), and there is the reassurance that it will be about

"real creatures" (p.3). At the same time, the reader is reassured that this colourful tale will be contained within the respectable context of "a study."

However, The Tragic Comedians betrayed its promises. Its techniques do not sustain the dual mode of address which their fulfilment would require. From Chapter One onwards, as we have seen, the narrator continually addresses the reader as a "philosopher," and provides appropriate platitudes, and points the significance of every emblem. Any sense of the "lurid catastrophe" has failed to materialise. "Real creatures" never appear. Both the overall manner of narration, and the constant "knottedness of language"[13] work against a reader's involvement in narrative excitement. The skittishness in the didactic digressions is the very opposite of the magistrate's tone which enabled divorce reports to excite fantasy, while appearing only to be concerned with fact. The Tragic Comedians wears its fancifulness too blatantly on its sleeve for it ever to be of popular interest.

Diana of the Crossways

Meredith's next novel, Diana of the Crossways, solved the problems which The Tragic Comedians so disastrously failed to tackle. It achieved success because its mode of address took into account the plural demands of a reading public. Although divorce might not provide a last chapter "written in red blood" (p.2), it was, as we have seen, a

subject to entice sensation-seekers in 1885 - and Meredith developed a mode of address which was on target.

In his treatment of divorce, Meredith ignores the positive steps Caroline Norton took to change the system herself. This would seem to have been an obvious area to develop if the novel was to be the serious analysis of a woman's character that it claims to be, with the feminist overtones which Lorna Sage stresses[14]. Allen Horstmann discusses Caroline Norton's influential role at length:

> Caroline Norton, besides writing fiction, often turned her attention, and her pen to her problems and those of other similarly situated women. Her child custody fight produced <u>A Plain Letter to the Lord Chancellor on the Law and Custody of Infants</u> in 1838, which contributed greatly to a change in the law. After that year, mothers in most circumstances had custody of children up to the age of seven.
>
> When changes in divorce law loomed as a real possibility after 1850, she wrote <u>English laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century</u> (1854) and <u>A Letter to the Queen on Lord Chancellor Cranworth's Marriage and Divorce Bill</u> (1855). Both were credited at the time with making the differing treatment of women and wives, difficult to sustain. (p.44)

These crusading activities of Caroline Norton are not incorporated into the plot of <u>Diana of the Crossways</u>. The character Diana has no children and her enstranged husband dies only a few years after the separation, so there is no question of such campaigns being necessary. Caroline Norton's symbolic status as a woman who fought against the laws of a male orientated society, and won, is not exploited. Diana is a victim whose only victory in the

novel is the passive one of eventually accepting the marriage proposal of the right man.

Where the resemblance to the life of the historical figure is clear, however, is in the portrayal of the various sensational events in the heroine's career. The divorce case is not treated as an illustration of Diana's position in society, so much as the first of a series of scandals initiated by the breakdown of her marriage. The reader follows the plot from one crisis to the next, led on by the enticing chapter headings: "Containing Hints of Diana's Experiences and of what they led to," "The Crisis," "Diana's Night-watch in the Chamber of Death," "A Chapter Containing great Political News and therewith an Intrusion of the Love God," "Wherein we behold a giddy Turn at the Spectral Crossways." The organisation of the novel around a series of crises reinforces the reader's impression of Diana as a victim to whom things happen, rather than as a strong character in control of her life, as Caroline Norton appears to a large extent to have been. Like the vicar's wife in The Times divorce report, Diana is presented as a character who must wait to be rescued by a man. This pattern in the novel, and the use that is made of the events in Caroline Norton's life, weakens the arguments of those who think that the scandal was used primarily for its educational value.

Furthermore, the crises in the novel centre around not one, but two, scandals in the life of Caroline Norton. Diana's first marriage leads to a divorce case, and the breakdown of her affair with Dacier, in the second half of

the novel, leads to her selling of the Corn Law secret.

The inclusion of the second scandal attracted a great deal of attention when the novel was first published. The matter was discussed in newspaper editorials and letter pages for weeks afterwards, and sales of the novel could not but have been increased by this controversy. Alice Acland draws attention to this posthumous episode, in her biography of Caroline Norton: "Speculation over the whole Repeal betrayal question was revived by the publication of Diana of the Crossways." She concludes that "Meredith gave credence to cruel gossip."[15] The episode, forming as it does the climax of the novel, and following closely the popular version of events, certainly invited the response it received. Gossip and speculation serve as useful bait in attracting a wider readership.

It was not denied by even the most admiring critic that Diana of the Crossways contained these sensational elements. Yet, in no review was it dismissed as simply a sensational novel. As in the following extract, the sensational plot was seen to be only the starting point in the creation of a complex effect:

> In Diana of the Crossways Mr George Meredith, not for the first time has the authority of history for the main incidents in the career of his principal character. He fully appreciates the truth that fact is stranger than fiction, and the value of an impregnable base for his inventive campaigns. Such a career as that of his Diana might well bring down upon his head the charge of extravagance if he could not point to well-known facts in support of its most startling incidents. Diana's beauty and wit; her social, literary and political power; her unfortunate early marriage;

> her dangerous intimacy with a distinguished statesman, and the consequent scandal; her betrayal of an important Cabinet secret; the failure of her husband's attempt to obtain a divorce - all these are facts, and quite sufficient to form the basis of a very "sensational" novel. It need scarcely be said that in Mr Meredith's hands the materials are turned to greater advantage.[16]

The reviewer lists all the "startling incidents," but emphatically removes the novel from the realms of popular fiction: "It need scarcely be said..." It is suggested that the distinction between <u>Diana of the Crossways</u> and a sensational novel is obvious. The reviewer's account of the novel's subject matter is an accurate one, so why should this be obvious? In what way does this material appear to the respectable reader to have been "turned to greater advantage?" A closer examination of the text of <u>Diana of the Crossways</u> is necessary before these questions can be answered.

The first chapter of the novel takes the form of an address by the narrator to the reader on the subject of the novel. This address begins with an account of the various styles in which the heroine's story has supposedly already been told, before moving on to a more general discussion of the "novelist's Art" (p.13). The overt purpose of this discussion is to invite the reader to consider the possibilities of the popular style, before abandoning it in favour of the narrator's own superior brand of fiction.

In an attempt to disassociate his novel from writing aimed at public taste, the narrator identifies two styles in

particular; the sentimental style and the "sham decent" of the court report. Both are mocked through parody. The following extract provides an example:

> Henry Wilmer is not content to quote the beautiful Mrs Warwick, he attempts a portrait. Mrs Warwick is "quite Grecian." She might "pose for a statue." He presents her in carpenter's lines with a dab of school-box colours, effective to those whom the Keepsake fashion can stir. She has a straight nose, red lips, raven hair, black eyes, rich complexion, a remarkably fine bust, and she walks well, and has an agreeable voice; likewise "delicate extremities". The writer was created for popularity, had he chosen to bring his art into our literary market. (p.3)

The narrator's tone in these lines clearly invites the reader's disdain for Henry Wilmer's style. The phrase "not content" suggests that he ought to be content with the less ambitious project. The direct quotation of unexceptional phrases draws attention to the poverty of the popular author's vocabulary. The reader is further encouraged to accept the narrator's scorn of the crudeness of this style by the threat of being sneeringly relegated to "those whom the Keepsake fashion can stir." The narrator then directly parodies this crudeness, the simple adjectives and hackneyed phrases which together form a stock romantic portrait. Likewise, the author's one attempt at decorative phrasing, "delicate extremities," is held up for ridicule in quotation marks. The final sentence serves to roundly condemn both this kind of writing and the "literary market" which would accord it "popularity." The reader has been led to the conclusion that "popularity" is a derogatory term.

The sentimental style is in this way fairly effortlessly dismissed. The full weight of the narrator's ridicule is reserved for the style of neutral reporting described in the following extract:

> He has no belief, no disbelief; names the pro-party and the con; recites the case, and discreetly, over-discreetly; and pictures the trial, tells the list of witnesses, records the verdict: so the case went, and some thought one thing, some another thing: only it is reported for positive that a miniature of the incriminated lady was cleverly smuggled over to the jury, and juries sitting upon these cases, ever since their bedazzlement by Phyrne, as you know...And then he relates an anecdote of the husband, said to have been not a bad fellow before he married his Diana - and the naming of the Goddess reminds him that the second person in the indictment is now everywhere called "The Elderly Shepherd" - but immediately after the bridal bells this husband became sour and insupportable; and either she had the trick of putting him in the wrong, or he lost all shame in playing the churlish domestic tyrant. The instances are incredible of a gentleman. Perry Wilmer gives us two or three; one on the authority of a personal friend who witnessed the scene. (p.5)

This passage describes a style resembling that of the newspaper divorce report previously discussed. The narrator mimics the factual, unbiased tone of these reports - "no belief, no disbelief," "names," "recites," "records." However, by modifying "discreetly" to "over-discreetly" he draws attention to the power of insinuation which this matter-of-fact tone holds. The narrator further deflates this impression of "truth" by highlighting the writer's confusion between what is "anecdote" and what is "reported for positive." The account of this report continues with the usual assessment of the couple's misery, forcing the

circumstances to fit one or other of the standard formulae. The husband is either "sour and insupportable," or a "churlish domestic tyrant." The high moral tone of this type of comment is undercut by the juxtaposition of the last two sentences in the extract. The husband's behaviour may be condemned as "incredible of a gentleman," but the writer still "gives us two or three" examples. The reader can express moral outrage and satisfy his curiosity at the same time. If the sentimental style appeals to the undiscriminating reader, this style, it is implied, will suit the hypocrite.

After thus introducing the central character through the gossip and innuendo of the popular diarists, the narrator then directly dissociates himself from these scandal-mongers:

> Henry Wilmers, I have said, deals exclusively with the wit and charm of the woman. He treats the scandal as we might do in like manner if her story had not to be told. But these are not reporting columns; very little of it shall trouble them. The position is faced and that is all. (p.7)

The narrator distinguishes between the "scandal" and "her story," and claims for himself the serious purpose of telling this story which "had to be told." Furthermore, only episodes which contribute to the serious telling of this story will be included in the novel. The narrator has no motive other than to present the "truth." Readers are offered the opportunity to associate themselves with the narrator's motives. He is not reading out of idle

curiosity, or because of any pleasure he takes in scandalous or sensational incidents: "The position is faced, and that is all."

The narrator then procedes to widen the gulf which the reader has already been encouraged to believe exists between <u>Diana of the Crossways</u> and popular writing. The novel is elevated by the narrator's labelling of its distinctive quality as "philosophy" (p.13). This word would have several connotations for a contemporary audience. The Oxford English Dictionary cites two uses of the word from the 1880s:

> Whatever is real is rational, and with all that is rational philosophy claims to deal...So far from resting in what is finite and relative, the peculiar domain of philosophy is absolute truth. (Caird, <u>Philos. Relig.</u> 1880)
>
> That philosophy only means psychology and morals, or in the last resort metaphysics, is an idea slowly developed through the eighteenth century, owing to the victorious advances of science (<u>Edin. Review</u> 1887)

"Philosophy" is here associated with the words "rational," "real," "absolute truth," "psychology," "morals," "metaphysics" and "science." The narrator uses the word in a general sense which evokes all these associations:

> Whereas a single flight of brains will reach and embrace her; give you the savour of Truth, the right use of the senses, Reality's infinite sweetness; for these things are in philosophy; and the fiction which is the summary of actual Life, the within and without of us, is, prose or verse, plodding or soaring, philosophy's elect handmaiden. (p.14)

"Philosophy" is personified, connected with the fundamental concepts of "Truth," "Reality" and "Life," and placed where only a "flight of brains" can reach it. This rhetoric leaves the reader with the impression that whatever "Philosophy" is it is something serious, intellectual and superior.

However, the narrator's principal definition of the term occurs in relation to the other styles of writing discussed in the chapter. "Philosophy" is everything that they are not: "And how may you know that you have reached to Philosophy? You touch her skirts when you share her hatred of the sham decent, her derision of sentimentalism" (p.14). The reader is directly exhorted to adopt the narrator's attitude of "hatred" and "derision." It is presented as a matter of taste. Appreciation of Diana of the Crossways demonstrates good taste, whereas enjoyment of the "sham decency" of scandalous divorce reports and sensational novels reveals obvious bad taste. Moreover, the novel's "Philosophy" offers the reader an opportunity to improve his taste in fiction:

> You have to teach your imagination of the feminine image you have set up to bend your civilised knees to, that it must temper its fastidiousness, shun the grossness of the over dainty. Or to speak in the philosophic tongue, you must turn on yourself, resolutely track and seize that burrower, and scrub and cleanse him..." (p.16)

The reader is offered an opportunity to regard a reading of the novel as an educational exercise, a rigorous and

purifying experience which will leave the reader spiritually scrubbed and cleansed. Not only is it suggested that individual readers will be improved by reading Diana of the Crossways; the chapter ends with the lofty claim that the narrator's fiction will perform the "service of helping to civilise the world" (p.17). Directly after this pronouncement the narrator brings the discussion swiftly to a close, and turns the reader's attention to the tale itself: "Wherewith let us to our story, the froth being out of the bottle"(p.17).

In this preface to Diana of the Crossways, Meredith is using a similar technique to that employed in the court reports that the narrator scorns. The reader is encouraged to believe that it is almost a moral duty for him to read about a divorce case. "Scandal" is transformed into "Philosophy" in the same way that it becomes a "public service" in the court reports. The "Respectables" are provided with an acceptable excuse for their enjoyment of the sensational aspects of the novel. They are at the same time reassured that however sensational the "story" may be, Diana of the Crossways is not a sensational novel.

The preface also demonstrates a similiar "sham decency" to that of the court reports. The narrator condemns the popular style of writing, while simultaneously imitating it in an attempt to arouse interest in the novel's heroine. It is through the sentimental and scandal-mongering diaries of Henry Wilmers and Perry Wilkinson that the reader is introduced to Diana, and given only such brief glimpses of

"the circumstances of the scandal" (p.3) as will excite his curiosity. The narrator's address is in this way designed to appeal to readers' hypocrisy. It serves both to convince readers of the novel's respectability, and also to hint at all the less than respectable episodes in the plot. It is this equivocal response that is reflected in contemporary criticism of the novel; one critic comments in the same paragraph that "His way of telling the story is, in the main, as excellent as he knows how to fashion it," and that, "He titillates the impure appetite of readers by introducing scandal and divorce proceedings."[17]

The function of the first chapter, as outlined above, is further defined when the chapter is seen in relation to the rest of the novel. Chapter Two does indeed begin the "story," not with a lengthy address to the reader, but by immmediately setting the scene and introducing the principal characters: "In the Assembly Rooms of the capital city of the Sister Island there was a public Ball, to celebrate the return to Erin of a British hero of Irish Blood, after his victorious Indian campaign" (p. 17). It is, however, not just this alteration in the narrator's tone which distinguishes the first chapter so clearly from the succeeding ones, the style is also markedly different. This becomes obvious when passages from both sections of the novel are compared.

The first paragraph of the novel immediately introduces the reader to the particular style of the preface :

> Among the Diaries beginning with the second quarter of our century, there is frequent mention of a lady then becoming famous for her beauty and her wit: "an unusual combination," in the deliberate syllables of one of the writers, who is, however, not disposed to personal irony when speaking of her. It is otherwise in his case; and a general fling at the sex we may deem pardonable, for doing as little harm to womankind as the stone of an urchin cast upon the bosom of mother Earth; though men must look some day to have it returned to them, which is a certainty; - and indeed full surely will our idle-handed youngster too, in his riper season, be heard complaining of a strange assault of wanton missiles, coming on him he knows not whence, for we are all of us distinctly marked to get back what we give, even from the thing named inanimate nature. (p.1)

The most immediately noticeable feature of this style is the length of the sentences. This paragraph is composed of only two sentences, one with 51 words and the other with 104 words. Not only are these sentences long, they are also complex in structure. The second sentence is made up of 11 separate clauses. Each clause refines the previous one in a movement away from the original statement. In the course of two sentences, the narrator progresses from the specific, "Diaries beginning with the second quarter of our century," to the abstraction of "the thing named inanimate nature." The density of the paragraph is further increased by the inclusion of a quotation, a simile merging into a metaphor and a final platitude.

These features, taken together, render the opening sentences of the novel almost incomprehensible on a first reading. The paragraph leaves the reader with the impression that something weighty is being discussed, rather than with an exact grasp of the actual sense. The sense of

the following extract from chapter four is in contrast quite plain:

> She told him not to think it necessary to pay her compliments. "And here, of all places!" They were in the heart of the woods. She found her hand seized - her waist. Even then, so impossible is it to conceive the unimaginable even when the apparition of it smites us, she expected some protesting absurdity, or that he had seen something in her path - What did she hear? And from her friend's husband!
>
> If stricken idiotic, he was a gentleman; the tigress she had detected in her composition did not require to be called forth; half-a-dozen words, direct, sharp as fangs and teeth, with the eyes burning over them, sufficed for the work of defence. - "The man who swore loyalty to Emma!" Her reproachful repulsion of eyes was unmistakable, withering; as masterful as a superior force on his muscles - What thing had he been taking her for? - She asked it within: and he of himself, in a reflective gasp. Those eyes of hers appeared as in a cloud, with the wrath above: she had the look of a Goddess in anger. He stammered, pleaded across her flying shoulder - Oh! horrible, loathsome, pitiable to hear!..."A momentary aberration...her beauty...he deserved to be shot!...could not help admiring...quite lost his head...on his honour! never again..."(p. 46)

This style is designed to hold the reader's attention. Simple sentences, dots, dashes and exclamation marks create the impression of immediacy. The action is described in cliches which require little effort on the part of the reader - "in the heart of the woods," "sharp as fangs," "the look of a Goddess in anger." The characters' attitudes, as revealed in both direct and indirect speech, offer no more of a challenge to the reader's understanding: "And here, of all places!," "...he deserved to be shot!," "quite lost his head." The passage contains no complicated metaphors, or

similes, but relies rather for its effect on adjectives and images with a more immediate visual impact: "eyes burning," "reproachful repulsion."

The incident thus described would have been considered likely to appeal to public taste, even if it had been related in the soberest of prose, concerning as it does the attempted seduction of the heroine by her friend's husband. The style that is adopted exploits the sensational possibilities of the scene. It is this style, rather than that of the first chapter, that one contemporary critic must have been referring to when he described the style of _Diana of the Crossways_ as "direct, dramatic, vivacious."[18]

When compared with the direct style of the above passage, the style of the first chapter seems perversely obscure. One contemporary critic described it in the following way:

> Of all introductory chapters to an interesting novel, surely that which prefaces the history of _Diana of the Crossways_ is the most irritating. It may be presumed that many a reader brought face to face with such a bristling rampart of phrases has sadly gone back and walked no more with an author of so appalling a cleverness.[19]

The introductory chapter is a display of "appalling cleverness," but with a more constructive purpose than this critic would suggest. The narrator's cleverness establishes a tone for the novel just as clearly as do his moral and intellectual pronouncements. The style that the reader first encounters enables him to distinguish _Diana of the_

Crossways from a popular novel in the same way that the style of a divorce court report distinguishes it from a common scandal sheet. For the first few pages, the reader can indulge in the pretence that his intellect is being appealed to. Unlike in *The Tragic Comedians*, the "bristling rampart of phrases" is confined to the first chapter. With the commencement of the story at the beginning of Chapter Two, there is a shift to a readily accessible style.

A clear distinction exists between the first chapter and the succeeding ones in terms of style. This is one aspect of a general distinction between the narrator's discussion of "the novelist's Art" and the techniques practised in the rest of the novel. An analysis of the structure of one of the novel's chapters reveals the disparity.

Chapter Thirty-Four is crucial to the plot of *Diana of the Crossways*. It is concerned with Dacier's discovery that Diana has sold a secret he entrusted her with to the newspapers, and with his consequent rejection of her. It forms the climactic episode in the novel, from which the narrative moves towards closure.

The chapter opens with two paragraphs of generalizations related to the heroine's experiences: "When we are losing balance on a precipice we do not think much of the thing we have clutched for support. Our balance is restored and we have not fallen..."[20] This commonplace observation is typical of the many maxims and aphorisms which punctuate the text. These remarks are the closest the text comes to the "Philosophy" described in Chapter One.

Though presented in a tone of sage reflection they do not require much "brainstuff" to be understood. They serve only as prefaratory remarks to reinforce the reader's impression that what happens to the characters is of some importance beyond that of the "story."

The third paragraph then launches into the "story" through what corresponds to the "internal history" of the first chapter: "Knowing that her lover was to come in the morning, Diana's thoughts dwelt wholly upon the way to tell him, as tenderly as possible without danger to herself, that her time for entertaining was over until she had finished her book; indefinitely" (p. 321). Here, the character's thoughts and feelings are described for the purpose of setting the scene for the action to follow. This paragraph of "internal history" does not pretend to expand the reader's understanding of psychology in the way the narrator proposes in the first chapter.

After these introductory paragraphs of "philosophy" and "internal history," the dialogue begins. This conversation between Diana and Dacier forms the core of the chapter, and is carefully constructed to build up suspense. As the dialogue moves away from commonplaces and closer to the critical issue, the reader is led to wonder at what point Dacier will discover Diana's guilt, and what his reaction will be. The exchanges are swift with only brief interruptions from the narrator. The comments on the conversation that are made are direct and descriptive, rather than digressive: "For the first time since her midnight expedition she felt a sensation of the full weight

of the deed. She heard thunder" (p. 323). In this way, the reader's attention is never for a moment diverted from the dramatic tension of the scene.

At the climax of the scene the sense of drama is so heightened as to produce dialogue that is almost melodramatic :

> "I can never trust you again," he said.
> "I fear you will not," she replied.
> His coming back to her after the departure of the guests last night shone on him in splendid colours of single-minded loverlike devotion. " I came to speak to my own heart. I thought it would give you pleasure; thought I could trust you utterly. I had not the slightest conception I was imperilling my honour!..." (p. 328)

The contemporary reader would be immediately aware of the associations of such fictional cliches as "loverlike devotion" and "imperilling my honour." This dialogue does not require any of the narrator's "Philosophy" to make it intelligble to the reader.

The chapter ends with a similarly accessible image; that of the heroine rejected in love: "To her it was the plucking of life out of her breast. She pressed her hands where heart had been. The pallor and cold of death took her body" (p. 328). With their exaggeratedly dramatic tone, and their association of lovesickness with actual physical illness, these final sentences resemble a stock description from the sentimental fiction the narrator scorns in his introductory address to the reader. They fulfil the same function of arresting the reader's attention and compelling him to read on.

The structure of this chapter does not accord with the precepts of "the novelist's Art," as outlined by the narrator in the first chapter. The reader is told to expect "Philosophy," "internal history," "brainstuff;" what they encounter from Chapter Two onwards is a tightly plotted narrative with a strong dramatic interest.

Diana of the Crossways is, in this way, addressed to the same reader on two different levels. The first chapter appeals to the reader's regard for respectability, intellect and literature with a serious moral purpose, whereas the rest of the novel satisfies his desire for an exciting and easily accessible "story." In using this dual mode of address to narrate a divorce and its consequences, the novel was imitating a technique employed in the newspapers every day with great popular success. Diana of the Crossways popularity could have been expected, appealing, as it would, to this wide and already established readership.

"Modern Love"

The important part a dual mode of address played in the popularity of Diana of the Crossways is confirmed by a consideration of Meredith's first experiment with the topic of domestic misery, his verse novel "Modern Love" (1862). This collection of fifty sixteen-line "sonnets" recounts the break up of a marriage. The continuous narrative, told from the husband's viewpoint, frankly describes the bitterness and suffering lying behind the respectable facade of a contemporary middle-class marriage. This openness met with

outrage: if Diana of the Crossways represented the height of Meredith's popularity, then "Modern Love" was its nadir: "The final effect of the reviews on the public could not have been pleasant. Meredith's name was strongly associated with indecency and obscurity. And there was no other edition of Modern Love until 1892."[20] Why this revulsion to a topic which, as we have seen, was eagerly digested by the reading public in the daily newspapers?

A partial answer to this question is arrived at by looking at the reviewers' initial reaction to the poem's publication. The majority of critics condemned the poem in rhetorical phrases compatible with only the most extreme moral outrage: "a theme so morbid as the present," "disease and nothing else," "a loathsome series of phenomena," "the sickly peccadillo of "Modern Love," "a grave moral mistake."[21] It was left to a select few to point out the power of the poetry. Swinburne published his famous defence of the poem, in which he described it as "a poem above the aim and beyond the reach of any but its author," [22] in response to the following piece of scathing criticism by R. H. Hutton in The Spectator:

> The chief composition in the book, absurdly called "Modern Love," is a series intended to versify the leading conception of Goethe's "elective affinities." Mr Meredith effects this with occasional vigour, but without any vestige of original thought or purpose which could excuse so unpleasant a subject, and intersperses it, moreover, with sardonic grins that have all the effect of an intentional affectation of cynicism...The thing has no kind of right to the title "Modern Love." "Modern Lust" would be certainly a more accurate though not a true title, there is something of real love, but more of the other embodied in the sonnets...a confusion between a "fast taste" and what Mr Meredith mistakes for courageous realism...[23]

Hutton's objection to the poem is not just that it deals with "so unpleasant a subject," but, more seriously, that it provides no "excuse" for doing so. Unlike The Times divorce reports, the reader can not be assured of a moral reason for taking an interest in the intimate domestic details of a failing morriage. There is no sense of "thought or purpose" which will allow the reader to comfortably enjoy the scandal, while preserving his sense of propriety. In fact, Hutton's distaste for the narrator's "sardonic grins" and "cynicism" makes it clear that the narration disturbed this reader without delivering the reassurance which would have made the poem acceptable. From Hutton's remarks, and those of the other critics, with their emphasis on "disease" and "moral mistakes," it would seem that the "Modern Lust" could not be suitably contained within the nobler frame of "Modern Love." Where the poem failed to please, was not in its subject matter - that subject matter had its place and appeal for Victorian readers - the project failed to please by getting the address to the reader wrong.

The sense of outrage expressed by the critics is an indication of the sensitivity of the "Respectables" of 1862 on the subject of divorce. If divorce and marriage break up was, as we have seen, a topic of interest to the public in 1885, it touched a raw nerve in 1862. The Divorce Act had been passed only five years before, and the effects were only just beginning to be felt as the annual number of petitions, from a pre-1857 figure of four, began to rise into the hundreds.[24] The Times, in 1859, reflected its readers' shock at this public expression of hitherto hidden

distress: "No one, violent opponents or eager supporters, had, according to an editorial in The Times, 'the least idea of the quantity of matrimonial misery which was silent'".[25] The general foregrounding of the subject of divorce in the late 1850s, brought about by the passing of the Divorce Act, can be seen in the public attention given to a number of matrimonial scandals. Dickens, George Eliot and Meredith himself, were all involved in scandals revolving around the break up of a marriage. The slanderous rumours surrounding Dickens' separation from his wife were so vociferous that he was forced in 1858 to publish a statement in Household Words, in an attempt to dismiss them.[26] This frankness did nothing but encourage further speculation. Edgar Johnson, Dickens' biographer, remarks of this period that "London was buzzing with scandal."[27] The words used by Dickens in his letters of this time to describe the misery that could lie behind the facade of a respectable marriage anticipate those voiced by the couple in "Modern Love":

> Mrs Dickens and I have lived unhappily together for many years. Hardly anyone who has known us intimately can fail to have known that we are, in all respects of character and temperament, wonderfully unsuited to each other. I suppose that no two people, not vicious in themselves, ever were joined together, who had a greater difficulty in understanding one another, or who had less in common[28]

The same phrases would serve to describe the condition of Meredith's marriage before the final separation in 1857, when his wife, Mary Ellen, ran away with Henry Wallis. Unlike Dickens, Meredith was at this time unknown to the

general public, and even the fact that Meredith had modelled for Wallis's picture, "The Death of Chatterton," would have aroused very little interest in the scandal; a coterie of art lovers were, however, more aware. Allon White describes Meredith's humiliation:

> But some time between August 1856 and July 1857, Mary Ellen and Wallis began an adulterous affair. It was precisely at this period that the picture was being exhibited, and the prints must have been circulated in the artistic and intellectual groups of London at the same time as the gossip. Wallis and Mary Ellen went off to Wales together, and Meredith was left to look after his young son Arthur whilst the picture of himself, painted by the man who had cuckolded him, continued to attract whispers, insinuations and knowing smiles.[29]

The misery which the separation, and ensuing scandal, caused Meredith must have contributed to the intensity of "Modern Love," although his bitterness is only hinted at in his letters: "No sun warmed my roof-tree; the marriage was a blunder; she was seven years my senior, Peacock's wife became mad, and so there was a family taint."[30] This letter sensationalises the facts of Meredith's own marriage. By all accounts, their marriage had not been so bleak from the outset, and Mary Ellen was neither that much older, nor mad. However, Meredith's letter shows that the disintegration of a marriage was a contemporary cliche.

Despite its obvious potential for public interest, Meredith's use of this material as the focus of an entire work, under such a frank title as "Modern Love," was experimental. Meredith is sometimes described as Browning's pupil, but Browning's experimental poem on the subject of

marital separation, "James Lee's Wife," was inspired by Meredith's poem, and was not written until two years later. George Eliot's novel The Mill on the Floss, published the previous year, dealt only with a broken engagement, not a broken marriage; it was to be another decade before she was to use - in Middlemarch (1871) and Daniel Deronda (1876) - incompatibility in marriage, and the resulting domestic misery, as a central theme in a novel. When Dickens included marital break up in a novel, it was never as a central topic, but on the margins, and always as the predictable outcome of what the reader recognised at the outset as an obvious mismatch. In any event, Dickens belonged less to high culture than Browning, or George Eliot, or, of course, Meredith. In exploiting the subject of divorce, Meredith was leaning more towards sensation fiction than high culture.

In 1862, the year in which "Modern Love" was written, huge mass market success was enjoyed by The Woman in White (1860), East Lynne (1862) and Lady Audley's Secret(1862), and all these novels addressed the public taste. Patrick Bradlinger has isolated as common features of these novels some traits which are parallel to those which I have identified as features of the address to what, within Meredith's concept of the dual readership, can only be understood as the popular reader.

> But the fictions of Wilkie Collins, Sheridan Le Fanu, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Charles Reade, Mrs Henry Wood, and some other popular authors of the 1860s have special structural qualities as well, which can perhaps be summed up historically as their unique mixture of contemporary domestic

> realism with elements of the Gothic romance, the Newgate novel of criminal "low life," and the "silver fork" novel of scandalous and sometimes criminal "high life"...In "sensationalizing" modern life, however, the novelists paradoxically discovered that they were making fictions out of the stuff that fill the newspapers everyday. Indeed, on one level they could claim that to sensationalize was to be realistic.[31]

What is unusual about "Modern Love" as a Meredith work is that its manner of address corresponds in some respects to the manner in which popular sensational fiction addressed its readers. From its title onwards, the emphasis is on "contemporary domestic realism," and this, combined with the overall scandalous nature of the subject matter which could also be said to "fill the newspapers everyday," would justify the conclusion that the poem "sensationalizes modern life." It differs from sensational fiction in its sonnet form - its verse form and stanza form target it on the audience which appreciated Browning, an audience not willing to admit public taste. In its subject matter, it might be described as Winifred Hughes has described the sensational novels of the 1860s: "To many contemporary readers its 'final import' appeared to be that things are not what they seem, even - in fact, especially - in the respectable classes and their respectable institutions." "Modern Love" faced the audience for poetry with the mode of address characteristic of the sensational novels. Marriage was the "respectable institution" above all others as far as the "respectable classes" were concerned, and to show the reverse side of this institution, the "snakes in the bed,"

as Meredith described it (I, 1.5), was to provide the most sensational revelation of all. The fact that Meredith dealt so frankly with a subject about which "the first reviewers of sensation novels raised a great hue and cry,"[32] explains to a large extent the public's shock reaction to the poem.

Reading "Modern Love" alongside _Diana of the Crossways_, it becomes very obvious that the narrator in the poem has a different function to that of the narrator in the novel. In the novel, our first contact with the narrator is as an instructor, setting up the action that is to follow as a subject of study. In the poem, the narrator begins the narrative immediately, as did the narrators of the popular tales published by _The Glasgow Weekly Herald_ before it went up market with _The Egoist_, and, like _Archie Graham's Peerage_, the narrative does not build up gradually with an introduction to its characters, but instead establishes straight away the controversial nature of the subject matter. The characteristics of the poem are evident from the very first sonnet:

> By this he knew she wept with waking eyes:
> That, at his hand's light quiver by her head,
> The strange low sobs that shook their common bed,
> Were called into her with a sharp surprise,
> And strangled mute, like little gaping snakes,
> Dreadfully venemous to him. She lay
> Stone-still, and the long darkness flowed away.
> With muffled pulses. Then, as midnight makes
> Her giant heart of Memory and Tears
> Drink the pale drug of silence, and so beat
> Sleep's heavy measure, they from head to feet
> Were moveless, looking through their dead black
> years,
> By vain regret scrawled over the blank wall.
> Like sculptured effigies they might be seen
> Upon their marriage-tomb, the sword between;
> Each wishing for the sword that severs all.

From the opening, then, a reader is faced with a narrator who does not offer instruction or guidance. From line three onwards, the "Respectables" have grounds for feeling offended, for it is there made clear that the sonnet is set at the provocative centre of the poem, "their common bed." As in sensational fiction, the narrator's concern is to whet the reader's appetite. The poem begins in medias res. Its two principal characters are introduced in the first line: "he knew she wept." The vocabulary is emotive, vivid and easily accessible, giving the lie to contemporary charges of obscurity. To the reader of Gothic fiction, though not perhaps to the reader of George Eliot, the phrases are familiar and promise emotional excitement. Again, as with Archie Graham's Peerage, the narrative follows a clear sequential and consecutive line. That closing image of the lovers in their "marriage-tomb" points to the Gothic, and perhaps to William Blake, whose work did not yet count as literature. The contemplative tone of the "Philosopher," which served to reassure readers of Diana of the Crossways, is totally absent. Instead, the reader encounters a narrator whose tone is over-excited, disturbingly involved in what is being described.

The anonymous narrator appears in only the first five and the last two sonnets. The rest are narrated in the first person by the husband. The fact that one narrator slips into the other, third person to first, in the sixth sonnet confuses the perspective, and lessons the authority of the first narrator. His input at the start of the poem

offers intensity and excitement as incitement to keep reading, but does not offer the comfort provided by the moralizing framework inherent in newspaper reports. The second sonnet, with its description of the wife's feelings, sets out to attract its readers interest, without attributing to reading a nobler motive than pure curiosity:

> And if their smile encountered, he went mad,
> And raged deep inward, till the light was brown
> Before his vision, and the world forgot
> Looked wicked as some old dull murder-spot.
> A star with lurid beams, she seemed to crown
> The pit of infamy: and them again
> He fainted on his vengefulness, and strove
> To ape the magnanimity of love,
> And smote himself, a shuddering heap of pain.
> (2, ll. 7 -16)

No attempt is made here to place or intellectualise the husband's feelings. The vocabulary comes from a particular semantic field which the poem shares with the sensation novel of the time - "mad," "raged," "wicked," "murder-spot," "lurid," "infamy," "vengefulness," "smote," pain." This vocabulary sets out to evoke, not to mute, feeling, and presents those feelings without defining a distance for the spectator.

The episodes which the husband's narrative focuses on would also have a place in a sensation novel. Extracts from diaries, particularly diaries of distress, were frequent in sensational novels; for instance a famous later example - Johnathan Harker's journal in Bram Stoker's Dracula.[33] The use of the husband as a narrator in some episodes of "Modern Love" is similar. The wife's adultery provokes the husband

into taking a mistress while all the time they maintain the conventional appearance of a happy marriage: "...They see no ghost./With sparkling surface-eyes we ply the ball:/It is in truth a most contagious game:/HIDING THE SKELETON, shall be its name." (28, ll. 15 - 16). Here, the husband is apparently speaking to no one, not to the wife, not to the mistress, and certainly not to readers. As he gloats over finding for his game the name "HIDING THE SKELETON," his words occupy the private space of the secret diary.

When the poem was revived at the end of the century, critics such as George Trevalyan, who produced the first serious critical work on Meredith's poetry, tried to explain the poems lack of popularity on its publication in high-minded terms, attributing it to the poems "Philosophy":

> In "Modern Love" it is difficult to say whether the subtlety and realism of the psychology, the grandeur of the tragic feeling, or the wealth of poetical power and imagination contributes most to the effect of the whole...But readers of books are little accustomed to this admixture; it bewilders them; they look to have beauty, psychology and ethics served up to them under separate covers. At least only on such hypothesis can one explain the comparative indifference of the public to such a work as "Modern Love". 34

However, as in <u>Diana of the Crossways</u>, the "philosophy" Meredith provides is of the aphoristic kind, and is subordinate to the drama. Even in the final sonnet, the narrator can supply no perspective that would give the events described the intelligibility and clarity of a well-distanced spectator: "Ah, what a dusty answer gets the

soul/When hot for certainties in this our life!" (50, ll. 11 - 12). Readers were not "bewildered by the complexity of 'Modern Love," but embarrassed by its directness. Readers are made continually aware by the husband's direct address that this is a "respectable" middle-class marriage that is being dissected, using the naturalism of the "French novel": "Unnatural? My dear, these things are life:/And life, some think, is worthy of the Muse" (25, ll. 15 - 16). This amounts to a warning that there will be no attempt to accommodate an English sense of propriety. When the husband's voice broadens out to take in the voyeuristic reader, it is to challenge. The address "Modern Love" made to Meredith's reading public did not, unlike the address Diana of the Crossways made to its readers, accommodate scandal for the "Respectables." For a reader nowadays, this does not define the poem as a failure (nor necessarily either as a success), but as part of a serious experiment with a reading public which was not unified but fractured.

CONCLUSION

My enthusiasm for some aspects of Meredith's fiction will have been obvious. While personal preferences are inescapable, my aim has not been to offer another appreciation, or another revaluation. The survey (in the first chapter of this thesis) of how reputation is established, and how reputation fluctuates, demonstrates the uselessness in mistaking pleasure for understanding.

In her study of Peter Pan, Jacqueline Rose explored "history as a divided entity which is given a false unity in the image of the child" (p.143). Meredith's fiction had a diversity of address in seeking to reach a multiplicity of readers who made up a fractured reading public, just as Barrie addressed his work diversely, in writing for the child who at once is and is not adult, and for the adult who at once is and is not a child. The conclusion of my study may be summarised by replacing in Rose's sentence the word "child" with the word "Reader."

This conclusion has been achieved from a study of Meredith's fiction, but there is nothing to say that it is applicable only to the work of Meredith. I have mentioned in passing the work of George Eliot and Charles Dickens. There is obvious scope for studies of these and of other Victorian novelists, who addressed the same fractured nineteenth century readership. Such studies of such canonical novelists would face an additional problem which the student of Meredith is to some extent spared - it would

first be necessary to dismantle the unity of address they have acquired today in the readings of an academic community, which is far more homogeneous than was the Victorian reading public. In its precarious placing both inside and outside the current canon, Meredith's fiction provides a useful body of work from which to initiate a study of how the discursive aspect of writing, the address of fiction, maps onto what Renée Balibar has remarked on as the "devious paths by which a work becomes consecrated as literature."[1]

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